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Statelessness and (il)legitimacy in Al Bassam's *Petrol Station* and Shakespeare's *King Lear*

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The purpose of this paper is to investigate how Kuwaiti British playwright Sulayman Al Bassam's *Petrol Station* (2017) draws on themes, tropes, and motifs from Shakespeare's *King Lear* (1606) to dramatize the plight of stateless people worldwide. Al Bassam's use of *King Lear* hinges on the fact that it is a play that depicts fraught family bonds against the backdrop of national concerns, a question that *Petrol Station* vividly dramatizes. First, both plays open with an old patriarch making an important decision. Although the two patriarchs propose that their decisions will ensure justice and integrity, ironically, the decision taken by each patriarch wreaks havoc, augments sibling rivalry, and eventually creates a chaotic situation that exacerbates divisions and frictions. Second, in both plays a patriarch has a legitimate son and an illegitimate one whose relationships are marred by continual conflicts and clashes. However, while in Shakespeare's play, the illegitimate son is Machiavellian and malevolent, in Al Bassam's play, the illegitimate son is helpless and even naïve. Furthermore, some characters in Al Bassam's play can be viewed to have traces of Shakespeare's characters, particularly the Fool, who critically comments on the course of actions. Finally, both plays end tragically with people committing suicide or being killed and carried to the stage. Overall, Al Bassam's play draws our attention to the harsh conditions that stateless people, represented by the illegitimate son of the petrol station's owner, endure daily. In this sense, Al Bassam's play draws on Shakespeare's representation of violence to depict how stateless people are subdued and oppressed.

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Introduction

Commenting on the imminent performance of his play *Petrol Station* at the prestigious Kennedy Center in Washington in 2017, Kuwaiti British playwright Sulayman Al Bassam states that *Petrol Station* is "a modern dystopian story which addresses the problems of human identity, borders, loyalty, betrayal, love, ambition and the struggle for power in a civil war-torn country where the currency of exchange is smuggled petrol and fleeing refugees" (Kassraie, 2017, para. 2). Al Bassam adds that the play is "the tragic backdrop to a familial standoff where the crimes and secrets of one generation make violent claims on the lives of the next" (Kassraie, 2017, para. 2). He elaborates that he was inspired to write *Petrol Station* in 2003 at the start of the US-led invasion of Iraq where scenes reminded him of the burning oil fields in Kuwait from the withdrawing Iraqi army twelve years earlier, and he concludes that the play "is a shift in the form of spatial and temporal space where events in the play intersect with current and modern day events" (Kassraie, 2017, para. 6).

Indeed, Al Bassam's words draw our attention to various themes that the play vividly dramatizes. As can be deduced from Al Bassam's comments, the play is a site in which national and familial issues intersect. Moreover, the spatial and temporal shift in the play invites critics and audiences to think how it draws on precursor sources, especially that Al Bassam has previously experimented with appropriating Shakespeare in his *Arab Shakespeare Trilogy*. In this context, as a Shakespearean play that intwines private and public themes, such as national identity, sibling rivalry and family conflicts, *King Lear* (1606) presents itself as a source for Al Bassam's *Petrol Station* (2017). Therefore, this paper will examine how Al Bassam's *Petrol Station* draws on themes, tropes, and motifs from Shakespeare's *King Lear* in order to dramatize the plight of stateless people worldwide. In particular, it focuses on Al Bassam's depiction of the character of the Manager as both an illegitimate son and a stateless person whose tenuous legal position renders him vulnerable to inclement socio-cultural forces. The problem of statelessness first came to prominence after World War II. According to Hannah Arendt (1951):

Much more stubborn in fact and much more far-reaching in consequence has been statelessness, the newest mass phenomenon in contemporary history, and the existence of an ever-growing new people comprised of stateless persons, the most symptomatic group in contemporary politics. (p. 226-7)

Therefore, Al Bassam's depiction of statelessness in his play can be read as the dramatist's attempt to draw people's attention to a universal issue that debases humans and strips them of their rights. The Manager, who, on the one hand, resembles Shakespeare's Edmund since both are bastards, and, on the other hand, differs from him since Shakespeare's Edmund is far more heinous and villainous, epitomizes vulnerable stateless people whose home countries refuse to acknowledge their presence and turn a blind eye to their predicament.

Sulayman Al Bassam is a Kuwaiti playwright and director who co-founded SABAB Theatre, an independent, international touring theatre company. Son of a Kuwaiti father and an English mother, Sulayman Al Bassam was born in Kuwait and raised in England; he graduated from the University of Edinburgh. He is widely recognized as one of the world's leading contemporary Arab theatre makers. With a contrapuntal vision, Al Bassam, like other Arab writers in diaspora, tries to bridge the gaps between cultures and to open corridors of dialogue between the East and the West (Awad, 2012, p. 12). Writing in English and directing in Arabic, English, French and German, Al Bassam's best-known work is *Arab Shakespeare Trilogy*, a collection of three plays: *Al-Hamlet Summit*, *Richard III: An Arab Tragedy* and *The Speaker's Progress*. In his adaptations, Al Bassam transposes Shakespeare's plays into the landscape of contemporary politics and identity. In an interview with Lokke, Al Bassam (2021), Al Bassam concurs that the *Arab Shakespeare Trilogy* is "an albatross" since he is "called upon to repeat that kind of work all the time" (p. 95). A host of researchers have critically investigated *Arab Shakespeare Trilogy* since its publication and pointed out how Al Bassam uses Shakespeare's plays to comment on contemporary political issues in the Arab World. In this sense, *Petrol Station* is no exception since it vividly comments on socio-cultural and political matters by drawing on Shakespeare's *King Lear*.

