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# Self-Representation and the Change of Position: The Role of Arab American Theater in the 21st Century

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## Abstract

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# SELF-REPRESENTATION AND THE CHANGE OF POSITION: THE ROLE OF ARAB AMERICAN THEATER IN THE 21ST CENTURY

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**Abstract**

Arab American theater refers to theater performances by Arab American playwrights and artists from the early decades of 20th century onward. It dramatizes contemporary issues that challenge the Arab American community in the United States. Arab American theater discusses mainstream American culture and the minority culture of Arab Americans in different theater performances, reflecting the relationship between the two cultures and how each one looks at and negotiates itself with the other. It provides a bifocal vision of the two cultures as it delineates understanding, acceptance, repudiation, or negotiation between both cultures. This paper, thus, sheds light on American discourses, as well as Arab American theater performances as counter discourses which provide space to depict fairly images of their communities and cultures. The paper critically analyzes some plays, written and performed by Arab American playwrights with the intention of expounding their attempts to resist, recast, restage, and redefine negative depictions. The main contention of this paper is to expose how Arab American theater plays an important role in the lives of Arab Americas in the early 21st century, as it gives the Arab American playwrights space to articulate their identity and voice the challenges they face in American society. It explicates how the position of Arab Americans has changed from invisible to hyper-visible, from passive to dynamic, from silent to vibrant and from an unknown to a well-known community.

***Keywords:*** Arab American theater; counter-discourse; change of position; hyper-visible; self-representation; resistance

## Introduction

The term 'Arab American theater performances' refers to theatrical productions of plays by Arab American playwrights and artists which serve as counter-discursive tools to resist, recast, restage, and redefine misrepresentative images of Arab Americans in American discourses especially after the occurrence of the September 11, 2001 attacks (Najjar, 2015). In fact, Arab Americans used to be misrepresented in the American media, movies, and narratives as suspicious, violent, disloyal, the eternal other, and different. However, after terrorist attacks, (i.e., the terrorists' attacks of September 11, 2001, which targeted the American Pentagon and the World Trade Center with hijacked planes), this misrepresentation and othering of the Arab American community in American discourses was intensified and politicized. Essentially, the Arab American community is still on the periphery of American society and culture. Hence, Arab American playwrights and artists have been denied any space in the American regional and Off-Broadway theaters (Selim, 2014). Therefore, they decided to counter the negative discourses and depictions using their stories and theater performances. Theater became the most vibrant tool, giving space for Arab American playwrights to dramatize and resist the negative depictions of their community and culture, articulate their identity and voice the contemporary challenges they face in American society.

Many Arab American playwrights (e.g., Betty Shamieh, Yussef El Guindi, Heather Raffo, Jamil Khoury, Suhair Hamad, Laura Shamas, and many others) became more visible after the September 11 attacks, and began resisting the negative portrayals of their community members in different performances and theater productions. This paper, thus, analyzes the role of the Arab American theater as a tool of counter-discourse in giving a stage for Arab American playwrights to voice the pressing issues which they face in American society, as have been reflected in *Again and Against* (2005) by Betty Shamieh, *Back of the Throat* (2005) by Yussef El Guindi, *Nine Parts of Desire* (2004) by Heather Raffo and *Pistachio Stories* (2007) by Laura Shamas. It critically examines and discusses how the position of Arab Americans has changed as they have decided to revitalize their transnational

ties with the homeland, articulate their identity (not as Arabs, or as Americans but as Arab Americans), and have failed to be accepted in American society. Some of them have attempted to mask their identity and silence their ethnic differences in view of becoming Americans but realized that in the end, they are still on the margins of the American society. The paper additionally shows how Arab Americans contest Americans and members of other ethnic groups educationally and socio-economically, as they are the only ways to obtain recognition and social status in American society.

