



Ain Shams University
Faculty of Women for Arts, Science, and Education
Department of English Language and Literature

**The Dilemma of Arab Americans in Selected
Plays by Yussef El Guindi: A Post-Colonial
Reading**

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Introduction

This thesis handles the dilemma of Arab Americans in contemporary theatre particularly in the plays of Yussef El Guindi. The word dilemma is defined as "a difficult situation in which you have to choose between two or more alternatives" (*Collins Dictionary*). It also indicates confusion and predicaments which spring from an inability to choose. As such, it is related to important post-colonial concepts such as "mimicry", "ambivalence" and "stereotype" to be explained later in the thesis.

The introduction is divided into two parts. The first part traces the three waves of immigration of Arab Americans to the United States in addition to the history of Arab American theatre before and after the 9/11 attacks. The second part studies Homi Bhabha as a chief thinker in the post-colonial theory and highlights his concepts "mimicry" and "ambivalence" which serve as the theoretical framework of the thesis.

Immigration of the Arab Americans and Its Different Waves

The United States of America is the most multicultural nation on Earth. It includes people of different nationalities. Arab Americans form a great sector of the United States population nowadays. According to the Arab American Institute, there are 3.5 million Arab Americans living in the United States of America. They settle in different states and most of them exist in New York. They emigrated from different Arab countries such as Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, Palestine, Morocco and Egypt.

The history of the Arab American immigration is divided into three different waves; early mass immigration (1880-1924), Post-World War II immigration (1945-1967), and Post-1967 War immigration(1970-present) (Arab Stereotypes). Arab Americans decided to settle in the United States and leave their native homelands to escape from oppression, political brutal violence, economic problems and war, and search for better opportunities of life in the United States.

The First Wave of Immigration

Throughout the period of the early mass immigration (1880-1924), around 20 million immigrants arrived at the United States. About 95% of these immigrants came from Greater Syria which during that time consisted of Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine and Israel (Arab Stereotypes). During the first wave, most of the Arab countries were colonized by the Ottoman Empire (1299- 1923). The majority of the Arabs that arrived at the United States at that time were Lebanese or Syrian Christians and half of them were illiterate. At first, they did not intend to settle in the States, however, they intended to come to the States to search for a better life and then go back to their native land. Most of them worked as peddlers at the beginning, then they owned dry-goods stores and served in factories and farms. They settled in the urban areas of the Northeast and Midwest, in states

such as New York, Michigan, Ohio, Massachusetts, and Pennsylvania (Arabs in America).

Arab American Literature of the First Wave

Arab American literature has been influential in the lives of most Arab American citizens. It has enabled them to have voices and to reflect on their experiences. Yet, it has become much more visible after the 9/11 attacks.

In 1920, Khalīl Jibrān, Mīkhā'il Nu'aymah, and Amīn Al-Rīḥānī established The Pen League or Al-Rabitah al-Qalamiyah. The three authors were also known as The Mahjar School. The aim of The Pen League was to revive Arabic literature in America. Khalīl Jibrān (1883-1931) was a charismatic Lebanese author who was known for his book *The Prophet*. He wrote in Arabic and English. Amīn Al-rīḥānī (1876-1940) was a significant Lebanese novelist. He wrote his English novel *The Book of Khalid* about the Syrian immigration to the United States. Mīkhā'il Nu'aymah (1889-1988) was a Lebanese poet and philosopher. He wrote a biography for Khalīl Jibrān (Step Feed).

Post-World War II Immigration

The second wave of immigration began after the Second World War and continued till 1967 (Every Culture). Unlike the majority of the immigrants of the first wave, most of the immigrants in this wave were well-educated and came from upper-classes. Many of them were students whose intention was

to study at the American universities and get job opportunities. Unlike the first wave which was largely Christian, the second wave included more Muslims. It contained a great number of Palestinian refugees because of the conflict that had already begun between Palestine and Israel during that period and which resulted in the displacement of many Palestinians. Few literary works were produced during this period.