Al Bassam himself has indicated in various interviews that in *Petrol Station*, there are echoes of Shakespeare's *King Lear* and *Troilus and Cressida*, Palestinian writer Ghassan Kanafani's short story "Men Under the Sun" and Werner Herzog's "Lessons in Darkness" (Hill, 2017, para. 5). The only academic paper that has fully investigated Al Bassam's *Petrol Station* so far is titled "At the Dawn of Existence: Aspects of Liminality in Sulayman Al Bassam's *Petrol Station*" by Saleh et al., (2023). The authors argue that the play "takes place in an iconic space outside actual space and time where everything is on hold" (p. 196). They maintain that "the characters' identities are on hold due to the liminality of their existence" adding that the border is an annoying space for the characters (p. 196). The authors conclude that "Al Bassam's achievement in *Petrol Station* chiefly resides in his creative and allegorical manipulation of liminality which he portrays as a powerful shaping force on the personal and the collective levels" (p. 196). Saleh, Saleh and Alzoubi's reading is quite illuminating because it focuses on issues of border crossing, identity formation and geographical liminality. However, the paper does not touch on how Al Bassam draws on Shakespeare's *King Lear* to foreground some of these issues.

Some researchers and reviewers have briefly pointed out that there are traces of Shakespeare's *King Lear* in Al Bassam's play (Wofford, 2017 and Pressley, 2017). In her "Foreword" to the Oberon Books edition of *Petrol Station*, Susan Wofford (2017) points out that "[a] comic, apocalyptic tone reminiscent of both *Endgame* and *King Lear* pervades" Al Bassam's play (p. 10). She maintains that "a bleak humor like that which colors the scenes in *King Lear* permeates the play" (2017, p. 10). The play, to cite the words of Pressley (2017), "starts vaguely like 'King Lear,' with a furious father telling his sons to find the meter - a signifier for governance, for justice, for buried history - that's gone missing from the family petrol station" (para. 3). Moreover, Lokke, Al Bassam (2021) describes *Petrol Station* as palimpsestic (p. 93). Wofford's, Pressley's and Lokke's comments are illuminating and hint at a strong relationship between *Petrol Station* and *King Lear*.

Indeed, a thorough reading of *Petrol Station* clearly shows Shakespeare's influence on Al Bassam's play. First, in the opening scene of both plays an old patriarch makes an important decision. In *King Lear*, the monarch divides his kingdom among his daughters and in Al Bassam's play, the founder of the petrol station gives orders to dig out a long-lost Meter. Although the two patriarchs insist that their decisions are made to ensure justice and integrity, ironically, their rulings wreak havoc, augment sibling rivalry, and create more chaos. King Lear's decree leads to a civil war and turmoil, and the petrol station founder's decision results in a deadly confrontation between the two half-brothers. Second, in both plays, a patriarch has a legitimate son and an illegitimate one. Here, I have to point out that Al Bassam negatively portrays the legitimate son, the Cashier, who stands for Shakespeare's Edgar, while the illegitimate one, the Manager, who is a stateless person and stands for Shakespeare's Edmund, is represented as a magnanimous and noble person. By reverting roles, Al Bassam makes the audience identify with the

illegitimate stateless son, and simultaneously, he highlights the universal nature of the dilemma of refugees and displaced people. Third, some characters in Al Bassam's play resemble those in *King Lear*, particularly the Fool, who critically comments on the course of actions. Finally, the chaotic situations caused by the two patriarchs lead to tragedies whereby corpses accumulate on the stage as characters kill each other or commit suicide.

Al Bassam draws on these themes, tropes, and motifs to dramatize the dilemma of stateless people worldwide. In particular, in the play, Al Bassam merges concepts of illegitimacy and statelessness in the character of the Manager whose position as a bastard echoes that of Edmund. Yet, unlike Edmund, the Manager is not a villain. In the play, the Manager and the Cashier are half-brothers, with the former being the illegitimate son of the petrol station's founder and the latter is the legitimate one (Al Bassam, 2017, p. 43). The relationship between the two is reminiscent of that between Edmund and Edgar. Significantly, in Al Bassam's play, the legitimate son hoards all the money as a cashier, and this echoes in *King Lear*, according to Edmund, the unfair rule of primogeniture that entitles Edgar to inherit all his father's possessions and leaves Edmund at his half-brother's mercy. The Cashier feels superior to the Manager and frequently taunts him as a socially stigmatized person who has no citizenship rights. The conflicts between the two are frequently fueled (pun intended) by the Trafficker, who is the maternal uncle of the Cashier. He tries first to incite the Manager against his half-brother, but he fails. He then finds out that his alleged bride, a girl he smuggled from the civil war-torn neighboring country, has an affair with the Manager, which, in a bizarre way, parallels Regan's and Goneril's illicit love for Edmund. The Trafficker, the Cashier and Noah, the Girl's bleeding brother, set off to kill the Manager. In the meantime, the owner of the petrol station sees the Girl, talks to her, and falls dead. Joseph, a domestic servant who knows many family secrets, hangs himself, echoing the motif of hanging in Shakespeare's *King Lear*. The Manager returns carrying the corpse of Noah onto the platform. The Girl gives the Manager her dead brother's passport and exits.

