



Exacerbation of Panic Onstage: Ethnic Problems and Human Rights Violations in Yussef El Guindi's *Back of the Throat* (2006)¹

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Abstract

This article discusses the oppressive attitudes, ethnic problems, human rights violations, and onstage panic in *Back of the Throat*, a play by one of the most celebrated contemporary Arab-American dramatists, Yussef El Guindi. The study emphasizes El Guindi's exposition of the official American reaction against Arabs and Arab-Americans particularly after the devastating September 11 episodes. In the outset, the study provides a rapid survey of the history and origins of Arab-Americans as an ethnicity and traces their literary and dramatic production which has been mostly neglected. Further scrutiny of specific scenes from the play aims at highlighting the critical and horrible practices of power and authority which accumulate painful feelings inside Arab-Americans and pose a threat to human rights and liberties within borders of the United States.

Key words: Arab; Muslim; Middle Eastern; Arab-American Literature; Yussef El Guindi; *Back of the Throat*; September 11; Ethnicity; Panic; Human Rights Violations; Terrorist Attacks

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INTRODUCTION

Most scholarship and research on American literature have either overlooked or given slight references indicating the relative submergence of Arab-American literature from the literary scene of the United States. Although Arab-American literary production has existed for a long time, "it has only recently begun to be recognized as part of the ethnic landscape of literary America" (Majaj, 2008, para.1). More specifically, drama criticism has been so entirely neglected that McCarus (1997) writes:

Drama coverage has been neglected. There are no published materials on Arab American drama; the material presented here is new. Dr. Ala Fa'ik in "Issues of Identity: In Theater of Immigrant Community" traces the evolution of Arab drama in the United States and characterizes a number of representative plays. In the earliest phase Arab Americans produced plays in their cultural clubs and organizations about the glories of Arab history. Before World War II the drama experience of most Arab Americans was limited to viewing Egyptian movies. After the war large numbers of Arabs came from various Arab countries and created communities capable of sustaining Arabic language activities in religious observances, schooling, and the mass media. Theatrical performances also appeared, usually in the dialect of the local community. (p.5)

It has been also noted that the dramatic works of Arab-American writers have been relatively recent, and most of these productions have come into existence as reactions and stances towards the stigmatic September 11 and its

¹*Back of the Throat* has had a rich production history. It was first premiered in San Francisco, California on April 18, 2005; in Seattle Oregon on May 19, 2005; in Durham, North Carolina on November 3, 2005; in Anchorage, Alaska on January 6, 2006; in New York City on February 2, 2006; in Chicago, Illinois on April 4, 2006; and in Pasadena, California on June 24, 2006.

aftermath. According to Esch-van Kan (2008), "while there is a tradition of Arab American writers and poets, it is often claimed that 'Arab American Theatre' was born on September 11" (para.1). Since their work still demands further scrutiny and more elaborate research, the idea of this article has developed to study one of the most reputable plays, *Back of the Throat* by contemporary Arab-American dramatist, Yussef El Guindi (1957–),³ to examine the serious issues related to the ethnic problem and the violations of human rights after the September 11 episodes. So far, El Guindi's dramatic works have been only reviewed by a number of newspaper articles and somewhat brief critiques, but do not almost seem to have won profound or leisurely scholarly studies. For assessment of the Arab-American ethnic problems, this article commences with a brief survey of the existence of Arabs as an ethnicity in the United States.

ARAB-AMERICANS: HISTORY AND LITERATURE

The history of Arab-American literature is said to have coincided with the history of the early arrival of Arabs in the United States during the late 1800s when the majority of Arab immigrants, who were mainly Christians, came to America as sojourners intending to go back home sometime. Mostly preoccupied with their alienation experiences, those early immigrants, Majaj (2008) notes,

"voiced a mainly diasporan consciousness" (para.2). However, as many remained and settled down in various areas in the United States, their settlement "led to the second period of Arab American history, which was one of assimilation as the immigrant quotas from 1925 to 1965 restricted the number of new entrants into the community" (Kayyali, 2006, p. xvi). Nevertheless, the 1965 changes in the immigration laws led the Arab-American community to grow and become more manifold. With the early beginnings of the twentieth century, the Arab-American community began to take a more sophisticated existence as many Muslims came from Egypt, Iraq, and Jordan. Like several people from other ethnic origins, the *Syrian*⁴ immigrants, who were most entirely Christians, applied for citizenship which they gained on the basis of their color rather than their ethnic origin.⁵ However, since the 1950s, some Arab and Muslim immigrant families have become "likely to relate less with the white majority culture and more with subcultures in which religious, national-origin, and language traditions are preserved. For those who live in ethnic enclaves, intra-group marriages, and family businesses often limit outside social interaction" (Samhan, 2001, p.2). In spite of the political challenges, Arab-Americans continued to have their own cultural contributions. Of the writers who gained prominence at that time, Khalil Gibran, a Lebanese-born poet, was the most widely read and appreciated by Arab and non-Arab-Americans. In spite of the fact that

