

**At the Dawn of Existence: Aspects of Liminality in Sulayman
Al Bassam's *Petrol Station***

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Abstract

This article explores the temporal and the spatial aspects of liminality in Sulayman Al Bassam's play, *Petrol Station* (2017). Drawing on the theory of liminality, the paper investigates how liminality informed characterization, identity formation, the evasive concept of truth, and the characters' absurd existence in Al Bassam's work. It also shows how the author skillfully projects the liminality of geographical locations on the erratic boundaries between the personal and the collective, the literal and the symbolic, identity and loss of identity, faith and atheism, order and chaos, meaning and futility, tragedy and humor, and life and death. Accordingly, the play provides a proficient dramatization of how geographical liminality directly affects subjectivity and creates an apt environment where liminal identities can develop. The article concludes that the characters who manage to overcome their in-betweenness in the play achieve this through their individual determination to transcend the different aspects of liminality.

Keywords: Sulayman Al Bassam, Liminality, Temporal, Spatial, Absurdity, Identity.

Introduction

Sulayman Al Bassam is an Anglo- Kuwaiti playwright and director. He is the founder of Zaoum theatre in London and the author of several works, most of which take place in the contemporary Arab world and tackle a wide array of themes such as identity, border crossing, immigration, political corruption, extremism, loyalty, and betrayal (Holderness 2014, v-viii). This paper explores the temporal and the spatial aspects of liminality in Al Bassam's *Petrol Station* (2017) which is the first play in a trilogy he is still working on (The Kennedy Center 2017, n. p.). It examines these aspects vis-a-vis characterization, identity formation, the evasive concept of truth, and the characters' absurd existence. It also shows how the play goes beyond the liminality of geographical locations to encompass the liminality

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between the personal and the collective, the literal and the symbolic, identity and loss of identity, faith and atheism, order and chaos, meaning and futility, tragedy and humor, and life and death.

In “On liminality: Conceptualizing ‘in between-ness’,” Jasper Balduk (2008) traces the development of the theory of liminality by underlining the modern conceptualization and postmodern re-conceptualization of the term. Balduk states that the ethnologist Arnold Van Gennep was the one who coined and first introduced the term “liminal” or “liminality” in *Les rites de passage* (1909) in which “liminality refers to a state of in between-ness during rites of passage.... such rites are ceremonial acts of a special kind that accompany a person going from one social grouping to another, connected to different phases in life” (2008, vii). According to Balduk (2008), the term started to gain attention only after the English translation of the book appeared in 1960 and after the anthropologist Victor Turner elaborated on Gennep’s argument in his book, *The Forest of Symbols* (1967). Since then, the concept started to be recognized “outside ethnology and anthropology” (Balduk 2008, vi).

Balduk (2008, iv-viii) contends that with the advent of postmodernism, the concept underwent a shift and started to extend to include more situations to be “labeled luminal,” resulting in “an ‘expansion’ of the instances in which the concept is applied.” Balduk asserts that in-betweenness as a traditional modern concept is socio-anthropological whereas geopolitical in the postmodern context. Considering the term’s general reference to states, situations, or spaces of transition, Balduk (2008, 23) underscores the concept’s departure from “the context of ritual.” Hence, he accentuates the fluidity and flexibility of the term since it fits into various contexts and fields of study.

Following the same line of thought, Hazel Andrews and Les Roberts (2014) argue in their article entitled “Liminality,” that it is restrictive to think of the concept of liminality within the confines of geography in literature. In this regard, they assert that “those surveying the abundant literature on border zones, non places, interstitial spaces, edgelands, contact zones, spaces of hybridity, third space, heterotopias, and so on, could be forgiven for thinking that liminality is and ever has been intrinsically spatial in terms of the discursive landscapes within which discussions on liminality are invariably situated” (3). They maintain that the “spatial turn” was influential enough to make the concept transcend geography, thus emphasizing the “need to rethink and ‘re-map’ liminality” and to explore other “spatialities of liminality” (Andrews and Roberts 2014, 4). Most importantly, Andrews and Roberts (2014) demonstrate that liminal spaces are spaces in which liminal identities develop: “liminal zones are anti-essentialist spaces where identities are contingent, malleable and fluid, is one that also underpins Bhabha’s concept of ‘third space’, conceived of as a cultural space where hybrid identities are negotiated and forged, often in resistance to hegemonic power structures” (14). Drawing on the aforementioned discussions, this paper gradually unfolds some crucial characteristics of liminality and liminal subjects in *Petrol Station*.

Spatial and Temporal Liminality in *Petrol Station*

Petrol Station is a border play that is set in “a remote petrol station in proximity to a national border in the Arabian Gulf...surrounded by arid desert” (*Petrol Station*, 16 italics in original). On this turbulent

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border between two unidentified countries and near a civil war, the plot revolves around a family dispute between two half-brothers, one of which is the fruit of an extramarital relationship. In the play, the characters are divided into three groups: Masters (Father, Cashier, Manager, Trafficker, and Mother of the Cashier), Migrant Workers (Joseph, Bayu, Khan, and Mother of the Manager), and Refugees (Girl and Noah). The author resolves the conflict by killing off the Father and other characters, the migration of the illegitimate son, and the burning of the station in an absurd way.

