



REVIEW ARTICLE

Vol. 13. Issue 1. 2026 (Jan-March.)

INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA
2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

A Review of the Arabic Translation of Allusions in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*

Nour Alshikh Sobeh

PhD, School of English Language Education, The English and Foreign Languages
University, Hyderabad, India
Email: nouralshikhphdele19@efluniversity.ac.in

[doi: 10.33329/ijelr.13.1.164](https://doi.org/10.33329/ijelr.13.1.164)



Article information

Article Received:10/02/2026
Article Accepted:02/03/2026
Published online:09/03/2026

Abstract

Shakespeare's *Macbeth* is interwoven with allusions to biblical narratives (e.g., the Fall in Lady Macbeth's sleepwalking scene), classical mythology (e.g., Hecate's invocation), and historical motifs (e.g., equivocation echoing Gunpowder Plot rhetoric), which pose significant challenges for translators who seek to preserve their interpretive power. This review article critically analyzes Jabra Ibrahim Jabra's 1960s Arabic translation of allusions in the play of *Macbeth*, applying frameworks from Peter Newmark's semantic-communicative spectrum to pivotal excerpts including the witches' prophecies ("fair is foul"), Banquo's ghost, and Macbeth's "tomorrow" soliloquy. The analysis demonstrates Jabra's hybrid strategy: foreignization via direct transliteration for culturally resonant allusions (e.g., retaining "Birnam Wood"), domestication through Arabic proverbs or Quranic parallels for accessibility, and innovative footnotes to bridge gaps. While this enhances readability for Arab audiences, selective omissions in politically sensitive historical references occasionally weaken thematic irony. Nevertheless, Jabra's rendition exemplifies culturally attuned fidelity, advancing Arabic literary translation by negotiating Shakespearean universality with local hermeneutics. This review article contributes to translation studies by illuminating allusion transfer in drama and offers practical guidance for future renditions of intertextual classics.

Keywords: literary translation; cultural studies; allusions; drama; Jabra Ibrahim Jabra; *Macbeth*.

Introduction

Although more than a century has passed since Shakespeare began to be translated into Arabic, the translations still endure a number of problems which deserve to be examined. Practical suggestions are necessary to get better translation of Shakespeare into Arabic and produce more faithful and accurate versions.

To translate literary texts from quite different languages and cultures is difficult. The case becomes more complicated and problematic when one translates Shakespeare's plays into Arabic, since the Elizabethan cultural background is totally different from the Arab one's. English and Arabic differ widely in idioms, puns, proverbs, grammar and images. Most of the times, these plays are translated into Arabic for an Arab reader who has neither read Shakespeare in English, nor had the chance to see a performance of the plays on stage. Therefore, a very accurate and faithful translation is needed in order to retain all the dramatic aspects and themes of the Shakespearean plays.

However, a serious question arises as to how the passages in verse should be translated into Arabic since these plays were composed of prose and verse, Kamal Nadir (1958, p. 166) believes that:

For this reason a good translation of Shakespeare into Arabic verse has been found impracticable, and the Arab audience has to content itself with prose. Thus the Arab translator is not only translating from one language to another, but from one distinct medium into another.

This review is concerned with the translation of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* into Arabic. It discusses namely Jabra Ibrahim Jabra's rendering of this tragedy. The reasons that this translation is selected for discussion are that it is among the most modern versions of Shakespeare's tragedies in Arabic and it is one of the most faithful renderings as Hadi (2009) and Alsaai (1997) considered it. It is a translation that is done by a well-known writer and a specialized professor in English Literature. This review is a comparative study in the sense of discussing other translators' choices in some cases I felt they would highlight the way in which Jabra has(not) succeeded in rendering the best equivalents to an Arab reader.

The question that needs to be answered in this review is what kind of translation techniques and methods are used by Jabra in transferring Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, the Elizabethan text, from culture to culture?