³Yussef El Guindi is originally from Egypt. He was brought up in London and is now living in Seattle, Oregon. El Guindi was granted a B.A. degree from the American University in Cairo and a Master's degree in Fine Arts (in playwriting) from Carnegie-Mellon University in 1985. He has worked as playwright-in-residence for a number of years at Duke University. El Guindi has won achieved considerable success and his popularity now rests on a good number of plays being widely staged in various states and cities around the U.S.A. Two years ago, El Guindi was honored by the American Theatre Critics Association (ATCA) by winning

"its 2009 M. Elizabeth Osborn New Play Award for an emerging playwright. The award will be presented April 4 at the Humana Festival of New American Plays in Louisville, Ky. The award recognizes El Guindi's play, *Our Enemies: Lively Scenes of Love and Combat*, which premiered in March 2008 at the Silk Road Theatre Project in Chicago. . . He frequently examines the collision of ethnicities, cultures and politics that face Arab-Americans. Those themes culminate in *Our Enemies*, a frequently witty, always intellectually challenging depiction of Arab and Muslim activists and artists arguing whether to dispel or encourage mainstream America's stereotypical perceptions of the Arab world. He asks universal questions about the price of assimilation, who speaks for a minority community, whether minorities should abet a news media seeking fast food sound bites to explain complex problems and how frank minorities should be in publicly exposing their divisions and shortcomings."

For more details, see:

Elizabeth Maupin (2009, Apr. 2), Attention must be Paid: American Critics Honor Playwright Yussef El Guindi. *Orlando Sentinel*. Retrieved from http://blogs.orlandosentinel.com/entertainment_stage_theat/2009/04/american-critics-honor-playwright-yussef-el-guindi.html.

⁴The term Syria has been used "in its late sense of bilad al-Sham, or geographical Syria: that is, the territory that now consists of the states of Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, and Israel/Palestine." For more details see:

Sarah M. A. Gualtieri (2009), *Between Arab and White: Race and Ethnicity in the Early Syrian American Diaspora* (p.xv.). Berkeley: University of California Press.

⁵Regarding the problems of naturalization and obstacles faced by the first Arab to be granted the US citizenship, Sarah Gualtieri writes: In December 1909, a twenty-three-year-old Syrian immigrant named Costa George Najour appeared in Atlanta's circuit court to hear arguments related to his petition to become an American citizen. He had already filed his first papers and fulfilled the five-year residency and English proficiency requirements of the U.S. Naturalization Law. The question to be decided was whether Najour met the racial requirement of the law, which dictated that, to acquire citizenship, persons not born in the United States—that is, "aliens"—had to be either "free white persons" or of "African nativity or decent." Ignoring the possibility that Najour was the latter, the lawyer for the government argued that he was not a white person but "Asiatic" and that he could not, therefore, be accepted into the American citizenry. Najour, with the help of his lawyer and a Syrian voluntary association that mobilized to assist him in his case, mounted a strong defense in support of his whiteness. The presiding judge supported Najour's claim that Syrians were Caucasian and therefore white and admitted him to citizenship." For more details, see: (Gualtieri, p.1).

Arab-Americans were gradually given better chances by serving in governmental offices, the problem of ethnicity grew more flagrantly complicated and discriminatory. It impelled them to look for more possibilities of better classification. Perhaps the first most shocking episode that developed an awareness of the Arab ethnic identity was the 1967 war. With the frustration it imposed on Arabs, this war made Arab Americans aware of their identity perhaps for the first time, because before that crucial historical event, as McCarus notes, "most of them were unaware of or unconcerned about their Arab origins" (1997, p.4).