Petrol Station is spatially and temporally liminal. Spacewise, the events take place on the border between unnamed countries. Timewise, as far as Genep's three phases of "preliminal," "liminal," and "postliminal" are concerned, the during-war period is the liminal stage to the pre-war and post-war periods. The spatio-temporal liminality of the play is quite significant for it foreshadows and highlights the play's several aspects of liminality and in-betweenness which this paper attempts to unravel. The specificity of the geographical location of the border, and temporal period of war underscore the other metaphorical liminal positions featured in the work. Altogether, they attest to the author's interest in liminality as a major dramatic concern. In an interview, Al Bassam (2014) stresses his interest in liminal spaces:

I've always found myself coming back to work on the liminal spaces between languages, power systems, and culture. These are areas of human interaction that are heavily marked and determined by ideology, stereotype, and prejudice within which the arc of the play carves out a new space for interaction and thought. I suppose this is why I am attracted to dramatic structures, spaces, and language that tear away from the safety zones of straight realism and present less linear trajectories, they reflect more precisely my own sense of experience. I've made work highly critical of the ways in which ideology (nation, sect, and religion) perverts and destroys individuals. I'm ready now to embark on more intimate, character-driven explorations of these themes. That's what excites me. (854-55)

Interestingly enough, this interview in 2013 (published 2014) coincided with the time when the idea of the play dawned on Al Bassam; and this was his answer when asked about his plan for the future text. Al Bassam's attitude towards liminal spaces offers a starting point for tracing the liminal aspects in *Petrol Station*.

Al Bassam sets the events in a typical liminal geographical area where personal and collective conflicts intersect and reciprocally affect each other. Whereas the familial dispute between the two half-brothers represents the personal or the individual conflict, the nearby civil war stands for the collective struggle. The fissure in the half-brothers' relationship becomes quite clear at the beginning of the play when the Cashier sternly divides the family belongings and distributes the roles around the station:

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. Do we need drama? Do we need blood ties? Monkeys groom each other's fur of lice. We should do the same:

exchange services. Despite the brutality of our surroundings, we could concoct an illusory, circumstantial kind of harmony. (*Petrol Station*, 19)

The Cashier's disregard for "blood ties" indicates that these half brothers are victims of a legacy of hatred and greed which eliminate any sense of genuine fraternity. He bases his relationship with his brother on mutual interests and fake agreement. The familial conflict of the petrol station owners functions as a microcosm for the nearby civil war.

As Susanne L. Wofford (2017) mentions in her foreword to the play, Al Bassam "presents a powerful *personal* drama that is also a story on a *global* scale of migrants, statelessness, and intersection of war, oil, and profit" (7 emphasis added). At the beginning of the play, Al Bassam (2017, 6) states that he started writing the play in the aftermath of the American invasion of Iraq in 2003, an experience, which he thinks, "echoed" the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990. In this respect, he maintains that both wars shared the same image of the "black skies" and "masked sun" and that "[t]his is the black sky under which *Petrol Station* unfurls: it is the sky of more than one war, more than one violence" (6). He adds that "questions of borders, oil, migrants, are not limited to the Arabian Gulf" (6). Despite the fact that the aforementioned local conflicts are not directly referred to in the text, they played a major role in inspiring the author to explore the atrocities of war and their indelible effects on various people with different backgrounds. The half brothers' dispute could be plausibly interpreted as an allegory for the Iraqi/Kuwaiti crisis.

In *Petrol Station*, the collective does not only stand for the war experience of a certain nation. In "Shakespeare, Global Debris, and International Political Theatre," Al Bassam (2012) clarifies how he maintains a balance between addressing national concerns of the Arab World and engaging non-Arab audiences in this political discourse. He claims that his works are:

highly critical of dominant political practices inside the Arab world; however, they simultaneously construct a second political discourse that is directed towards audiences outside the Arab world, looking in. The result of this double-edged moral thrust is that neither Arab audiences nor their Western counterparts can watch these pieces without feeling a sense of being addressees in a dramatic political dialogue that elicits engagement. (129)

Al Bassam (2012) mystifies the setting and uses some unnamed characters in order to transcend locality and regionalism. Additionally, the allegorical nature of the play allows the author to freely critique the status quo without exposing himself "directly to censure and punishment" (129). According to Omayya Khalifa (2017, 180), Al Bassam's employment of allegory in his plays acts as a mode of political resistance which enables him to satirize "despotism and corruption in the Arab World." His proficient use of allegory emancipates his expression and renders his coded political messages applicable to different social and political milieus.