According to Michael Foucault, every discourse encounters a counter-discourse to challenge its authenticity (Heracleous, 2006; Terdiman, 1989). Hence, this paper is divided into two main parts. The first part discusses the issue of the American discourse about Arab Americans (as an out-group) in Americans' movies, narratives, and media which generally denotes otherness and negativity about Arab Americans and many other ethnic groups. The second part discusses the issue of counter-discourse or writing-back through the Arab Americans' stories and theater performances. The first part also defines and chronicles the development of Arab American theater. It argues extensively the issue of Arab American self-representation and the change of position in the American society. Arab American theater performance in this paper is considered as a counter-discourse, as it constitutes counter discursive rather than homogenous, discourse. However, the position of Arab Americans has changed totally, from passive to dynamic and from invisible to hyper-visible. The second part also explores the role of Arab American theater after the September 11 attacks as it gives space for Arab American playwrights to articulate their identity and voice the challenges they face in American society.

**American Discourse about Arab Americans**

Since the early 1920s, Arabs and Muslims have been represented negatively in American discourses (i.e., media, narratives, and movies) as their discourses were inspired and influenced to a great extent by European orientalism, as we find in movies like *The Sheik* (1921), directed by George Fitzmaurice and George Melford, *The Son of Sheik* (1926), directed by George Fitzmaurice, *Invitation to the Dance* (1956), directed by Gene Kelly, *Harum*

*Scarum* (1965), directed by Gene Nelson, *Chapter Two* (1979), directed by Robert Moore, *Back to the Future* (1985), directed by Robert Zemeckis, *Father of the Bride Part II* (1995), directed by Charles Shyer, *Gladiator* (2000), directed by Ridley Scott, *House of Sand and Fog* (2003), directed by Vadim Perelman, and many other movies. All of these and many other movies, TV series, and narratives, depict Arabs and Muslims negatively as monolithic, violent, uncivilized, and savage. Consequentially, Americans began identifying and defining the Arab Americans with the same stereotypes of Arabs as they were instructed to homogenize all the Arabs, Muslims, and Arab Americans and consider them all as descendants of the distant enemy (i.e., the offspring of Arabs who became American citizens). However, Arab Americans, undeniably, are not the first ethnic group to encounter racism and stereotyping in the American society, as other ethnic groups, such as Native Americans, Africans, German community, Italians, Japanese, Jews, and Russian Americans have been targeted and most probably they will not be the last (Shora, 2009). After World War I (1914 - 1918), the United States started acting as the elderly brother for European countries, which were drained and tired out politically, socially, and economically. Meanwhile, Americans began assuming a kind of potential that enabled them to forge images for other races and groups in their discourses (narratives, movies, and media) as the Europeans used to do in their orientalist discourses. Negative depictions, as well as racism against Arab Americans increase incidentally i.e., after the occurrence of violent incidents either in the United States or the Arab world, such as Munich (1972), the oil embargo (1973), the American hostage crisis in Iran (1989), the Gulf wars (1990 to 1991), the bombing of the World Trade Center (1993), the September 11 attacks (2001), the invasion of Afghanistan (2001) and the invasion of Iraq (2003). Hence, Arab Americans used to be depicted in the American movies, media and narratives as an enemy within, suspicious, descendants of the distant enemy, and the eternal other. They are already Americans, though they are depicted as second class citizens, citizens in waiting, and eternal foreigners. This consequentially made them more vulnerable and prone to discrimination, violence, stigmatization, and demonization in American society. Therefore, Arab American playwrights decided to counter American discourses through their stories and theater performances.

**Arab Americans' Counter-Discourse (Writing-Back)**

The origin of Arab American Anglophone literature dates back to the early decade of the twentieth century. For more than a century, Arab American writers have been producing Anglophone literature in the United States (Zabel, 2006). Owing to pioneering works in English such as the play *Wajdah* (1908). Ameen Rihani is considered to be the father of Arab American literature. The play *Wajdah* is the first Arab American play in English (Najjar, 2015). The development of Arab American literature was categorized by Shakir (1997) into "three stages: the early stage from 1900 - 1920s, the second stage from 1930s to 1960s and since 1970s till the present time is counted as the third stage" (p. 3). Arab American writers in the early period used to consider themselves to be mediators between the two cultures and worlds (East and West), blending their experience in the new society and reminiscences about Arab culture. Those works contributed to create the first literary movement, 'Mahjar', in 1920, which gave an identity to Arab American literature and literary artists. The second generation of Arab American writers moved on from exploring Arab culture and history and started focusing on the Arab American hyphenated identity, assimilation, and the way of becoming and being American (Schmidt, 2017). The publication of *Grape Leaves: A Century of Arab American Poetry* (1988) marked a distinct identity of Anglophone, and Arab American literature.