Highlighting the unfair and unnatural treatment that the Manager receives from people around him, Al Bassam's play delves into portraying the Manager's predicament as an ostracized and a vilified person. On the one hand, he is unable to leave the country since he has no passport; on the other hand, he has to endure his half-brother's insults and derogatory comments. The play is set in a petrol station located in a border zone between two Arab countries. As a civil war rages in the neighboring country, the Cashier accumulates wealth by smuggling petrol to the warring factions in the neighboring country in collaboration with the Trafficker. In addition, the Trafficker also smuggles refugees across the borders. Therefore, this paper investigates how Al Bassam's *Petrol Station* draws on Shakespeare's *King Lear* to highlight the plight of the Manager who stands for the universal figure of the stateless person. To achieve this goal, this article will outline certain thematic and artistic commonalities between the two plays.

Nationality, statelessness, and (il)legitimacy

In her book *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Hannah Arendt (1951) argues that the existence of stateless people after World War II "can hardly be blamed on one factor alone, but if we consider the different groups among the stateless it appears that every political event since the end of the first World War inevitably added a new category to those who lived outside the pale of the law" (p. 226-7). Commenting on Arendt's argument, Serena Parekh (2014) argues that "Arendt was the first to observe that once a person is stripped of her or his political persona and citizenship, that person appears as an abstract human being who […] does not appear to be fully human" (p. 659). Therefore, Parekh (2014) pinpoints the significance of moral obligations towards stateless people:

> [P]hilosophers ought to take more seriously the ontological deprivation of statelessness described by Arendt in considering our moral obligations to refugees and stateless people. The ontological deprivation contained three separated but interdependent elements that together showed that statelessness deprives people of certain essential features of their humanity in a fundamental though never absolute way. (p. 659)

Parekh's words are quite important because she highlights the ontological crisis that is associated with statelessness. Seen from this perspective, Al Bassam's play skillfully comments on the awkward position that the Manager occupies in the cultural and sociopolitical tapestry of the Arab society that the play dramatizes. As a stateless bastard, he is always ridiculed, stigmatized and marginalized. The play, to cite Parekh's words once more, calls on philosophers, intellectuals and human activists to "help stateless people mitigate, if not entirely overcome, the ontological deprivation […] in order to] be included in the common realm of humanity" (p. 659). Therefore, Al Bassam transforms Edmund to a stateless person over whose body legal, cultural, historical and sociopolitical discourses converge. In this way, he creates a bastard/stateless figure in his play to dramatize the dilemma of the stateless people. *In King Lear*, Edmund complains that social customs and traditions stigmatize him and render him vulnerable. According to Summers (1977), Edmund's "actions are explicable in terms of various kinds of prejudice which […] he] feel[s] or in light of the limitations imposed upon […] him] by a flawed society" (p. 231). Summers's analysis of Edmund's plight helps understand why the character of Edmund appeals to Al Bassam. In the play, the Manager tries to explain to the Girl the limbo in which he lives as a stateless bastard:

> Place of birth? Blank.
> Occupation? Blank.
> Sex? Blank.
> Mother's name? Blank.
> Nationality? Blank.
> Born here, bred here, blank. (Al Bassam, 2017, p. 68)

The Manager expresses his grievances which emanate from the social stigma attached to his identity as a bastard/stateless. Al Bassam highlights the Manager's vulnerable position in society. He draws on *King Lear* because it touches on the issue of national identity, and, in a way, foregrounds questions of statelessness, dislocation and (ill)legitimacy. Kiernan Ryan (2002) argues that we should read Shakespeare's plays in different contexts and situations to allow them "to speak not only of the world as he found it, but of the world as we know it, and of worlds to come that we will never know" (p. 380). Similarly, Desmet (2014) highlights the fact that appropriations are valued precisely for "showing us a different connection, a previously unacknowledged resemblance, between two texts or persons" (p. 55). Hence, Ryan's and Desmet's words encourage novelists, poets and playwrights to adapt and appropriate Shakespeare's plays to comment on contemporaneous issues. In addition, audiences and readers are usually keen to find links between a canonical text and a contemporary one since the latter usually helps see the former from a new perspective. By intricately drawing on Shakespeare's play, *Petrol Station* invites us to look with fresh eyes at concepts like nation-building, border crossing, and statelessness.

Just like Shakespeare's *King Lear*, Al Bassam's play foregrounds themes of nationhood, national identity, and citizenship. As many critics have pointed out, the subject of national identity is an

important theme in *King Lear*, and it is fundamentally embodied in the question of a divided, as opposed to a united, Britain. For instance, Maley (2011) argues that the play also presents, in its sources and adaptations, national, regional, and ethnic identities that are "sites of resistance to mainstream metropolitan Englishness" (p. 141). Maley (2011) insists that *King Lear* is "preoccupied precisely with what is foreign, and what is domestic" and concludes that the play "dramatizes homelessness in a new state, or statelessness in a new home" (p. 155). Similarly, Jaecheol Kim (2013) points out how *King Lear* reflects contemporaneous preoccupations of King James's reign, especially the formation of a new united nation. He argues:

In James's political rhetoric, kingdom, nation and nature are one indistinguishable entity. […] This propagation soon develops into his proclamation of "Naturalization" of the Scots. Yet, for James's English subjects, this anti-nationalist claim, wearing absolutist rhetoric, was hardly acceptable; it was *unnatural* for his English-born subjects. (p. 686-7)

According to Kim, *King Lear* is a topical play because it dramatizes issues central to King James's political views on citizenship and nationhood. Seen from Kim's perspective, one may suggest that Shakespeare's play is concerned with issues of national identity, naturalization and foreignness at the backdrop of King James's efforts to unify England and Scotland. These questions are of paramount importance in Al Bassam's play, which grapples with issues of citizenship, foreignness, and nationality. In this sense, the character of the Manager in Al Bassam's play is a site over which discourses on citizenship, foreignness, and nation formation converge. Since he is a stateless bastard, the Manager, Edmund's counterpart, is the focal point of Al Bassam's commentary on the exclusionary nature of nation-formation, and hence, the universality of issues of statelessness and displacement.

