The Ambivalent Holistic Nature of Nationalism explored in Arab-American Drama; the Long–Ignored Genre

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Abstract

The idea behind writing a research about Arab-American drama came to me when a highly efficient scholar - who knows a lot about Arab-American literature in general and intercultural theatre in specific - asked me if there is such a thing as Arab-American drama. Her query tempted me to search for writers who were often excluded from both the Arab-American literature genre as well as the American theatrical canon. Arab-Americans have produced a large amount of fiction and poetry that was the focus of many literary papers and dissertations; however limited number of academic research ever discussed drama written by Arab-American writers. My paper aims at proving that Arab-American playwrights have produced a considerable amount of drama that makes it a distinct genre by itself. Through reviewing different modern Arab-American plays written in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, I concluded that playwrights often face a dilemma of being stuck between their past and their future. Some write about the importance of dissolving in the American community, embracing its culture and becoming one with it while others keep reminding their readers to preserve their authentic customs and traditions and reject all that defies them. The ambivalence of their language shows their wavered trials to form an identity and define nationalism only to discover that it cannot be preserved by segregation. It is holistic and can only be explicable by its reference to the whole.

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> How we have been running
> To leap the gulch between two worlds, each with its claim. Impossible for us to choose one over the other From "The Passing There" by Mohja Kahf

The last two hundred years have witnessed a rapid increase in the number of literary Arab-American texts in different genres including fiction, drama, poetry and memoirs (Conrey1). The hostility and bias towards Arabs in general and Moslems in specific due to a number of political events – especially; after 9/11 tragedy – drew more attention to the meaning of belonging and citizenship found in Arab-Americans' literary works as seen by their writers who either came as immigrants in search for security, a better job or a place to live in or simply were born in the United States forming the second and third generations (2).

In The Development of Arab-American Identity, Ernest Nasseph McCarus states clearly that "in Arab-American Literature, drama coverage has been neglected" (5). Even though this genre has technically existed for more than one hundred years, there has been surprisingly so little written about it. Ala Fa'iki wrote that there had been no attempt to record, study or analyze Arab-American theatre (Najjar, Arab American Drama 205). The first Arab-American play written in English was Wajdah (1908) by

Ameen Rihani in which he attempts to synthesize a Shakespearean inspired female protagonist like Lady Macbeth with Arabian literature. This play along with Gibran's The Chaneleons and Naimy's Father and Sons have paved the way for more sophisticated plays that appeared later (Conrey 17).

There are many reasons why this genre has remained obscure for over a century. One of which is that many Arab-American plays were originally written in Arabic so they were never produced, staged or published to be read (Najjar, Introduction to Four Arab American Plays 2). The first professionally produced drama by an Arab- American playwright did not come until 1965 when S. K. Hersheweii wrote his comedy Oasis in Manhattan. It tells the story of a Lebanese patriarch who discovers that his Christian daughter is engaged to a Jewish man. When the Arab and Jewish families finally meet, a series of humorous events take place. The comedy was well-received by the audience but the play (like many others that preceded it) was never published or produced since that time.

Another reason that may explain why drama was neglected for years is that many Arab-American families dissuaded their children from participating in the art business because of the difficulty of making a living as an artist in America especially among the Arab community. According to Betty Shamieh, the Arab-American community was the greatest opponent to Arab-American theatre. Shamieh mentioned that Arab-American artists needed more

support from their community "I was told all my life in different ways by Palestinians and non-Palestinians that I would never make it as a Palestinian working in American theatre, that it would be impossible for me to have an impact or voice" (qtd. in Najjar, Introduction to Four Arab American Plays 15). Even Edward Saidiii at one point mentioned how Arab-American contribution to art is dismal, ineffective and of little importance. He wrote:

You know, maybe there are other issues that are more important, like surviving, maintaining your identity, and so on … but the question is, can you make an impression in the face of the dominant culture? And in that, the Arab American simply plays a very tiny, marginal, unimportant role (qtd. in Orfalea 174-175).

It is worth mentioning that later, Arab-Americans had very special contributions to the theatrical canon (including Edward Said's own daughter Najla Said who made a career as a playwright and performer) except that they were not given the opportunity to publish or produce their plays within the mainstream culture (Najjar, Introduction to Four Arab American Plays 3).

Professor Barbara Harlowiv has often called this canon the "resistance literaturev" since it was often excluded by both internal and external forces from being part of the Arab-American literature mainstream. She describes resistance literature as that of struggle and cultural siege. She writes:

> Literature and literary studies themselves, as part of the academic enterprise, are being contested by the cultural and ideological expressions of resistance, armed struggle, liberation and social revolution in those geopolitical regions referred to as the "Third World" (Harlow 14).