Over the last three decades, Arab Americans' literary productions started reflecting how Arab Americans are considered to be the descendants of the distant enemy. They began to encounter these stereotypes and misrepresentations more after the September 11 attacks. Thus, Arab American writers and artists have been galvanized to react and respond to these stereotypes. They decided to "represent themselves in their literary expressions instead of tacitly bowing to the constant definitions by others" (Schmidt, 2017). This period can be identified as the 'writing-back' period for Arab Americans. This 'writing-back' broke the barriers of invisibility, negativity, and silence in the Arab American community. They started talking about hyphenated identity, discrimination, marginalization, racial profiling, and forceful assimilation. Most importantly, Arab American playwrights began

gaining access and acceptance in mainstream American theaters and publications (Ameri and Arida, 2012). This acceptance brings American discourses and Arab American dramaturgy, as well as theater performances, together (as a means of counter discourse) to share the same platform, reaching Arab Americans and non-Arab Americans.

Arab American theater serves as a tool of counter-discourse that dismantles the dominant codes and constructions. In many situations, it has given voice to the nature of the relationship between oppressors and oppressed or marginalized. The operation of Arab American theater is dynamic and resistant. However, it does not attempt to subvert American-dominant discourses with the purpose of taking its place but rather to develop artistic means of resistance that counter constantly the negative depiction of their culture and community people (Tiffin, 1987).

**What is Arab American Theater?**

The term 'Arab American theater' in this paper refers to Arab American theater companies, which started emerging in the late 20$^{th}$ century and increased in the early 21$^{st}$ century. Arab American artists and playwrights began working cooperatively with Middle-Eastern playwrights and artists as they faced the same racism and denial of access to American regional and Off-Broadway theater companies. These theater companies started giving space for Arab American and Middle-Eastern playwrights to perform their ideas, articulate their identity, and defend their communities and cultures. Najjar (2016), in his article *Arab American Theater* defines, Arab American theater as: A general term that describes plays and performances by Americans of Arab descent written in Arabic and/or English from the early twentieth century onward. This modernist movement breaks from Arab performance modes such as storytelling, improvised poetry and traditional dance forms (p. 1).

Therefore, the Arab American theater performances refer to "the plays and theater performances of self-identified of Arab Americans whose works are a response to the backlash of September 11 against their community members" (Najjar, 2011). Accordingly, Arab American playwrights dramatize the contemporary challenges which they encounter in American society by

adopting modern dramatic forms, such as one-act and two-acts plays, radio plays, screenplays, and monodrama, using realist dramatic style.

**The Development of Arab American Theater**

The beginning of Arab American theater performances remains a controversial issue. Despite this, Najjar (2015) asserts, "the origin of Arab American drama and theater performances dates back to 1896 when the play *Andromak* was performed by the Syrian Youth Society in New York for Syrian and American audience" (p. 71). Ali (2015) contrarily assumes that "the beginning of Arab American theater performances dates back to the publication of *Wajdah* (1908) by Ameen Rihani and has started developing more after September 11 attack, 2001 especially in adopting different dramatic forms, styles, plots, and audience" (p. 26). Inaccurately, Mohr and Dawes (2016) discuss that "the Arab American theater was born after September 11, 2001" (p. 169). However, there is a history of Arab American dramaturgy and theater performances that predates September 11, but the terrorists' attacks increased dramatically the demand for plays and performances by Arab Americans writers and artists (Kan, 2008; Al Khatib, 2016).