1967 War Immigration

The third wave of immigration started in 1967 and it has lasted till the present time. This wave included professional, skilled and unskilled labourers. The immigrants of the third wave wished to escape the political conflicts and the wars that overwhelmed their countries during that time. This wave incorporated Lebanese from Southern Lebanon, Palestinians from the West Bank occupied by Israel, and Iraqis. There were also immigrants from other countries such as Syria, Yemen, Egypt and Jordan who travelled in search of better economic opportunities (Kayyali 33).

Arab American Theatre before and after the 9/11 Attacks

Nibras is an Arab American theatre that was founded in June 2001, two months before the 9/11 attacks. Nibras, which comes from an Arabic word meaning "lantern", produced its first play "Sajjil" in 2002. "Sajjil" is the Arabic translation of the word "record". In the same year, this play was performed in the New

York International Fringe Festival. It also won the Festival's Best Ensemble Award. The play presented various points of view of Arab and non-Arab Americans concerning immigration and assimilation to the main stream American community (Al Jadid).

Arab characters and issues related to the Middle East featured in often ethnic theatres. For instance, in 2010, "Noor Theatre" was established by three female Arab American playwrights; Nancy Vitale, Maha Chehlaoui and Lameece Issaq. "Noor Theatre" presented its first play *Food and Fadwa* in June 2012 (Roaa Ali). "Golden Thread Productions" was founded by the Iranian American playwright Torange Yeghiazarian in October 1996. This company was known for its festival called Re-Orient which depended on performing short plays representing Arab related themes (Roaa Ali). "Golden Thread Productions" with the co-operation of the Asian American theatre Company in San Francisco, produced Yussef El Guindi's play *Language Rooms* in 2010. This company was supported by another ethnic minority company i.e "Silk Road Rising" which was a reaction to the 9/11 attacks and reflected the anti-sentiments of Arab Americans especially Muslims after the attacks. This company was formed by the Syrian American director Jamil Khoury and his partner Malik Gillany in Chicago in 2001. It produced its first play *Precious Stones* which addressed ethnicity

and sexuality. It was performed in Chicago in 2003. "Silk Road Rising" has produced other significant plays by Yussef El Guindi such as *Back of the Throat* in Chicago in 2005 and *Our Enemies: Lively Scenes of Love and Combat* in March 2008 (Al Jadid).

The Playwright Yussef El Guindi

Yussef El Guindi (1960-) is a prominent Arab American dramatist who has contributed a lot to Arab American theatre. He currently lives in Seattle, but he was born in Egypt in 1960. He left Egypt when he was a 3-year-old child and moved with his family to London. He received his B.A from the American University in Cairo. Then, he travelled to the United States where he received a Master of Fine Arts from Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh. He was appointed as a playwright at Silk Road Theatre Project and as a literary manager for Golden Thread Productions in San Francisco. He worked as a reader at the Magic Theater, a dramaturg at the Eureka Theater and as a lecturer at Duke University. In addition, El Guindi worked as a playwright at Silk Road Rising and he was a literary manager for Golden Thread Productions ("Playwright Yussef El Guindi").

Yussef El Guindi won many awards such as the prestigious Harold and Mimi Steinberg/American Theatre Critics Association New Play Award for *Pilgrims Musa and Sheri in the New World*, which premiered in 2011 in Seattle. El Guindi is also the recipient

of the 2010 Middle East America Distinguished Playwright Award.

El Guindi comes from an artistic family. His grandmother is the prominent actress and publisher Rose al-Youssef, his grandfather is the famous director Zaki Toleimat and his uncle is the outstanding novelist Ihsan Abdel Koudous (Qualey).

El Guindi's plays portray the immigrant experience and the status of Arab Americans in the American community. Some of El Guindi's plays discuss the position of Arab Americans that has become very critical in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks. Yussef El Guindi's style can be easily differentiated from other playwrights that belong to his generation. He discusses serious themes with sarcasm and a notable sense of humour. He also mingles the personal with the political. Besides, he uses the technique of flashback in some of his plays. He also employs the element of "displacement" to illustrate how Arab Americans are regarded in the American community as the "other". Moreover, El Guindi's plays usually have unexpected ends which raise questions in the audience's minds.

Yussef El Guindi and His Contemporaries

Betty Shamieh, Laura Shamas and Ismail Khaldi are very significant playwrights who belong to the third generation of Arab American playwrights to which Yussef El Guindi also