The same struggles that affect the so-called "Third World" writers face Arab- American playwrights living in the States as well. They often create works that dissect the notions of ethnicity, culture and homogeneity by speaking from a marginalized multicultural position (Najjar, Introduction to Four Arab American Plays 6). Thus, they have the license to speak about issues that bother them yet their marginalization makes them unheard. As a result, their works are neither embraced by the American theatre mainstream nor by Arabic literature lovers settled in the States. By viewing Arab-American culture -as a whole- as that of resistance, it becomes clear that Americans of Arab descent are set apart from the mainstream culture in which they form the minority both in number and in ideology due to political and historical necessities (6). Consequently, Arab-Americans' struggles take the form of what Sociologist Nadine Naber calls "diasporic anti-imperialism" (6).

Naber argues in her book Arab America: Gender, Cultural Politics and Activism (2012) that Arabs have played a role in this segregation too. Those who live in America have isolated themselves by expecting social norms of their offspring that

sometimes are in direct opposition to the dominant culture that surrounds them, thereby causing conflict within the Arab community and conflict between the Arab and non- Arab communities as well (6). Plays (especially written by the first and second generations) deal with these contentious issues that arise from both inside and outside of the Arab-American community.

In fact, the nature of Arab-American drama and the issues its playwrights discuss can be compared to Janusvi. The God of transitions is often depicted as having two faces; one looks to the future and the other to the past. It symbolizes the dilemma Arab-American writers feel when they describe their current status. "There is a tension between Arab communal values and the individualism and freedom America is seen to offer. It is a tension not resolved so much as honored" says Naomi Shihab Nyevii (qtd. in Gabriel 34). As a result of this tension, some playwrights write about the importance of dissolving in the American community, embracing its culture and becoming one with it while others keep reminding the readers of their origin, asking them to preserve their authentic customs and traditions and reject all that defies them. Thus, Arab-Americans face the dilemma of being stuck between their past and their future. Many try to maintain both their Arab and their American identities, without sacrificing one or the other (34). The ambivalence of their language shows their trials to form an identity and define nationalism only to discover that nationalism

cannot be preserved by segregation. It is holistic and can only be explicable by its reference to the whole. In Nation and Narration, Homi Bhabha[viii] talks about the ambivalence of language (either spoken or written) in the construction of the Janus-faced discourse of a nation. He states:

> Meanings may be partial because they are in the medias resix; and history may be half-made because it is in the process of being made; and image of cultural authority may be ambivalent because it is caught in the act of "composing" its powerful image (4-5).

Originally, Arab-American drama was either ignored or categorized under the rubric of "Middle-Eastern American Drama". The first anthology to publish several Arab-American plays included dramas written by Iranian-Americans, Armenian-Americans and Israeli- Americans. However, what distinguishes Arab-American drama from American writings of other origins is its history with colonialism, ethnicity and suffering from "Islamophobia" and "Arabophobia". To group the Arab-American experience with that of the Middle-East gives the impression that all Middle-Eastern groups are somehow similar and this is not necessarily accurate (Najjar, Introduction to Four Arab American Plays 5).

A major shift took place post the 9/11 tragedy as there was more demand for Arab American writers' literature. Egyptian-American playwright Yussef El Guindi said " For the longest time

Arab issues or Muslim issues just had not been on the radar … They were regarded as too complex but after 9/11 suddenly there were calls for plays" (theater.nytimes.com). Dean Obeidallah, A Palestinian-American Standup comedian came to realize that embracing his Arab identity after 9/11 was more important that rejecting it. He wrote:

> I started taking Arabic lessons after 9/11 – never did before. I joined Arab-American groups, talked about it in my act much more. It became such a big part of me and because all of us came together, like circling the wagons to protect ourselves, we were under siege … we were like "well, let's collectively try to do something to define who we are the right way" (qtd. in Najjar Introduction to Four Arab American Plays 12).

In Michael Malek Najjar's most recent publication Arab American Drama, Film and Performance: A Critical Study, 1908 to the Present (2015), he explains that playwrights' aim was not to glorify a certain race but introduce portraits of average Americans of Arab descent who grow up in America, get persecuted as terrorist suspects or just try to find balance between two very different cultures (215). Theories often used by dramatists include the idea of nationalism, ethnicity, cultural exclusion, as well as identity formation. Ideas such as stereotyping and xenophobia towards Americans from Arab origin as well as Arabs recreating communities of their own within the US borders have always been

the centre point of most Arab-American literary works and drama is not an exception.

