

# Reconstructing Arab Muslim Identity in Contemporary American Drama: A Postcolonial, Trauma, and Performance Analysis in the Plays of Yussef El Guindi, Heather Raffo, Rajiv Joseph, Jessica Blank and Erik Jensen

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**Abstract**—The existence of Orientalist and securitized tropes, that present Arab Muslim subjects as types of civilizational menace, or other cultural otherness, has been validated over time in scholarship on the Arab Muslim representation in Western cultural production (Said, 1978; Alsultany, 2012; Shaheen, 2009). Although these studies have been greatly applied to film, television, and news media, the American theatre in modern times has been relatively under-theorized as a place of representational contestation. To fill this gap, the current paper develops a comparative study of the chosen plays by Yussef El Guindi, Heather Raffo, Rajiv Joseph, Jessica Blank, and Erik Jensen. The article builds upon postcolonial theory (Said, 1978; Bhabha, 1994), trauma theory (Caruth, 1996; LaCapra, 2001), and performance theory (Butler, 2004; Fischer-Lichte, 2008) by stating that American drama today serves as a counter-discursive space whereby the Arab Muslim identities are being re-articulated using testimonial voice, performative embodiment, and narrative fragmentation. Instead of recreating hegemonic geopolitical scripts, the plays enact the ambivalence, hybridity, and ethical spectatorship, which disturb predetermined types of national and religious identity. This paper contends that a model that cross-plays the postcolonial and performance-based approaches to analysis can be used to analyze Arab Muslim subjectivity in theatre by synthesizing these two perspectives. It places modern American drama no longer as a mimetic reflection of media discourse but as an aesthetic realm of its own, which reforms representation in the body of encounter and dialogic address.

**Index Terms:** *American Drama, Arab Muslim, Arab Muslim Identity, Counter-Discourse, Cultural Memory, Diaspora, Performance Studies, Postcolonial Theatre, Representation Studies, Trauma, War.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

The Arab Muslim identity representation in the Western literary and cultural discourse has been historically organized in epistemological structures that take the aesthetic practice beyond the field of power and knowledge production. Orientalism as to be argued by Edward Said is a discursive system in which the object of knowledge known as the Orient is created through which the West has been able to self-define itself through hierarchical constructions of cultural difference (Said, 1978). Such a paradigm shifts literary and cultural texts into places of alterity is not just presented but is constructed systematically, frequently by reductive tropes that make Arab Muslim subjects exotic, irrational or threatening. These logics of representation continue into contemporary Western cultural production where stereotypes play off ambivalence and repetition and oscillate between fixity and instability (Bhabha, 1994). These processes are conditioned by a number of geopolitical pasts, such as Cold War alignments and post-Cold War reconfigurations, in the American context, and reposition the figure of the Muslim enemy at the centre of cultural imagination (Kumar, 2012; Little, 2002). After 9/11, these representations were magnified in securitized discourses, where, according to Evelyn Alsultany, strategies of simplified complexity gesture at diversity, at the same time, supporting cultural inferiority assumptions and sustaining powerful background presumptions (Alsultany, 2012). This has led to the habitualization of Arab Muslim characters into narrative structures that restrict interiority agency and

supports the Judith Butler conceptualization of the work of differential whether the life of a particular person should be seen as more or less visible and more or less valued within a framework of social discourse (Butler, 2004). Despite this, a number of counter-narratives have been introduced to Arab writing and in the diasporas, still, these interventions continue to be mediated by market logic and liberal multiculturalism that make difference consumable instead of transformative (Ahmed, 2012). It is in this larger representational arena that American theatre is having a unique, but under-studied, role, these other mass media forms tend to emphasize foregrounding, co-presence, and spectatorship, theatre, as a result, is in a strategic position to create a feedback loop between actor and spectator that is achievable, as Erika Fischer-Lichte argues, through destabilising fixed meanings and providing ethical interaction (Fischer-Lichte, 2008). Nevertheless, even though it has the potential to be treated as a counter-discursive medium, the coverage of academic attention has been dominated by the study of film and media, with foundational critiques by Jack G. Shaheen and Alsultany showing how stereotyping continues to exist within visual culture with theatre remaining relatively under-theorized (Shaheen, 2009; Alsultany, 2012). This imbalance demonstrates a research issue, although the reproduction of orientalist and Islamophobic tropes has already been widely researched in media studies (Kumar, 2012), little comparative, theory-driven analysis has been conducted on how contemporary American drama participates, reconfigures or resists these representational regimes. To fill this gap, the current paper will discuss the manner in which the chosen plays by Yussef El Guindi, Heather Raffo, Rajiv Joseph, and Jessica Blank and Erik Jensen rebuild the Arab Muslim identity beyond the stereotypical and securitized paradigms. Instead of viewing theatre as a secondary reflection of media discourse, this paper will take dramatic texts as performative spaces in which identity is negotiated through the process of embodiment, fragmentation and dialogic exchange. It is based on the postcolonial theory (Said, 1978; Bhabha, 1994), the study of trauma (Caruth, 1996; LaCapra, 2001), and the theory of performance (Butler, 2004; Fischer-Lichte, 2008) and explores the way the contemporary drama challenges epistemic fixity by preempting hybridity, testimonial voice, and traumatic memory. The research will be informed by three questions in relation, what are the ways in which these playwrights criticize the Orientalist

discourse and performance creates identity, and how theatre creates a culture of counter-memory to challenge geopolitical narratives of dominance (Caruth, 1996; LaCapra, 2001). To this end the main thesis that is pushed in this direction is that the modernist American drama serves as a counter-discursive cultural location where the Arab Muslim identity is not just being described but being reenacted in the form of performative hybridity, trauma-touched narration, and ethically charged spectatorship. Through mobilization of formal resources of theatre liveness, embodiment and involvement of the audience, these plays disrupt the prevailing representational paradigms and redefine subjectivity as contingent, historically located, and opposed to reduction in categorization (Bhabha, 1994; Fischer-Lichte, 2008). In this regard theatre does not give rise to a marginalized cultural practice but rather it is a crucial site where the cultural memory is negotiated and a story agency is reclaimed.