Accordingly, the history of Arab American theater was divided by Najjar (2015) into two periods: modern and contemporary. Nevertheless, this paper divides the history of Arab American theater into three stages: the early stage, which extends from the first documented performance of *Andromak* in (1896) to the publication of *Wajdah* in 1908. Then, the modern period begins from 1908 to 1967, and, thereafter, the contemporary period begins in 1967 and continues to the present time (Najjar, 2015). The development of Arab American theater is ostensible in every stage, as it effectively covered almost all the aspects of language, form, subject matter, audience and infrastructure (ethnic theater companies). In the aspect of language, either language of dramatic composition or theater performance, Arab American theater performances began to be produced by and for Arab Americans. Arab American playwrights and performers were using the Arabic language in writing and performing. as they were able to speak and understand Arabic at

that time. McCarus (1994) discussed that most of those performances were farcical, discussing the challenges which the Arab immigrants faced in the new culture and society. The type of these performances reflects the influence of Arab theater which culminated in the 1970s and 1980s. In those performances, Arab immigrants used to discuss issues such as drugs, marriage, and work in the new society. Thereafter, in the late 1980s, performances in Arab American theater became "bilingual mixing both Arabic and English language. Such language is called Arabeezi and/or Englieezi" (Najjar, 2015, p. 113). These performances reflected the influence of other ethnic theater performances, like Mexican American theater in Texas as the performances began to include musical patterns too (McCarus, 1994; Najjar, 2015). Such developments were an attempt to meet the wishes and needs of the American-born generations who were unable to read or understand Arabic. The development of Arab American theater performances reached its peak, as they started to be in professional English for a general audience of Arab Americans and non-Arab Americans. Additionally, using English in the composition and production enables their voice to reach the entire American public (McCarus, 1994). Consequently, the use of language has different agendas, as Hassan (2014) asserts: when writing in Arabic, Rihani and Gibran had not only different agenda but also enjoy discursive latitude, first, they did not have to explain the Arab culture to Arab people but when writing in English they had to couch their message in ways that guaranteed or at least increase the likelihood of its acceptance and of their acceptance as writers by the American readers (p. 41).

However, in the aspect of the dramatic forms, contemporary Arab American playwrights started adopting modern dramatic forms, whilst the early Arab American writers used to conform to traditional dramatic forms (Najjar, 2016). In another way, contemporary Arab American playwrights utilize modern forms like one-act, two-acts and other plays in unconventional forms. They have started using modern dramatic styles like realism, as they dramatize the realities of daily life and the pressing issues which they face in American society (Selim, 2014). Additionally, the early Arab American theater performances used to dramatize and glorify Arab culture and history whilst contemporary Arab American theater performances usually debate and

question the issues of stereotyping, assimilation, and the hyphenated identity (Ali, 2017). Therefore, contemporary Arab American theater is dubbed as 'resistance theater' (Arida and Amin, 2009).

The development of Arab American theater has resulted in a dramatic increase of and variety in the audience (McCarus, 1994). Initially, Arab American theater performances were in Arabic language and therefore confined their voices and shows for Arab Americans only. However, contemporary Arab American theater performances use professional English and, hence, reach out to non-Arab Americans. These developments have made Arab American theater performances move rapidly from an exclusive means of counter-discourse and entertainment for Arab Americans only to an inclusive form for all American audience (McCarus, 1994). Also, early performances of Arab American theater used to take place in clubs, societies, and Middle-Eastern theaters. However, since the late 1980s, Arab Americans have begun establishing their own theater companies that consequentially give space for Arab American playwrights and performers to counter negative American discourses. The Middle-Eastern and Arab American theater companies grant space for Arab and Middle-Eastern American playwrights and artists, as they have been denied any opportunity in the American mainstream theaters. The most vibrant contemporary Arab and Middle-Eastern theater companies are Ajyal Theater Group (1988) established by Najee Mondalek, the Arab American Childrens' Theater (1989), by Hamman Shafie, Golden Thread Productions (1999), by Torange Yeghiazarian, Nibras Theater (1998), by Maha Chehlaoui, Rana Kazkaz and Dalia Sabour, Silk Road Rising (2002), by Jamil Khoury and Malik Gillani and Noor Theater (2010), established by Lameece Issaq, Maha Chehlaoui and Nancy Vitale.