Dalia Basiouny, a theatre scholar working on Arab-American female playwrights, states that "one of the interesting features of the current flowering of Arab-American theatre and performance is that a great majority of the participating artists are women". Writers including Elmaz Abinader, Soha El Jurf, Leila Buck, Rania Khalil, Heather Raffo, Najla Said and Betty Shamieh have played vital roles in this newly flourishing genre by creating complex dramas that chronicle their lives as Arab-American women.

Leila Buckx's play Isite (1999) is a solo performance that explores the tension experienced when growing up as an Arab-American. In her play, Buck uses Lebanese words written in English characters like "shou haboubti, shoo sar?", "Inti kteer Americaneeyi" and many other examples. Her writing style includes techniques like both transliterationxi and phonemic transcriptionxii. Through using these approaches, the language reveals Arab-Americans' cross-cultural experience as a theme on its own showing the playwright's trials to form an identity being lost between two languages that represent two different cultures. According to researchers like Jefferson and Ochs; transcription offers answers to questions of identity and representation (Jefferson 149 and Ochs 44). Mary Bucholtzxiii argued how choices about representation of talk in literature encompass power relations, a

phenomenon that has been examined in great detail in the sociolinguistic literature related to transcription (32). According to Buck, after watching the play performed the audience "realizes that it is up to them to decide … how, as a nation, we choose the stories, people, and cultures that come to shape who we are". She displays her writing skills through the portrayal of multiple perspectives of herself and her family at different points in their lives. She writes as TETA speaking:

> TETA: The kids at school asked your Mom if she lived in a tent! How she dressed! And she said "No I don't live in a tent, I have jewelry!" And she brought them all home to see the six gold bracelets her uncle, Jed brother Khaled, gave her when she was born (30).

Buck, similar to many Arab-American writers, sheds light on the widened cultural gap that comes to the surface whenever Arab-Americans are seen as a monolithic group. Michael Malek Najjarxiv states that:

> One of the problems we face as Americans is seeing entire ethnic groups as monolithic. Instead, we need to realize that these groups are comprised of a myriad of religious, ethnic, and tribal affiliations.

Lisa Suhair Majaj sums up the situation in her remarkable quotation in Boundaries Arab/American, published in Food For Our Grandmothers: Writings by Arab-American and Arab-Canadian Feminists. She writes:

> I searched for someone to explain me to myself. I knew that Arabs – my relatives as much as neighbors and shop-keepers and strangers – thought me foreign, while "real" Americans thought me foreign as well (76).

In another passage, she explains her need to belong to a category that can be understood by others.

> My childhood desire was not so much to be a particular nationality, to be American or Arab but to be wholly one thing or another: to be something that I and the rest of the world could understand, categorize, label, predict (79).

The dilemma lies in the hyphen as Dr. Ala Fa'ikxv concludes "To be an Arab-American is to be both Arab and American, and for the time being at least, to be neither" (qtd. in McCarus 5).

It is the Janus-faced ambivalent nature of culture that makes writers - speaking for common Arab-Americans - mention their need to be either one or the other. This need to return to their roots in order not to be lost is explored in a number of plays. One of which is Country of Origin (1997) by Elmaz Abinader who writes in an extended monologue inspired by her life as a child that no matter how long Arabs stay in the States, they always feel the need to meet - from time to time - to become "themselves" once more. It is as if they reclaim their lost identity in fear of losing it by practicing their Arabic language, dancing their dances and eating food that reminds them of their far away homeland.

> ELMAZ: Being Lebanese became like belonging to a secret society most of the time. We had haflis, big parties with cousins, music and durbuke and line dancing through the living room and dining room. We ate grape leaves, humus, baba ghanouj, tabbouleh, mjadara and bitawah. The adults spoke Arabic rapidly and often … Behind closed doors, a few times a year, we were Lebanese, Arab, Maronite, Elmaz, dancing and eating (33).

Critics Michael Omi and Howard Winant explain in their book Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s the idea of "cultural nationalism" expressed in most Arab-American plays in one way or another which is simply focusing on "cultural elements which give rise to collective identity, community and a sense of "peoplehood" (40). Nostalgic reminiscence of Arab homeland can be seen in the characters' love for Arab food and their non-stopping trials of trying to prepare it using American ingredients only to find out that it is not the same. Diana Abu-Jaber captures this moment in a prominent quotation in the Crescent mentioned by Aunt Aya:

> People say food is a way to remember the past … Food is a way to forget … Your father? He's the worst of the worst. He thinks he cooks and eats Arabic food, but these walnuts weren't grown from Jordanian earth and this butter wasn't made from Jordanian lambs. He is eating the shadow of memory. He cooks to remember, but the more he eats, the more he forgets (190).