The personal/collective liminality performs an integral part of the play's literal/figurative liminality which Al Bassam skillfully employs to raise the text's themes and tropes to a universal level. In most of his plays, Al Bassam shows how Western or global political corruption collides with the corruption of

local leaders and governments “especially when the profits of the oil and energy industries and the selling of arms are taken into account” (Wofford 2017, 8). In *Petrol Station*, the setting has a double function as an actual place where everybody stops to refill their tanks as well as a “symbolic space, a picture of an oil kingdom itself, an entire state that is really just like a gas station” (Wofford 2017, 8-9). One could further argue that the Petrol Station symbolizes any country, Gulf or otherwise, for just like the Petrol Station that explodes at the end because of a cigarette thrown playfully by two war profiteers, it only takes a spark for war to start in any country characterized by sectarian, religious, political, or economic struggles. Warmongers and war profiteers greedily exploit such conflicts for their own benefit.

Liminality of Characters and the Absurd Existence in *Petrol Station*

In *Petrol Station*, the symbolism of names manifests itself in the author's use of titles or labels instead of names to refer to the main characters like Father, Cashier, Manager, Trafficker, and Girl. Although Al Bassam states some of their names within the dialogue, the anonymity of these characters intentionally broadens the scope of their referential capacity in order to transcend the geographical setting of the play. Accordingly, and on the figurative level, these characters represent specific groups besides being characters on their own right. The evasive symbolism of character names and roles enhances the universal dimension in the author's ultimate dramatic goals. In this vein, Al Bassam directed a performance of the play in Washington DC on March 24, 2017 at the Kennedy Center in which, unlike his previous plays, he had American actors to perform this supposedly Middle-Eastern play in order to emphasize the play's universal tropes. In an online interview with Heather Hill (The Kennedy Center, 2017), Al Bassam argues that he intentionally avoided Arab actors and chose actors who went through similar experiences like African Americans or Spanish-speaking Americans to perform roles of migrant workers. This actually further adds to the multilayeredness and complexity of the play since it goes beyond literal signification to encompass similar situations elsewhere in the world.

In *Petrol Station*, the characters feature the characteristics of liminal subjects. According to Turner, “[i]n the original, ethnographical meaning of the concept, liminality thus refers to someone going through a transition, being neither this nor that, and at the same time both” (qtd. in Balduk 2008, 2). Inhabiting a liminal space, the play's liminal subjects are stuck in a middle position, “thus ‘betwixt and between’ all the recognized fixed points in space-time of structural classification” (Balduk 2008, vii). Otherwise stated, liminality describes “a state of being ‘beyond usual categories’ and, as such, forms a category itself, ‘in between categories’” (Balduk 2008, vii). The liminal aspects in characterization can be attributed to the identity crisis several characters suffer from. The Trafficker pronounces two key statements that assert the characters' liminality of existence. He demonstrates that being on the border is being “on the edge of visibility” (*Petrol Station*, 28) to reflect the characters' literal and metaphorical difficulty to “see” through darkness. Dawn time refers to the temporal liminality between darkness and light and thus symbolizes being on a threshold between knowledge and ignorance. The Trafficker also wonders “who's ever seen black sky at dawn” (*Petrol Station*, 25) to indicate that the sky is further darkened because of pollution to symbolize most of the characters' lack of sight and insight in wartime.

In this respect, Balduk (2008, 2) quotes Turner who explains that “liminal personae (‘threshold people’) are necessarily ambiguous,” hence “become outsiders.” In other words, temporal and spatial liminality foster the characters’ acute sense of blurriness, ambiguity, and uncertainty; it is also responsible for their absurdity, alienation, and disorientation.

The Cashier is the legitimate son of the station’s owner and a central character with three dimensions of liminality: his wish to redeem order and harmony, his belief in his transformative powers, and his hybrid identity. From the very beginning, the Cashier tries to redeem order in his chaotic life with his half-brother by distributing roles unfairly. He deprives his half brother from his right to his father’s money because he is “bastard” or “darkie,” as he keeps calling him. By so doing, the Cashier claims that he abides by law for his half-brother deserves nothing as a stateless person according to “1959 Nationality Law” (*Petrol Station*, 19). Apparently, the possession of money especially in wartime brings order and peace to his greedy soul. The Trafficker asks the Cashier “[t]hink everything’s for sale?” (*Petrol Station*, 29). This indicates that the Cashier wrongly believes that he can bring the whole world under his control through money.

The Cashier believes that he is the “transformer” of this place that he intends to turn into a utopia (*Petrol Station*, 44). He has a ruthless ambition for “commerce and free trade [;] the unhindered movement of people, goods and trade” (*Petrol Station*, 43). This reflects his fantasy of eliminating borders for his own benefit. Moreover, the Cashier believes in technological advancements that lead to globalization. In his air-conditioned and internet-provided booth, he has a sheet of a model global city that he aspires to build on the border. If the border is all other characters’ dystopia, establishing the city makes it a utopia for him: “it’s called ‘Firdous’, you know, like paradise” (*Petrol Station*, 44). In other words, as a war profiteer, the Cashier is able to see through the darkest times and most disorienting places and he is ready to exploit war at the expense of the misfortunes of others to attain his ignoble and materialistic goals.