**Self-Representation in Arab American Theater**

Arab Americans have been struggling for a long time with misrepresentations and negative depictions especially after September 11; some were charged with terrorism. On the one hand, the American public

started absorbing and reflecting what they used to see and read in American discourses, literary narratives, cultural discourses, and media representations, while on the other hand, the American government normalized racial profiling, Islamophobia, and anti-Saracen sentiments in its policies and treatments. Teo (2012) states, "Arab Americans are probably still the only group in the United States that anyone dares to portray in pejorative terms and this type of thing would never be tolerated by other ethnic groups in the American society like black, Asian, Jews, and Irishmen" (p. 301). They are still depicted in American literary narratives, media, and Hollywood movies as controversial embodiments and explicit negative depictions (El Guindi, 2017). Suleiman (1999) remarks, "Arab and Muslims have been usually depicted as inherently violent, religiously fanatic, hopelessly backward, women oppressors, lazy, dirty, anti-western and most importantly anti-American" (p. 35). Yussef El Guindi (2017), a prominent Arab American playwright, explains that the Arabs and Muslims are always depicted as genetically prone to mindless violence, wars, the oppression of women, etc. The go-to images are always large mobs of angry Arab men, veiled women, bearded Muslims in prayer, bombed sites, and so on. But, what I see in the American mainstream culture and society about Arabs and Muslims contradicts completely with what I observe and experience when I travel back to Egypt and hang out with friends and family.

As a result, Arab American writers resolved to counter American discourses to redefine their image, re-articulate their identity, and defend their community and culture. Arida and Ameri (2009) opine "we have to define our image otherwise our image will be defined for us either by those who commit violence in our names or by those who constantly represent Arab Americans as terrorists, violent and monolithic" (p.1). When it comes to encountering explicit racial profiling and implicit prejudice, Arab American theater is a head of the curve as it strongly resists and challenges racial profiling and attempt to represent Arab American individuals and communal (self) accurately and passably (El Guindi, 2017). Arab-American theater contributes to re-articulate the Arab American identity that emphasizes hybridity and dual allegiances (Najjar, 2016). Inexorably, Arab American playwrights and theater artists are endeavoring to restore their threatened self-image and depict a positive image

of themselves in their literary narratives and theater performances (Zuhur, 2001). Arab America theater addresses the deluge of negativity that mainstream culture exhibits about Arab Americans (El Guindi, 2017). Consequentially, Arab American playwrights like Yussef El Guindi, Betty Shamieh, Heather Raffo, Nathalie Handal, Sam Younis, Najee Mondalek, Jamil Khoury, Leila Buck, Ismail Khalidi, Abdel Fatah Abusrour, Imad Farajin, Suheir Hammad, Hannah Khalil, Catherine Filloux, Dalia Taha, Lameece Issaq, and Jacob Kader, and many others attempt to rearticulate, recast, and restage their American ethnic identity in their dramatic expressions and counter-discursive theater performances. Accordingly, these artistic productions become the most important form for self-representation of Arab Americans and their community (Fadda-Conrey, 2014).

**The Change of Position of the Most Invisible of the Invisibles**

Arab Americans factually have been considered as the most invisible of invisibles regardless of their status of whiteness. Their invisibility has been caused by many factors especially American policies and the incessant stereotyping, public harassment, stigmatization, violence and biased treatment (Naff, 1993). Also, racial profiling against Arab Americans witnessed a dramatic increase in the 1960s and 1970s and peaked in the wake of September 11, 2001. The normalization, as well as the repetition, of these stereotypes in the American media and cultural discourses, instigated the American public to accept them as facts. Additionally, the invisibility of Arab Americans has been galvanized by the rejection of some Arab immigrants of their Arab ancestry and identity, like the Lebanese who started claiming Phoenician ancestry. In addition to this, some Arab Americans decided to be invisible in order to evade violence, stigmatization, hate crimes, and harassment in American society. Others resolved to be invisible in order to achieve their socio-economic dreams which were the incentives for their migration. Contrarily, some Arab Americans resolved to become visible, rejecting assimilation into American society and culture, as they failed to pass and be accepted because of their noticeable ethnic differences, like color, accent, and appearance (Al Khatib, 2016; Pennock, 2017).