Lisa Suhair Majaj explains in her article "Arab-American Literature: Origins and Developments" that instead of having a

static Arab-American identity dependent on the past and defined through preservation of cultural heritage, Arab-Americans can discover their identity by making sense of disparate experiences and cultural contexts and by nurturing the sparks generated by their juxtaposition. In her book Contemporary Arab American Literature: Transnational Reconfigurations of Citizenship and Belonging (2014), Carol Fadda-Conrey explains the tension experienced by people who hold the Arab-American label:

> The sense of doubleness or splitting captured by the Arab-American label adequately donates an inherent tension between these two terms. The tension, however, is not based on some epistemic or ordinary difference between the two entities but is largely based on history and politics, including colonial histories and neo-imperial US ambitions(11).

Perhaps one of the most controversial modern Arab-American dramas that discuss this sense of "doubleness" is Yussef El Guindi's Our Enemies: Lively Scenes of Love and Combat (2008). It depicts the struggles of a young female Arab-American writer, Noor, who is asked by her future publisher to make changes to her manuscript which would fit her story into mainstream narratives of Arab-American women. Her boyfriend, Gamal, attacks spokespersons who confirm stereotyping Arabs and are frequently asked to show up in the mainstream media. He humiliates Sheikh Alfani by throwing his birthday cake into his face. Later, he is

being accused by Alfani's son, Hani, who had left for a longer stay to Egypt to get familiar with his roots, of having burnt his father's mosque down. The play dares to ask the Arab-American community questions like who exactly the real Arab is and who are his enemies. It explores how intra-ethnic politics have led to strife and conflict; tearing the Arab community apart at a time when it desperately needed to unite against the forces attacking it. "We really have to stop hurting each other. It seems to be the one thing we do well—be our own worst enemies" (El Guindi 89) says Mohsen, one of the main characters in the play. El Guindi's work offers a form of resistance to stereotyping and denigrating of Arab Muslims by creating multi-dimensional characters like Noor's character whose story is rejected by her publisher for its topic. Olivia, Noor's publisher, mentions that "intimate stories of Arab and Muslim women still hold some interest for people" a comment to which Noor answers "I thought that curiosity had passed" (El Guindi 95). Noor makes fun of her publisher who represents Americans' interest in stereotyping Arab-American women.

> NOOR (To Gamal): Oh, you know, she wants the woman unveiled memoir. The terrible travails of the put-upon Arab female. As she swims against the current of all that Arab male testosterone. The struggles of "Mona" or "Fatima" as she cries herself to sleep because she was forbidden from doing something by her brother or father; and then secretly reading all those forbidden Western

> books which lead to enlightenment, love, and the latest Western fashions. That book (107-108).

Some of El Guindi's Arab characters are morally flawed. El Guindi refuses only to provide positive portrayals of Arabs, opting instead to portray the characters in their complexity. In Our Enemies, the Arab characters attack and denigrate one another under the pressure of conforming to a system that only utilizes them for their profit-making potentials (Najjar, Introduction to Four Arab American Plays 12- 13).

El Guindi's play examines who has the right to speak for the Arab-American community. The fractured lives and experiences of the characters in the play prove that there is no monolithic Arab voice or community (Najjar 13). Instead, the community is composed of conservatives, liberals, straights, homosexuals, traditionalists and progressives; a typical microcosmic representation of the larger American community. El Guindi highlights the holistic nature of nationalism:

> Because there are so few depictions of Arab-American life in our theatre, people have wanted me to just give a very, very affirmative view of who we are … But in order to humanize a people, you need to show their warts and all. Our humanity lives in our cracks and wounds. How can you affirm something, without talking about everything (qtd. in Berson 50)?

Another play in which the playwright does not play the role of a preacher or a cultural cheerleader is Precious Stones (2003) by

Jamil Khouryxvi. It is a drama about Jewish and Arab Diasporas and one of very few Arab-American dramas that addresses the sensitive issue of homosexuality in the Arab-American community. Precious Stones presents two lesbian protagonists: one Palestinian-American and the other is Jewish-American. The two women come together for a discussion group but end up in love. They find themselves dealing with opposition to their politics and sexuality from relatives, co-workers and eventually each other. Esther (Andrea's Jewish friend) warns her of the consequences;

> ESTHER: Ever since you befriended that Palestinian woman, you haven't been the same Andrea. I think that ... your feelings for her ... are complicating things. Look at how your priorities have changed. You love this community. You don't want to find yourself isolated.
>
> ANDREA: Esther, I think I love her.
>
> ESTHER: Sweetheart, no. You're confusing politics for ...
>
> What about you and that Rachel get back together? You are already
>
> roommates. Granted, Rachel's no genius, but at least she's
>
> Jewish. Sort of (Khoury 69).

