

## Re-thinking the Stereotypes and Violence Against Arabs and Arab Americans in El Guindi's *Back of the Throat* and Shamieh's *The Black Eyed*

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### Abstract

This article explores two contemporary Arab American dramatists' challenging attitudes towards the enacting dynamics of violence that have existed in either their native or host societies in the context of Shamieh's *The Black Eyed* (2008) and El Guindi's *Back of the Throat* (2006). Both dramatists actively engage in addressing the ways, enabling factors, and agencies through which various forms of violence operate against Arab and Muslim (Americans), and dramatize them to carve an intellectual space in the American mainstream to express their own reflections on the causes of this phenomenon and its negative consequences, the intersection between violence and injustice, and the necessity of breaking the silence of those people who suffer from colonial subjugation, imperialist hegemony, racism, invisibility, prejudice, and hostility.

**Key words:** Stereotypes; Violence; Hegemonic discourse; Resistance; Self-representaion

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### INTRODUCTION

Post- 9/11 Islamophobia – a war on terrorism, a euphemism for a war against Islam— violence, prejudice, and hegemonic discourse on Arabs, Arab Americans, and

Muslims display a strong awareness among Arab American playwrights of the need for dramatizing/expressing their views on the tragic events of 9/11 and the hostile attitude they (re) engender. This dramatic engagement is crucial not only to rectify the image of Arabs and Arab Americans in the hegemonic discourse and in American popular mainstream, but, more importantly, to contextualize violence and counter-violence (that led to the suicide bombings and the tragic events of 9/11), demystify the extremist/fundamentalist discourses that promote such forms of violence and feature Islam as a religion of terrorism and violence, and address the backlash and the unfair institutionalized, structural, and state violence experienced by Arab Americans in the US after 9/11. The theatrical endeavor of intellectually communicating such issues is condensed in Shamieh's *The Black Eyed* and El Guindi's *Back of the Throat*. Both dramatists seek through theatre, a public forum for resistance, and scripts to speak back to the enabling factors and various forms of violence perpetrated by/against Arabs, Arab Americans, and Muslims. Exploring violence through these two literary works is particularly important because, to the best of the researcher's knowledge, such an investigation has not been attempted yet—a matter that will hopefully make this effort a contribution to Arab American literature of violence.

### 1. CONCEPTUALIZATION OF VIOLENCE

Before approaching the plays in question, it is important to briefly explain the concept of violence. In their book, *Violence, inequality, and Human Freedom*, Ladicola and Shupe identify violence as “any action or structural arrangement that results in physical or nonphysical harm to one or more persons” (Ladicola et al., p.23). What is unique and fresh about this definition is that it goes beyond the traditional conceptualization of violence as an act of physical force. Violence might be direct or

indirect, concrete or subtle. They argue: “violence may be recognized or not recognized by either the recipient of the action, the actor, or both” (p.26). They continue: “Certain forms of violence may be so integral to the structure of society and the functioning of its institutions that they may not be recognized as violence per se” (p.26). For this reason, they think that conformity to the harmful/abusive views, prospects, norms, or ideology of the dominant institutions within society embodies an aspect of violence. Ladicola and Shupe not only foreground such dimensional meanings/aspects of violence but also draw distinctions between its three major forms. One, of course, is “state violence,” which means “all forms of violence” authorized, endorsed, and wielded by government authorities either against the state subjects in the name of order, or at another country (p.262). Second is “institutional violence” that exists via societal institutions: family, education, and religion (pp.28-29). Third, “structural violence” that refers to violence that occurs through keeping “hierarchical relations between categories of people within society,” or that emerges from maintaining “hierarchical relations” between nation states (p.375). Accordingly, the (neo) colonial, imperialist paradigms, and the essentialist dichotomies of Self/Other, together with stereotyping manifest themselves as forms of structural violence that are to be challenged like any other form of violence.

## 2. ARAB AMERICAN THEATRE AND COUNTERBALANCING VIOLENCE

As a matter of fact, Arab American theatre is projected by dramatists as a means of counterbalancing the stereotyping, and liberating Arabs and Arab Americans from the various forms of violence—be it structural, state, institutional, or religion-based— which as such turns drama into a form of resistance. Barbra Harlow posits that resistance literature “continues to wage a struggle for liberation on many levels and in many arenas. This ongoing struggle is part of its political and cultural agenda” (Harlow, xviii). Liberation, as an intellectual mission, and opposition to the ravages of the performative colonial discourse form a cornerstone of contemporary Arab American theatrical formation. Somaya Sabry asserts: “The literary writings and performances of contemporary Arab-American [writers] have become an arena of resistance to such Orientalist discursive practices” (Sabry, p.3). At the helm of such challenging dramatic initiatives is Betty Shamieh's *The Black Eyed*. The play, with its powerful women characters and their multilayered voices, offers a fecund area for cultural negotiation concerning the intersection between political/colonial actions and violence, the fabricated religious claims enabling violence and women's victimization of colonial power, so that the image of Arab (American) and Muslim

is re-staged and realized in a way that is different from the one enacted, maintained, and reinforced by culturally and politically hegemonic appropriation in popular American fantasy. It is within this context and for such an end that the restoration of the past— for the purpose of unearthing/giving voice to the unknown traumatic sufferings of Arabs from colonial violence— is revisited.