Al Bassam reveals the predicament of the Manager by showing that since he has no passport, he is not allowed to cross borders and start a new life. In the play, the Manager hopes that one day he will get a passport and will no longer be labeled as stateless. The Trafficker has promised the Manager that he will get him a passport. When the Trafficker meets the Manager, the latter immediately asks if the Trafficker has brought him a passport:

Manager: Where's my passport?

Trafficker: I'll give you a passport, for nothing, for love. It's shameful that you, our very own boy been left to grow into a man of undetermined nationality […] looked down on by the Bangals, cussed by the local girls. Who can tolerate it?

Manager: What you after?

Trafficker: Justice! I'm going to get us a meeting with the Minister of Interior.

(Al Bassam, 2017, p. 37-8)

The Trafficker is not serious to fulfill his promise because a passport-holding Manager will be a threat to him and his partner in crime, the Cashier. In this sense, the Manager is unable to prevent the Trafficker and the Cashier from making more money by smuggling fuel and trafficking humans. As Bill Berkeley (2009) argues, "statelessness is a major source of human trafficking and weapons smuggling, fueling cross-border mafias in the drug and sex trades that are themselves a growing source of instability" (p. 8). In other words, the Trafficker and the Cashier are happy to keep the Manager paperless because, on the one hand, they feel superior to him, and, on the other hand, he will remain excluded from the privileges that citizenship bestows on him. In a way, just as Edmund's bastardy makes people around him debase and marginalize him, the Manager's identity as a stateless bastard is exploited by others, especially his half-brother and the Trafficker, to demarcate the borderlines of the nation by deciding who belongs to it and who does not.

Al Bassam's appropriation of themes, tropes and motifs from *King Lear*

In *Adaptations and Appropriations*, Julie Sanders (2015) suggests that "in appropriations the intertextual relationship may be less explicit [and] more embedded" than in adaptations (p. 2). An appropriation, Sanders (2015) maintains, involves "a process of reading between the lines, offering analogues or supplements to what is available in a source text, and drawing attention to its gaps and absences" (p. 60). Naturally, Shakespeare's plays have been among the most adapted and appropriated works worldwide. Douglas Lanier (2014) argues that "appropriation operates not merely on the Shakespearean text but also on the cultural authority attached to that text, its accumulated cultural capital, which serves as a legitimating token in cultural struggles between subgroups" (p. 24). He asserts that "Shakespearean meaning is available in the present *only* through processes of appropriation that actively create, rather than passively decode, the readings and values we attribute to the Shakespearean text" (2014, p. 25). In *Petrol Station*, Al Bassam changes the names of the characters, relocates and modernizes the setting, and localizes the events. In this sense, Al Bassam's play involves, to use the words of Sanders once again, "a more decisive journey away from the informing source into a wholly new cultural product and domain" (p. 26). Hence, one may argue that *Petrol Station* is a palimpsest that still bears visible traces of *King Lear*.

Arab playwrights and novelists have notably "contributed to this burgeoning field by adapting and appropriating Shakespeare's plays for various reasons and at different times, making Shakespeare and his oeuvre an essential part of Arab audiences' literary and cultural repertoire" (Awad, 2020, p. 814). For instance, Arab American novelist Rabih Alameddine draws on Shakespeare's *King Lear* "to narrate the horrors of Lebanon's civil war" (Awad, 2016, p. 87). Yet, no study has adequately explored the relationship between Al Bassam's *Petrol Station* and Shakespeare's *King Lear*. In fact, a careful reading of Al Bassam's play shows that it borrows themes, tropes, and motifs from *King Lear*. Just like *King Lear*, *Petrol Station* merges private and public issues as it dramatizes how nation formation is predicated on processes of exclusion, marginalization, and demarcation.

The play was staged at the Kennedy Center in Washington in 2017. Local Kuwaiti newspapers like *Alanbaa*, *Alqabas* and *Aljarida* and the state-owned Kuwait News Agency (KUNA) carried the news that "Kuwaiti playwright Al Bassam kicks off world premiere of 'Petrol Station,'" and even cited Al Bassam's remarks on the issues that this play tackles. Talking to KUNA, Al Bassam expressed his hope to perform the play in Kuwait in the future (Kassraie, 2017, para. 7). However, the play, has never been staged in Kuwait nor reviewed by local Kuwaiti critics and journalists. In fact, when the play was staged at the Kennedy Center, it was described by Pressley (2017) as "enigmatic" (p. 3). Pressley (2017) maintains:

The tone is understandably subversive and angry; everything blows up at the end thanks to cartoonish yahoos who would rather destroy than share. The genre-crossing, border-blurring lens is intriguing, but the focus is blurry. Interesting ideas. Frustrating play. (p. 9)

Al Bassam has responded to Pressley's criticism in an interview with Lokke in 2021. He states that Pressley's critique emanates from the fact that the play inverts "racist and orientalist assumptions" (2021, p. 95). He elaborates that what upsets Pressley was how the play "dare[s] to present a series of deeply unflattering parallels between Arab and American male sexualities" (p. 95). In another interview, Al Bassam indicates that although the cross-cultural encounter that the play dramatizes is a fertile soil for acculturation and universal dialogue, he warns that it can be also hard to navigate. He states that he wanted *Petrol Station* to be an experiment in

crossing cultural borders (Hill, 2017, para 17). Drawing on the agonies and anxieties that Shakespeare's Edmund experiences as an illegitimate son, Al Bassam presents to international audiences the sufferings and woes of the Manger who doubles up as a bastard and a stateless person. Practically, this reduces the Manager's ability to speak and act in a meaningful way, and hence, to use Parekh's (2014) words, "his political agency [is] diminished" (p. 654). Thus, just like *King Lear*, *Petrol Station* brings home issues of nation formation, foreignness and marginalization.

