

Melha Abdullah's *the Libero*: A Psychoanalytic Reading

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Abstract

Melha Abdullah is a prominent Saudi playwright and critic. Her dramatic work engages profoundly with moral, social, and cultural issues, addressing themes such as oppression, marginalization, and human struggle within restrictive environments. Although her works have attracted widespread global attention, underscoring Abdullah's role in developing Saudi theatre, feminist discourse, and audience engagement, few studies have examined her significant play, *The Libero*. Drawing on the psychoanalytic approach and Jung's concepts of the persona and the shadow, this study investigates how societal pressure and moral corruption contribute to psychological fragmentation. The analysis centres on the protagonist, focusing on his internal conflict and divided sense of self. This study argues that over-identification with the persona and the continued repression of the shadow lead to aggressive responses embodied in the monster Bakeleto. The findings indicate that the protagonist's transformation represents the breakdown of the social persona under excessive moral and social strain. This collapse enables the emergence of the shadow as a psychological strategy of resistance and survival. This study offers a psychoanalytic reading of *The Libero*, illuminating the inner dimensions of dramatic characters in modern Saudi theatre.

Keywords: Carl Gustav Jung, Melha Abdullah, Saudi Theatre, Psychoanalytic Criticism, the Persona and the Shadow, *the Libero*.

Introduction

"Theatre is a window to the human heart, a reflection of culture, a shaper of public consciousness, and a mirror to the history of every nation," said Dr. Melha Abdullah, the lady of Saudi theatre, revealing her vision of theatre, its role, and its importance in society (2024). Abdullah (b. 1957) is a pioneer and a leading female figure in Saudi theatre. She is among the most influential Saudi playwrights in modern Arab theatre and became the first Saudi woman to earn a Ph.D. in theatre

studies. 'The Fifth Dimension' is one of her major theoretical contributions to theatre, a concept that extends theatrical communication beyond the stage by engaging the audience's emotions, imagination, and ethics. Her long list of achievements includes more than 60 plays performed across Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, and the Gulf countries. Abdullah's dramatic works explore women's identity, social repression, and cultural transformation, uniquely combining realism with symbolic and philosophical depth. Her foundational 2013 study mapped the socio-cultural tensions, tribal heritage, and structural challenges that Saudi women face in playwriting and performance, offering insightful recommendations to help decision-makers resolve them. She continues to play a crucial role in the development of contemporary Saudi theatre, both as a playwright and as a critical voice engaged in cultural and social transformation. She dedicated herself to elevating theatre from artistic practice to intellectual endeavour, fully aware of the responsibility associated with pioneering the field. In one of her interviews, Abdullah expressed that she viewed theatre as the father of all arts and a magical cave that destroys those who approach it without knowledge (Al-Tarawneh, 2012, p. 97). Convinced that theatrical writing demanded knowledge as much as creativity, Abdullah postponed her theatrical career until she completed her academic journey.

Her work reflects a sustained concern with identity, power, and the lived experiences of marginalized individuals in Saudi society. She studied in Egypt in the 1980s because there were no academic theatre programs in Saudi Arabia at the time, particularly for women. She pursued her studies at the Higher Institute of Dramatic Arts in Cairo. There, she was immersed in a rich intellectual and theatrical environment and engaged directly with leading figures in Arab theatre and criticism. Abdullah developed a deep attachment to Egyptian theatre, describing herself as 'the daughter of Egyptian theatre'. Her notable engagement with Egyptian culture is evident in her famous play *The Libero*, which reflects its characters, dialogue, and traditions. *The Libero*, first published in 2002, is set in a poor neighborhood in Egypt, capturing the humble, simple lives of its people. The play delves into the life of the protagonist, Hassouna, as he navigates the harsh realities of poverty, social injustices, and moral corruption. The play adopts a comic style; however, it subtly reveals the tragic dimensions of the collective social struggles of poor communities. Beneath the play's surface humour lies an authentic portrait of the resilience, compassion, and endurance of people who continue to live, love, and hope amid adversity.

This study examines the psychological dimension of *The Libero* to analyze the protagonist, Hassouna, his inner conflict, and his monstrous double, Bakeleto. It argues that Hassouna's monster emerges as the aggressive manifestation of his repressed shadow, shaped by anxiety, suppressed anger, and his overreliance on the persona he adopts to meet social demands. Through a Jungian psychoanalytic lens, it investigates how societal pressure creates a psychological split that leads to Hassouna's duality. The significance of this study lies in illustrating how social expectations and constraints disturb a character's psychological balance. It contributes to psychological and theatrical studies by demonstrating how inner moral dilemmas and societal demands intersect to produce featured characters and symbolic monstrous forms such as Bakeleto.