## II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### Postcolonial Theory

The depiction of the Arab Muslim identity in the modern American drama should be interpreted in the context of the epistemological paradigms which have traditionally shaped the orient into an object of knowledge and control, so that the postcolonial theory becomes a vital source of analytical foundation for this study. This paradigm is based on the works of Edward Said, Homi K. Bhabha, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, who view theatre as a discourse that negotiates power, identity, and voice continuously rather than a judging place of representation. The orientalism theory formulated by Said confirms that the Western depiction of the East is an institutionalized discourse that creates Arab Muslim subjects, using binarial oppositions to uphold cultural and political asymmetries (Said, 1978). Such discursive formations have been re-articulated in American context through post-Cold War and post-9/11 securitization, in which Arab Muslim identities are put in reductive oppositions of terrorist versus assimilable subject (Alsultany, 2012; Kumar, 2012; Shaheen, 2001). Nevertheless, when Said predicts structural dominance of discourse, Bhabha disrupts this framework by pointing out to the issue of ambivalence, mimicry and hybridity in insisting that colonial authority is never stable in that it is always filled with internal contradictions that creates a third

space which can be negotiable (Bhabha, 1994). In modern American theatre, this hybridity is expressed in fragmented identities, through multilinguality, and through performative negotiation of belonging showing identity not as a pre-existing essence but as the process of continual negotiation that occurs in the intersection of diasporic and cultural identities. This kind of ambivalence is more apparent in the post-9/11 images, where Arab Muslim characters alternate between danger and victimization, thus revealing the unsteadiness of the same discourses that aim to keep them in place. Continuing this discussion, Spivak presents the critical interrogation of voice and representation whereby Spivak identifies a difference between the speaking about the subaltern and the subaltern speaking and emphasizes the dangers of the epistemic violence within the frameworks of the dominant representations (Spivak, 1988). This difference is essential in the analysis of whether the modern plays in America can be used to achieve true testimonial agency or the replication of liberal-humanist forms of making trauma readable but domesticized to the Western audience. The embodied and dialogic quality of theatre makes such a dynamic more complicated because the stage is the site of immediate interactions between the performer and the spectator nevertheless, these interactions are mediated by institutional, cultural, and ideological formations which determine how reception and understanding are received. Combined, these positions of theory constitute a system of analytical matrix wherein Said presents the discursive power critique, Bhabha facilitates the instability and bargaining in the identity formation, and Spivak presupposes the ethical problematics of voice and representation. Combining these strategies, this paper will place American theatre today as a place where the Orientalist discourse is not reproduced only but also challenged by means of performative tactics that anticipate the hybridity, fragmentation, and testimonial speech. The postcolonial theory is not used in this instance, but as a fixed interpretive prism, a flexible structure that allows a critical analysis of the construction, negotiation, and possible restructuring of identity, power, and representation within the theatrical space.

#### Trauma and Cultural Memory

Reconstruction of the identity of Arab Muslims in American drama of today should be based not only on critique of the aspect of representation, but also involves the aspect of the engagement with the

trauma and cultural memory as a formative structure through which history is written and acted by performance. Appearing in a post-9/11 setting characterized by war, displacement, surveillance and diasporic precarity, this type of drama is representative of complex processes of remembering and witnessing that transcend the coherence of linear narrative. Based on the analysis on the work of Cathy Caruth, Dominick LaCapra, and Jeffrey C. Alexander, the paper conceptualizes the concept of trauma as neither a concentrative psychological experience, but a disrupted and culturally mediated experience over time. According to the theory of belatedness by Caruth, any trauma is not fully experienced when it occurs, but rather reoccurs via fractures, repetition and narrative lapses which are manifested in the non-linear dramaturgies, testimonial monologies as well as broken temporalities that define post 9/11 theatre (Caruth, 1996). Yet, according to Stef Craps, this set of models is dangerous because it tends to destroy the geopolitical and historical specificity of trauma, especially in situations where colonial violence, exile, and racialized suspicion are at work (Craps, 2013). In order to overcome this weakness, the separation of acting out and working through given by LaCapra is a critical paradigm through which theatrical representations can be considered to either perpetuate traumatic repetition or to be reflective, which makes it possible to be ethically and historically cognizant (LaCapra, 2001). Theatre is a uniquely situated embodied collective form of expression, uniquely poised to present this negotiation, making spectators subject to processes of witnessing which makes the privately experienced trauma translate into the discourse of the public. Ranging beyond personal experience, the theory of cultural trauma developed by Alexander underlines that the trauma is not embedded in events, but created within the social discourse forming collective identity (Alexander, 2004). In American society, 9/11 has been both institutionalized as a national trauma and marginalized Arab Muslim communities have both been formed as a result of surveillance and exclusion that have created multiple and competing memories of collective (Cainkar, 2009; Gray, 2010). The modernity drama of America, therefore, emerges as the center of performance and contention of such contradicting narratives, creating so-called alternative formations of cultural memory competing with the regimes of remembering (Assmann, 2011). Additionally, these theatrical interventions overlap

with the notion of differentiated grievability developed by Judith Butler, revealing the hierarchies according to which the suffering of different people becomes publicly acknowledged, and whose suffering becomes marginalized (Butler, 2009). The synthesis of such views, this paper will take trauma as not as universal pathology but as historically inflexible, culturally mediate and performatively re-created in theatrical space. Fragmentation, testimonial articulation and embodied performance mean that in the modern American drama, it is not just the presence of trauma itself but the reconfigurative influence of these elements that gives rise to a critical space where the renegotiation of memory and the rearticulation of Arab Muslim identity with regard to audience, history, and power are produced.