The journey to the past for a challenging self-representation against colonial power both empowers and creates a sense of agency for the colonized. To Hovsepian, it is “imperative for the colonized to produce and create their own narratives that negate the colonial misrepresentation of their reality. A re-writing of history is required to enable liberation and to put an end to colonial suppression and domination” (Hovsepian, p.9). Inclined to evoke the enacting agency of history, Shamieh creates four women of Palestinian origin from different historical periods, namely, Delilah and Tamam, who fall preys to colonial crusaders, Aiesha, a victim of Israeli occupation and a suicide bomber, and the contemporary Arab American, the Architect, a victim of the tragic 9/11 attacks. The very choice of these characters is consciously made so that the long standing oppression of Arab (American) Muslims is mapped out and their refractory attitude towards violence is redefined.

## 3. AIESHA AND TAMAM— OPPOSITION TO RELIGIOUS STRUCTURAL VIOLENCE

Since violence is a multifaceted dynamic, *The Black Eyed* interweaves it with the cultural, historical, and ideological elements underpinning it, thereby probing the various sources and forms of this phenomenon. For Shamieh, violence functions/operates as an inherent feature of culture and ideology, thus reinforcing Galtung's views of the nexus between culture/ ideology and violence. Galtung assumes that certain “aspects of culture . . . exemplified by religion and ideology . . . can be used to justify or legitimize direct or structural violence” (Galtung, 196). It is from this perspective that Shamieh believes in the intersection between fundamentalist religious thought and the making of structurally religious violence that fuel the dichotomy of Self/Other, and Muslim/Christian, as the following dialogue suggests:

Aiesha: Muhammed? Do you know how many Muahammeds are probably in there [Heaven]?

Tamam: No more than there are Johns.

Aiesha: True. (*Black Eyed*, p.25)

The euphemistic and simple aspects of such speech point, in part, towards the two women's

opposition to the fundamentalist/militant Islamic thought/discourse and its Muslim/non-Muslim duality that promotes Islam as the only true message of God. The shared view Aiesha and Tamam blurs the boundaries of the artificial structural violence grounded on the superiority

of one religion over another, offering a true understanding of Islam which welcomes and celebrates the legitimacy of other religions. As Azevedo writes, while “the Koran preaches the legitimacy of the religions of ‘the people of the Book’ . . . The militants preach exactly the opposite . . . denature their own faith and feed hatred” (Azevedo, p.4). To Aiesha and Tamam, both Islam and Christianity, as suggested by the presence of “many Muhammads” (a common name in Islam) and “Johns (a widespread name in Christianity) in Heaven, lead back to God.

But even more impressive is the way Aiesha’s and Tamam’s view reads as a form of resistance to a Western tendency towards a totalizing image of Islam as a religion of extremism. “The representation of Islam” in Western consciousness, writes Rane, “lends legitimacy to extremist Muslims as the representative of Islam . . . Hardline and extreme Muslim voices are overrepresented and tend to be represented as representative of Muslim masses” (Rane, p.151). This collective construction of Islam reduces each Muslim individual into the general infamous label of extremism and denies him/her any sort of singularity—a matter that makes the voice of tolerance by Aiesha and Tamam extremely significant. It is important that both Muslim women refuse to be defined in Western hegemonic discourses that structure Islam/Muslims as a monolithic entity characterized by fundamentalism and intolerance, instead offering a radical contestation of the authority and authenticity of those discourses that deprive Islam and Muslims of respect and understanding of other religions.

#### 4. RELIGION, VIOLENCE, AND COLONIAL POWER

Religion-based structural violence and violence in general are nearly synonymous to the extent that in certain historical contexts the former necessitated the latter, usually resulting in violent political/military acts. Aware of this fact, Shamieh uses the theatrical space within a historical frame to write back to Western Christendom’s practice of such form of violence upon Arab Muslims during the Crusades. The Crusades were in many respects founded on creating orientalisating discourses, which aim to create a hierarchical religious discrepancy between Islam and Christianity. In these performative discourses, Islam, in Said’s terms, is “not by any means a spiritual one [faith]” (Said, p.151), and thus a religion-oriented war (i.e. a Crusade) functioned as an excuse for the crusaders’ violent military incursion into the Arab Muslim world. “The Crusades,” writes Said, “were not aggression;” they were appropriated to be just Christian wars against “Orientals, Arabs whose civilization, religion, and manners were so low, barbaric, and antithetical” (p.172). The unsettling combination of religion and constitution of colonial power throughout the Arab world (particularly

Palestine) becomes a pivot around which Tamam’s story revolves.