Literature Review

Several studies have examined Abdullah's critical writing, dramatic language, artistic vision, theatrical techniques, and audience engagement. Many discussions have examined cultural and gender representation in Abdullah's drama. Al-Boqami (2020) examined the representation of women, the body, and authority in Abdullah's *Al-Azifah (The Pianist)*. The study revealed how the play exposes implicit and explicit cultural patterns that shape female identity, power relations, and bodily control. Al-Boqami demonstrated that Abdullah's drama critiques the dominant cultural structure through symbolic representation and tragic outcomes, presenting the body as a site of both resistance and constraint. Numerous scholars have examined audience engagement in Abdullah's theatre. Al-Ajmi (2023), for instance, analyzed how *Muwatin Raghm Anfih (A Citizen Despite his Will)* invited the audience to actively interpret irony, social tension, and moral dilemmas. He argued that Abdullah constructed an implied audience capable of engaging with ethical questions and evaluating the characters' choices. Al-Ajmi concluded that Abdullah's theatre not only depicted social conflict but also cultivated a reflective, morally aware audience. Sediq (2023) also investigated the intellectual and aesthetic features that distinguished Abdullah's theatre, emphasizing how her works portrayed struggles with identity, human suffering, oppression, and cultural displacement. He highlighted that Abdullah used symbolism and fragmentation to express deep psychological and social fractures, positioning her theatre as a blend of sociological insight and artistic innovation.

Other studies have examined Abdullah's critical writing and her role in shaping Saudi theatre. Al-Shehri (2024) analyzed Abdullah's major critical works and highlighted that her meta-critical perspective consistently exposed structural limitations in Saudi theatre and interrogated the cultural roots of women's marginalization within it. She showed that Abdullah blended historical and anthropological approaches to reveal how Bedouin traditions and patriarchal norms restricted early theatrical development. Al-Shehri concluded that Abdullah's criticism represented an objective feminist stance that resisted ideological extremism and sought theatre reform through balanced cultural analysis. Other researchers investigated pragmatic and discursive strategies. Al-Ghafees and Al-Numsi (2025a) showed that deixis in *The Libero* serves as a key device for constructing Hassouna's unstable identity and social position. Through shifts in personal and spatial references, the study demonstrated how language reflects Hassouna's marginal status and unstable social role, enabling Abdullah to encode a critique of power relations and social control in ordinary speech rather than in overt ideological statements. In another study, Al-Ghafees and Al-Numsi (2025b) showed that implicit meaning in Abdullah's dialogue revealed repressed emotions and hidden hierarchies. By violating the Gricean maxims, her dialogue conveyed conflicts that could not be openly articulated on stage. They showed that implicature enabled Abdullah to communicate psychological pressure and societal contradictions with subtlety and depth.

Several studies have also examined different mythological features in Abdullah's theatrical works. Ali (2025) emphasized mythology as a major source shaping Abdullah's dramatic vision. Through

close readings of selected plays, including *Jocasta*, *Sahiyat wa Na'san (The Awake and The Sleepy)*, and *Bir Hut (The Well of Hut)*, Ali demonstrated how myths, legendary figures, and symbolic settings are used to address issues of Arab identity, cultural conflict, and contemporary concerns. Ali concluded that mythology serves as both an aesthetic and intellectual device that enriches contemporary Saudi theatre. Numerous studies have also explored the relationship between dramatic space and symbolic expression in Abdullah's theatre. Shuaib (2025) examined the complex relationship between language and dramatic space in Abdullah's plays *Al- Manzar (The Scene)*, *Al-Sa'ah Al- Dharriyah (The Atomic Clock)*, and *Harat Al-Saad (The Neighborhood of Al-Saad)*, arguing that both elements are inseparable from their cultural, social, and political contexts. Through a descriptive-analytical approach, Shuaib revealed that dramatic space functions as a dynamic symbolic entity shaped by language. He concluded that language plays a constructive role, enabling characters to create symbolic spaces that intensify psychological conflicts and reflect social and cultural realities.

Previous studies, mostly in Arabic, have examined Abdullah's theatre from social, linguistic, and critical perspectives, highlighting her engagement with issues of identity, social authority, cultural norms, and systems of marginalization. These studies focused on social and cultural forms of control, especially patriarchal constraints on individual behavior. However, few studies have examined how societal forces operate at the psychological level of characters. Thus, this study seeks to address this gap by employing psychoanalytic perspectives, drawing on Jungian psychology, to explore how societal and moral pressures shape the formation of the persona and the repression of the shadow, leading to internal conflict.