Consequentially, the intensification of racial profiling, stereotyping and violence against them relegated most Arab Americans not only to the margins, but also to become totally invisible (Nelson, 2005). Schmidt (2017) points out that "the Arab Americans for most of the 20th century had been living in the United States unnoticeable by the public; they were counted as the most invisible of the invisibles among the other American minorities" (p.14). Some of them changed their names, others silenced their ethnic differences and many others distanced themselves from the issues that concerned their homeland and/or the Arab American community in the US. However, the backlash after the September 11 attacks targeted all Arab Americans visible or invisible, Muslims and Christians, men and women as they all were homogenized and depicted as an enemy within (McCarus, 1994). They used to be represented also as descendants of the distant enemy, the eternal other and the enemy within (El Said, 2003). At that moment, Arab Americans realized the gravity of the situation and decided to step forward.

Grimm (2001) observes that, Arab Americans did not have any identity, as they were invisible for decades, but such invisibility was shaken off after the attacks of September 11. Basiouny (2009) points out: The negative depictions after September 11 urged Arab Americans to be no longer invisible. Their position has changed completely from invisible into hyper-visible, from passive into dynamic or active, from silent into vibrant and from an unknown community into a well-known group within the American social fabric (p.2). They have changed from invisible citizens into visible subjects. (Jamal and Naber, 2008).

However, this change did not occur all of a sudden, or in "night long; the gradual preparation for such shift or change has taken a number of decades" (*ibid*, p. 3). Shamieh (2005) in *Again and Against*, did not focus on the Arab's history and culture, like the early Arab American writers, but rather questioned, resisted, and challenged the misrepresentation of and misconception about Arab Americans. Consistently, Shamieh creates strong, sharp and unapologetic female characters (e.g., Dahlia, The Architect, Irene, and Hala) in view of arguing the issues of identity, racial profiling, and feminism. Dahlia is an Arab American student who is politically active. Like most of her community members Dahlia, after the September 11 attacks,

became hyper-visible. She resolved to articulate her hyphenated identity and to resist negative portrayals and discrimination. Like many Arab Americans, Dahlia was suspected of being a terrorist and further accused of being the culprit in the September 11 attacks; as Omer (an Arab American FBI agent) states, "you are being accused of trying to set bombs in Columbia University" (p. 9). She was arrested, interrogated, and violently treated (see Figure 1) in order to extract particular confessions.

**Figure 1:** The Backlash of September 11 Attacks (Shamieh, 2005)

Shamieh shows here how many Arab Americans like Dahlia are suspected, incarcerated, and violently interrogated after the September 11 attacks because of their racial and/or religious backgrounds. Dahlia here is accused of being an accomplice in the September 11 attacks, but she tells Omar (an Arab American who is working as an FBI agent) that attacks are not simple incidents but, rather, historic and racist game, as she explains, "forget culture and creed you came from, your community is among the marked" (Shamieh, 2005).

Shamieh, in *Again and Against* (2005) depicts a major shift, especially in the style and approach of her dramaturgy. This play is a one-act play in which Shamieh resists totally the racial profiling of Arab Americans, especially the labels and stereotypes which have been promulgated widely in the American media. Shamieh explains that Arab American men used to be

depicted as sand nigger, violent, and women oppressors, while Arab American women used to be depicted as submissive, veiled, dangerous, oppressed and exotic. Therefore, Dahlia replied sharply, when her teacher provocatively referred to Arab American women as oppressed in their dress by saying:

One of the fourth women is raped and there is no word for that other epidemic. … in places like Texas if you shoot your wife in bed with another man you could until recently plead temporary insanity and get six months… your position as a world-class scientist does not help you. You are still old. You are still a woman. That makes you the lowest of the low on the totem pole in your precious fascist America (Shamieh, p.19).

Significantly, Shamieh (2005) depicts here the change of position of Arab American writers and artists as they began recasting and re-defining their misrepresented image in their stories and theater performances.

Similarly, El Guindi in *Back of the Throat* (2005) dramatized the backlash that followed the September 11 attacks. Like Shamieh, El Guindi challenges the issues of suspicion (see Figure 2), racial profiling and paranoia.