#### Performance and Representation

Where postcolonial theory questions the epistemological formation of the Arab Muslim subject, and trauma theory how the past might be implemented into the present, performance theory is what makes sense of how these identity formations are practically performed, enacted, and negotiated during the theatrical event, in which representation is enacted in relation, in a state of flux, and at an ethical level. Based on the idea of performance as a restored behaviour offered by Richard Schechner, the concept of identity is viewed not as a defining quality but a series of culturally coded and replicable behaviours that are formed under the influence of social scripts (Schechner, 2013). In this context, the representations of the Orientals act as historically sedimented practices- gestures, accents and narrative anticipations that govern the perception of the Arab Muslim bodies in the dominant discourse (Said, 1978). American drama of the present day contests this collection by interfering and restructuring such scripts with the help of dramaturgical practice like fragmentation, polyphony, testimonial monologue thus revealing the constructedness of the very practice of representation and making performance a meta-critical space. Expanding this study, Erika Fischer-Lichte has developed the idea of theatre in terms of the autopoietic feedback loop in which meaning is created by the active co-presence between actor and spectator as opposed to predetermined textual authority (Fischer-Lichte, 2008). This interaction process makes representation fundamentally unstable, and it creates the potential of what she terms as transformative aesthetics, where

the performer and the audience experience perceptual changes. Arab Muslim subjectivity, in this sense, is not only presented, but re-made in embodied contact with the fixity of stereotypical forms popular in mediated forms. Nevertheless, the transformative power of performance does not necessarily guarantee ethical representation; instead, it has to be viewed critically in terms of the Judith Butters notion of grievability, according to which the life of those whom the world considers worthy of mourning is prioritized (Butler, 2009). Theatricalizing the Arab Muslim misery can permeate these hierarchies by making their marginalized lives visible, but visibility itself is a risk to aestheticization and consumption. According to Nicholas Ridout, spectatorship is organized according to distance and complicity, in which audiences can both sympathize with and extract aesthetic satisfaction out of images of suffering (Ridout, 2009). That is why ethical spectatorship presupposes reflexivity and being conscious of the power relations which are inherent in the process of viewing. By combining these theoretical approaches, it can be seen that performance is a counter-discursive space where the representation is not pre-established but is constantly staged and fought over. Schechner demonstrates the identity as a rehearsed cultural script; Fischer-Lotte foreshadows the transformative possibilities of the embodied interaction; Butler clarifies the politics of recognition; and Ridout unveils the ambiguous ethical aspects of the spectatorship. Within the Arab Muslim representation, the liveness of the theatre comes into trouble the stasis of the visual grammar of Orientalist discourse and to remake it as dialogic embodiment, re-positioning representation as image to encounter, re-identifying the state of identity as performative, dialogic, and historical. Therefore, the performance theory is not so much a complement to postcolonial critique, but it turns it around and shows how theatre can be a place of embodied reconstruction where discourse, trauma, and cultural memory are renegotiated by the immediacy of the theatrical event.

### III. LITERATURE REVIEW

Arab Muslim Representation in Western Discourse  
The postcolonial critique, media studies, and Islamophobia studies of Arab Muslim representation in the Western discourse have been mostly influenced by the fact that representation should be viewed as a form of power, and not as a descriptive practice.

Principally, Said (1978) conceptualizes the Orientalism as a discursive construct achieved through Western epistemologies to conceptualize the Orient as figure of stasis, irrationalism and inferiority, and organizing cultural hierarchy and geopolitical control; the conceptualizations were later adopted by other scholars including (Macfie 2002, Young 2001 and Shohat and Stam 2014), who situates Orientalism in the history of imperialism and contemporary Eurocentric media machinery, and Hall. The orientalist logics in the American context are restructured in geopolitical interest terms instead of direct inherence, as demonstrated by (Little 2002) and (McAlister 2005) in their examinations of the Cold War cultural discourses. The Middle East is framed in melodramatic binaries of threat/rescuing, which were later institutionalized in the post-9/11 discourse. An empirical study of Hollywood cinema established by (Shaheen 2001) demonstrates how representation is cumulative over time and genre with a consistent set. The history of Islamophobia is supplemented by Islamophobia studies, which conceptualize Islamophobia as the construction of racial discourse by social actors (Allen, 2010) as well as its role in the imperial politics of securitization (Kumar, 2012) and the simplified and complexity frameworks in understanding how the post-9/11 representations perpetuate the illusion of subtlety despite further enforcing already existing structures of suspicion (Mamdani, 2004). This is further proved by empirical and sociological studies done by (Bayoumi 2008) and (Cainkar 2009) on the lived effects of such representational regimes, revealing how surveillance, profiling, and marginalization have shaped Arab Muslim American lives, as well as (Gregory 2004) links these cultural discourses to material geopolitical practices, demonstrating that the two cannot be separated. Even with such a rich scholarship, the focus on film, news media and policy discourse has led to the relative marginalization of theatre as an object of study and has meant that the question of what embodied and performative forms can do to reconfigure dominant conditions of representation has remained under-researched (Gray, 2010). Alongside these criticisms of the external representation, Arab American literary scholarship has moved towards the processes of self-articulation, diaspora, and exile, and developed an understanding of how identity can be reconstructed under the conditions of migration and racialization; early work on ethnic assimilation (Suleiman, 1999) has been succeeded by more complex focus on diasporic