The Cashier’s zealous dream does not appeal to the Girl who discerns an identity crisis in his character – i.e., his hybridization. Because of her awareness of his fascination with Western Civilization, she accuses him of being a “traitor” to his nation. His dream of a global city is based on “the pursuit of pleasure” (*Petrol Station*, 45) and at the expense of the oppressed slaves. The Girl also blames him for being culturally occupied because of his obsession with the American culture. Moreover, she criticizes his ignorance of his own culture and identity: “You’ve been gutted, razed, blasted you are pap; all that’s left of you is an olive-skinned shell. The Semite, the Akkadian, the Babylonian, the Nabataean, the Jew and the Arab all cower within you, all dead husks. You prancing, walking genocide” (*Petrol Station*, 45). The Girl articulates his liminal existence between being an Arab and a non-Arab. According to Balduk (2008), “[i]n politics, so-called ‘liminars’ are between allegiances” (24). The Cashier’s half-Arabness is the result of being the son of a white mother as well as his Americanization after receiving his education in the States. Although he is “a national of the first degree” (*Petrol Station*, 43), the girl foreshadows his inevitable doom at the end: “the flames that consume us over the border, will reach your roofs soon” (*Petrol Station*, 45). At the end of the play, the Cashier decides to set fire to the petrol station rather than

to share it with anyone. This action bespeaks the destructiveness of liminality which manifests itself in the character's absurd behavior.

The liminality of the Trafficker resides in the fact that he is a dual national who can freely move across borders. Just like the Cashier, the Trafficker is a war profiteer, and an inhumane opportunistic person who exploits wartime for his personal gain. The Trafficker takes advantage of his border position by trafficking oil to a nearby war-afflicted country and by smuggling people out of that country on his way back. The Trafficker once says, "I love withdrawing armies. All sores and pustulence, skinned clean of righteousness- sell anything" (*Petrol Station*, 24). This indicates the moral fragility of the Trafficker whose sole concern is to accumulate wealth in twisted and dishonorable ways.

In other characters like the refugees, the Manager, and the migrant workers, Al Bassam presents more manifestations of liminality. Such characters are less fortunate than the Cashier and the Trafficker since they are war victims rather than victimizers. The Girl is a refugee who loses her nationality when she crosses the borders while trying to escape from the civil war. Contrary to her expectations, the Girl does not find refuge in crossing the border. She expresses her bitter feelings of dislocation: "I am out of my world, into another darker nether world, but I am not lining up to join the ranks of the dispossessed. I've a people that need me, a country on the slaughter rack, seized on the pains of a terrible becoming" (*Petrol Station*, 54). The fact that she refuses to be dispossessed forever reflects her awareness of her short-term statelessness and her strong sense of belonging to her homeland. The Manager identifies with her plight but seems to covet her for having a speck of hope, unlike him: "Girl: I crossed the borders and became stateless/Manager: Yours is a temporary affliction" (*Petrol Station*, 69). The Girl's dislocation from her original country does not entail relocation across the border. This definitely perpetuates the Girl's status of geographical liminality because she resents the idea of abandoning her original identity for a new one. The contrast between her reality and her aspirations creates a tormenting situation of being an in-between.

On the psychological level, war trauma fosters another dimension of liminality in the Girl's uniquely transformative character. Balduk (2008) states that "[d]uring the phase of liminality a person transforms; he or she becomes, or grows in a sense" (7). Addressing the Manager, the Girl says, "I saw my father murdered and my mother die silent like a bird that's been stoned, and you ask if I'll question God's will? I will question it! My being is a question mark!" (*Petrol Station*, 69). Being severely traumatized, the Girl becomes an atheist who questions God's will and her very being. Losing her parents and being raped desolate the Girl's selfhood and throw her on the periphery of identity. Her physical existence on the border parallels her psychological liminality which renders her a constantly transformative character which resists categorization, fixity, and individuality; thus, her being repeatedly "betwixt and between."

The experience of war subjects the Girl to an irretrievable loss of innocence that disillusiones her and alienates her from her own selfhood. The shattering effect of the trauma on the Girl's identity becomes very explicit when the Girl refers to her former self prior to her traumatic experience using the third-person pronoun:

Girl: She was young and very shy.

...

Girl: Pretty and full of promises.

...

Girl: She is no longer who she was.

...

Girl: Who's she?

...

Girl: No one did anything to me because I'm no longer one woman: I

am many...

...