Methodology

Abdullah's *The Libero* exposes societal pressures, hypocrisy, and moral decay. This study employs a psychoanalytic framework, drawing on C. G. Jung's perspectives in his seminal work, *Two Essays on Analytical Psychology*, first published in 1917 and revised in 1966. Jung articulates a compelling vision of the human psyche as a field shaped by opposing forces: one anchored in conscious intention and social obligation, and another rooted in instinct, repression, and symbolic life. This framework is essential for analyzing Hassouna's psychological rupture in *The Libero*. It is vital to examine how Hassouna's overreliance on his persona forces him to suppress his shadow until it erupts violently. Ultimately, the shadow manifests as a hostile form in Hassouna's double, Bakeleto. The first concept this study examines is the 'persona,' the socially constructed mask individuals adopt to meet cultural expectations and maintain acceptance. The persona is a selective, polished version of the self that suppresses impulses, vulnerabilities, and anger. Jung describes two purposes of this mask: the first is "to make a definite impression upon others," and the second is "to conceal the true nature of the individual" (Jung, p.264). If individuals do not adopt the manners society demands, they risk not fitting in. Jung explains that this mask is a secondary reality and does not reflect genuine authenticity. He states that "the persona is nothing real; it is a compromise between individual and society as to what a man should appear to be" (p.217). When the persona becomes overly dominant, people begin

to confuse their social mask with their identity. This distortion suppresses genuine individuality, creating a rigid, collective façade that limits psychological growth and distances individuals from their inner selves.

The second aspect that contradicts the persona is the ‘shadow’, which represents the hidden, dark, and unacknowledged aspects of the personality. It contains traits, impulses, and moral weaknesses that the ego refuses to recognize as part of the self, and it consists “not just of little weaknesses and foibles, but of a positively demonic dynamism” (Jung, p.54). Jung emphasizes that confronting the shadow is psychologically demanding because it requires admitting that the dark elements of one’s character are not imagined absences but genuine parts of the self. Ignoring the shadow, in Jung’s view, suffocates and weakens individuals, stating that “The personality is not enriched by it, only impoverished and smothered” (p. 362). If individuals acknowledge this part of themselves, it can be a source of power and creativity. However, this dimension of the self can become destructive when it is ignored or misunderstood; thus, engaging with the shadow is a psychological necessity. Treating the shadow as a hidden antagonist only forces it to return in distorted forms, emerging through projection, sudden outbursts, egotism, and other uncontrolled, instinctual drives.

After outlining Jung’s psychological framework, which distinguishes the socially constructed persona from the repressed shadow, this study examines the duality that shapes Hassouna’s character in *The Libero*. It argues that Hassouna’s outward kindness serves as a persona that secures social approval, while Bakeleto emerges as a shadow that carries Hassouna’s suppressed frustration, anger, and unresolved inner conflicts. The following analysis highlights scenes in which the shadow breaks through, moments when the persona strains under social pressure, and instances when the conflict between these two aspects becomes visible, revealing the psychological tension at the core of Hassouna’s identity.

Analysis and Discussion

Abdullah’s *The Libero* consists of seven scenes and is set in a poor, crowded neighbourhood where everyday interactions define the rhythm of life. The plot centres on the protagonist Hassouna, a gentle, poor man who embodies generosity and sacrifice in a harsh world around him. He works in a government office in the morning and takes on several jobs, including the goblin in the haunted house in the evening, to cover his living expenses (Abdullah, 2023, pp. 26-27). He helps children, protects the weak, and tries to solve people’s problems without expecting anything in return. He lives in Farag’s house. Farag, the butcher, is the play’s antagonist, who desires Hassouna’s beautiful wife, Aziza, and schemes to have Hassouna arrested. Although all the neighbours appreciate and respect Hassouna, they remain silent about Farag’s injustices. This analysis focuses on the causes of Hassouna’s transformation into the monster Bakeleto.