subjectivity, and (Naber 2012) theorizes the diaspora as dynamic processes of hybridity and transnational belonging, and Brah. The element of exile as formulated by (Said 2000) brings another aspect of estrangement and critical distance, which tends to position the narratives in the theme of displacement, memory, and liminality, and post 9/11 scholarship by (Bayoumi 2008) and (Cainkar 2009) places the experiences in a securitized space to make belonging contingent and precarious. In addition, the focus on internal heterogeneity and intersection between religion, race, and nationality as the characteristic of Muslim American identity studies also contests homogenizing representations (Haddad et al., 2006). Nevertheless, this literature has been largely focused on prosaic literature and there has been minimal contact with dramatic literature and there is lack of sufficient interest on how genre specific aesthetics construct representational politics. Theatre, especially, presents special dimensions with the help of its dependence on embodiment, co-presence, and acts of performance, here the notions of diaspora and exile are not described but can be experienced in the form of voice, gesture, and space. Thus, although the current scholarship proves the continuity of orientalist stereotyping, Islamophobic discourse and the complexity of the diasporic identity formation, the issue of how theatrical form may enter into the following structures remains unanswered sufficiently. The gap that is addressed by the current study is the extension of the postcolonial and diaspora-based analysis into the sphere of performance where reconstructing the Arab Muslim identity is observed not merely as a content of the theme but rather as a relational and ethically mediated process performed in front of a crowd.

#### Scholarship on Selected Playwrights

Critical scholarship of Yusef El Guindi, Heather Raffo, Rajiv Joseph, and the documentary collaborations of Jessica Blank and Erik Jensen have grown significantly over the last twenty years, but have been highly fragmented and not yet embraced on a sustained comparative basis. The work of El Guindi, especially *Back of the Throat* has been popularly construed as a commentary piece on post-9/11 surveillance culture, where the interrogation scenes dramatize the straddling status of the Arab American identity in securitized discourse, conventionally discussed in Foucaultian terms of discipline and internalized surveillance (Bleicher, 2013; Foucault, 1977) but often more popularly

through the prism of politics than the technical analysis of fragmenting and theatrical form (Reinelt, 2011) In the same vein, *9 Parts of Desire* by Heather Raffo has been discussed by feminists and testimonial factors, but the polyphonic monologue structure of the piece has been analyzed as a way of speaking the gendered trauma and speaking against homogenized representations of Muslim women (Craps, 2013; Alsultany, 2012), although such commentaries are frequently limited in scope to voice and representation issues. *Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo* by Rajiv Joseph has been located mainly in the absurdist and war theatre, and writer focus on its surreal dramaturgy and moral indeterminacy in its representation of the American as well as the Iraqi vision (Biggsby, 2013; Gray, 2010), although trauma is often discussed as the thematic, but not as a principle of structuration due to the belatedness, repetition and spectrality (Caruth, 1996). The practices of documentary and verbatim theatre have been a subject of scholarship in the works of Jessica Blank and Erik Jensen, where authenticity, testimony, and the ethical implications of staging non-Western suffering in the institutions of contemporary drama (Reinelt, 2011; Ridout, 2009) are frequently debated, but are not yet a part of the larger discussion of Arab Muslim representation in contemporary drama. In these works, there are various fundamental weaknesses that may be indicated; scholarship is largely author-centric, theoreticalist, and lacking in any form of integrative analysis, which incorporates postcolonial critique, trauma theory, and performance studies into one conceptual frame. In turn, this is why, although the current studies are rather abundant, there is still no consistent comparative analysis that would synthesize Orientalist discourse analysis (Said, 1978), theories of trauma and memory (LaCapra, 2001; Caruth, 1996), and performance-based ethics (Fischer-Lichte, 2008; Ridout, 2009) to determine how modern American theatre generally recreates the subjectivity of Arab Muslims. The current paper fills this gap by developing an integrated conceptual framework, which places these playwrights in a common discursive and performative space and explores how their works transcend thematic representation to restructure the identity by embodiment, fragmentation, testimony, and ethical spectatorship, and thus the place of theatre as a counter-discursive zone of cultural and epistemological change.

#### IV. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

##### Surveillance, Suspicion, and Masculine Identity

In present day American drama, surveillance is not staging as a form of political support but rather as a constitutive process through which identity, specifically Arab Muslim masculine identity is created, controlled, and disrupted in the context of post-9/11 securitized discourse. In Yussef El Guindi, the role of interrogation as a narrative element, as a performative form, dramatizes the definition of subjectivity as constructed by suspicion, imposed visibility and discursive constraint. Basing on (Foucaults 1977) conceptualization of disciplinary power, interrogation becomes a technology that forces the subject to speak himself in existing structures of suspicion wherein confession, repetition, and analysis are technologies that create identity and not to expose identity. This dynamic is also a manifestation of larger sociopolitical relations whereby Arab Muslim men have been socialized as pre-emptive threats in domestic surveillance regimes (Cainkar, 2009), which reinforces the binary of the good Muslim versus the bad Muslim where innocence has to be built and proved on a continuous basis. This logic is translated into theatrical form by El Guindi, dialogue is adversarial, silence is accusatory and mundane items are turned into incriminating evidence, exposing the effects of surveillance not only externally but internally also, the subject is now able to anticipate and recreate the interrogative gaze. In this regard, the arguments by (Said 1978) regarding how Orientalism constructs the Eastern subject using Western epistemological constructs can be taken as performative because the Arab Muslim male makes no sense without being constructed as a subject of suspicion. Language further enhances this process and it is a place of asymmetry of power where accents, hesitations, and semantic vaguenesses are seen as an indicator of duplicity, resonating with the Orientalist associations of ambiguity and apparent exorbitance (Hall, 1997; Said, 1978). Theatrically, this comes out as interrupted dialogue, repetition and circular questioning that makes speech not a transparent medium of communication, but a battleground. The idea of the restored behaviour proposed by (Schechner 2013) helps to understand how the process of interrogation is itself culturally rehearsed and how this process can be destabilized by El Guindi by predicting the breakdown of language and distorted communication, which is the indication of

