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ARTS

## Shakespeare and Censorship in the UAE

BY HARIKA KOLLIPARA ON JULY 24, 2020 • ( 2 COMMENTS )



*“London-based actress Eleanor Russo of the Bedouin Shakespeare Company (BSC) recalls the moment that a seemingly innocuous gesture on an Abu Dhabi stage in 2012 provoked a shocked intake of collective breath from the all-male audience for whom she was performing the role of Ophelia in Hamlet. The transgression? She had perched momentarily on the lap of the actor playing the role of Polonius.”*

As many know, Shakespeare’s plays have the magical capacity to transcend time, place, and culture. In her book, *Shakespeare on the Arabian Peninsula*, Katherine Hennessy explores how the impact of Shakespeare can be seen in the Gulf, and, as the above quotation from her book suggests, whether or not the performance reaches the audience is a separate question. Shakespeare in

the Gulf is as controversial as Shakespeare was in London during the 1600s, challenging religious and political norms; yet, Shakespeare's stories are still used as a means to express the political conditions of the region and the universal human condition.

It is censorship that proves to be the main inhibitor. Hennessy dedicates almost an entire chapter in her book discussing the ways in which censorship in the United Arab Emirates has impacted performances of Shakespeare. Used as a means to maintain the conservative mores of the UAE's ruling faction, the country's censorship laws "blocks websites, cuts kissing and sex scenes from films and certain satellite TV channels, and blurs the names of dishes that contain non-halal foods, like pork and bacon, on episodes of *Masterchef*." **The UAE's internet guidelines** (<https://www.tra.gov.ae/en/about-tra/information-and-egovernment-sector/internet-guidelines/details.aspx>) define prohibited content as "any content that offends against, is objectionable to, or is contrary to the public interest, public morality, public order, public and national security, Islam morality or is otherwise prohibited by any applicable UAE law;" this includes references to pornography, homosexuality, drugs, gambling, and explicit opposition to the UAE government and Islam. **Further analysis**

(<https://opennet.net/studies/uae>) of internet censorship shows a sensitivity of restrictions extending to the conversion of Muslims, dating sites that allow coupling with non-Muslims, and even sites on the Baha'i faith. Humorously, an **article from Time Out Dubai from 2010**

(<https://www.timeoutdubai.com/films/features/15329-censorship-in-the-uae>) discusses the final UAE cut of *Sex and the City*, which left only about 30 minutes of the film to be screened. Even additional articles and instances explicating on censorship in the UAE are few and far between.

Censorship is a component of blocking **coordination goods**

(<http://www.jstor.org/stable/20031707>), an action frequently utilized by authoritarian regimes. Coordination goods that impact the ability for political opposition to organize, and can include human rights and free speech. Scholars have said that the suppression of these goods increases the longevity of regimes, and there is no doubt that this is the ultimate goal of the UAE's censorship laws. The UAE's National Media Council says that its **mission** (<https://nmc.gov.ae/en-us/NMC/Pages/visionmissionobjectives.aspx>) is to develop "a national strategy to enhance the media sector that reinforces the UAE's positive image and maintain its excellent status on all levels." The mission on its own sounds rather intense, but in its carrying out, one can understand why. **Jobs in the UAE** (<https://journals-sagepub-com.ezproxy.lib.utexas.edu/doi/full/10.1177/0306422012466798>) require a security clearance, which means livelihoods can be threatened by any express show of opposition. There have even been instances of harassment and arrests, contributing to an overall atmosphere of fear towards voicing controversial opinions. In November 2011, five individuals, called the UAE5, were arrested for insulting the UAE government on the currently banned online forum, UAE Hewar. **Mansoor, the founder of the forum**

(<https://citizenlab.ca/2016/05/stealth-falcon/>) and two others were sent links from

fraudulent human rights organizations. These links were like the one sent to Jeff Bezos (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2020/01/29/apple-iphone-bezos-hack/>) in January of 2020, when the UAE government was accused of uploading spyware onto his device. Apparently, the links have been frequently sent to human rights activists, who speak on the issues that the press cannot.

This lengthy explanation of the UAE's censorship laws leads to the obvious. It can be difficult for the audience to submit to the suspension of disbelief that the theater relies so heavily on when the audience is accustomed to viewing the world through this singular, pervasive, and even dangerous government-regulated lens.

It should be no surprise, then, that the spirit of performance in the above mentioned production of *Hamlet* could not fool the audience. Sure, Ophelia and Polonius are father and daughter in the tale, but that does not hide the fact that *the actors* partook in a taboo against contact between an unmarried man and woman. Somehow, it was something as simple as brief contact between man and woman acting as father and daughter that was more shocking than on-stage regicide of which the audience could potentially reflect on in a monarchical country. But despite the shock, the audience left the performance with positive reviews.