Since they arrived in the United States, the early Arab immigrants have confronted occasional anti-foreign demeanors, but because this was a general sentiment and did not really single out Arabs, nothing was particularly depressing to Arabs and they could go on without embarrassment. Nevertheless, during the 1970s, anti-Arab stances have developed markedly on popular and state levels because of the development of the Arab-Israeli conflict which, according to Samhan (2001), "created a highly-charged political arena in which the United States became a strategic player and a strong supporter of the state of Israel" (p.3). However, the formation of this negative stereotype image of Arabs was largely based on the public exposure of a large sector of the American people to Arab history and culture mostly represented by the old stereotype of Arab sheiks, harems, and camels. Thus far, the negative stereotype image of the Arab continued to appear in the United States media and movies focusing mainly on Arabs as terrorists, uncultured, and sensually obsessed.

Even though many Arab-Americans have achieved remarkable success and could have possibly changed this negative stereotype image of the Arab, many Americans have still had their vision unchanged. Therefore, Arab-Americans have endeavored to become more culturally adapted since they felt that their existence was undesirable and unwelcome. As Jamal and Naber (2008) assert, "this theme of being racialized and ignored is central to the Arab American experience" (195). The negative stereotype image of the Arab has taken various shapes and visions during the 1980s and 1990s, where the attitudes of the American public still held the same vilified image denoting racial and ethnic discrimination. To measure the negative attitudes of Americans toward Arabs,

A study carried out in 1981 documents the negative attitudes of Americans toward Arabs. A large proportion of respondents in the study held Arabs to be "'barbaric, cruel' (44 percent), 'treacherous, cunning' (49 percent), 'mistreat women' (51 percent), 'warlike, bloodthirsty' (50 percent)"; similarly,

respondents viewed "'most' or 'all' Arabs 'anti Christian' (40 percent) 'anti-Semitic' (40 percent). Moreover, the study showed that the term "Arab" elicited more hostility than did individual Arab identities such as Lebanese, Egyptian, Saudi, or Palestinian. (Qtd in Suleiman, 1999, p.321)

This social and cultural background would inevitably abort any successful literary production by Arab-Americans apart from the fact that critical attention would even neglect their writings.

IMPACT OF SEPTEMBER 11 AND THE ADVENT OF NEW DRAMATISTS

Due to the development of relationships between the United States and several Arab countries in the last decades of the twentieth century, the conditions of many Arab-Americans have improved, but the advent of the new millennium was so unfortunate that it stormed away all aspirations for betterments. So far, nothing has been more devastating than the events of September 11, 2001. In spite of the serious responses of all Muslim Associations in America and their condemnation of the events,⁶ these episodes and the subsequent escalations including the American global war on terror and the war on Iraq ought to have drastically affected Arabs and Muslims all over the world. Indeed, the imperatives of September 11 have developed more militant stances against Arabs and Arab-Americans. Eventually, a general sense of atrocity towards Arabs and Muslims has disseminated within the borders of the United States and outside. Moreover, intolerance and malice have begun to develop unprecedented awesome trends in the management of the crisis. Allegedly, the United States government might have had convincing causes in those attempts to locate or find possible justification for the events. It could be America's new policy for more preemptive security precautions which led the United States government to develop strategies for tracking Arabs and Muslims everywhere for meticulous investigations. It was logical at that time for American officials to prevent similar or even more intensified terrorist attacks prognosticated in the following years. In the reports of the Lawyers Committee for Human Rights, Doherty (2003) asserts: "We start from the premise that the U.S. government, like any government, has the right and obligation to protect its people from attacks. We recognize that the continued threat posed by al Qaeda and other such groups is grave" (p.i). Given the fact that America has vast borders, the potential for future violence continued to be a threat. To achieve public security, the United States government has then gained support to do

⁶Muslim Societies and Associations in America have entirely condemned the events and called for positive participation in the crisis by all possible means. For more details about the reaction, see, "Muslim Americans Condemn Attack". *Islami City*. Retrived from <http://www.islamicity.com/articles/Articles.asp?ref=AM0109-335>.

so by whatever means or action.

September 11 episodes and the aftermath have unequivocally deepened the sense of marginalization and discrimination within such a complex ethnic frame; a feeling that eventually led Arab-American writers to react positively instead of considering themselves scapegoats. For this reason, they led a sturdy move to face such new politics which confirmed the image of the Arab as a terrorist. They began to introduce "a new type of character and story line in an attempt to avert the dangerous potential of the stereotype" (Jamal and Naber, 2008, p.206). These new obligations have given birth to a number of talented dramatists such as: Betty Shamieh, Heather Raffo, and Leila Buck who endeavored "to provide a complex presentation of social identity and religious identification in a new world order" (Saddik, 2007, pp. 208-9). Another significant playwright of the post September 11 episodes is Yussef El Guindi whose portrayal of the conditions of an Arab-American writer in *Back of the Throat* gives a loud shriek of panic in a light comic mode, and examines the problem of being associated with such terrorist attacks by virtue of ethnicity and religion. As Whittington (2010) notes, El Guindi's "mix of international discourse and emotional identity, post 9/11, packs a dramatic punch in the gut, at the same time plot twists play with your head" (para.3).