the ambivalence in the systems of authority that (Bhabha 1994) speaks about. This unsteadiness is further enhanced by trauma-inflicted forms of expression in which disjointed speech and repetition are symptomatic of the temporal disturbances that come up as a result of traumatic experience (Caruth, 1996). In this context, Islamophobia is functioning not only by explicit hostility but in the form of anticipatory suspicion and conditional belonging (Kumar, 2012), which creates a kind of masculine precarity whereby Arab Muslim identity is both hyper visible as a marker of threat and as marginalized as a citizen. The concept of differential grievability suggested by (Butler 2009) highlights this superiority of some lives over others, in which some lives are less recognizable or deserving of protection, a state that is theatrically expressed by the loss of some of the traditional signs of masculine dominance, namely control over space, voice, and the physical body. Instead of merely opposing stereotypes with affirmations of innocence, the dramatic performance reveals the relationally constructed nature of identity per se as the subject swings between assertion and self-doubt between the positions of acting out and working through, respectively. The interrelatedness of the processes of surveillance, linguistic alienation, and internalized suspicion, in the drama by El Guindi, shows the Arab Muslim masculinity is not a consistent category, but a contingent and performatively constructed identity, formed in the theatrical and political economy of suspicion.

#### Gendered Voice and Embodied Testimony

When the construction of Arab Muslim masculinity, based on suspicion, is revealed by surveillance-based dramaturgy, theatrical practice of Heather Raffo creates another arrangement of the representational field by making active the embodied testimony of Iraqi women to shift the dialogic confrontation into the monologic multiplicity and be able to rebuild the subjectivity through voice. The monologue, in this context, is not only a stylistic figure but a historiographical intervention that cracks onto the usual geopolitical discourse of war and security which largely defines Iraq but creates what can be termed as counter-history because it prefigures lived experience and oppositional voices and thereby disrupts what (Said 1993) describes as imperial structures of attitude and reference. The testimonial mode is consistent with the way of testimony that (Felman 2002) imagines testimony as an address

needing to be witnessed, not be narrated impersonally, that creates a direct relationship axis between performer and audience and cuts across institutional mediation. Raffo creates a polyphonic archive by making several voices of women run through one embodied actor and thereby opposing the homogenization of Muslim womanhood that is widely reproduced in the Western media (Alsultany, 2012), she makes subjectivity internally diverse, conflicting, and agentic. This reconstruction is a direct response to Orientalist paradigms that diminish Arab Muslim women to aspects of symbolic oppression or exotic difference (Said, 1978), and (Bhabha 1994) idea of hybridity enlightens on how these characters exist within transnational and liminal spaces as created by war, migration, and cultural negotiation, and that identity is performative and contingent as opposed to fixed. It is theatrically enacted when voice, gesture, and affect are changed making the body a place of inscribing and rearticulating geopolitical histories. Notably, the dramaturgy of Raffo does not allow the framing of the agency by the Western liberal feminist paradigms but places the subjectivity of women in particular Iraqi socio-historical contexts, a case that challenges the notion of differential grievability by that requires the acknowledgment of the lives that are usually marginalized by the narratives of the dominant mourning practices (Butler 2009). On the structural level, the play appeals to the trauma of fragmentation, where the recollection of the events occurs in fragments and non-linearity, which is the direct result of (Caruth 1996) argument that trauma is belated and non-linear; nevertheless, this fragmentation is not abstract by the fact that such manifestation is historically based upon traumatic experiences of war, sanctions, and displacement, which is consistent with the cultural theory of trauma and its focus on the social mediation of collective suffering (Alexander, 2004). Unlike the repetitive acting out, the monologic form is closer to what (LaCapra 2001) describes as working through and it allows critical involvement of traumatic pasts. This process is further enforced by the embodied quality of performance as the notion of the autopoietic feedback loop introduced by (Fischer-Lichte 2008), that emphasizes the fact, meaning is created during the interaction between the performer and spectator, and turns the testimony into an affective and ethical experience. However, according to (Ridout 2009), there is always a threat of aestheticization in the staging of suffering, a conflict that Raffo alleviates by staging very little and

confronting the audience directly, which anticipates the experience of witnessing as opposed to seeing. It is in this monologic counter-history, staged hybridity, and trauma-influenced fragmentation, that the theatre of Raffo reconstructs Arab Muslim femininity as something historically situated, epistemologically dynamic, and ethically charged and no longer reactive.

#### Absurdism and Moral Dislocation

When the construction of Arab Muslim masculinity has been revealed by Yussef El Guindi dramaturgy and the subjectivization of subjecthood was established by Heather Raffo, the surrealist war theatre is used to mobilize other factors as the moral and ontological displacement caused by imperial violence is revealed by Rajiv Joseph in his *Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo*, as the ghosts speak, the animals philosophize, and ethical sense fails. Absurdism as practiced in this dramaturgical art serves not as an aesthetic ornament, but as a response in form to geopolitical disaster, which the Iraq War is placed in a destabilized ontology where the borders of life and death, human and animal, material and metaphysical are continually permeated. This ontological breakage confounds with the logic of haunting as the continuity of undress violence in the present such that the spectral figures fail to signal an end but rather represent the incompleteness of the past and current trauma, which transfers the locus of trauma to theatrical form itself. In refusing mimetic realism, a strategy that artificially naturalises or aestheticizes violence, Joseph uses surreal fragmentation as an epistemological challenge that prefigures the impossibility of attempting to stabilise the meaning of war as an experience, therefore forcing the audience to confront the irrationalism and incoherence of war as experience. The same instability is extended into the realms of ethics, in which the moral categories are made radically unstable: American soldiers are both vulnerable and cruel, Iraqi people on the other hand are both victims and participants in their own constrained situation, and metaphysical questions of sin, redemption, and divine justice are posed over the scenes of looting and violence, thus precluding any sort of moral clarity. This instability is reminiscent of the concept of differential grievability introduced by (Butler 2009) as the play challenges the unequal structures of recognition by giving the Iraqi characters posthumous voice and presence, which is in effect a response to their being erased by the mainstream