Girl: Like a cluster bomb I'll multiply. (*Petrol Station*, 64)

Due to her severe trauma, the Girl believes she has different identities; accordingly, she refers to herself by the different names of the wives of Prophet Mohammed, in spite of her atheism. Evidently, the Girl transforms into worse versions of herself; her constant transformation is neither constructive nor progressive. Turner suggests that most of the time the liminal subject transforms for the better for liminality "is related to growth and rebirth" (qtd. Balduk 2008, 7) and the "liminal experiences shape personality, focus mind and experience, and foreground human agency" (qtd. in Balduk 2008, 9). However, he also stresses that liminality could be a positive or a negative experience (qtd. in Balduk 2008, 7). Trauma leaves a permanent scar and an irreversible negative effect on the Girl which perpetuate her liminality.

The Manager is another in-betweeners in the play who suffers from dual liminality, personal and collective. On the one hand, he is an illegitimate son to the Petrol Station owner and a half brother to the Cashier. This places him in a second rank familial position where he does not enjoy any recognition as a legitimate family member. On the other hand, the Manager experiences a larger scale of not belonging because he is a "Bedoon" or a "blank" citizen in this unnamed country. The Arabic word "Bedoon" means stateless. In their first meeting, the Manager explains for the Girl the intricacy of his situation as a blank citizen:

Girl: Have you ever –

Manager: No. Blanks don't cross borders.

Girl: Blanks?

Manager: I'm a Bedoon!

Place of birth? Blank.

Occupation? Blank.

Sex? Blank.

Mother's name? Blank.

Nationality? Blank.

Born here, bred here, blank. (*Petrol Station*, 68)

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The Girl rejects the Manager's advances towards her because of his lack of property and statelessness. She throws his reality in his face by saying that he is "nothing" (*Petrol Station*, 31). Unlike the Girl, the Manager's liminality and "nothingness" do not relinquish his faith in God. The Manager is the one who calls for prayers, believes in the approaching truth, and insists on finding the Meter "to give the mute past its tongue" (*Petrol Station*, 70). In spite of his unwavering belief in God's will and fate, he finds a difficulty in making the decision of leaving: "[a] month from now I will not be where I am" (*Petrol Station*, 39). Therefore, his identity stays on hold and his existence remains liminal until he manages to get the passport of the Girl's deceased brother and crosses the border with a forged identity.

Al Bassam projects the liminality of the border on the social relationships which resist absolute definition. The Trafficker, for instance, claims his marriage to the Girl while she completely denies it. He asserts that he has a marriage certificate that "stands on both sides" (*Petrol Station*, 63) and asks for his "legal, god-honoured rights" as a husband (*Petrol Station*, 64). He believes that "there are mores and customs, nephew, mores and customs; solid tangible rules, even out here on the edge of visibility" (*Petrol Station*, 28). In this respect, Wofford (2017) disagrees with this assumption because it "proves incorrect – there is no custom that rules at the border" (10). Neither politics nor religion provides appropriate rules to govern this border passage. On the border, the distinction between right and wrong is rather confusing. Al Bassam aptly uses the loss of the Meter to stand for lack of order. However, although the border is anarchic and lawless, one can argue that it creates its own rules. Opportunistic characters and war profiteers like the Cashier and the Trafficker try to exploit this chaos for their greedy personal gain. War is planned chaos which victimizes simple ordinary people who find it incomprehensible.

Al Bassam illuminates the liminality of the migrant laborers who suffer in many parts of the world under dehumanizing conditions through the predicament of Khan, the Bengali station worker. In the play, Al Bassam associates this category of workers with the worst working conditions and with menial jobs. Bayu assumes the role of the spokesman for this group because he belongs to them and perfectly understands their situation:

Noah: Who are your tribesmen?

Bayu: "The pill bearers, the dirt-carriers, the cement throwers, the garbage cleaners, the eyes gleaming in the pipes, the bodies in the burning tires, the sutures in the wound, Indians, Pakistanis, Nepalese, Koreans, Thais the dark and yellow skinned...

We black armies of the black gold" (*Petrol Station*, 79)

Accordingly, Khan, Bayu, and the rest of migrant workers share the same destiny of dehumanizing conditions of liminality where they lose control over their lives. In this respect, Andrews and Roberts (2014) highlight "the extent to which such groups [migrant workers] are an invisible but immutable presence, occupying a ghostly liminal zone on the social and geographic margins of the nation; caught in the interstices of transnational space" (14-15).

Geography and hierarchy of power generate Khan's liminality. Besides being a foreign worker on a foreign land, Khan's superiors eliminate his free will as a human being and make him feel worthless. They deny him the right to make decisions relevant to his personal life. Hence, he is in a liminal state of

mind, torn between two decisions that he has no control over. Khan is neither capable of crossing the borders to seek a better life nor is he able to stay and send money to his sick mother to undergo the heart surgery she urgently needs in order to survive. Towards the end of the play, we learn that his mother dies and that Khan regains his passport, encouraged by the Girl who prompts him to steal it and flee. Similar to the Manager, Khan achieves salvation through crossing the border and leaving this chaotic and turbulent area.