BACK OF THE THROAT: PRODUCTION HISTORY AND ANALYSIS

El Guindi's play must be seriously reconsidered by the United States government because its content poses a threat not only to Arab-Americans, but also to the entire American system and human rights. In *Back of the Throat*, like in most of his other plays, El Guindi attempts to reintroduce a more credible image of the Arab-American instead of the vilified image of the Arab. His most popular and recent plays *Jihad Jones and the Kalashnikov Babes*, *Language Rooms*, and *Back of the Throat*, are fine examples in which he portrays the Arab-American character after the September 11 episodes. Commenting on El Guindi's dramatic style and themes, Whittington (2010) writes: "*Language Rooms* is about US policies on prisoner interrogation. El Guindi explains it takes place in one of these so called black sites where prisoners are brought to be interrogated and while it is not about that specifically, it's more about questions of identity, fitting in and immigration" (para.7). Indeed, there have been other plays which dealt with the post September 11 episodes, but El Guindi's plays have been very specific in many respects. As Kendt notes,

There have been many distinguished theatrical contenders - Theresa Rebeck and Alexandra Gersten-Vassilaros' "Omnium Gatherum," Craig Wright's "Recent Tragic Events," Anne Nelson's "The Guys" - and no shortage of staged protests against the United States' "war on terror," which, with a few

exceptions ("Guantánamo", "Stuff Happens"), have been as scattershot and indefinite in execution as the war itself. None has probed as directly as El Guindi's, and with such mordant wit and imaginative focus, into the heart of darkness itself - into the terror of others, and of ourselves, that has poisoned and confounded the nation since Sept. 11, 2001. (para.1)

Becoming one of America's most celebrated and successful dramatists of the present time, El Guindi has carved his way out to achieve reputation by more than fifteen plays which toured around several cities in the United States. He has recently "won the 2009 M. Elizabeth Osborn New Play Award for an emerging playwright" (Havis, 2010, p.280). Since its debut, *Back of the Throat* has achieved remarkable claim and reputation for its author. For Example, the play won "the 2004 Northwest Playwright's Competition, was nominated for the 2006 American Theater Critics Association's Steinberg/New Play Award, was voted 'Best New Play of 2005' by the Seattle Times, and has been published by Dramatists Play Service" (New York Theatre Workshop (NYTW), 2007/8). Its dramatic intensity arises from the jolt of terror it provokes as it focuses on the desperate conditions of Arab-Americans after September 11. Locating the negative impact of the events on all American people, Snyder (2006) writes: "If anything's been lost amidst the rhetoric of the 'war on terror,' it's the human dimension. We talk about the intangibles, things like 'rights,' 'evil' and 'freedom,' but lose track of how things like September 11, and the paranoia that followed, affect everyday people in everyday situations" (para.1).

Feeling that Arabs are getting more marginalized in a country they have long considered their homeland, El Guindi diagnoses an essential, but not exclusive, side of the problem which is the hidden belief that Arab-Americans have done nothing good for America and that they are there only to reap its fruits. While interrogating Khaled, Bartlett bursts outrageously:

My family worked damn hard to make this country the place it is. And if you came here to do the same, I will personally roll out the red carpet for you But if you've come here To take from us. Pick all the good things this country has to offer and give nothing back Then I don't think you're making a contribution, not at all. (El Guindi, 2006, p.27).

In spite of his individualistic outlook, Bartlett represents a wide national belief that the existence of Arab-Americans as an ethnic group vis-à-vis other ethnicities is useless and therefore undesirable. Besides, El Guindi exposes new attitudes and language strategies used by these government officials during their visit to Khaled's place to denote that such new practices will definitely eliminate human rights and liberties. Practices as such must inevitably breed more hostility and negative consequences.