media discourses that attribute their deaths as abstract or ungrivable instances. Meanwhile, psychological fragmentation of the American soldier makes reductive binaries more complex since it becomes apparent that moral dislocation is not a personal fault but an axiomatic feature of the war machine as a whole where guilt, paranoia, and ethical ambiguity are expressed as effects of systemic violence and not individual maladjustment. Absurdism worsens this state by depriving the probability of coherent moral solution; characters are forced to customize meaning in a discontinuous world, the tiger philosophical questions reflect the audience in quest of the ethical foundation in the absence of steadfast interpretive models, therefore, opposing catharsis and perpetuating what (LaCapra 2001) would describe as an unresolved working-through process. In addition, the play involves a politics of perspectival asymmetry, in that as much as Iraqi suffering is prefigured, narrative mediation is frequently mediated through American soldiers, which is the geopolitical form of occupation in itself; yet, this hierarchy is at the same time challenged, when Iraqi characters are made to narrate their histories of loss, anger and metaphysical reflection, and their spectral return becomes a necessary counter to the epistemic marginality of (Said 1978). This unresolved tension creates a spectatorial mode of ethically negotiated positioning in which the viewers have to negotiate their own positionality, instead of passively receiving a morally resolved narrative, as (Ridout 2009) suggests, ambiguity and moral hazard are fundamental to spectatorship. The absurdist approach of Joseph therefore plays a dual role, not only of disorientation, both ontological and ethical, but also of reconfiguring the visibility of the Iraqi and American lives in the theatrical frame, as a territory that is haunted and morally discontinuous. Placed within the wider comparative context of this paper, where El Guindi presents surveillance, and Raffo speaks on behalf of the voice of the testified, the dramaturgy of Joseph proves that the representation of traumas, powers, and subjectivity is not presented passively, but through specific performance aesthetics, interrogative form, monologic embodiment, and absurdist surrealism, orchestrated by them to make visible, challenged, and reshaped within the contemporary American theatre.

#### Documentary Realism and Refugee Narratives

When Rajiv Joseph takes an absurdist approach to destabilize reality by using absurdist dramaturgy,

Jessica Blank and Erik Jensen use an opposite aesthetic approach to stabilize reality in *Aftermath* in which theatrical form becomes an overt location of mediation and not invention, and the politics of representation are re-directed towards witnessing through the collection of Iraqi civilian witnessing testimonies based on interviews done during the U.S. occupation. The verbatim theatre is used to lend the dialogue the authority of its purported factual source, performance is therefore consistent with the traditions of documentary in which the authority of testimony is paramount, but mediation nonetheless is involved, since narrative coherence must always be created, and the illusion of transparency is also a construct effect. Here, the idea of performance described as a kind of restored behaviour by (Schechner 2013) becomes crucial because the voices of Iraqi people are re-performed by American actors in front of the predominantly American audiences, and therefore, the experience is turned into an aesthetic event, which traverses linguistic, cultural, and geopolitical borders, and thus, prefigures the conditions of representation through its presentation. This dramatic effect places audiences as participants in mediated pain, and makes them subject of witnessing. The moral rhetoric increases in the case of this testimony touching on the realms of war and displacement, as the play attempts to intervene in what (Butler 2009) thinks of as the differential grievability by making visible the lives of Iraqi civilians and publicly and mournably inhabitable within a U.S. cultural framework, although this remaking is always impermanent, according to (Ridout 2009), spectatorship is vulnerable to turning suffering into consumable affect where empathy could replace political responsibility. Blank and Jensen resolve this tension by not actively interpreting the story in a moralizing manner, but contrasting various accounts of loss, fear, adjustment, and endurance, thus opposing narrative closure and avoiding easy catharsis, making the audience a witness to open and unresolved realities. This documentary address consequently creates a kind of ethical mediation that does not transfer trauma into an abstract symbolic form or into instrumental activism, but doesn't situate the spectators in an abstract and abstracted way, but instead places them in a position of affective experience and discomposure. And yet, there exists a seminal contradiction between humanization and liberal empathy and whereas Orientalist homogenization is broken by the multiplicity of voices and makes Iraqi

subjects socially and professionally diverse mothers, engineers, artists, and children—there is, however, the danger that affective identification is the finish line instead of the impetus to structural critique and in the process enables spectators to have a feeling of compassion without asking questions of the larger structures of violence that create such victims. Unlike the ridiculousness of Joseph, which destroys the integrity of moral sense, documentary reality can have the effect of stabilizing it accidentally, by creating empathic awareness, but also serves as a form of correction and restraint, insofar as it requires the audience to hear voices otherwise annulled as part of the mainstream discourse of war. Located within the larger comparative paradigm of this paper—where El Guindi stages surveillance and identity fracture, Raffo rebuilds gendered subjectivity by way of testimonial embodiment, and Joseph destabilizes moral ontology by way of absurdist haunting Blank and Jensen documentary theatre situates along this spectrum by presupposing in advance mediation, witnessing and ethical responsibility all of which show that contemporary American drama is not just a representational medium, it is instead an epistemic intervention in which Arab Muslim identity is re-enacted by using discrete but still interrelated

#### Theatre as Cultural Counter-Discourse

The exemplary American drama as shown in the creations of Yussef El Guindi, Heather Raffo, Rajiv Joseph, Jessica Blank and Erik Jensen is not a representational practice but rather a counter-discursive cultural archive that breaks dominant post 9/11 discourse that constructs representations of Arab Muslim identity as either practices of securitization, suspicion or reduced humanitarianism (Alsultany, 2012; Kumar, 2012) but rather produces alternative epistemologies through embodied performance, testimonial multiplicity and ethically charged. It is not only the thematic resistance that makes theatrical performance counter-discursive, but its formal strategies, by which it constructs counter-memory through the re-combinations of historical events that it has sought to exclude in the official war narration (the cultural trauma theory posits that collective memory is mediated by narrative), i.e. the work of drama like *Nine Parts of Desire* and *Aftermath* anticipates the voices of Iraqi civilians, thus disrupting the hegemony of American victimhood and repositioning the memory around lived subjectivity; the fragmented monologues. At the same time, theatre reinstates narrative agency by returning