**Figure 2:** Suspicion and Othering of Arab Americans (Kosidowski, 2015).

El Guindi dramatizes the way in which many Arab Americans like Khalid are suspected, incarcerated, and consequently tortured. The FBI agents (Bartlett and Carl) suspect Khalid because of his Arabic name. Thereafter, he is accused of having connections with a mysterious character by the name of

Gamal Asfoor, who is in the photo in Figure 2. However, the play ends without substantiating any indictment, except for posing constant menace for all Arab Americans, as Bartlett promises, "We are going to leave you to think about it, come back later tomorrow" (*ibid*, p. 67). Here El Guindi depicts how all Arab Americans in post-September 11 period started expecting the visit of FBI agents at any time. Many Arab Americans like Khalid are already suspected, as Bartlett says, "We have already established you are a left-leaning, subversive with Maoist tendencies, who has a thing for bestiality and militant Islam" (*ibid*, p. 19). El Guindi shows here how all Arab Americans began to be considered as enemies within or as national threats.

Meanwhile, El Guindi created a kind of flashback, in which the role of three American female characters are performed by one character, despite their different opinions, roles, and positions in view of dramatizing the dispersal of Islamophobia and stereotyping about Arab Americans among Americans in American society. Shelly the librarian describes Arab Americans as evil, treacherous, terrorists and dirty. Then appears Beth (Khalid's ex-girlfriend), who accuses Khalid of being suspicious, terrorist, anti-American, evil and dishonest. Similarly, Jean a (stripper), describes both Asfoor and Khalid as anti-Americans, enemies within, and haters as she says, "I always give my best even to people who turn out later to be scum, who want to do us harm" (El Guindi, 2005, p. 63). Overall, El Guindi, in his article, *Arabs and Muslims on Stage: Can we Unpack our Baggage* (2017), exposes that unpacking the baggage (resisting and challenging the pressing issues that ethnic groups encounter) is a constant process which takes a long time. Specifically, El Guindi appends, "for the Arab Americans, the unpacking has barely begun" (*ibid*, p. 3). However, this reflects accurately the change of position of Arab Americans.

Additionally, the same shift has been observed in many other theater performances such as *Re-orientalism* (2003) by Suhair Hamad and *Pistachio Stories* (2007), by Laura Shamas. Both plays explore and challenge the issue of the racial profiling of the Arab Americans. Moreover, there are Arab American playwrights who have resolved to dramatize stories from the areas of conflicts in the old homeland, so that they give them grounds to challenge current American racial profiling, like *Territories* (2008), *The Black Eyed*

(2005), by Betty Shamieh, *Nine Parts of Desire* (2004), by Heather Raffo, and *Precious Stones* (2003), by Jamil Khoury.

## The Role of Arab American Theater in the 21st Century

Arab American theater started blossoming in the last two decades of the 20th century and, thereafter, gained more popularity and space in the early decades of the 21st century. Basically, Arab American theater possesses a bifocal vision which has been used for exploring mainstream American culture and the Arab Americans' minor culture as well as countering American biased discourses. It seeks the possibilities of deepening the understanding and acceptance of each other. Consequentially, it contributes in establishing self-identity, assisting self-representation, and exploring the experience of Arab Americans (McCarus, 1994). It provides a space for Arab American playwrights and artists to counter American discourses as they have been placed on the periphery of American society and denied access to Off-Broadway and regional theaters. Besides, the Arab American theater helps in normalizing and equating the experience of Arab Americans with other minority groups, as in the early plays, *Smile You 're in Dearborn* (1993), *We are Becoming Americans* (1996), and *Come See… Come Saw* (1998) by Najee Mondalek. However, since the late 1990s, Arab American theater started producing theatrical performances like *Me No Terrorist* (2001), by Najee Mondalek, *Sajjal* (2002), by Nibras Theater Group and *ReOrientalism* (2003), by Suhair Hammad which respond to the engendered stereotyping against Arab Americans.