The title of El Guindi's play, *Back of the Throat*, refers to the position where the first sound in Khaled's name is produced. Khaled, an Arab-American writer,

lives in a humble studio that he describes as a “little claustrophobic. But it’s cheap,” he assures, “I’d live extravagantly if I could afford it” (El Guindi, p.11). Probably, Khaled’s wretched condition prevents him, at least temporarily, from socializing and deepens his sense of being marginalized. When the play opens, two American officials, Bartlett and Carl, appear on the scene without previous notice. It seems that they have selected Khaled on account of his name as an Arab who might be associated with the September 11 attacks. Shortly, they inform Khaled that their visit is informal. While Khaled pretends to control his nerves, they lose control over theirs and begin to use all possible means to force a confession out of Khaled. Their main effort seems to trap him by any means even if it were some petty and insignificant stuff they find. As they do this, Khaled notices how catastrophic the situation is: “I hope you’re not going to pick apart every little thing because I’m sure you could come to all sorts of conclusions by what I have” (El Guindi, pp.16-7). Recognizing that they intend to trammel him by whatever they find, Khaled denies any knowledge of Arabic and Islamic faith when they pick the picture frame on which the word ‘God’ is written in calligraphy. Khaled’s endeavor to shake off the accusation of being associated with the terrorist attacks is symbolic of a broader attempt to avoid being singled out on the basis of ethnic origin. This behavior unveils the United States’ discriminative attitudes towards Arabs who have become sure that their ethnic origin imparts nothing but trouble and shame. From another perspective, Khaled’s earnest attempt to dissociate himself from his cultural background may be depreciated. Nevertheless, it can be only excused as a spontaneous reaction to disclaim responsibility and avoid inevitable disaster. Having jerked the entire world, September 11 and the aftermath will not be easily forgotten.

Since Muslim Arabs were main suspects as prompters of such attacks, the entire ethnicity would be tracked down for investigations. For this reason, Middle Eastern and Arab-Americans would be easily recognized by complexion and physical appearance. Consequently, an air of hostility has developed against them as it appears from a story an Indian engineer recounts:

On day of 9/11 . . . I witnessed the biggest tragedy of our life time . . . On the next day, I received my first hate call in USA. ‘You mother . . .’ I tried to interrupt the old lady and tell her that I am an Indian born Hindu, but she didn’t know what I was talking about. Then I realized, 80-90% of the American thinks, every body that looks like a middle-eastern complexion, is a Muslim and they do not know the existence of Hinduism. But that is typical of American, the most parochial nation on

the earth . . . On 9/13 nite [night], I was heading towards a bar and I was stopped by the cops which is the first time, I was ever pulled over. First thing, I was asked where I was heading at 11 PM? I politely told him that I was going to the bar. . . Oh! That’s great, so you drink. You are not a Muslim then? I told him that he is right. So, he showed me the direction to the bar. His intention was pretty obvious. He was looking for an [a] suspicious Muslim to grill. (para. 1-2)⁷

What happens to Khaled in *Back of the Throat* is an awful predicament where he finds himself face to face with suspicion; a confrontation that plainly embodies utmost disaster and utter destruction. Consequently, he denies knowledge of Arabic and Islamic roots; a choice which indicates either that his faith as a Muslim is weak, or that his paranoia has forced him to dissociate himself by any means. However, there is a possibility that Khaled may be lying for why does he keep books in Arabic? Not very much different from Khaled, most Arabs and Muslims have reacted in two opposite ways; they either denied their ethnic roots as Kayyali’s remarks: “some Arab Americans have reacted to the post-9/11 atmosphere in the United States by distancing themselves from their heritage” (2006, p.144), or resisted the idea of vilification. The latter group started to reestablish their identity, as Abdo (2006) notes, “American Muslims had reacted to September 11 and its aftermath by asserting their own unique social and political identity. . . . Beforehand, the majority of Muslims had generally preferred to maintain a low profile, seeking to blend into the diverse demographic landscape of contemporary American life” (p.83).

Most probably, El Guindi’s portrayal of Khaled’s character was based on his own vision of the panic that he may experience if an FBI agent visits his place. He meditates, “What do I have in my apartment if an F.B.I. agent came in? I have books on assassins, guns, Islam, research materials, the Koran, that would identify me as interested in the Middle East” (as cited in Smith, 2006, Para.13). At Khaled’s place, Bartlett and Carl find similar items including a copy of the Koran, a couple of books in Arabic, some books on various political theories including Communism, a book on assassins, and some porn magazines. At first, Khaled appears cooperative with the agents thinking that they are only making an easy investigation. Unfortunately, his cooperative attitude is met with cynicism and aggression.