As the play opens, the stage directions indicate that "[t]he sky is tarnished, dirty and not clear. Tousled wisps and tufts of smoke rise on the distant horizon denoting, to the trained eye, 21st-century urban warfare" (Al Bassam 16). With its gloominess and dirtiness, the setting portends ominous actions and events that are reminiscent of *King Lear*. Just as *King Lear* opens with Lear's important decree, the founder of the petrol station urges his sons, in a formal speech, at the start of Al Bassam's play to find a long-lost Meter:

In the name of God, the Bounteous the Merciful and in the name of His Prophet Peace Be Upon Him the follower of the right and true path. […] when our Station began, it was founded on an agreement, a contract, a pledge. This pledge took the shape of the Meter. […] Evil has taken root in this Station; corruption, like cancer, has seized its bones. […] May Allah ward us from rumor and unproven accusation: find the Meter, the bell of truth will toll. Long live the Station. (Al Bassam, 2017, p. 17)

The Father's introductory speech carries traces of both Lear's speech at the start of the play and Gloucester's superstitious banter after Lear disinherits Cordelia and banishes Kent. The formal and grand style with which the founding Father starts his speech befits kings making official announcements. Lear claims that his decision is made so "that future strife/May be prevented now" (Shakespeare, 2001/1606, 1.1.43-4). As Janette Dillon (2007) points out, the first scene of *King Lear* merges "a focus on family bonds, legitimate and illegitimate, with a focus on the broader social and political bonds underpinning the state" (p. 114). Seen from Dillon's perspective, one may argue that the Father's words at the start of *Petrol Station* reflect those of Lear since he positions his decision within a broader social and national context. Hence, both decisions combine family bonds with national concerns.

Moreover, the Father's speech portends an ominous situation. It echoes Gloucester's credulous speech on impending disorderliness in the universe:

These late eclipses in the sun and moon portend no good to us: […] love cools, friendship falls off, brothers divide: in cities, mutinies; in countries, discord; in palaces, treason; and the bond cracked 'twixt son and father. […] and all ruinous disorders, follow us disquietly to our graves. (Shakespeare, 2001/1606, 1.2.103-114)

Apparently, each play opens with an extraordinary situation that has a straight effect on the plot. The Father's speech fuses Lear's and Gloucester's ideas and thoughts and prepares the audience for a play full of violence, injustice, treachery, and familial conflicts. The parallel between Gloucester and the Father is further enhanced in the performance as the latter gives his speech while wearing sunglasses and is led by a man, implying that he, just like Gloucester who is blinded by Cornwall and Regan in *King Lear*, is eyeless.

Minor characters in *Petrol Station* are cleverly used by Al Bassam to create more links with *King Lear*. In particular, Joseph, a domestic servant, comments on the actions of the play in a way that parallels the Fool's observations. For instance, after he sees the Girl whom the Trafficker smuggled into the country, Joseph, under threats from the Cashier, reveals an important incident from the past:

Last time the skies were dark they came in swarms and droves; you weren't born, there were no fences then. […] Your father bought a girl. […] He took her to bed, for many nights he took her. […] When the darkness peeled from the skies and the sun came again, the girl was pregnant and a terrible silence filled the station. (Al Bassam, 2017, p. 55-7)

Despite Joseph's cryptic language, one speculates that the Girl that the Trafficker smuggled is a descendent of the girl whom the founder of the petrol station impregnated years ago. Joseph's prediction that the Girl has come to avenge her dead (56) echoes 'The Prophecy of Merlin' that Shakespeare's Fool speaks of:

Then shall the realm of Albion
Come to great confusion:
Then comes the time, who lives to see't,
That going shall be used with feet.
This prophecy Merlin shall make, for I live before his time. (Shakespeare, 2001/1606, 3.2.79–95)

In the prophecy, as Ryan (2002) points out, the Fool "deliberately dislocate[es] and confound[s] our temporal point of view" (p. 381). Similarly, Joseph's words are confusing as the real identity of the Girl/girl remains inscrutable.

Finally, the ending of *Petrol Station* resembles that of *King Lear*, where some characters are killed off the stage, while others commit suicide or drop dead on the stage. The closing scene of *Petrol Station*, which Wofford (2017) describes as "explosive" (p. 13), is comparable to that of *King Lear* since the number of deaths is astonishing. Joseph commits suicide by hanging himself, resembling the way Cordelia is hanged. It also replicates Goneril's suicide. The Manager enters the stage carrying Noah's body in a way that echoes the way that King Lear enters the stage carrying Cordelia's dead body. The Manager relays to the Girl how her brother was killed: "His neck was brittle as a sapling branch. In the combat of dogs what he did not know, I could not teach him. […] His neck went limp in my hands like an empty petrol hose" (Al Bassam, 2017, p. 85). The Manager's words indeed echo those of King Lear: "She's gone for ever./I know when one is dead, and when one lives;/She's dead as earth" (Shakespeare, 2001/1606, 5.3.255–258). King Lear rails at people around him and bursts into a bout of cursing and swearing: "Why should a dog, a horse, a rat, have life/And thou no breath at all? O thou'lt come no more,/Never, never, never, never, never!" (Shakespeare, 2001/1606, 5.3.304–306). Both scenes present images of fragility and despair. The Manager and King Lear speak with unbridled bitterness, making these deaths even more tragic. In addition, both the Manager and King Lear draw on animal imageries to convey a sense of loss since Noah and Cordelia died prematurely while animals, whether meant literally or metaphorically, are left to live.