Tamam highlights the connection between the religious justification and the European crusaders’ colonial existence in Palestine: “[T]he Europeans and their Holy War, crusading against we people who lived here before” (*Black Eyed*, p.38). Though presumably crusaders existed in Palestine to take on a sacred/divine military mission, Tamam debunks this claim. A debate on violence, as Schinkel writes, involves “recognition of violence, on its immediate understanding versus its structural antecedents and mythological or ideological masks” (Schinkel, p.3). Tamam plays ironically with the ideologically overloaded sense of “Holy War,” dramatizing it as a mere veneer, which masks the fullness of the inner truth of torture and violence exerted upon its victims, namely, Arab Muslims. The Holy War becomes a world of human atrocity that Tamam and her people “looked at the crusaders/with every ounce of hatred a human heart can hold” (*Black Eyed*, p.38). Along with this repugnant feeling against crusaders, there are the trauma and pain of their violent tools. The ways the colonizing crusaders assume to suppress the indigenous Palestinians are tied to violence, and completely stand in contrast with any sense of holiness or humanity.

The crusaders become a codeword for destruction and suffering. Their brutality is privately and publicly executed. To elicit information from her brother, Tamam is gang raped before him in the jail: “And they raped me in front of him . . . They wanted to know something” (*Black Eyed*, 40). A little later, the play proceeds to leave the audience/readers face to face with the grim scene of Tamam’s gang rape:

When the first hand was laid upon me, we  
both screamed. . .  
a scream is a cry for help,  
they tied down the only one who could  
so I silenced myself. . .  
I flinched when I had to,  
but I kept my breathing regular. . .  
They thought making us face one another  
in our misery would break us.

But we were used to misery. (*Black Eyed*, pp.40-41)

More violent still, perhaps, than this grim act are the intimidating macabre measures exerted on

Tamam’s village. It is completely destroyed so that none of its citizens dares to rebel against crusaders as her brother does in his pursuit of avenging his sisters’ rape. Tamam: “And I didn’t say it loud. Brother, they burned down our entire village because you killed those people” (*Black Eyed*, p.45). In these episodes, among the many symptoms generally associated with the colonized’s ordeal of colonizing violence are silence, semi-silence, sense of powerlessness, and lack of agency, signs of his/her sense of being controlled by greater forces. Tamam encounters her gang rape with silence, and her people encounter the

damage of their village by powerlessness and lack of agency. The dearth of the colonized's agency, conversely, functions not only to intensify his/her suffering from the colonizer, but to serve as a theatrical effect on the audience. No one can neither view nor read such episodes without a shocking awareness of the tremendous role religion-oriented structural violence plays in enacting violence, hatred, and abuse among nations.

## 5. DEMYSTIFYING RELIGION-BASED (STRUCTURAL) VIOLENCE

Indeed, throughout the play, Shamieh rejects perceiving religion in binary terms. She advocates escaping the confines of religiously structural violence that foment the notion that our belief is explicitly superior/true, and theirs is false and inferior to be eliminated. Architect doubts that Heaven would be the place for the proponents of such thought: "But we can't believe what we've been told/ . . . Heaven is not a place where people segregate/ themselves/ according to religion or race" (*Black Eyed*, 80). Revealingly, this same quality of doubt is what determines Tamam to respond: "Hell is a place where we have to look for the ones we lost" (p.80). The implication, of course, is that those who die/sacrifice themselves for a cause grounded on a religiously structural violence inevitably face the torment of hell.

Nonetheless, the implications of reluctance to religion-based structural violence and its consequential violent military and political acts do not stop here. Indeed, allusions to invalidate this form of violence reappear obsessively throughout the play. To Tamam, any religion enacting violent acts remains a man-made appropriation/fabrication to legitimize violence. Tamam articulates:

I went to talk to all gods and prophets  
of all the religions . . .  
to tell us where to locate the  
martyrs in the after-life.  
None had a clue, except this god that humans  
. . . made . . . to the sapien part of the homo sapien.

(*Black Eyed*, p.28)

In contrast to the religious notion that man is made in God's image, God is shaped in man's image to legitimize his use of violence, Shamieh seems to propose. Tamam takes this paradox to debunk the gross practice of religion, where certain acts of violence such as suicide attacks against civilians are appropriated by fundamentalists to be of positive value, an upholder of God, and a door through which they pass into hereafter. A Suicide attack (er) that is modified by labels like "martyrdom" or "martyr," a means of earning rewards in the next world, is to Tamam infidelity. That neither God nor His prophets had "a clue" where "to locate" such perpetrators of this form of violence "in the afterlife" extravagantly gives credence to the rejection of this heinous act by all religions, including, of course, Islam.

"Suicide bombings and attacks against civilian targets," writes Ul-Qadri, "are not only condemned by Islam, but render the perpetrators totally out of the fold of Islam, in other words, to be unbelievers" (Ul-Qadri, p.6). This really gets to the heart of what Tamam means by rebuking Aiesha, a Palestinian suicide bomber: "In what religious text did you find that if you/blew yourself up you . . . ended up with a hundred male virgins in heaven" (*Black Eyed*, p.36). The very essence of Tamam's reprimand functions to release Islam from any connection with suicide bombing against civilians, and critique Aiesha's internalization of the fundamentalist Muslims' manipulative discourse on this issue, which promotes the conduct of suicide bombing as a vehicle for (sexual) pleasures in the next world. In direct contrast to Aiesha's bogus confidence that she has carried out suicide bombing because she was promised "a hundred men of every hue . . . like fruits" (p.35), Delilah protests, like Tamam, against Aiesha's brainwashing by such discourse and thought: "Did you happen to miss that she said that/these men had no/ sexual experience?/ How many times can a woman scream?" (p.36). Delilah represents such discourse/introspection as irrational, and her irony effectively destabilizes it.