Translating culture in a Shakespearean play

Translation as a process of communication normally communicates the intended meaning of the original language to its counterpart (TL) culture in a different language and to a different audience. Linguistic theories provide the basis for the translation process, and analysis of the linguistic form of SL units (word, sentence or a text) regardless of the SL author cultural background. However, the meaning of a word or a sentence relies not only on its place in the text but also on other factors outside the text.

Generally speaking, when dealing with a poetic text, the subject of culture must be considered in the translation process, as it directly affects the understanding of the ST message, and constitute an essential factor in determining the appropriateness of linguistic units (Berdson, 2007, p. 121). Commenting on such issues, in his article "Source culture and target reader/creativity in translation" Aziz (1982, p. 20) states that "translation is not merely confined to language; it also involves translating culture."

English and Arabic have different characteristics both linguistically and culturally. Linguistically, the two languages belong to very different language families: English is an Indo-European language while Arabic is a Semitic one. Consequently, there are no complete correspondences between the two languages. Nida (1964, p. 156) states:

No two languages are identical, either in the meaning given to corresponding signals or in the ways in which such signals are arranged in phrases and sentences; it stands to reason that there can be no absolute correspondences between languages. Hence there can be no fully exact translations.

Accordingly, the task of translation needs to be carried on carefully, given the cultural differences between SL and TL balancing communication between the two cultures. Nevertheless, this demands the translator a careful use of culturally specific metaphors and allusions in particular.

Jabra's Translation of Allusions

Allusion is one of the basic elements to observe in Shakespeare's works in general and particularly this play. Abrams (1992, p. 9) defines allusion as "a passing reference, without explicit identification, to a literary or historical person, place, or event, or to another literary work or passage." He mentioned that the meaning of allusion (as the most common type of intertextuality) as an English word was equal to the initial meaning of "illusion" and in the early Renaissance it was used in the sense of a pun, or word-play in general. Later it meant any symbolic likening, whether in allegory, parable or metaphor. Another meaning, which is still the correct modern one, follows by the early seventeenth century and involves any implied, indirect or hidden reference. Generally, allusion is considered a literary device, like alliteration or simile, the poet or author uses it in order to invite a specific kind of aesthetic experience and finally a kind of textual object/moment is created.

The occurrence of allusions is more challenging in translation. Not only does the translator of *Macbeth* have to cope with the usual linguistic difficulties of translating from English to Arabic, he also has to handle different references and allusions. In some of its parts, the text of this play is filled with diverse references: religious, historical and cultural. Very often, these three references cannot be separated from each other as mythology is usually mixed with historic events and vice versa. For example, readers encounter the allusions in 'two-fold balls and treble sceptres' (IV.i) يحمل كرتين اثنتين و صوالج ثلاثة to the descent of Scottish kings from Banquo when Macbeth describes the ghost. This is a strange description in the TT, so Jabra adds a footnote here to relate these lines with the English and Scottish tradition in monarchy coronation. Though it cuts the reading, it is a helpful cultural remark. Later in the play we come upon the undramatic description of touching for the King's Evil (James performed this ceremony); and the dramatic use of witchcraft, a matter on which James considered himself an authority. This is an obvious example where mythology (the fictitious ability to heal) is assorted with historic events (King James is real historic figure) in an allusion. A further example is the allusion to the Gunpowder Plot (II.iii) "here's an *equivocator* that could swear in both the scales" in the Porter scene where real historic event is subtly mixed with other cultural implications around this word. Jabra finds no better ways to pass these references to the Arab reader than explaining them in notes. Thus in the same scene which is dense with cultural references, the Porter welcomes in his imagined hell a farmer who expects plenty crop, and then an "English tailor come hither for stealing out of a French hose." Jabra translated these lines literally, so he needed a long explanatory note that outnumbered the original speech.