As the officials start selecting items, it appears that they intend to twist facts and use whatever they find as evidence against Khaled. In this consideration, Bartlett and Carl seem to typify real short-sighted detectives in several parts of the world. Instead of professional

⁷A few words in Pal’s story are either misspelled or written in the typical American tradition of registering the sounds of a word rather than using its formal spelling (e.g. ‘nite’ instead of ‘night’), or mistakes with the use of article ‘an’ instead of ‘a’ which I left as they are, but added my corrections in square brackets. For details, consult the original article:

Biplab Pal (2004, Dec 24), *Discrimination Against Muslims in USA-Facts and Fiction: A Personal Account*. Anaheim, CA. Retrived from http://www.muktomona.com/Articles/biplab_pal/muslim_discrimination.htm

investigation, Bartlett presses on Khaled to convince him that his holdings are suspicious and dangerous even though these items do not assert any political stance or extremist ideology (i.e. the copy of the Koran with its religious symbolism is in fact antithetical with the porn magazines). Moreover, Bartlett picks up a few other books which he considers suspicious and resumes his stigmatic cynicism asking if Khaled feels oppressed during this process. Stunned by the situation, Khaled gets more irritated, but promptly tries to justify why he keeps these books by claiming that he was a lit major and that he reads everything. However, Khaled himself is certain that some of these items may be really suspicious or shameful at least. Presumably, Bartlett's method of interrogation ought to have been more civilized than it appears since they were trained on "how to put people at ease" (El Guindi, p.18).

From what he finds, Bartlett classifies Khaled's interests into politics and sex, but according to Khaled's perception of the American culture, all the items Bartlett finds do not indicate any particular abnormality. Khaled wonders: "doesn't that cover most people's interests?" (El Guindi, p.19). Nevertheless, Bartlett, seeming a highly self-congratulatory prig, ignores Khaled's remarks and resumes pressing even harder so that he may obtain any confession:

BARTLETT: No. No, this isn't normal. I have to tell you, Khaled, none of this is normal. Right about now I would place you a few feet outside of that category. . . . I am frankly amazed at just how abnormal everything is in your apartment. I have been growing alarmed by what we have been finding. More: I'm getting that uncomfortable feeling that there's more to you than meets the eye and not in a good way. I wouldn't be surprised if we were to turn on that computer and find plans for tunneling under the White House. (El Guindi, pp.19-20)

By his allusion to the possibility that Khaled might have stored computer files with plans to tunnel the White House (i.e. symbolic of the most significant spot in the United States), Bartlett tends to pursue his coercive plans to entangle Khaled. Likewise, Bartlett's oppressive method continues to unveil his undeclared animosity towards Arabs and Arab-Americans and denies their legal rights as American citizens. When Khaled insists to call a lawyer as long as he has the right to do so, Bartlett frustrates him: "No, you don't, you've been misinformed" (El Guindi, p.21). Cynical as it may be, Bartlett's statement implies that equal human rights are not evenly available for all Americans. Therefore, Arab-Americans must reconsider the many facts about which they are "misinformed".

Khaled's panic is accrued by Bartlett's use of sharp and aggressive language in which he employs demeaning and scornful diction and references. He bombards Khaled with cutting accusations and smutty implications: "I mean we've already established you're a left-leaning subversive with Maoist tendencies who has a thing for bestiality and militant Islam" (El Guindi, p.21). Realizing his plight

and meager chance to escape the tactics of Bartlett and Carl, Khaled insists to try again and see if he has any right as an American citizen to speak to a lawyer. At this moment, Bartlett shifts abruptly into a different discourse reflecting his uncontrolled wrath, disgust, cynicism, and aggression: "What you do have is the right to cooperate with your intelligence and do the right thing and ask for a lawyer is a dumb move because it alerts me to a guilt you may be trying to hide. Which further suggests that I need to switch gears and become more forthright in my questioning; which usually means I become unpleasant" (El Guindi, p.20). Now, Bartlett's aggression accelerates quickly in a remarkable shift from verbal to physical violence, so that he frustrates Khaled's attempt to use his own phone. Amidst his panic, Khaled still acts upon a simple impulsive belief that he must have the rights an average American citizen may have. Unfortunately, this illusory conviction evaporates as soon as he falls in the labyrinth of suspicion even though both officials fail to obtain real evidence against him. Khaled's ethnic problem is neither individual nor fictional, as Zarris (2008) notes, "If you think that this is a far-fetched dramatization, you need only consult the ACLU [American Civil Liberties Union]. You'll find that this not only happens, but over 1400 people have been detained, and also it has happened in situations even more egregious than depicted in this disturbing story" (para.5).