## 6. CONTEXTUALIZATION OF SUICIDE BOMBING

Since true Islam is rescued from association with suicide bombing, Shamieh moves into contextualizing this phenomenon in an attempt to communicate the other reasons for this form of violence so that its contingent occurrence is either minimized or eliminated. Understanding acts of violence as expressive indications of circumstances surrounding them helps extenuate violence and the subsequent suffering it causes. *The Black Eyed* remains an ample demonstration of violence that speaks to the time and conditions in which it occurs. Suicide attacks, the play communicates, are neither only religion-oriented nor random acts; they arise as well from colonial violence and oppression.

Serequeberhan points out "Conflict and violence are not a choice, they are an existential need . . . arising out of the [oppressive] colonial situation" (Serequeberhan, p.74). Or as Fanon puts it, it is the colonizer who "brings violence into the homes and minds of the colonized subject" (Fanon, p.4). Fanon never means that the colonized subject has acquired violence from the colonizer. Rather, he suggests the cause-effect equation of actions. The vicious cyclical dilemma of colonial violence and the colonized's counter violence are in many respects vocalized by Aiesha: "How do you survive in a violent world and not be violent?" (*Black Eyed*, p.82). Aiesha cannot understand how she and her people could survive the harshness of Israeli state violence without being

violent.

Aiesha's act of suicide bombing is dramatized as an expression of unyielding rage against the excruciating forms of oppression created by Israeli occupation, which uses expulsion and discrimination against native Palestinians as essential tools for its existence and expansion. Aiesha, like millions of Palestinians, is expelled from home to find herself miserably living in "a dirty, crowded refugee camp" (*Black Eyed*, p.83) in Gaza, treated as subhuman, "think of me as a human" (p.84). Murder and rape are other popular forms of violence Israeli state agents inflict on Palestinians. Aiesha complains to Tamam about the ferocity of Israeli colonialism: "You could start by acknowledging your story/ is not unique. You were raped and lost a brother to war/That happened to millions of women/ . . . In fact, the Crusades were nothing compared to/ the Palestinian and Israeli wars I lived through" (p.46). Similarly, reacting to the demeaning victimization wielded by the colonizers against his people and sister, Tamam's brother chooses to join "a rebel group organized in a prison" (p.41) and then carries out a suicidal attack against people at a Crusader marketplace. The colonial oppression is inextricably linked to the violent death of Tamam's brother: "The day he did it," Tamam says, "he told me over breakfast—Oppression" (p.42). What seems to matter for Shamieh, here, is not a justification of suicide attacks but how this heinous act and with what motive it is perpetrated.

Indeed, Shamieh's dramatization of the conditions and circumstances under which Aiesha and Tamam's brother carry out suicide attacks problematizes the dynamics of violence and their consequences in colonial situations. She understands the colonial violence and the colonized's counter violence as a correlative relationship. The colonizer's violence and violation of the colonized subject's integrity, humanity and land are what inevitably yield such and other forms of counter violence by the colonized. The play is remarkable in articulating this problematic connection as the Chorus says: "Why violence is only wrong when *we* use it? / . . . Isn't violence the only thing these people understand?" (*Black Eyed*, 82, my italics).

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## 7. DISTURBING THE HEGEMONIC DISCOURSE ON 9/11

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The tendency, however, to deal with disturbing the hegemonic discourse on suicide attacks by means of rejection and association with causalities continues to be a remarkably defensive feature of Shamieh's dramatization of the tragic events of 9/11. The events have signaled a tremendous shift in multiplying hostility and pernicious stereotypes about Arabs in general and Muslims in particular in the American mainstream that constructs them as violent terrorists. After 9/11, rising

fear and hatred are monolithically fostered against Arabs/Muslims by American popular culture and essentially political discourse to convince the public that they are anti-American, naturally violent, and a global threat. Afridi describes the anti-(Arab) Muslim attitude, and the enactment of hegemonic discourse on them after 9/11: "[T]he word terrorism has become conflated with Islam, and now, by extension, every Muslim is a potential terrorist in America today" (Afridi, p.57). *The Black Eyed* has provoked a great deal of interest to serve as an answer back to this prejudice. It foregrounds the significance of destabilizing such a hegemonic performative discourse that condemns all (Arab) Muslims for actions of some.

The reaction of Shamieh's protagonists to 9/11 attacks ruptures the essential notion that (Arab) Muslims are homogenous in terms of their attitude towards violence and terrorism. It demonstrates that the perpetrators of such heinous attacks can neither define nor represent (Arab) Muslims. The refreshing quality of Shamieh's women is their complete abnegation of terrorism. Architect's narrative begins with the eager declaration that she rejects 9/11 attacks: "All that still doesn't make it right to kill/ . . . You're hijacking this plane full of people who are ignorant" (*Black Eyed*, p.65). A similar persistent voice against the assaults is reinforced by Tamam: "Listen, I don't agree with killing innocent people/under any circumstances" (p.43). Still, the Chorus, in their turn, flagrantly opposes the attacks: "What kind of people could do such violent, cruel things?" (p.66). These opposing voices to violence remain a deconstructive site of Eurocentric generalizations against Arabs and Muslims.