Arab Muslim subjects back to being spoken instead of being spoken about, and so the asymmetry of marginalized identities identified by (Said 1978) and (Spivak 1988) is reversed, so that the marginalized identities are no longer spoken on their behalf but made to happen, as El Guindi's staging of interrogation reveals the violence of imposed self-narration and the destabilization of narrative control that occurs when Joseph is suddenly brought to speak, whereas the embodied exchange as conceived by F Furthermore, theatre also challenges hegemonic representation, disrupting the repetitive flow of the stereotypes that are defined in studies of culture and media (Shaheen, 2001; Alsultany, 2012) as El Guindi uncovers the artificiality of suspicion, Raffo distorts the stereotype of the victimized Muslim woman through the multiplicity and contradiction, Joseph breaks the moral categories through the aesthetics of the absurdist, and Blank and Jensen redefine the Iraqi civilians as complex historical figures through the art of In addition to the representation, the establishment of ethical spectatorship in theatre also intervenes in the hierarchy of grievability, in which the Arab and Muslim life is placed in a common civic setting where spectators are no longer observers, and instead become witnesses to the events of the performance, thereby reflexive in their approach, as Raffo demands active listening, Joseph creates a sense of moral inertia, and Blank and Jensen foreground mediation. All these dramaturgical practices are evidence to suggest that theatre is a counter-discursive archive, generating alternative cultural memory, reinstating narrative agency, undermining hegemonic representation, and creating an ethics of seeing based on discomfort and critical cognizance. Significance of this, transformative capacity is achieved through aesthetic means, interrogative structures, testimonial monologue, absurdist dislocation, and documentary realism, and allowing identity to be, therefore, not only represented in performance but also negotiated in a new way as a result. In a cultural field dominated by securitized discourse and mediated spectacle, the American theatre of the present, then, re-appropriates the representational power, not just through challenging the dominant narratives but through restructuring the epistemological grounds of making the Arab Muslim identities intelligible, declaring the theatre as politically consequential site of cultural intervention, reconstruction of memory, and re-orientation of ethics.

## V. DISCUSSION

The presentation of this study puts the results in a strictly integrated theoretical and methodological context in which it is shown that contemporary American drama is not only the place where the Arab Muslim identity is represented but also that it is a crucial site where postcolonial discourse, trauma narrative and performative embodiment interplay to reconstruct the Arab Muslim identity in a critical manner. The analysis establishes that the representational regimes that occur in the Orientalist and Islamophobic scholarship (Said, 1978; Alsultany, 2012; Kumar, 2012) do not cease to exist in the larger field of culture, but they are being dialogically involved and, at the same time, their inherent contradictions are revealed but remain within the limits of their epistemology. The hybrid status of theatre as a form of culture is highlighted by this dual positioning, which is to say that theatre does not exist beyond power and is not entirely defined by power either, but instead represents a medium of mediation, a means to resist as well as partially reproduce what is being represented.

In a postcolonial sense, the results support the persistence of Orientalism as a structuring discourse and make it spread to the realm of performance. As demonstrated by the plays under analysis, the subjectivity of Arab Muslims is created by the means of surveillance, categorization, and framing the narrative, whereas the mechanisms are depicted as transparent and precarious by the means of the dramaturgy techniques of interrogation structures, fragmented dialogue, and polyphonic testimony. This is in line with the claim by Said (1978) that representation is an epistemological process as well as support the view by Bhabha (1994) that colonial discourse is characterized by ambivalence and slippage. The play of identity reveals the performativity of these discursive formations that prove that the categories of terrorist, victim, and enemy are not ontological facts but conditional consequences of power-infused discourses. Simultaneously, the analysis recognizes the critique of epistemic violence made by Spivak (1988) by presenting the argument that counter-representational work is still mediated through institutional structures, which casts significant doubts as to the confines of voice, authorship, and agency within the theatrical practices in the West.

Trauma theory is also incorporated into the discussion, and it uncovers the fact that narrative

form itself is informed by the temporal and epistemic violence caused by violence. This paper shows that the modern American drama has utilized not only fragmentation, repetition and non-linear temporality, but also in a manner that fits the notion of belatedness, as proposed by Caruth (1996) and acting out versus working through, as defined by LaCapra (2001). Notably, these theoretical constructs are not put into practice in an abstract way but are placed in the particular geopolitical context of post-9/11 warfare, displacement, and diasporic experience. The plays, therefore, explain that trauma is not merely a personal psychological state of being but a historically constituted and culturally mediated reality. Theatrical performance of the trauma also allows the drama to be performed in a more melancholic way by using testimonial structures, spectral presences, and documentary forms in an effort to create a space where personal agony is converted into civic witnessing. Nonetheless, the debate also critically addresses the ethical risks that have been outlined in the representation of trauma, specifically the opportunity of aestheticization and commodification, and it is stressed that theatrical experience in the presence of suffering is also subject to conditionality on the possibilities of staging and reception.

The performance theory would be very useful in the interpretation of how these representational and traumatic processes are made material. The results suggest that the use of embodiment, co-presence and interaction with the audience is one of the key features distinguishing theatre among other types of media, and allows theatre to represent in a relational, and not merely mimetic, manner. Based on the works by Fischer-Lichte (2008), the research proves that the field of meaning production, where the identity is constantly negotiated, is created by the autopoietic feedback loop between actor and spectator. This performative aspect will enable Arab Muslim subjectivity to be lived, embodied and unresponsive to abstraction. However, the argument also brings in an idea by Ridout (2009) about the critique of spectatorship to illustrate the ambivalence inherent in such an encounter, whereby the ethical witnessing of the event is inseparable with the eventual spectatorship of aesthetic consumption. As a result, theatre is theatrically theorized as a place of relative emancipation instead of an ethical zone where the process of representation can be debated in terms of opposing interpretive and affective reactions.