In addition, translators find further difficulty in rendering the Roman and Greek references to the Arab reader in the text. This is so common type of allusion that spreads throughout the original text. *Macbeth*, awaiting the murderers, compares himself and Banquo with Mark Antony and Octavian (Shakespeare's Octavius), the man who became Augustus Caesar, the first Roman emperor. This reference is quite meaningful in the ST yet it needs again an explanatory note by Jabra in the TT:

ST There is none but he,
Whose being I do fear; and under him
My genius is rebuked, as it is said
Mark Antony's was by Caesar

TT ..ليس ثمّة من أخشاه
إلاه، وملاكي الحارس إزاءه مهين

كما كان ملاك انطونيو، على ما يقال، إزاء قيصر

Interestingly, Ameen in the previous extract managed to explain the reference without extra-textual notes:

إنني لا أخشى أحد سواه . فنجمي هو دائماً باهت الضوء إلى جوار نجمه، تماماً كما يقال عن نجم مارك أنطونيو إلى جوار نجم أوكتافوس
قيصر Ameen (1994, p. 162)

His translation is better at the communicative level, though as we have seen it is not always available especially in cultural allusion which is strict to certain community as the implications of the farmer and tailor. This asserts what Munday (2009, p. 81) concludes:

Not all allusions have such clear exospheric and exportable referents, but rather carry with them 'cultural baggage', opening up frames or schemata more specifically related to what is appropriate or valued in a particular culture.

However, the translation of this play encompasses further problems on the cultural levels, particularly on rendering the religious references. One of the problematic words in the TC is the one referring to God; in the play we encounter words like Faith, Heaven, Powers, etc. in so many contexts. Jabra does not seem so more systematic than Ameen rendering them the accurate equivalence in each context. We know that these words cannot be simply translated as الله in Arabic. In addition, Jabra is aware of this religious consideration in the ST and he refers to it in his notes :

كان في عهد شكسبير قانون يمنع الممثلين من إساءة استعمال اسم الجلالة، أو المسيح، أو الروح القدس، كما يمنعهم من ذكر هذه الأسماء بصحبة ما يوحي بالتفكه أو الإثم . الكلمة الشكسبيرية هنا على الأرجح هي "الله" في الأصل، غير أن الممثلين يستبدلونها بكلمة السماء، خوفاً من عقاب القانون، كانت الغرامة عشرة جنيهات عن كل مرة يقع فيها ذكر الله في مثل الحالات المنصوص عليها. (Jabra, 1990, p. 767)

[There was an act at Shakespeare time that prohibits using the name of God, Jesus, or Holy Spirit by actors in inappropriate contexts as joking and offending. Shakespeare's word here is likely to be "God/ Allah" in the original, but the actors substituted it with "heaven" in fear of retribution; the forfeit was ten pounds to every time this name "God/الله" is pronounced in the prohibited contexts.]

Nevertheless, Jabra uses the word "الله" in his translation; he translates the word "heaven" in Lennox's speech, as "لا سمح الله" (BT: God forbid):

and I do think

That, had he Duncan's sons under his key

As, *an't please Heaven*, he shall not. (III. vi)

When the messenger addresses Lady Macduff with the word "Heaven"

Heaven preserve you; (IV. ii)

Jabra translates it as "حفظتك السماء" though it occurred in a solemn context, i.e. it is not used in the forbidden contexts which he refers to in the notes before. Similarly, 'heaven' is repeatedly used in the ST in few lines later in Macduff's speech (IV. iii):

Heaven rest them now/ ...

... But gentle Heavens/ ...

... Heaven forgive him too!

Jabra translates it to "سامحته السماء!" "السماء الخيرة" "أراحتهم السماء الآن" though it would be better in Arabic to appeal to God "الله" not "السماء" in such contexts. On the other hand, Ameen adapts these

expression a bit closer to the TT culture; he uses "طيب الله مثواهم" "رحمك اللهم" "غفرانك اللهم" respectively for the above expressions.

Jabra's inconsistency in translating these religious names, is best exemplified at the end of the same scene, Act four:

ST ... , Macbeth

Is ripe for shaking, and the *powers above*

Put on their instruments.