Nevertheless, Shamieh pushes the reader to see beyond the surface, revealing the connection of 9/11, and US oppressive policies. In so doing, she urges us to understand violence in its many forms as an inevitable response to oppression, and recognize the oppressor's complicit role in enacting it. Hannah Arendt echoes this observation, stating: "Under certain circumstances violence—acting without argument or speech and without counting consequences—is the only way to set the scales of justice again" (Arendt, p.64). Accordingly, 9/11 attacks with its victimization of innocent people come about as an expression of protest against the cruelty and violence inflicted on Arabs and Muslims by the US government. Architect claims: "They don't know that . . . /The American government has been doing/ just as violent, cruel things . . . /in its people's name for generations" (*Black Eyed*, p.66). The assailants committed such horrid violence not because they are inherently blood thirsty, but because they have long been victims of US violent policy against their people.

To Architect's contention, the attackers perpetrate such violence so that "[a]ll the Americans . . . would listen to the grievances of the/ men who were willing to kill and die to be heard" (*Black Eyed*, p.67). References to US government's bias against "Palestinians' . . . right

to self-determination" (p.67), the murder of hundreds of thousands of Iraqi civilians "so their oil can be stolen" (p.67), together with its indifference to the inhuman siege against Palestinians, "when my people are no longer under siege" (p.69), highlight the (in) direct mechanics of oppression and violence inflicted by US government in the Middle East. The resulting impasse of such patterned US anti-Arab/anti-Muslim policy for decades is the creation of the reactionary and indiscriminate violence by fundamentalists against innocent Americans. As Fanon puts it: "The violence of the colonial regime and the counter violence of the colonized balance each other and respond to each other in an extraordinary reciprocal homogeneity" (Fanon, p.46). Both Fanon's argument and that of Shamieh are based upon the premise that poses the oppressor as the one who holds responsibility for producing the colonized/oppressed people's violence. In this light, Shamieh explains that if the various forms of US government's violent policy are suspended, such attacks are certainly supposed to stop: "When all those conditions are met, everyone on the plane leaves safely" (*Black Eyed*, p.68). The oppressor's violence and that of the oppressed fortify each other to such a degree that it is impossible to communicate one without in some way dealing with the other.

## 8. STATE VIOLENCE AGAINST ARAB AMERICANS AFTER 9/11

On the other hand, the theme of violence is a conspicuous presence in El Guindi's *Back of the Throat*. El Guindi bases his play on the traumatic backlash experienced by Arab/Muslim Americans after 9/11, when they become vulnerable to various forms of violence through racialization, stereotyping, profiling, random detention, and torture. Violence against (Arab) Muslims during this period, Butler observes, can be seen "at work in racial profiling, in the detention of thousands of Arab residents or Arab American citizens, sometimes on the basis of last name alone . . . the attacks on individuals of middle eastern descent, and the . . . Arab -American-American professors[/intellectuals]" (Butler, p.76). What strikes in practicing such forms of violence is that they have been legislated by the institutional powers of US government, whose agents perform them as if they were a natural license for racialization in the name of nationalism and security. Salaita argues that 9/11 "did provide" anti-Arab racism "with pragmatic legitimacy to advocates of imperative patriotism" (Salaita, p.160). Likewise, Haddad makes an important point of how 9/11 legitimized certain forms of violence against (Arab) Muslims. For him, in the post 9/11 era, racial profiling, attack, arrest, and deportation of Arabs and Muslims "became a necessity as government security measures" and an essential for "America's declared global war on terrorism" (p.38) that

"left Muslims isolated, marginalized, and placed in what Muslims called a 'virtual internment camp'" (Haddad, 38). In a theatrical performance, El Guindi's *Back of the Throat* echoes the actuality of violence inflicted on Arab (Muslim) Americans by state power structures after 9/11, giving a theatrical life to the victims who have been oppressed because they were, being Arab Muslims, marked as potential terrorists.

Based on flimsy evidence and assumptions of collaborating with suspected terrorists, Khaled, the protagonist, like thousands of Arab and Muslim Americans, falls victim to state agents' violent interrogation, abuse, and torture. By localizing these aggressions in Khaled's apartment, El Guindi generates a theatrical semiotic through which he asserts the legitimization of violation of human and civil rights against Arab (Muslim) Americans in their domestic sphere. These attacks are performed not so much on the individual level as on the institutional level, through the authority the Bush administration gives to US government officials.

For Bartlett, the transgressions conducted are an unavoidable measure and a natural consequence of a state that is controlled by the Bush administration's promotion of, in Haddad's terms, "measures that allowed search, seizure, and incarceration of Muslims and Arabs without evidence or recourse to legal advice" (Haddad, p.67). To Khaled's protest against the government agents', Bartlett and Carl, illegal raid on his apartment as an American citizen, "Did I mention I'm a citizen" (*Throat*, p.14), Bartlett responds: "I guess there's no avoiding the fact that this is what it is . . . it would be natural . . . We're not here to get you for jaywalking" (p.15). With this response, Bartlett initiates his speech with Khaled, one whose very utterance turns out to be of performative quality that naturalizes racialization and violation of human rights. In further violation of his civil rights, Khaled is not allowed to have a lawyer to defend him against the spurious charges.