Contrary to their opening statement that their visit is casual, the tone of the officers becomes so high pitched that their tumult exacerbates panic onstage. They violate all human rights rules and laws by considering Khaled a suspect without proper evidence. As they turn the place upside down and discover that Khaled possesses normal stuff, they twist facts and misuse any minute or trivial thing even if it were a payment receipt they find in Khaled's pocket. El Guindi's use of language and dramatization is remarkably effective in this scene where Carl and Bartlett exchange their clipped remarks and comments while examining the receipt as a positive proof: "You were where you shouldn't have been, Khaled; in a place you shouldn't have gone to. Bad news. Very bad news" (El Guindi, p.23). Indeed, Bartlett's verbal reprobation and ruthless demeaning violence expose the American official reaction against Arabs and threaten human rights at large. El-Guindi's cynicism develops to capture paradoxes of existence and antithetical outlooks as Khaled still protests to use his right, as an American citizen, not to say anything until he calls a lawyer to attend the investigation. In the mean time, Bartlett "*grabs him by the arm and drags him into a corner of the room – away from the door, which Carl shuts. Bartlett pushes Khaled into a corner and stands inches from him*" (El Guindi, p.25). Bartlett now shows readiness to crush Khaled: "First thing: shut up. . . (*Interrupting*) Second thing, shut up. . . (*Interrupting*) If I have to tell you what the third thing is, I will shut you up myself. (*Khaled opens his mouth*

but is interrupted.) I will shut you up myself” (El Guindi, p.25). In this frightful atmosphere, Bartlett veers from verbal to physical violence and vice versa giving a stark parable of the flagrant violation of human rights that is not even equaled in third world countries. The atmosphere of panic overshadows the scene by Bartlett’s outrageous and unruly methods. Even though Carl tries to calm him down, Bartlett loses temper and pours his pungent threats and insults to Khaled and the entire Arab ethnicity: “You come here with shit, from shit countries, knowing nothing about anything and you have the nerve to quote the fucking law at me?” (El Guindi, p.26).

By emphasizing what happens to Khaled, El Guindi does not only exalt the negative attitudes towards Arab-Americans, but also tolls an alarm bell to warn against serious threats of American interior security. For this reason, Genzlinger (2006) contends:

Someone from the Bush administration really needs to see ‘Back of the Throat’, Yussef El Guindi’s examination of the excesses of post-9/11 security. Not because the president needs to be told that many people are concerned about domestic surveillance and questionable arrests; he’s heard that before. What this play would tell Mr. Bush is the price of his administration’s inaccessibility and secrecy in terms of image-making. (para.1)

The significant issue is that the threat posed by discrimination on the basis of ethnic origin may yield more violence and insecurity. Instead of violence, it is fundamentally important that America must have internal unity and staunchness to face the crisis. El Guindi also examines another important issue concerning the existence of Arab-Americans as an ethnicity. According to Maupin (2009), El Guindi’s plays are “intellectually challenging depiction of Arab and Muslim activists and artists arguing whether to dispel or encourage mainstream America’s stereotypical perceptions of the Arab world.” Besides, Maupin adds that the dramatist proposes a number of “universal questions about the price of assimilation, who speaks for a minority community, whether minorities should abet a news media seeking fast food sound bites to explain complex problems and how frank minorities should be in publicly exposing their divisions and shortcomings” (para.4).

Unnecessarily, Bartlett’s pokes the ethnic question in an unequivocal manner that develops the tension and raises resentment and irritation to a maximum. He contradicts himself when he falsely assumes: “At no time should you think this is an ethnic thing. Your ethnicity has nothing to do with it other than the 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” (El Guindi, p.23). Bartlett’s contradictions become explicit when he declares to Khaled: “You’re a Muslim and an Arab. Those are the bad-asses currently making life a living hell and so we’ll gravitate you and your ilk” (El Guindi, p.23). As an American, Bartlett does not hide his profound prejudice against all other

ethnicities: “Yesterday the Irish and the Poles, today it’s you. Tomorrow it might be the Dutch” (El Guindi, p.23).