Thereafter, in the early 21st century, Arab American theater started addressing various pressing issues that challenge Arab American individuals and the community in various plays like *Chocolate in Heat* (2001), by Shamieh, *Language Rooms* (2010), by El Guindi and *Nine Parts of Desire* (1993), by Heather Raffo. Through these plays, Arab American theater helps Arab Americans to break the barrier of silence and dramatize the misrepresentations and negative depictions which they encounter in their second homeland. Talking about Arab American theater, El Guindi (2017), states, "theatre should have a critical eye; it should offer up critiques,

contextualize, and provide some kind of critical framework through which to view the culture and politics of the day" (p. 2).

Arab American theater played significant role in countering negative American discourses and in exploring the backlash (see Figure 1) that followed September 11, as it gave space for many Arab American playwrights to address the pressing issues, as El Guindi (2017) confirms, "I turn to the arts as one potential source to put some of these happenings in perspective" (p. 2). Many plays dramatized these challenges, such as *Again and Against* (2005), *Roar* (2004), by Shamieh and *Back of the Throat* (2005), by El Guindi. Like other ethnic groups, Arab Americans started using literature and theater as tools for demystifying the misrepresentations and for re-defining their image, as El Guindi (2017) affirmed, "the political burden on other minorities has begun to lessen … It takes a while, and the struggle to unpack that baggage is still ongoing. But for Arabs and Muslims, that unpacking has barely begun" (p. 4).

Also, Arab American theater is used to dramatize the conflicts and the political controversies in Arab homelands, challenging misrepresentations and negative depictions against the Arab culture and people. This grants Arab American theater an agency to represent and re-define the image of Arabs' culture and race. Meanwhile, it makes Arab American theater a form of resistance as it gives a stage for Arab American playwrights and artists to challenge the misrepresentations of their community, as in the plays *Precious Stones* (2003), by Jamil Khoury, *Territories* (2008), by Shamieh and *Tennis in Nablus* (2010), by Ismail Khalidi.

In addition, Arab American theater has been used to produce some performances that depict other complex issues, political realities, and daily challenges that Arab Americans experience in American society, such as their hybrid identity, marginalization, assimilation, retaining connections with home culture and the rectification of their misrepresented and distorted image, as in *Isite*, (2013), by Leila Buck, *Our Enemies: Lively Scenes of Love and Combat* (2008), by El Guindi, *Flag Piece* (2011), by Rania Khalil, *Black Eyed* (2008), by Shamieh, and *Brown Town* (2004), by Sam Younis. In such a scenario, Arab American theater acquires more urgency and importance. Hence, these

theater performances began gaining considerable interest among Arab American and non-Arab American audiences.

## Conclusion

Arab Americans started writing in English in the first decade of the twentieth century. However, the accretion of racial profiling and negative depictions in the late 20th century and the early 21st century urged Arab American writers to counter the negative discourse and represent their culture and community positively and vehemently. The performances of Arab American theater in the 1980s differ from contemporary theater performances in many aspects and for various reasons. Accordingly, performances in contemporary Arab American theater shed light on the Arab American identity and image, racial profiling, negative depictions, daily challenges, assimilation, and the perpetuation of transnational ties with the homeland culture and people. Consequentially, dramatizing and speaking out about these issues reflect the remarkable change in the position of Arab Americans in American society. Their artistic and literary expressions changed the permanent invisibility of their community into hyper-visibility, especially after September 11, 2001. Also, contemporary Arab American theater plays a different role in the lives of Arab Americans and the Arab American community in the US. Unlike other literary genres, theater grants the audience a live show and sets the actors and the audience in the same environment and at the same immediacy. This paper has discussed the issue of discourse (American discourses in media, narratives, and movies) and Arab Americans' counter-discourse. More tellingly, it has depicted how Arab American playwrights and artists write-back and counter American discourses in their stories and theater performances.

Ultimately, this paper has described what Arab American theater is and traces the historical stages of its development. It has explained how Arab American theater gave Arab Americans space to articulate their identity and challenge Americans' misrepresentation of their community and culture. It has debated and elucidated the issue of the change in position of the Arab American community and how Arab Americans have become hyper-visible

instead of invisible, dynamic instead of passive, and well-known in lieu of being an unknown community. The change in their position has been served to a great extent by their literary and artistic productions.

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