TT مالكوم : مكبث حان قطافه ، و القوى العلوية

. ترتدي سلاحها

Apart from his odd wording in Arabic to "القوى العلوية" "مكبث حان قطافه", Jabra probably wants to evoke the Arabic allusion of "إني أرى رؤوساً قد أينعت و حان قطافها". On the other hand, Ameen provides dynamic equivalence once again at the expense of intertext allusion; he translates the previous extract as :

قد حان أوان سقوط مكبث , و قد اختارنا الله للأخذ بالثأر ,

This kind of intertext allusion has been used by Jabra in many occasions of the text; it enhanced his translation on the cultural and linguistic level as well in my opinion. The following extract illustrates this point further:

ST Lady Macduff: ... for the poor *wren*,

The most diminutive of birds, will fight,

Her young ones in her nest, against the owl. (IV. ii)

TT ..فالبغاث المسكين,

أصغر العصافير كلها، حين تكون

فراخه في العش، يقارع اليوم

Jabra preferred to use "البغاث", not the denotation of the ST's word "wren", in order to evoke in our minds the Arabic proverb "إن البغاث في أرضنا يستنسر". This allusion serves the communicative purpose of the lines in the TT since, in the origin, they have been said to tempt Macbeth in metaphoric language, it is so clever then to create this effect in the TT by referring to an Arabic proverb that serves the meaning of the speech.

In other direct allusions or quotations to Biblical texts particularly, Jabra does not hesitate to embed such allusions in the target text, while Ameen fairly often omits them. In the following extract Jabra keeps the intertext allusion of the original text and adds note clarifying the Biblical verses they were referred to:

ST Macduff: Most sacrilegious murder hath broke ope

The Lord's anointed temple, and stole thence

The life o' the building! (II.iii)

TT مكدف : لقد انتهك القتل الحرام عنوة

هيكل الممشوح بزيت الرب وسرق منه

حياة البنين!

There are two compact allusions to the Bible in order show us the grave crime of killing the King as the worst violation of a sacred thing:

(الملك الذي مسح بزيت الله) "but mine eye spared thee; and I said, I will not put forth mine hand against my lord; for he is the LORD's anointed." Sam.24:10 and (الهيكل وحياته) 1Co:3:16: "Know ye not that ye are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwelleth in you?" 1Co:3:17: "If any man defile the temple of God, him shall God destroy; for the temple of God is holy, which temple ye are". Though these seem not so familiar to the Arab reader, they add a lot to the faithfulness of the translated text in my opinion, the thing that is missing in Ameen's rendering when he omits such religious expressions. Indeed, these verses and other cultural allusions tell us a lot about the cultural background of the ST and so participate in a way or another in the overall meaning of the work.

So, from the above discussion, we can conclude that a theory of translation includes more than the text itself. That is to say, the meaning of a word or a sentence depends not only on its place in the text but also on other factors and matters outside the text. For example, cultural facts and factors are also relevant to the interpretation of SL word meaning. In this regard, Larson (1984, p. 430) notes that "meaning of this kind needs to be conveyed with the conditions of a culture and its audience." He gives a clear-cut picture when he states that:

Each society will interpret a message in terms of its own culture. The receptor audience will decode the translation in terms of its own culture and experience, not in terms of the culture and experience of the author and audience of the original.

Conclusion

Cultural words and references exhibit various connotations that need to be considered by the translator. The challenge for the translator, then, is double-faced. First, the figurative meaning of lexical items creates a great challenge for translators of poetic texts; hence, a translator must recognize when words in the SL are being used in a secondary sense in order to produce a reasonable translation. Second, when a word in the TL is being used in its secondary meaning, care must be taken to build in the adequate context to guarantee correct meaning, since secondary meanings are dependent on context.

The play is written in the Renaissance English, thus it has very peculiarities as a literal work in English firstly, and when translated to Arabic, secondly. Therefore, translators should pay attention to the special meaning of some words in that era in order to avoid inappropriate renderings as we saw for example in words like time, seasons, nature and so many other ones throughout the discussion of this play.