Charges against Khaled include either actions that would not typically be considered against the law, so called intentions of committing implausible actions, apparently a manifestation of institutionalized anti-Arab and Muslim racism. Khaled is guilty of reading "*A Manual for the Oppressed, Theater of the Oppressed, Covering Islam*" (*Throat*, p.17), having "four or five more porn magazines" (p.16), and is deemed a terrorist suspect for having "a book on guns" (p.17) and a computer that might have "plans for tunneling under the White House" (p.20). Regardless of how ridiculous such indictments may sound, they serve to condemn Khaled as Bartlett warns him: "To be honest, you are . . . very unnormal individual. I am frankly amazed at just how abnormal everything is in your apartment. I have actually been growing quite alarmed by what we've been finding" (pp.19-20). Bartlett's insubstantial evidence against

Khaled appears to be just a façade of anti-Arab racism and a manifestation of state violence that produced unjust conditions for Arab and Muslim Americans. Khaled is not fundamentally targeted by the agents for his association with the terrorist suspect, Asfoor, whom we figure out later is innocent, but for being an Arab Muslim. Bartlett vocalizes this prejudice: “[T]he fact that your background happens to be the place where most of this crap is coming from. So naturally the focus is going to be on you . . . You’re a Muslim and an Arab” (p.23). Being an Arab Muslim, Khaled is naturally objectified and racialized.

Khaled is reduced to a racially designated category and a set of stereotyping characteristics. Bartlett conceptualizes Khaled within racist paradigms, attributing to him sexual inclination to animals for having a pornographic magazine: “Uh-huh . . . You think this is healthy? . . . With cows?” (*Throat*, p.16). Bartlett’s terms, here, operate as an allusion to the stereotypical notion that an Arab is sexually deviant, namely, engaged in bestiality. Throughout the play, racism and stereotyping actually operate together to enact/justify (structural) violence against Arabs. Helg points to the interplay of racial stereotyping and violence: “The stereotypes . . . help to establish a social hierarchy and boundaries of inclusion and exclusion as well as to fuel the dominant group’s racial violence” (Helg, p.50). Stereotypes against Arab Americans exert their power as a dynamic and putative evidence for naturalizing violent control on them after 9/11. Carl’s internalization of stereotypes against Khaled and his native people involves a natural impulse for inflicting violence.

In Carl’s Orientalist consciousness, Khaled is by nature a traitor and a hypocrite, lacking Americans’ desirable qualities of truthfulness. Carl attacks Khaled: “I know your type . . . The smiling little Semite who gives you one face while trying to stab you with the other . . . [y]ou hate everything this country stands for” (*Throat*, p.43). Here, the Semitic myth is devised to enact cultural prejudice and racism that produce an Arab as evil, traitorous, and the antithesis of Americanism, and then normalizes the oppressive power inflicted on them. Carl’s emphasis on such a stereotype functions as an essential vindication for the later violent interrogation against Khaled. Carl speaks of Khaled as a person who deserves to be subjected to physical and verbal violence: “I could snap your neck just for that . . . ‘[F]uck-face’ . . . ‘Hitit khara’ . . . ‘Sharmoot’” (p.43). The intersection of myth and ideology, nonetheless, remains a basis of American consciousness to violently constitute the identity of Arab (American).

Ideologies, writes Althusser, “do not correspond to reality, they constitute an illusion . . . to reality, and . . . they need only be interpreted to discover the reality of the world behind their imaginary representation of that world (ideology= illusion)” (Althusser, p.44). This Althusserian formulation of ideology in many ways illustrates the illusionary construction of Arabs’ and Arab Americans’ identity in their host society. The cultural and ideological

illusion/allusion to Arabs and Arab Americans as members of treacherous and malevolent race of people impose itself on Americans’ recognition of these people. In *Back of the Throat*, Shelly, the librarian, who accidentally meets Gamal Asfoor among bookshelves, reports him to the agents, Bartlett and Carl: “[H]e was like a dark cloud that changed the mood the moment he walked in . . . had a cloud of dirt . . . [And] evil” (*Throat*, 30-1). Beth, Khaled’s ex-girl friend, is another example of making the illusionary prejudiced ideological paradigms the main standards of describing Khaled to FBI agents. To Beth, Khaled is central to “betrayal” (p.35) and in many ways represents it. “His whole life seemed to be one big lie. I don’t think he has an honest bone in his body . . . Always keeping things close to his chest, like he had another life going on” (pp.35-36), says Beth. Therefore, she sees that he is a probable suspect of the terrorist attacks: “It wouldn’t surprise me if he was involved . . . Like he knew his life was for shit and something like this would give it meaning” (p.36). Clearly, Shelly and Beth celebrate the stereotypically illusionary image of Arab (American); he/she is mysterious, dirty, evil, menacing, treacherous, hypocrite to be disdained and feared.