The similarity between the two scenes is further boosted as the Father's death comes right after his reunion with the Girl. It is reminiscent of the scene where King Lear is reconciled with Cordelia:

Father: I loved you so much. I disemboweled the earth in search of you.

Girl: I came out of the blood red earth, my hands are trembling, I don't know why, I want them to stop trembling, but I don't know why –

[…]

Father: I want to die in these arms, let me kiss them and die, Maria. (Al Bassam, 2017, p. 85)

The Father dies near Girl's body the same way that King Lear falls dead near Cordelia's corpse. When the Manager enters carrying Noah's dead body, he comments: "Must you be dead when I am whole?" (Al Bassam, 2017, p. 85) One may argue that Al Bassam's play ends with an epiphanic moment, just as *King Lear* does. Hugh L. Hennedy (1974) argues that the ending of *King Lear* should be viewed "as presenting the last of a long series of recognitions" (p. 376). And when seen as part of a pattern of recognition, the ending of *King Lear* suggests hope rather than despair (Hennedy, 1974, p. 384). Similarly, although many people

die at the end of *Petrol Station*, the play still suggests hope especially that the Manager gets the passport that he desperately needs to end his statelessness.

Shakespeare's Edmund and Al Bassam's the Manager: bastardy and statelessness

Probably, the most important link between the two plays is the presence of a legitimate son and an illegitimate son in each play. Summers (1977) describes Edmund as "strangely affecting" and argues that Edmund's "complex attractiveness […] results from […] his intelligence, his daring, and his individuality" (p. 225). He also highlights Shakespeare's characteristic tendencies to infuse even his villains with a capacity for suffering and to suggest a significant relationship between villainy and victimization" (1977, p. 225). Thus, Shakespeare highlights the fact that Edmund is a victim of social customs. His stigmatization is a result of social views and perceptions. Hence, the stigma that Edmund bears as a bastard causes him to feel unloved and renders him incapable of loving others (Summers, 1977, p. 228). Edmund is both a villain and a victim "and his villainy can be understood only in terms of his victimization" (Summers, 1977, p. 229).

In *Petrol Station*, Al Bassam amalgamates two issues, namely bastardy and statelessness. The Manager takes on the persona of Edmund since both are the illegitimate sons of their fathers. Therefore, in this research, the Manager will be viewed as Al Bassam's version of Edmund. As a character who represents the double issues of bastardy and statelessness, the Manager is depicted by Al Bassam as a helpless character who lacks Edmund's trickeries and scheming plans. In *Petrol Station*, the legitimate son, the Cashier, is the villain who looks down upon his half-brother and seeks to murder him. In other words, while Edmund is both a victim and a victimizer, the Manager is just a victim of unrelenting cultural, historical and sociopolitical forces. While Edmund resorts to treachery, conniving and forgery to rectify what he believes is an unnatural and unfair situation, the Manager attempts to uncover the truth through finding the Meter. He believes that once the Meter is found, he will be able to expose his brother's villainy and wickedness since the latter is involved in smuggling petrol and embezzling the accrued money. By portraying the Manager as a benevolent and honorable person, who is denigrated by society solely because he has no citizenship rights, Al Bassam exposes inherent socio-cultural prejudice and bias against stateless people.

As the play opens, the Manager asks the Cashier to give him some coins (18) and insinuates that he is aware of his involvement in illegally selling petrol to a convoy of fifty trucks (19). As the Manager demands what he considers his right, the Cashier is enraged and denigrates his brother as a "bastard boy" and a "savage" (19). The Cashier intimidates the Manager and silences him. This, in fact, leads to a confrontation between the two and the Cashier reminds the Manager of his identity as a stateless person. The Cashier reminds the Manager that each of them has his own rights and duties: "The bench is yours: the office is mine. The darkies are yours: the money is mine: each to his charge, we task-share the hardship post" (19). In fact, the Manager is assigned the more laborious job of monitoring the workers under the merciless sun, while the Cashier hoards money in his air-conditioned cabin. The Cashier's division of labor between him and his half-brother reflects his superiority and his half-brother's inferiority. The way the Cashier addresses the Manager draws our attention to how stateless people have been historically viewed, to use Arendt's words, as "the scum of the earth" (p. 267). In fact, the Cashier calls the Manager and other immigrants "bastard boy and […] medieval bag of migrants" (20) to further belittle his half-brother.

Speaking to the Girl, the Cashier boasts about his superiority over his half-brother by confirming that he is a stateless person. He insists that Manager is merely "[h]alf-brother, blighted by a whore of a mother" (43). The Cashier emphasizes the idea that his half-brother is an outsider who is excluded from the privileges that the nation bestows upon its citizens. As Arendt (1973) succinctly puts it, "the loss of citizenship deprived people not only of protection, but also of all clearly established, officially recognized identity, a fact for which their eternal feverish efforts to obtain at least birth certificates from the country that denationalized them was a very exact symbol" (p. 287). Taking Arendt's words into consideration, one realizes that as a bastard/stateless person, the Manager in Al Bassam's play is presented as a vulnerable person who has neither civil rights nor social entitlements. Even the Girl is bemused that while the Cashier has a passport and a nationality, the Manager is a paperless person.