Perhaps the most fascinating aspect of censorship in the Gulf is its relationship to cultural barriers. In a move to become more integrated into the global community, (<https://mepc.org/uae-arab-spring-and-different-types-dissent>) the UAE has allowed international news outlets like CNN and Sky News to broadcast their Arabic satellite channels within the state, and newspapers that take no issue criticizing the country, such as The Guardian and The Economist, are available to the UAE public unabridged; meanwhile, local news outlets subject themselves to copious amounts of self-censorship. During the arrests of the UAE5, international news outlets immediately responded before any formal statement had been made by the UAE and even before the arrests had been deemed legitimate. The local press, on the other hand, waited for the downbeat from the Emirates News Agency (WAM), which dictates what news is publishable, before releasing their pro-government material on the arrests. It would seem hypocritical, then, that the English press in the UAE is not restrained by the same restrictions as the Arab press; however, there seems to be no urgency to tighten the content laws for the English press. In an assessment of 100 countries (<https://www.thenational.ae/uae/education/english-proficiency-in-uae-among-best-in-region-report-shows-1.948182>), the UAE placed 70th in English proficiency and fell under the “very poor proficiency” category. In essence, international media poses no threat and has little impact on the opinions of the general public because most of the population is simply unable to understand what they are saying.

Hennessy recalls being told by a theatre director from the Gulf (<https://arablit.org/2019/04/24/the-enchanting-the-surprising-the-shocking-shakespeare-on-the->

arabian-peninsula/), “We perform Shakespeare because the censors don’t understand Elizabethan English.” Yet, an inability to understand the language has not inhibited the entertainment of Emiratis. A senior staff member of the National Media Council (<https://www.timeoutdubai.com/films/features/15329-censorship-in-the-uae>) once stated “‘90 per cent of material – films, music, video games – is from outside our culture’.” On a similar line, an Indian adaptation of *Twelfth Night* performed in Hindi and Punjabi, Hennessy discusses, had no problem getting the audience members busting at the seams from laughter when Malvolio came “on stage in near transparent yellow tights, family jewels struggling to break out of barely concealed blue kachchas.” Unlike news outlets, cultural barriers have the potential to liberate performances in the UAE.

Similarly, an all-women adaptation of *Hamlet* by Resuscitation Theater (RT) used a movement sequence to to portray the rape of Queen Gertrude by Claudius before their marriage, and the adaptations portrays Gertrude as a victim of domestic abuse by both the late Hamlet and Claudius. The lack of controversy and censorship was due to the fact that the sexual violence was portrayed by only women and the action itself was more implicit through movement rather than explicit. Furthermore, “the play itself has the cultural cachet of Shakespeare attached to it.” For RT, they rarely run into censorship issues as the Ministry of Culture only “look[s] out for obvious things like sexual language or religious imagery or political messages.” News outlets are limited by the words they use and, thus, they limit their audience. However, theater, and in general art, utilizes other means of expression through physical movement, lights, sets, costumes, and the inflections of the voice. Provocative and taboo subjects can still be brought to the public; they just need to be symbolic. Another Shakespeare adaptation performed by RT, *Comedy of Errors* was performed in 2014, when the abuse of migrant workers in the Gulf had hit headlines. With the zeitgeist of the time, the adaptation thus “transformed Nell from a minor figure of fun into the play’s moral compass. Meanwhile “The Law Enforcer” — a fusion of the roles of Duke Solinus and the Jailer....provided a discomfoting reminder of the arbitrary nature of official power and authority in the Gulf.” Outside the bounds of language, performance can touch controversial issues in subtle, but impactful ways.

Likewise, film can also navigate around censorship laws. Nayla Al Khaja (<https://www.thecaviar spoon.com/people/nayla-al-khaja-first-emirati-female-film-director-and-producer>) is the first female filmmaker in the UAE and a leader in the movement to establish a stable Emarati film industry with its growth being obstructed by the country’s censorship law. She uses her films to subtly challenge cultural conventions, “by filming taboo topics through the usage of symbolism.” Her first short film, “Arabana,” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p-YfY5a0P8k>) was funded by UNICEF to cover the issue of pedophilia. Never explicitly stating or showing the crime, the thoughtful film still manages to remind audience members to keep a careful eye on their children. While she’s escaped the censorship laws, Al Khaja’s films have been met with mixed reactions.



(<https://www.arabianbusiness.com/film-it-they-will-come-438707.html>) According to her, she has dealt with harsh criticism from about 10 percent of nationals (as opposed to the expatriate population), while the other 90 percent have been supportive. “Arabana” overall had positive reviews since it covered a universal subject; however, for another one of Al Khaja’s films, “Malal,” which is about a newly wed wife who gets bored with her husband, “men absolutely hated it, but the women loved it.” Such a difference of opinion is necessary. While the controversy is tiny, it establishes a small gateway to understanding and discussing the larger issues at hand and lends itself to the possibility and hope of systemic change.

Censorship in the UAE is not quite like the doublethink Orwell imagined in 1984, but rather, as Katherine Hennessey observes in performances of Shakespeare, it is a matter of controlling presentation over content. Art is not simply a relaying of information; it is a means of expressing time-withstanding issues such as abuse and oppression. It has the capability to subtly challenge mainstream ideas beyond that of news media, whether that be in the US or the UAE. Art reminds people of what it means to be human, living in a world that will forever have its problems and the inherent need inside everyone to acknowledge those flaws.

*Grammatical and Spelling Errors corrected 9/30/20*



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Thank you for this very insightful analysis. Great work!

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