One dimension of the characters' severe sense of liminality stems from their absurd existence. Just like the "masked sun," truth for the characters seems unattainable and farfetched. Al Bassam places the characters along with the readers on the same level of perplexity due to the existential overtones in the play. Al Bassam actually acknowledges his indebtedness to the Theater of the Absurd; Wofford (2017) states that a "comic, apocalyptic tone reminiscent of both *Endgame* and *King Lear* pervades the play" (10). The most significant incident that reflects the futility of life is the meaningless digging in search for the Meter. This recurring act remains in the background almost throughout the whole play. The Manager keeps reminding the Cashier that they are "digging for truth" (*Petrol Station*, 37). The absurdity of this act and its connection to finding truth sets the atmosphere for the entire play since it reflects the reciprocal affiliation between absurdity and liminality. Absurdity performs a pervasive feature of postmodern literature which Al Bassam explores in relation to its unavoidable impact on subjectivity formation. In the play, absurd life conditions complicate matters for characters and enhance their liminality. Interestingly, this identity fissure manifests itself in their weird actions which function as coping mechanisms which make their awkward existence on the borderline of life more endurable.

Although the Manager expects that "truth is approaching" (*Petrol Station*, 40), the lost Meter which is used to measure petrol is never found. This symbolizes the characters' failure to "uncover the truth" (*Petrol Station*, 21) or to find meaning that explains their incomprehensible existence. According to S. Skrimshire, the absurd forces the individual to "live at the point where logic exhausts itself" (qtd. in Wolken 2016, 71). The play implies that the characters are questers who strive to find truth, in spite of the absurdity which surrounds them. The author expects the reader to find the characters' endeavors relatable regardless of their outcome. It is worth mentioning here that Al Bassam shares Albert Camus' tendency to present the absurd as a "self-reflexive" phenomenon which the latter "admonishes his readers not to try to understand, explain, or escape" (Wolken 2016, 70). Rather than the absolutism of definite answers, the reader's real reward emanates from the aesthetic aspects and the existential encounters found in the textual dynamics of absurdity.

Noah's existence is also absurd. Like many refugees, Noah crosses the border by hiding in an empty tanker. Noah goes through very similar conditions to those of the Palestinian refugees in Ghassan Kanafani's *Men in the Sun*, which is one of the works that influenced this play, as Al Bassam mentions in one of his interviews (The Kennedy Center 2017, n. p.). The first time Noah appears in the play, he speaks unseen from "*inside the dark cavern of the empty petrol tanker*" (Al Bassam 2017, 22, italics in original). Noah describes the tanker from the inside as "[a] void you wouldn't put animals in for slaughter/ A void for broken migrants at best" (*Petrol Station*, 22). Noah draws a dark portrait describing

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the miserable and dehumanizing conditions he suffers from, which are reminiscent of “visions of those who voyaged before me” (*Petrol Station*, 22). He identifies with all refugees and refers to the dehumanizing and tormenting conditions they go through like the Hell-like darkness and the unbearable heat. His description of his stay inside the tanker represents the world he lives in at large. Thus, Noah's existence is “a void in a void” (*Petrol Station*, 23) or a life that lacks life. Noah speaks in a bitter tone and poetic style reflecting on his miserable conditions, making the reader empathize with his extremely pathetic situation.

David J. Wolken (2016) argues that “in both the postmodern and the absurd, the self is dislocated, estranged, and effectively undermined as consciousness becomes uncertain, confused, despairing, and schizophrenic” (70). Like the Girl, Noah loses his faith and becomes an atheist because of the traumatic experience of war. In this regard, he says “I was a student of theology. /But the pain of living overwhelmed my mind” (*Petrol Station*, 86). Traumatized and faithless, Noah dies at the end. It is ironic how the Girl and Noah turn into atheists although they carry religious names. Noah is one of God's earliest prophets, and the Girl names herself after one of the wives of Prophet Mohammed each time her identity transforms.

Al Bassam sustains the absurdity to the last scene of the play. The *Petrol Station* blows up at the end at the hands of its owners, the Cashier and the Trafficker, for no convincing reason. After the death or departure of the other characters, the *Petrol Station* becomes completely theirs. However, after they divide it into two equal halves, each one of them throws a cigarette into the other one's share causing it to burn. Absurdly enough, after the *Petrol Station* burns, the Cashier and the Trafficker are “unemployed” and ironically wonder whether they should preach in a mosque or join the militia for future jobs. The Trafficker mentions that he “used to be a communist” but the Cashier mocks him by saying “Don't brag, Uncle, it's like saying I had polio, it's nothing to be proud of” (*Petrol Station*, 88). Comparing communism to polio harshly criticizes the monolithic ideology of political pluralism in Middle Eastern countries.