Hassouna appears after borrowing a bicycle from a repairman because he is late for work. While riding through a crowded street, he accidentally runs over a stone that strikes and shatters a parked police car. A policeman then chases him through narrow alleys. Hassouna has to abandon the bicycle

and escape by jumping from rooftop to rooftop. He hears a woman crying out in pain and decides to help her despite his fear of being caught, since Hassouna is not the kind of person who hears someone's cries and walks away (Abdullah, 2023, p. 26). He enters the house to find a woman in labour and calmly heats water for her. The situation intensifies when her husband enters the house and, seeing a stranger with his wife, bursts into anger. He shouts, threatening to kill Hassouna (p. 28). This scene captures Hassouna's overreliance on his persona, as his self-denying nature leads him to prioritize others, ultimately putting him in danger and causing misunderstandings. In another act, Hassouna's self-sacrificing nature drives him to help others at his own expense and discomfort. When his sister Adila visits and explains that she has lost her wallet and cannot afford basic groceries, Hassouna immediately gives her all the money he has. That sum was meant to pay Osta Arabi to repair a new toilet. Without considering the consequences, Hassouna hands Adila the money. Hassouna's wife, Aziza, questions his decision and expresses her concern that Osta Arabi may not bring the toilet base. Hassouna dismissively replies that it will work out (p. 46). This scene illustrates how Hassouna's actions harm him financially, disrupt his daily stability, and strain his domestic life with Aziza.

In another scene, Hassouna's generosity is exploited at his workplace. The scene unfolds in an office where his colleagues comment on the growing number of tasks assigned to him, noting that work keeps piling up on his desk. They know that everyone, including the manager, relies on Hassouna so much that he cannot even sit at his desk to finish work. The manager asks him to spy on employees and sends him to buy groceries for his wife. His colleagues say that he takes the manager's kids to school and tutors them at home. Despite their awareness of this repeated pattern of exploitation, they still complain that he is negligent and shows little concern for work, even though Hassouna is overloaded with other tasks that prevent him from completing his main tasks (Abdullah, 2023, pp. 62, 66). Hassouna's social persona and his mask as an obedient, helpful worker work against him. Apparently, Hassouna cannot refuse requests. His constant willingness to help others places him at risk of exploitation. His generosity is taken for granted rather than respected, and even the manager who benefits the most from Hassouna goes so far as to file a complaint against him. This scene shows the cost of relying on social masks.

The double Bakeleto emerges when Hassouna is imprisoned because of Farag's schemes. During Hassouna and Bisso's confinement, Hassouna randomly recalls working as a goblin in the haunted house, where people respected him out of fear, and he says he never felt human except there. Bisso immediately responds, wondering whether a person must be a monster for people to respect him. Hassouna pauses, then reaches a decisive conclusion that, after all the bitterness he has seen, he must be a 'monster'. For the first time in the play, Hassouna explicitly acknowledges bitterness and rejects the value of goodness, saying that there is no place for kindness anymore; there is only Bakeleto, the master of all those people; he needs to harden his kind heart just to survive (Abdullah, 2023, pp. 104-5, 109). In this scene, Hassouna's words signal the breakdown of his social mask after betrayal and prolonged humiliation. In Jung's view, this collapse reflects the danger of excessive identification

with an artificial persona: "a man cannot get rid of himself in favour of an artificial personality without punishment" (Jung, p.266). This punishment manifests as irrational fears, emotional disturbances, or destructive habits. In Hassouna's case, the shadow 'Bakeleto' emerges as the embodiment of his repressed anger, frustration, bitterness, and emotions that the persona could no longer contain.

As soon as Hassouna is released, Bakeleto's transformation is complete. After Hassouna's transformation, he begins frequenting cabarets, and people in the neighborhood grow cautious about provoking him. Although his drastic change earns him fearful respect, it comes at a personal cost. His wife, Aziza, no longer endures the man he has become and attempts to leave. Hassouna responds to her anger by telling her that if she leaves the house, she is not welcome back (Abdullah, 2002, p. 119). He nearly divorces her before Bisso and Farag prevent him. His new identity replaces kindness with intimidation, revealing that fear, rather than moral virtue, becomes the basis of social recognition. Farag, who initially sought to undermine Hassouna, begins calling him 'Mr. Bakeleto', signaling a reluctant submission to his intimidating presence. Similarly, Arabi adopts an exaggeratedly respectful tone, addressing Hassouna as his master, his lord, and the crown on his head (Abdullah, 2023, pp. 119-120). This respectful language had never been used toward Hassouna before his transformation, reinforcing the idea that authority in his environment is granted through fear rather than compassion.