References

- Abrams, M. H. (1992). *A glossary of literary terms*. Massachusetts: Earl McPeck.
- Alsaai, H. (1997). *A critical assessment of the translations* (Doctoral dissertation). London University.
- Aziz, Y. (1982). Cultural problems of English/Arabic translation. *Babel: International Journal of Translation*, 28, 20-30.
- Baker, M. (1992). *In other words: A coursebook on translation*. Routledge.
- Berdom, Abduladim, *A comparative study of some English translations of parts of three Mu'allaqat*, diss., Dueham: Durham University, 2007
- Blake, N. F. (1985). *Shakespeare's language: An introduction*. Macmillan.
- Braunmuller, A. R. (1997). *The New Cambridge Shakespeare: Macbeth*. Cambridge University Press.
- Catford, J. C. (1965). *A linguistic theory of translation*. Oxford University Press.

ⁱ Jabra (1990, p. 705) refers mistakenly to the number of the verses as "14:10" and "16:6" in his notes.

-
- Dickins, J., Hervey, S., & Higgins, I. (2002). *Thinking Arabic translation: A course in translation method – Arabic to English*. Routledge.
- Enani, M. M. (1992). *Fan al-tarjamah*. Al-Masriya Al-'Alamiya Lil Nashr-Longman.
- Gove, P. (1980). *Webster's new dictionary of synonyms*. Merriam-Webster.
- Hadi, A. (2009). *Macbeth fi arba'a tarjamat 'arabiyya*. Dar Sharkeat.
- Hatim, B., & Mason, I. (1997). *The translator as communicator*. Routledge.
- Hatim, B., & Munday, J. (2004). *Translation: An advanced resource book*. Routledge.
- Larson, M. (1984). *Meaning-Based Translation*. London: Bradford Publishing House.
- Munday, J. (2009). *The Routledge Companion to Translation Studies*. Routledge.
- Muir, K. (1995). *The Arden Shakespeare: Macbeth*. Routledge.
- Nadir, K. (1958). *Shakespeare and the Arabic-speaking audience* (Doctoral dissertation). Birmingham University.
- Newmark, P. (1988). *A textbook of translation*. Prentice Hall International.
- Newmark, P. (1991). *About translation*. Multilingual Matters.
- Nida, E. A. (1964). *Toward a science of translation: With special reference to principles and procedures involved in Bible translation*. E. J. Brill.
- Nida, E. A., & Taber, C. R. (1982). *The theory and practice of translation*. Brill.
- Raffel, B. (2005). *The annotated Shakespeare: Macbeth*. Yale University Press.
- Saeed, J. I. (1991). *Semantics*. Blackwell.
- Schmidt, A. (1971). *Shakespeare lexicon and quotation dictionary* (Vols. 1-2). Dover Publications.
- Shewmaker, E. F. (2008). *Shakespeare's language*. Facts On File.
- Soanes, C., & Stevenson, A. (2004). *Concise Oxford English dictionary*. Oxford University Press.
- Twaij, M. B. (1973). *Shakespeare in the Arab world* (Doctoral dissertation). Northwestern University.
- Wilss, W. (1982). *The science of translation: Problems and methods*. Gunter Narr Verlag.

Arabic Translations of *Macbeth*

- Shakespeare, W. (1974). *Macbeth* (K. Mutran, Trans.). Dar Al-Jeel. (Original work published 1606)
- Shakespeare, W. (1990). *Macbeth*. In J. Jabra (Trans.), *Al-ma'asi al-kubra: Hamlet, Othello, King Lear, Macbeth*. Al-Mu'assasah Al-'Arabiyya Lil-Dirasat wa Al-Nashr.
- Shakespeare, W. (1994). *Macbeth* (A. Ameen, Trans.). Dar Al-Shurūq.
- Shakespeare, W. (2000). *Macbeth* (S. Nyazi, Trans.). Arab Diffusion Company.

English Editions of *Macbeth*

- Shakespeare, W. (1997). *Macbeth* (A. R. Braunmuller, Ed.). Cambridge University Press.
- Shakespeare, W. (1995). *Macbeth* (K. Muir, Ed.). Routledge.
- Shakespeare, W. (2005). *Macbeth* (B. Raffel, Ed.). Yale University Press.