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## 9. ISLAMOPHOBIA, XENOPHOBIA, AND THE DENIAL OF INCLUSION

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Inherent in the structurally violent construction of Arab and Arab American identity is the idea of Islamophobia, a form of racism that has enacted hatred against Islam and Muslims, especially after 9/11. The British organization Forum against Islamophobia and Racism (FAIR) remarks: “Islamophobia has now become a recognized form of racism . . . intolerance, and stereotypical views of Islam.” Beth’s abusive reference to Muslim women as “a fucking burqa” (*Throat*, p.37) becomes a distortion of Islam as an oppressive religion that dictates that all Muslim women wear burkas, though this is the case only in a few fundamentalist countries.

This prejudice against Islam can further be seen in the following wishful terms of the stripteaser, Jeans, as she says: “If I had him again . . . I’d say touch me, Khaled, so the bouncers can come and smash your stupid face in. Coming here to get off on me while all the time wanting to do shit to us. Wrapping your women in black and then sneaking in here and getting your rocks off” (*Throat*, 47). What is hidden behind this speech is the sexist fantasy attributed to Islam. Here, sexism in Islam is accented by the contrast of sexual freedom surrounding a male’s life and the confinement that engulfs the image of a Muslim female. A Muslim male can go to a striptease club for sexual pleasure while a Muslim female should be forced into “wrapping” herself “in black” for any outdoor activity. Jeans’ prejudice against Islam, however, projects itself onto styling the (Arab) Muslim figure to collectively

mean threat and evil. She sees that an Arab/Muslim's scheme against US is a habitual one in which he/she normally participates with keenness. "Coming here . . . [A]ll the time wanting to do shit to us" (47).

Indeed, such sweeping anti-Arab/Muslim generalizations extend to Americans' racial propensity to marginalize such people in American multicultural society, and validate oppressive policies of exclusion against them. Salaita contends that Americans' "fear of Arabs or assumptions about Arab inferiority implicitly validate policies dictated on these fears and assumptions . . . [A]nti-Arab racism, its assumptions invariably lead us to the notion that anything Arab or Islamic is . . . 'evil'" (Salaita, 42). Xenophobia and the clichéd notion of Arabs' inferiority constitute Bartlett's rationale for what he contends is a necessity to marginalize and deprive them of living as citizens within American society. Bartlett's xenophobic hatred against Khaled arises from the stereotypes of the Arab as treacherous, evil, and terrorist. To Bartlett, Khaled has a "treacherous throat" (*Throat*, 26), he is a "bringer of chaos, [and] exemplar of horror" (29-30). Bartlett also draws on the Manichean opposition between the putative superiority and civilization of Self and the supposed inferiority of the Other to naturalize his racial propensity for excluding Khaled from civil liberties.

To Bartlett, Khaled has "come here with shit, from shit countries, knowing nothing about anything" (*Throat*, p.26). Ignorance, menace, and backwardness are the highly subjective terms to characterize Khaled and his race. Therefore, according to Bartlett, he does not deserve to be protected by American laws. Bartlett trivializes Khaled's call for being treated in a civilized and human manner as American laws dictate:

If I hear you say 'this is still America' one more time I am going to throw up . . . If I hear another immigrant spew back to me shit about rights, I will fucking vomit . . . [Y]ou have the nerve to quote the fucking law at me? . . . It's galling . . . [t]o hear these people . . . quote back to me Thomas Jefferson and the Founding Fathers. They're not his fucking Fathers. (pp.25-26)

Indeed, El Guindi problematizes Bartlett's discourse on numerous levels. What strikes about this discourse is not that it shows him as racially prejudiced, but that it displays the American government as racist since such a discourse happens within the framework of governmental power structures. Bartlett, after all, is an FBI agent, and what he says and does against Khaled should be accepted by his higher officers. After 9/11, "The FBI," observes Salaita, "no longer needs to resort to extralegal techniques in surveying, incarcerating, and indicting Arabs and Arab Americans, because the rules . . . are now all legal" (Salaita, p.107). Thereby, El Guindi dramatizes Bartlett's discourse to echo the rampant institutionalized racism directed against Arabs and Arab Americans. After 9/11, Anti-Arab institutionalized racism is considered necessary by the neoconservatives in the Bush administration, whose ethos, in Salaita's terms, determine that "Arabs are by

necessity dissidents, worthy of surveillance, detainment, or deportation" (p.109). To the neoconservatives, Arabs are essentially vulnerable to such racially oppressive measures because they assume that their discursive entities signal nothing more than danger and distrust.

## 10. THE NEOCONSERVATIVE INSTITUTIONAL VIOLENCE

Nonetheless, the neoconservative government officials, advisers, political analysts, journalists, and scholars, together with corporate media have succeeded in effectively constituting a rhetorical discourse that not only makes anti-Arab racism convincing for a large number of Americans, but also makes it impossible for Arabs and Arab Americans to assume a counter-hegemonic answer back to such a racist attitude without being accused of betrayal or standing against American values. Salaita has aptly observed: "[N]eoconservatives have successfully generated intellectual paradigms in which it is impossible for Arabs to articulate either political or cultural sensibilities without being accused of anti-Americanism" (Salaita, p.109). Beth's discussion with Khaled about 9/11 tragic attacks is not exempt from this reality.