In absurdity and allegory, Al Bassam finds appropriate venues for his critique of autocratic political regimes in the modern Arab World. He holds these regimes responsible for poor leadership, abuse of power, oppressing people, and mismanaging resources. Al Bassam argues:

More generally, the modern Middle East, ... offers a painful plethora of examples of how not to rule. Modern imperialism, tyranny, barbarism, oppression, plots, assassination and civil wars are sadly becoming the rule not the exception in our region. The players in this *grim game of politics*, natural resources and strategic power are many,... none are innocent; all have bloodied their hands (qtd. in Holderness 2014, xii emphasis added).

In *Petrol Station*, Al Bassam dramatizes his notion of the “grim game of politics” in the play's finale where the Cashier and the Trafficker carelessly set the station to fire. According to Graham Holderness (2014, x), Al Bassam portrays Saddam Hussein as a usurper of power in his other play, *The Al-Hamlet Summit*. In this creative postmodern appropriation of a Shakespearean tragedy, Holderness claims that the

character of Claudius bears more than a “passing resemblance to Saddam Hussein.” If Al-Bassam accuses this late Arab leader of usurping power in the aforesaid play, one could safely argue that he accuses him of lack of wisdom and diplomacy in *Petrol Station*. The absurdity and recklessness of pumping the station point the finger at Saddam Hussein’s major role in flaring the spark of destruction in the entire region.

Within the absurd context of the play, Al Bassam implies that understanding power is unattainable on the individual level. The play, however, suggests that being on the verge of knowledge or even ignorance might be better for one’s psychic stability and safety. The Trafficker describes Joseph as a lucky man for he “[k]now[s] a lot and still alive” (*Petrol Station*, 27). Moreover, the Manager fears looking into the Girl’s eyes because “[t]hey see more than they should see” (*Petrol Station*, 40). The Trafficker’s reply to this is that “[i]t’s called trauma; she got trauma –a symptom of civil war” (*Petrol Station*, 40). Traumatized people are usually the ones who have a perilous awareness of their surroundings. Hence, the play hints at the fact that the path of knowledge either leads to destruction or to death. Another example is Noah who states, “I know without seeing, but cannot see without knowing” (*Petrol Station*, 23). Noah implies that he prioritizes insight over sight; however, the vision he feels so proud to possess torments him and eventually leads him to his doom. During war time, several characters in the play believe that the “only truth... is the grave” (*Petrol Station*, 37). Since the logic of war is beyond their comprehension, it is better for them not to find truth. This explains why the Cashier, a war profiteer, wants the migrant workers to “[d]ig less” (*Petrol Station*, 41) and he is even ready to pay them to do so. Al Bassam also pinpoints how power uses patriotic ideas to delude and silence people, just like the Cashier uses “Mawtani,” the Arab Nationalist Anthem, as “a lullaby, to keep the old man asleep” (*Petrol Station*, 38). Therefore, war profiteers use nationalism to silence other sources of enlightenment and truth such as religion. In this sense, one could argue that “the sleeping father” stands for the absence of religion in that faithless liminal space, especially that the Father acts like a man of religion.

In the prelude, the Father addresses the migrant workers, instructing them to search for the lost Meter. The Father speaks “*in the darkness, over the tannoy*” (*Petrol Station*, 17, italics in original) in a way similar to a Sheikh reciting a speech to an audience. He starts with praising Allah and his prophet and by calling them “my sons.” Moreover, the Father who rarely appears after this speech asks the migrant workers to dig for the Meter: “when our Station began, it was founded on an agreement, a contract, a pledge. This pledge took the shape of the Meter. The Meter measures what is for us and against us, it is the substance of our bond with this nation; the record of our past, the guarantor of our future” (*Petrol Station*, 17). In a completely chaotic, lawless, and dark space like the border, everyone seeks light that shows him the right path in which he can achieve a sense of order and purpose. The prelude suggests that faith could be the Meter they are looking for, without which “our purpose is forgotten; we know no longer who we are.” The Father asserts that the “Meter [is] within us like instinct, like conscience, like destiny: an invisible hand that guides us” (*Petrol Station*, 17). This again explains why the Cashier, a completely secular and Americanized character, warns the migrant workers against digging to find the Meter, for money is his real Meter. Later in the play, the Trafficker refers to the Meter as “The Book of Judgment” (*Petrol Station*, 37) which again stresses the Meter’s association with faith.

The play sheds light on the fact that the border is a space of resistance. At the end, migrant workers and refugees revolt, but unfortunately their revolution fails for their masters turn them against each other. It is also a space of resistance in the sense that everything resists definition and meaning. In this regard, Wofford (2017) contends that

the play does not provide answers –rather we hover on the edge of answers and solutions. Perhaps this is because the play itself hovers on the border between the brutally realistic and the symbolic. It focuses on borders, as non-places that call attention to the gaps and crevices in any notion of civilization that might reach to both sides of the border. (10)

Despite the desperate lack of meaning as well as the inner and outer destruction, the play offers some hope by using humor and rewarding some characters with salvation.