In fact, the discourse that the Cashier employs is almost identical to that used by Gloucester when he introduces Edmund to Kent at the start of *King Lear*. Gloucester confesses that Edmund's "breeding […] hath been at my charge: I have so often blushed to acknowledge him, that now I am brazed to it" (Shakespeare, 2001/1606, 1.1.8-10). He elaborates:

But I have, sir, a son by order of law, some year elder than this, who yet is no dearer in my account. Though this knave came something saucily into the world before he was sent for, yet was his mother fair, there was good sport at his making, and the whoreson must be acknowledged. (Shakespeare, 2001/1606, 1.1.18-24)

Just like Edmund, who is constantly insulted un/willingly by his father in front of others, the Manager endures his half-brother's derogatory comments. As Summers argues, "Gloucester presses home the stigma of bastardy […] That his comments are goodnatured - unthinking and tasteless rather than vicious and intentionally insulting - in no way mitigates the indignity which Edmund must endure here, and which he has undoubtedly felt for a very long time" (Summers, 1977, p. 227-8). Just as Edmund endures pejorative comments by society, so does the Manager. However, while Edmund is wicked and treacherous, the Manager is kind-hearted and good-natured. In this way, Al Bassam stirs his audience's emotions to respect the Manager and understand his predicament as a stateless person. Hence, for Al Bassam *King Lear* is a suitable literary text to use as a blueprint in order to express his thoughts on the humiliating circumstances that stateless people have to navigate on a daily basis.

King Lear, according to Conner Moore (2021), shows that "any formation of nations is […] fallible - an unnatural construct created by the whims and for the benefits of powerful individuals with no regard to the conditions of the people they govern" (p. 34). *King Lear*, Moore (2021) insists, portrays the inception of nations as an exercise "in which a privileged elite bases decisions upon emotion, and does so in a decidedly abusive manner" (p. 34). As Kim (2013) points out, "the text and subtexts of *King Lear* discuss in depth the questions of 'birth' and 'property' (with the motif of primogeniture) along with 'nature' and 'nationhood' (with the motif of unnatural national-territorial division)" as the play conflates "the problems of nation, commonwealth and public sphere […], with problems of household, private property and private sphere" (p. 688). It is the relationship between Gloucester's two sons that Al Bassam appropriates in his play. In particular, in *Petrol Station*, Edmund is transformed into the Manager, a vulnerable stateless bastard over whose body discourses on nationhood, citizenship and illegitimacy converge.

As a marginalized person, the Manager is even ridiculed by the Trafficker, who shamelessly calls him a bastard and reminds him of his lowly status (Al Bassam, 2017, p. 40). In this way, the link between Edmund and the Manager is further boosted. Apparently, the Manager is entirely helpless, and he is unable to fight back since the law is against him. Al Bassam's representation of the Manager's dilemma resembles the way Shakespeare depicts "the feeling of

exclusion which Edmund experiences as a bastard" (Summers, 1977, p. 226). The Manager's only hope is to dig out the Meter to prove his half-brother's misconduct of illegally smuggling petrol to the warring factions in the neighboring country. Thus, the Manager wants to unveil the truth by digging out the Meter. He believes that it is "the truth that breaks [… the Cashier's] back," and therefore, he is confident that the Meter will engender his own "re-birth" (Al Bassam, 2017, p. 21). Both Edmund and the Manager, feeling that they are stripped of their rights, are keen to rectify the harsh reality into which they have been born.

Elsewhere, the Manager says that he is digging "[t]o give the past its voice" (Al Bassam, 2017, p. 69). Surely, the Manager's words echo Edmund's words in his first soliloquy on how the letter he forged will make him prosper and dislodge his brother. However, while in *King Lear*, Edmund forges a letter to overcome his brother and win his father's support, in *Petrol Station*, the Manager is an honest man who wants to find the truth legitimately. In this way, Al Bassam reverses roles by presenting the illegitimate son as an honest person, while the legitimate son is a dishonest person. By doing so, Al Bassam puts a human face on both bastardy and statelessness. In this way, *Petrol Station* is a cry for justice and respect of human rights.

The Trafficker incites the Manager against his half-brother by exposing the unnaturalness of the social hierarchy at play here:

Trafficker: It kills me to see that Yankee educated infidel sweaty–fisting his model village, flicking through porn in his air-conditioned cabin and you out here swarming in sweat like a beast. […].

Manager: This is my lot: that's his.

Trafficker: He's profligate: you are noble. He's a cockroach: you are a stallion. It's a crime against nature!

Manager: It's fate. Out of my way. (Al Bassam, 2017, p. 38)

The Manager understands that the legal system is against him, and therefore, he keeps quiet. Here, one may draw on Arendt's words to explain the Manager's feelings. Arendt (1973) states that to be "uprooted means to have no place in the world, recognized and guaranteed by others; to be superfluous means not to belong to the world at all. Uprootedness can be the preliminary condition of superfluousness" (p. 475). Commenting on Arendt's words, Parekh (2014) explains:

In short, for Arendt, to be excluded physically, economically, socially and politically, as stateless people are, from the common world constitutes part of the ontological deprivation because with this comes the loss of an individual place in a common public space from which action, speech and hence identity become meaningful. (p. 654)

Parekh's words show how stateless people are stripped of their right to "engage meaningfully with others" (Parekh, 2014, p. 654), and hence, they are excluded from debates on national identity and nation formation in the public space. This explains why the Manager is silent and helpless.