Khaled's idea that these events are to be thought of in relation to the US oppressive policies against the Arab (Muslim) world so that they might not happen again is sabotaged by Beth and regarded as a sign of betrayal against America. Even before Khaled's argument takes a complete shape, Beth furiously interrupts him: "Because they're evil assholes. Are you justifying this? . . . [S]aying . . . [T]here's a coherent argument for what they did . . . an act like this would just be so fucking offensive" (*Throat*, p.37). Then, she suspects Khaled's anti-American attitude: "It was more than what he was saying. It was an attitude . . . There was almost like a gleam in his eye. Like he was saying, 'it's just what you people deserve'" (p.37). Beth's assault on Khaled is based upon a type of racial consciousness which, while endorsing the neoconservative hegemonic discourse that Arabs are essentially evil and worthy of suspicion, also obscures and submerges any potential for challenging it.

Actually, Beth's assertive statement, "I used to think we shared the same politics" (*Throat*, p.37), becomes a means of confirming how Khaled should view the events. Like her, Khaled should read the tragic attacks in terms of inherent evil of the attackers, and, by analogy, of their fellow Arabs. It is "all their faults . . . unique traits that give them character" (p.36) to perform the attacks, asserts Beth. At this particular point, the reader/spectator becomes aware of the consequential dynamics of racial coercion inflicted on Khaled for deviating from the hegemonic attitude towards 9/11 events. Beth, indeed, takes on more racially aggressive acts against him: Beth ends her romantic relationship with Khaled, drives him out of the



house, and eventually turns him in to the government officials as an anti-American so that the development of the play's action moves the reader/spectator to see further forms of violence suffered by Arab victims of investigation.

## 11. TORTURE AND SEXUAL VIOLENCE AS MEASURES AGAINST (ARAB AMERICANS AFTER 9/11)

El Guindi's dramatization of the scenes of Khaled's torture and abuses during the investigation is important for the play's argument and the subject of violence it communicates. These episodes of violence underline the link between theater and reality. For El Guindi, theatre remains an effective privileged space that draws attention to the forgotten or unacknowledged stories of torture surrounding Arab/Muslim Americans under investigations. Khaled's interrogation is particularly violent and realistic in that it reflects brutality inherent in the investigations during that period. As the investigative journalist, Ripley, reports in *Time*, "separate and apart from the brutality documented at Abu Ghraib prison: since 9/11, according to U.S. officials and former prisoners, . . . Muslim detainees at the Brooklyn, N.Y., Metropolitan Detention Center . . . were physically and verbally abused" (Ripley, 44). Thus, *Back of the Throat* comes to correspond to the actual physical violence that plagued Muslim detainees during that period and underlines that such violence actually occurred.

The play demonstrates how beating is one of the prime measures by which Khaled is coerced into revealing information. Carl brutally beats Khaled and warns him of more flogging: "If you'd've kept your nose clean, then you wouldn't be here, would you, crawling in the ground, trying to get away from the next hit that's sure to come if you don't tell us what you and Gamal got up to" (*Throat*, p.42). This brutality is buttressed by sexual abuse and humiliation. In *Back of the Throat*, Khaled is such a powerless figure, coerced, intimidated by the strength and violence of the oppressive FBI agents, and completely subdued to their tyranny. The play's stage directions are emphatic in displaying the physical coercive power perpetrated against Khaled as he is nailed to the chair and stripped off his pants; so that he becomes completely immobilized; only able to timidly react to such violence: "(*Half in tears.*) Stop it. No.–No." (p.49). It is true that the play ends with an offensive scene of violence against Khaled, but Bartlett's subtle terms suggest the danger of more sexual violation against him. At the end of the play, Bartlett regrets not having a camera to take photos of Khaled naked: "I wish we'd brought our camera with us . . . Next time . . . We're going to leave you . . . Come back later, tomorrow" (p.49). With such terms Khaled and spectators are left in a state of fear of what more sexual

violation the next day may hold for Khaled.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, violence is a preoccupation for Arab American playwrights, whose interest in this phenomenon comes as a challenging response to its various forms that Arabs, Muslims, and Arab (Muslim) Americans have been subjected to by Western hegemony, especially after 9/11. The two plays discussed here are subversive in terms of offering a position of agency and subjectivity, often denied to Arab Muslim characters, to give voice to their suffering from colonial and imperialist violence, creating space that resists the structural violence enacted by the performative hegemonic discourse, and interrogating the fundamentalist discourse as a way of debunking its claim that Islam promotes violence and intolerance. While Shamieh's *The Black Eyed* is interested in exploring the intersection between violence and structural violence, counter violence and oppression, it sets up inspiring debates against the use of religion and othering discourse to shore up colonial and imperialist projects or justify any form of violence, be it perpetrated by Muslims or non-Muslims. On the other hand, El Guindi's *Back of the Throat* is dedicated to articulating the torture, oppression, and injustice Arab and Muslim Americans experienced after 9/11. Like Shamieh, El Guindi interrogates violence as a production of ideology where the Arab or Muslim (American) is perceived as the racial and ethnic other who is to be essentially subjected to control, marginalization, and submission. He embraces full consciousness to create his script/performance to resist Anti-Arab and Anti-Muslim ideology that perpetuates the conventional Self/Other binary and reinforces the imperial power dynamics that privilege and normalize violence against such ethnic people.

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