In a semi-experimental scene par excellence, El Guindi introduces Asfoor, and three other female characters; Shelly, Beth, and Jean. They successively appear to accelerate the action and push it into the conclusion where Khaled becomes entirely disillusioned by the grim reality. As El Guindi explains in his stage directions, the three women are played by one actress (p.10). Besides, Asfoor comes out of one of the closet doors that Carl slides simultaneously as Bartlett exhibits Asfoor’s photo to Khaled. Khaled shrinks and declines any previous acquaintance with Asfoor. However, Bartlett insists to establish a linkage between both men by other photos, emails, and a librarian who knew them both. From another closet door, Shelly appears shortly to implicate Asfoor. She recalls an alleged attempt of harassment by Asfoor: “he followed me into the room where we archive rare maps . . . Didn’t know he was there until I felt his hands. I screamed of course. Pushed him away. I even had to use one of rolled-up maps to ward him off” (El Guindi, p.31). Before Khaled overcomes the plight in which he might be associated with Asfoor, Khaled’s ex-girlfriend, Beth “*enters from the bathroom in a bathrobe. She is drying her hair with a towel*” (El Guindi, p.35). The scene must be from the past being played at the moment to confuse Khaled’s past with his present. Beth asserts to Bartlett that Khaled has got so vague a character that she could neither know nor understand him: “When you find out let me know. Because I sure as hell didn’t. You spend two years with someone thinking you have a pretty good idea of who you’re shaking up with, then boom, he pulls some shit that makes you wonder who you’re sleeping with” (El Guindi, p.35). While Khaled pleads to Beth in hope that she might be considerate, Beth continues to destroy what remains of his nerves: “When you thought I was at work. (*To Carl*) I should also tell you that I thought he was having an affair. I’m still not sure he wasn’t . . . He certainly was at the computer a lot. It must have been something steamy because every time I approached him he would do something to hide the screen” (El Guindi, p.38). Before the third woman appears, the use of power practice and humiliation escalate the exacerbation of panic to the highest possible level for Carl, who has been behaving decently from the beginning of the play, now gets infuriated and kicks Khaled in the groins “because of repeated references to an innocence that is not yours to claim” (El Guindi, p.41). When Khaled cries out in pain, Carl becomes even more outrageous and threatens: “Don’t overdo it. I didn’t hit you that hard. – That’s not pain you’re feeling. It’s shock. You’re overwhelmed by the notion of pain. . . . Enough with the dramatics or I’ll give you something to really scream about” (El Guindi, p.42). It is conspicuous that Carl does not even tolerate Khaled’s expression of pain.

Khaled’s fright continues with the appearance of Jean,

the third woman who also appears from another closet door. Jean is a cabaret striptease dancer. She assumes she has seen both of Khaled and Asfoor where she tried to tempt Khaled, but he seemed occupied in a rather vague affair. Immediately before she appears, Bartlett introduces her to Khaled in a thrilling dramatic way: "On a Tuesday night, August twenty-first, at around 10:05, you went to the 'EyeFull Tower Club'; where a Ms. Jean Sommers, aka, Kelly Cupid, 'Dancer Extraordinaire and Stripper Artiste,' as she calls herself, was performing" (El Guindi, p.45). The three women are thus drawn as dubious witnesses to implicate Khaled and assert an undeclared relationship with Asfoor. Besides, their appearance must lighten the dark effect created by Carl and Bartlett. Nevertheless, all three women resume the scornful manners and confuse Khaled more than before. The audience should notice how Khaled appears in such a dizzy mood that he doesn't remember meeting Asfoor at all even though he might be accused of planning for some terrorist plot with him. As the action approaches its end, Carl and Bartlett listen to Jean as she describes when she first saw Khaled: "I should have known something was up. I thought he was extra sweaty because he was just too close to something he couldn't have. But it wasn't that. He was always looking around to check for something" (El Guindi, p.47). Jean continues her story in a leisurely manner while Khaled, taken by the fright, stands stunned and paranoid. Before long, Carl and Bartlett take Khaled's laptop and leave with a sharp but rather cynical comment: "It's our chance to respond . . . we're fighting to safeguard that right. It sounds counter intuitive. But that's the struggle for freedom for you" (El Guindi, p.50).

CONCLUSION

In brief, El Guindi's play focuses attention on the terrible methods the United States administration has led to eliminate terrorism and abort any future attacks. Whether to launch war abroad or implement plans for preventive strategies within borders in the same way it happened in the play may be dangerous, critical, and problematic. These issues are central, but El Guindi's *Back of the Throat* goes further than this to expose the foibles of the United States administration in narrowing a national catastrophe to mere singling out of Arab-Americans as a hateful and destructive minority. Even though El Guindi desired his play to look like comedies, its horror and darkness might not please many Arabs and Arab-Americans who may become preys to similar investigations and terrible treatment. The panic and abuse exacerbated by the officials' methods with Khaled have much to be described as conspicuous violations of liberties and human rights.

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