The final scene culminates in Hassouna's transformation and the social consequences of Bakeleto's dominance. The scene opens with the arrival of an engineer who announces that the alley is scheduled for demolition under an old decision made after the earthquake. Panic spreads among the neighbours, who immediately turn to Hassouna as their last hope, pleading with him to intervene; they have only him, and ask him not to abandon them. Hassouna grows angry when people start addressing him by name, so he threatens to demolish the alley himself. Because of the bitter betrayal he survived, he distances himself from his community and denies any sense of belonging, saying he was dragged away like a couch. He finally confronts the neighbours with the suffering he endured: three months of misery because of a toilet repair. He was humiliated, frustrated, and deeply disappointed that none of those who claimed to be his people stepped up to defend him when he was arrested. He is sad that people doubted him, abandoned him, and, when they knew the truth, just brushed the matter aside, laughing while the fire kept burning inside him. Hassouna declares that his heart died because of this experience, emphasizing the emotional rupture that led to his double Bakeleto. Now, as he asserts, he lives like a king, and everyone is afraid of him (Abdullah, 2023, pp.124-5). He found comfort and security in power and authority rather than in kindness and vulnerability.

In the same scene, Aziza delivers unexpected news to Hassouna; she is pregnant. As he realizes he is going to become a father, he abandons his shadow. He declares that there is no Bakeleto anymore. From today on, he is Hassouna again. His words instantly alter the atmosphere, replacing fear with celebration. Farag confesses that he never knew how precious Hassouna was to them and asks for Hassouna's forgiveness (Abdullah, 2023, p. 126). Hassouna releases his anger and frustration and forgives everyone. His reply crowns their reconciliation. This reconciliation reflects Jung's view that "What seems evil, or at least meaningless and valueless to contemporary experience and knowledge,

might on a higher level of experience and knowledge appear as the source of the best" (p.326). The double Bakeleto carried repressed strength, authority, and self-worth that Hassouna's persona could not express. Once these forces are acknowledged, Hassouna can relinquish the shadow's dominance without losing its gains. His return does not erase the function of Bakeleto's shadow but integrates its latent power into a renewed identity.

Employing the sport's term of the libero, the title carries layered symbolic meaning. In football, the libero is a defender who operates from the defensive line to prevent threats. The libero's role requires supporting teammates and stepping in whenever needed. Hassouna functions as a social libero in his neighborhood. He is described as a kind, decent man who helps the young before the old (Abdullah, 2023, p.21). He moves among people, offering help, solving problems, and responding to crises. Like a football player providing defensive coverage, Hassouna consistently meets others' needs. However, this role comes at a cost. He becomes the line of support for everyone, leaving little room for his needs or emotional expression, which puts him under constant, heavy pressure. His role aligns closely with Jung's concept of the persona, in which his constant support for others compels him to suppress his shadow, creating an internal imbalance between his public image and his repressed emotions. The title reflects his social image and foreshadows his psychological conflict. Melha Abdullah transforms a sports concept into a powerful social metaphor for the burden of selflessness and the concealed strain of enduring responsibilities.

Conclusion

This study has examined Abdullah's *The Libero* and the psychological transformation of the protagonist, Hassouna, through the lens of Jungian psychoanalysis, focusing on the conflicting dynamics between persona and shadow. The study demonstrates that Hassouna's transformation into his shadow, Bakeleto, emerges gradually from the prolonged repression of anger, humiliation, and frustration rather than from a single traumatic event. Throughout the play, Hassouna relies on a socially approved persona built on kindness, service, and self-sacrifice. While this persona initially secures acceptance, it repeatedly fails to protect him when he faces injustice, betrayal, and public doubt. The analysis shows that Hassouna's community benefits from his moral values but withdraws support when he is most vulnerable. This persistent imbalance intensifies Hassouna's internal conflict and psychological strain. The findings reveal that Bakeleto is not merely a symbol of moral collapse but a psychological response that enables agency, authority, and social recognition within a corrupted environment. Once Bakeleto dominates Hassouna, social dynamics shift noticeably. Language becomes deferential, behavior cautious, and Hassouna gains the recognition long denied. The analysis of the final scene reveals that the shadow and its characteristics are not entirely destructive. When the demolition order threatens the neighbourhood, everyone finally recognizes Hassouna's importance. This study illuminates how the shadow may contain latent strengths that surface when the persona fails to secure dignity or protection. It also opens new avenues for future research by demonstrating the value of applying Jungian psychoanalytic analysis to theatrical works. The study was limited to a

single character and a single play, using the Jungian psychoanalytic framework. Further studies may compare *The Libero* with Melha Abdullah's other plays or with those of other Saudi playwrights, employing additional psychoanalytic perspectives or critical approaches.

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