Petrol Station oscillates between tragic devastating happenings and dark humor. In the midst of political corruption, violence and destruction, the play's ironic impulses give a kind of comic relief to an otherwise very dark play. Wofford (2017) believes that the play "tells a story of violence and near-apocalyptic destruction with a comic and ironic flare" (7). In an utterly ironic tone, the Cashier says "[n]o internet, no alcohol, war on the border. I am going to return to God" (*Petrol Station*, 27). Moreover, the Trafficker prides himself on being a communist before the war. Wofford (2017, 13) argues that the play is not a tragedy in spite of the tragic death of some characters, for some other characters (Khan, the Manager, and the Girl) manage to cross the border into safer spaces. In addition, the play's "songs, beautiful lyrics, [and] the touch of desire and love" lighten the tragedy and mitigate its depressing effect on the reader.

Conclusion

Petrol Station is a border play that is replete with liminal aspects. The liminality of the geographical border space mirrors many other liminal aspects and situations, especially time. On the personal and collective levels, the border is a perilous space of confrontation located outside "safety zones," to use Al Bassam words. Al Bassam (2017) continuously alludes to liminal spaces in the play by using expressions like "on the edge of visibility" (28), and "*on the edge of audibility*," (61, italics in original). Al Bassam puts temporal liminality to the forefront when he specifically associates important events in the plot with Dawn and Sunset prayers. In the prelude, the Father speaks to his sons immediately after Dawn prayer; he eloquently articulates the anxiety caused by time liminality as he says "Time takes us not forwards but as if a vortex backwards, our purpose is forgotten; we know no longer who we are. I am the falconer, but where are my falcons? My sons? I have spoken" (*Petrol Station*, 17). Moreover, the lack of communication between the falcon and falconer performs an unmistakable allusion to the state of anarchy and confusion during war time which William Butler Yeats describes in his poem, "The Second Coming." In this context, dawn does not connote fresh beginnings and hope; it rather stresses the characters' awareness of liminality and the pressing necessity for transition and transformation. Towards the end of the play, the voice of the Cashier's deceased mother emerges from "the edge of audibility" right before

“Maghrib – sunset – prayers” (*Petrol Station*, 61) to reproach her son for forsaking his origins. She says, “Are you an Arab? Or a freak these loins have borne? ... Stay where you are, whelp, you’re not free to forego what I earned for you with blood: this is your second birth: the pain of it is on you!” (*Petrol Station*, 61). The father’s speech and the dead mother’s rebuke represent Al Bassam’s disappointment in the Arabs’ decadence. They should not shirk their responsibilities of preserving their heritage and bearing the pains of resurrection.

Petrol Station takes place in an iconic space outside actual space and time where everything is on hold. On an isolated, chaotic, and absurd border, the characters’ identities are on hold due to the liminality of their existence. For them, the border is an extremely annoying space. It is a “prison with no walls, starvation without hunger, a sun with no mercy, even the air begs oxygen” (*Petrol Station*, 52). They diligently strive to find the Meter which Al Bassam uses as a compelling symbol of the lost truth. By finding truth, different characters harbor the hope of change. Towards the end of the play, the Girl powerfully advises the Manager to stop searching for the Meter for she tells him that “[y]ou will never find the meter: the meter is inside you” (*Petrol Station*, 70). The play ultimately suggests that in time of war, one should find the light inside himself against the outside darkness of the world. Apart from the play’s denouement, 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. The author’s oscillation between the tragic and the comic renders *Petrol Station* both a critique of borders and an invitation to cross them. Deliberately, Al Bassam drags his readers into the enigmatic liminality of *Petrol Station* as he leaves his testimony on the Gulf Crisis unfinished, with the promise of future sequels for this intriguing play.

عند فجر الوجود: المظاهر الحدودية في مسرحية (محطة الوقود) لسليمان البسام

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الملخص

يبحث هذا المقال في الجوانب الزمانية والمكانية "للحدودية" في مسرحية (محطة الوقود) (2017) لسليمان البسام. بالاعتماد على نظرية الحدودية، يتقصى البحث مساهمة الحدودية في استلهام الشخصيات وتشكيل الهوية والمفهوم المراوغ للحقيقة والوجود العبثي للشخصيات في مسرحية البسام. كما يظهر المقال كيف يسقط المؤلف بمهارة حدودية الموقع الجغرافي على الحدودية بين الفردي والجماعي، والمعنى الحرفي والمعنى الرمزي، والهوية وفقدان الهوية، والإيمان والإلحاد، والنظام والفوضى، والمعنى والعبثية، والمأساة والفكاهة، والحياة والموت. يخلص المقال إلى أن الشخصيات التي تمكنت من تجاوز حدوديتها في المسرحية قد حققت ذلك بفضل تصميمهم الفردي على تجاوز الجوانب المختلفة للحدودية. الكلمات المفتاحية: سليمان البسام، حدودية، زمني، مكاني، عبثية، هوية.

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