These theoretical observations can be supported through the comparative analysis of the chosen playwrights, which shows that the counter-discursive representation is achieved by the means of a variety of strategies, which are but interrelated in their effects. The interrogation dramaturgy of El Guindi predicts the subjectivation of surveillance and instability of masculine identity when placed under securitized questioning, the reconstruction of gendered subjectivity with a multiplicity of testimonials and embodied voice in the monologic form of Raffo, the destabilization of moral integrity and ontological catastrophe of war in Joseph, and the mediation and ethical witnessing of the verbatim testimony in Blank and Jensen. Albeit they can take different forms, these approaches allow realizing that the reconstruction of Arab Muslim identity in modern American theatre is not only done through thematic inversion but also through formal innovation which disrupts the regimes of narration and visuality. Simultaneously, the discussion also admits that these strategies cannot avoid the danger of re-inscribing the prevalent views, especially in the context of the reception by the audience and the contextualization of the institution.

Another major contribution of this work is that it outlines theatre as a counter-memory site in culture. Using the theory of cultural trauma (Alexander et al., 2004) and the idea of grievability suggested by Butler (2009), the outcomes reveal that the plays restructure the dominant narratives of the post-9/11 trauma by prefiguring the marginalized experiences and broadening the boundaries of the publicly-recognized suffering. This intervention questions hierarchical modes of visible that prioritize the lives of the West and make the lives of others peripheral. Nevertheless, it is argued that the efficiency of such counter-memory depends on the interpretative frames of the audience and the cultural context, in which the performance is interpreted, in general. The ability of theatre to reconstruct the collective memory therefore must be seen as tentative and not absolute.

The study provides a comparative and interdisciplinary approach that moves the limitations in the extant scholarship methodologically. Through the synthesis of the postcolonial theory, the trauma studies, and the performance analysis, the study goes beyond the single theory or the single author theory to produce a more thorough comprehension of the concept of representation in the modern drama. The

focus on thematic convergence, e.g. surveillance, witnessing, absurdism, and documentary realism, makes it possible to identify structural patterns in a variety of texts without losing analytical specificity. Moreover, the combination of textual analysis with performative analysis addresses the current discussion in the literary studies and the performance studies that the dual ontology of theatre in the form of script and event requires explanations.

## VI. CONCLUSION

This paper has shown that American drama today reinvents Arab Muslim identity using a combination of comparative framework to integrate postcolonial theory, trauma studies and performance ethics such that theatre is not viewed as a neutral mode of representation but as a counter-discursive cultural practice. Dramatic form, through the aesthetics and performative practices aimed at reconfiguring the epistemological conditions in which Arab Muslim identities can be intelligible, is seen across the works of Yussef El Guindi, Heather Raffo, Rajiv Joseph, Jessica Blank, and Erik Jensen, as the dramatic form challenges those dominant post-9/11 narratives that have been shaped by securitization, media sensationalism and humanitarian paternalism (Alsultany, 2012; Kumar, 2012). As analysed, the modern theatre initiates, first, that the contemporary theatre creates counter-memory through foregrounding war narratives and civilian subjectivities, disrupting the state-centred memorialization by fragmentation, testimoniality, and ethically charged ways of remembering, which, following the theory of trauma, makes the stage an alternative archive, where Iraqi and Muslim American experiences take centre stage (Caruth, 1996; LaCapra, 2001). Second, it shows that the identity in these plays is not introduced as any fixed essence but is negotiated performatively, as postcolonial frameworks (Said, 1978; Bhabha, 1994) represent the instability of the categories of terrorists, victims, as well as enemies, and the dramaturgical strategies through which this subjectivity is revealed are surveillance structures in El Guindi, testimonial fragmentation in Raffo, absurdist disorientation in Joseph, and documentary mediation in Blank and Jensen. Third, the research confirms that theatre creates a unique form of ethical spectatorship through the performance of Arab and Muslim suffering and suffering in common civic space, which alters the process of representation into an embodied and

reciprocal form, which is the province of theatre but no other dominant forms of media that tends to distort Arab Muslim identities into visual stereotypes or narrative abstractions (Shaheen, 2001). Theoretically, the research provides a synthesized model of analytical approach which brings together postcolonial discourse analysis, a trauma-informed narrative theory and performance studies as the study proves that identity reconstruction in modern drama is performed on discursive, psychological, and performative levels and takes the theory of cultural trauma (Alexander et al., 2004) to the level of live performance. Moreover, the development of theatre as a counter-discursive archive develops current literature by underlining the fact that forms of dramaturgical dramaturgy, namely interrogative structures, monologic testimony, absurdist fragmentation, and documentary realism, are an epistemological response and not a simple thematic critique as such. The study is methodologically a comparative, cross-playwright approach which transcends the analysis of individual authors to realize structural and thematic convergence of various dramatic practices through the use of such axes as surveillance, gendered testimony, absurd war aesthetics, and documentary mediation in creating a synthesis that does not eliminate the specificity of the textual material and can address interdisciplinary paradigms. The focus on close textual reading and performance theory combined to recognise the dual ontology of theatre as script and embodied event, which provides a more holistic approach to the generation of meaning through staging, voice, and spectatorship and in response to the wider demands of performance studies of approaches that are both conscious of dramaturgical construction and spectatorship. Overall, it is possible to say that the modern American drama can be viewed as a politically significant place of cultural intervention that is not only challenging the dominant discourses but redefining, in its ultimate form, the circumstances in which Arab Muslim identities, memories, and experiences are represented, perceived, and interpreted.

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