In fact, by describing the unbalanced relationship between the two brothers as "a crime against nature," the Trafficker in Al Bassam's play undoubtedly echoes Edmund's words in his first soliloquy on what is natural and unnatural:

Thou, nature, art my goddess; to thy law
My services are bound. Wherefore should I
Stand in the plague of custom, and permit
The curiosity of nations to deprive me? (Shakespeare, 2001/1606, 1.2.1-4)

Edmund expresses his frustration at being branded base because he is a bastard while his physical appearance is perfectly natural. He condemns social and cultural customs that debase him. As Summers (1977) clarifies, Edmund's "dedication of himself to his goddess Nature is inextricably linked to the pain his stigma exacts of him" (p. 229). Summers (1977) insists that:

But there is a fine indignation in these lines which is unavoidably moving. The pain of exclusion is palpable in them. And there can be no escape from the torment Edmund feels at the repeated taunts-base? … base ness … base, base? by which he has come to define himself. (p. 229)

Summers's words confirm that Edmund is abused by social and cultural norms and mores. Similarly, the Manager is maltreated by people around him since he is a stateless bastard. Yet, unlike Edmund, he is absolutely honest. In other words, while Edmund and the Manager are victims of socio-cultural prejudice, the former is villainous while the latter is innocent. In portraying the Manager as a victim, Al Bassam solicits his audience's sympathy for stateless people.

The Trafficker and the Cashier relish the fact that the Manager is marginalized and insignificant: "Cashier: He hasn't a birth certificate, what birth right?" (Al Bassam, 2017, p. 72) Here, the Cashier is employing legal discourse to exclude his half-brother from the nation. This is a process of discrimination and stigmatization that is meant to uproot the Manager. The Trafficker even calls the Manager a "scorpion" which full of tricks (Al Bassam, 2017, p. 72). The language that the Trafficker employs to describe the Manager is undoubtedly offensive. It also reflects a process of 'othering' that is meant to dehumanize the Manager and accentuate his alienness. The Trafficker claims that the Manager's blood is polluted with that of foreign sectarian, ethnic and religious groups, and therefore, he should be excluded from the nation (Al Bassam, 2017, p. 72).

The Cashier incites the Trafficker to kill the Manager by convincing him that the Manager has seduced his bride. He even uses derogatory words to make the killing plausible as he publicly describes the Manager as a half human:

[C]ull the faulty, behead the decrepit, show mercy to nothing but the pure of blood. No longer will the rightful owners of this Station live in fear on their own doorsteps: mongrels beware, half-blood scum and immigrants, death comes your way! (Al Bassam, 2017, p. 75)

The Cashier's words are replete with bigotry, animosity, and intolerance. He rails at foreigners who, he believes, have exploited the station and posed a threat to the natives. The Manager is further vilified and viewed as a vulture who preys on other people's wives. Describing the Manager as "[f]ilthy," the Trafficker is determined to kill him: "I'll pull his intestines out of his throat" (Al Bassam, 2017, p. 73). The Trafficker's position is almost identical to that of Albany who discovers that there is an affair between Edmund and his wife (Shakespeare, 2001/1606, 5.3.83-89).

The Manager's sense of alienation is further highlighted when he informs the Girl that because she is a refugee, her statelessness, unlike his, is "a temporary affliction" (Al Bassam, 2017, p. 69). He is adamant that his displacement is permanent. As Berkeley (2009) explains, tragic stories of stateless people internationally "have fueled a growing worldwide movement to try to confront statelessness in a systematic way. The movement is being spearheaded by non-governmental organizations like Refugees International, Human Rights Watch, and Amnesty International" (p. 9-10). This is actually reflected in the Girl's reaction towards the end of the play when she, out of mere sympathy with the Manager, gives him her dead brother's passport, and hence, liberates him from the cultural, historical and sociopolitical shackles that have confined his life and stigmatized him.

Conclusion

This paper has examined how Al Bassam's *Petrol Station* draws on themes, tropes and motifs from Shakespeare's *King Lear*, a tragedy that, among other things, dramatizes family bonds, social hierarchy and mobility, and national identity. Al Bassam connects

King Lear and *Petrol Station*, to use Desmet's (2014) words, "across times and space, [and] establish[es] contingent moments of recognition and insight" (p. 55). Lear's decision to divide his kingdom, which has been traditionally viewed as an investigation of King James's proposal for a union between England and Scotland, triggers many questions regarding who represents the nation and who is excluded from it. In the character of the Manager, Al Bassam merges issues of bastardy and statelessness as discourses on identity, nationality, citizenship converge on his body. *Petrol Station* depicts a series of confrontations between two half-brothers, one is legitimate and the other is illegitimate, to dramatize issues of national identity, exclusion and (il)legitimacy.

Both plays open with a crucial decision taken by a patriarch. Also, some minor characters in Al Bassam's play resemble some of their peers in Shakespeare's play. And, significantly, both plays witness the death/murder of many characters. While these resemblances are important because they highlight how Al Bassam draws on *King Lear*, the most important similarity by far is the presence of a bastard son and a legitimate son in each play. Al Bassam's play dramatizes "the ontological deprivation" of stateless people represented by the Manager who by virtue of this status, is deprived of, to quote Parekh (2014), "a public space to make opportunities for action more than rare exceptions, and an ability to be judged as speaking and acting agen[t]" (p. 646). In other words, through the character of the Manager, Al Bassam reminds his audience of the universal problem of statelessness that continues to affect millions of human. He gives the Manager voice to speak back and demystify his dilemma as a stateless person. This is similar to Shakespeare's dramatization of Edmund who, according to Summers (1977), "command[s] a measure of sympathy" partly as a result of his ultimate humanity, late repentance and our perception of him as a victim of conditions for which he is not wholly to blame (p. 230-1). As a bastard/stateless, the Manager is subjected to ridicule, social stigmatization and marginalization from his half-brother and other characters. The play raises the audience's awareness of the question of stateless people and draws attention to their perpetual sense of disenfranchisement and marginalization.

Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this research as no data were generated or analysed.

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YA is responsible for the argument, correctness of the statements and content of this paper.

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No consent was necessary for this study.

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