In Precious Stones, Khoury explains that problems in the Middle East affect Americans of Arab origin in America the way they do in Arab countries. He writes:

I wanted to explore how the conflict plays itself out in Diaspora communities and how it directly impacts the lives of

people in a place like Chicago, thousands of miles 'removed' from the conflict and yet more cognizant of events in the Middle East than events occurring a mile from our own homes.

Since the play allows the audience to arrive at its own conclusion, it has always generated a great deal of response among audiences of different backgrounds. It is worth mentioning that Khoury is the Founding Artistic Director of Silk Road Rising theatre company[xvii]. He co-founded this company with his life partner Malik Gillani as a proactive artistic response to the attacks of September 11, 2001. Khoury speaks of the main objective of modern playwrights in an essay on his company's site:

> I want an Arab-American theatre movement. I want an Arab-American theatre movement that is vibrant and visible and daring and unafraid of its own power. I want an Arab-American community that champions and supports our movement, and I want an American theatre that embraces and celebrates us. I want Arab-American plays to be woven into the fabric of American storytelling … I want our stories not to just enter the mainstream, but to help define the mainstream.

In conclusion, my paper has analyzed a number of modern Arab American plays showing the dilemma writers often face to depict their struggle. It has been noticed that some writers have used the hyphenated version of "Arab-Americans" while others have not. For some the hyphen was a bridge for the gap but for others it was a gulf. The chasm between the two worlds has often

caused the ambivalent state of having conflicting reactions, beliefs or feelings that contain both positive and negative components. It is from this interstitial space that playwrights have often found their inspiration.

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Endnotes

[i] An Iraqi-American activist who traces the revolution of Arab drama in the United States in "Issues of Identity: In Theatre of Immigrant Community"
[ii] Hershewe was an actor, writer and director of the Playwright Unit of the Actors Studio and he was the one who produced his play at the Stage Society Theatre in Los Angeles in 1965.
[iii] A Palestinian-American literary theorist and public intellectual who helped found the critical-theory field of Post-colonialism
[iv] Barbara Harlow is the Luann and Larry Temple Centennial Professor of English Literatures and taught at the American University in Cairo, University College Galway, University of Minnesota Twin Cities, University of Natal in Pietermaritzburg and in Durban.
[v] "Literature that wages a struggle for political and cultural liberation" (Najjar 115).
[vi] In ancient Roman religion and myth, Janus is the god of beginnings and transitions. He is usually depicted as having two faces, since he looks to the future and to the past (Wikipedia.com)
[vii] Naomi Shihab Nye was born in Missouri, with a Palestinian father and an American mother. She lives in Texas, and her writing often reflects the culture of the American southwest. She also writes from an Arab-American perspective, including works for young readers.
[viii] Homi K. Bhabha is the Anne F. Rothenberg Professor of English and American Literature and Language, and the Director of the Humanities Center at Harvard University.
[ix] Classical Latin which means "into the middle things"
[x] Her mother is Lebanese, her father is American and her husband is Jewish American.
[xi] Transliteration is not concerned with representing the sounds of the original, only the characters, ideally accurately and unambiguously. Another term for it is Romanization.
[xii] Transcription notes the sounds but not necessarily the spelling. Phonetic transcription is the visual representation of speech sounds (or phones).
[xiii] Mary Bucholtz, is a professor of linguistics at UC Santa Barbara. She is well known for her contributions to research on language and identity within socio-cultural linguistics.
[xiv] Michael Malek Najjar is an assistant professor of Theatre Arts at the University of Oregon in Eugene. He has published in academic journals and encyclopedias and has created the first university course in Arab American Drama. He lives in Eugene, Oregon.
[xv] In his essay " Issues of Identity: In Theatre of Immigrant Community"
[xvi] Khoury holds a M.A. degree in Religious Studies from The University of Chicago Divinity School and a B.S. degree in International Relations from the School of Foreign Service at Georgetown University. He has developed courses in

Middle East Studies for The University of Chicago Graham (School of General Studies) and has lectured widely on Arab American affairs.

[xvii] Since its foundation, Silk Road Rising has collaborated with twenty-four playwrights to produce fifty-eight plays.