

Arab American Theatre Caught in Censorship: A Study of Betty Shamieh's *Roar* and *The Black Eyed*

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Abstract

This paper deals with the restrictions of literary censorship imposed upon Arab American theatre. Giving literary analysis to Betty Shamieh's Roar and The Black Eyed, this study explains how Arab American playwrights, who could find a chance after 9/11 to voice out Arab American concerns, are caught on the radar of censorship which limits and deforms the image of Arab America they present. In Roar and The Black Eyed, Shamieh presents a confused image of the Arab American experience in order to conform to a publishing industry and white readership more interested in Arab exoticism than Arab Diaspora and political and cultural marginalization. The study explains how Arab American playwrights are still wandering and looking for artistic freedom in order to express their obsessions without being oppressed.

Keywords: Censorship, Betty Shamieh, *Roar*, *The Black Eyed*, Arab American, American Theatre

1. Introduction: The Birth of Arab American Theatre

In 2006, I took a course at UCLA on race and ethnicity. The course covered the history and concerns of different ethnicities and races in the U.S. To my dismay, there was no slight reference to Arab Americans as one of the components of the American cultural mosaic. An American colleague asked me after the end of the course where to locate and categorize Arabs among other races and ethnicities. Locating Arabs among "Caucasians" did not sound correct to my American friend since Caucasians are commonly conceived to be only white. The invisibility of Arab Americans in the race and ethnicity class echoes a broad invisibility in American life, academia and literature. For a long time, Arab Americans have been only visible in times of crises. When there is a crisis within the borders of the U.S. or in the Middle East, there is a mention and news coverage of Arab Americans.

Ironically, the 9/11 calamity in the beginning of the 21st century came with new hopes for Arab American literature, in general, and Arab American theatre, in particular. There is a long history of Western stereotypes of Arab (American) culture which is often (mis)represented as tainted with exoticism, backwardness and terrorism. It was of paramount importance after 9/11 to re-examine these stereotypes which have been consumed and digested by American readers for a long time. Although there is a legacy of Arab American poetry, essays and fiction that dates back to the nineteenth century, these early writings were more targeting gaining acceptance within the American society than resisting the stereotype and challenging common misconceptions. One of the first Arab American literary experiences was expressed by some Christian Arab immigrants from Syria and Lebanon who established *Al-Mahjar* "émigre" School in the 1920s. *Al-Mahjar* writers, aware of the public and official resentment of Arab immigrants in the U.S., stressed their Christianity and distanced themselves from the Arab culture in order to invoke American sympathy through religious spirituality and brotherhood. The next generations of Arab Americans- on account of the outbreak of the two world wars and the 1924 Immigration Act which cut the number of Arab immigrants- were further distanced from their homelands. Assimilation and lack of interest in the Arab World affairs were the marks of that period's literature.

From the 1960s forward, Arab American culture and literature witnessed radical changes. New immigrants from the Arab world came to reside in the U.S., most of them were educated Muslims. The Civil Rights Movement, along with the 1967 War and the emergence of independence movements in the Arab World, created a new generation of Arab American people and writers more interested in politics and connections with the Arab world than ever before.

The historical negative portrayals of Arab (Americans) and the emergence of postcolonial examples instigated Arab American writers to grapple with a desire to re-write themselves and to fight an overdue battle against Hollywood's stereotypes.

Affected by these early Arab American attempts in fiction and poetry, Arab American theatrical activity emerged in the U.S. by the late 1980s. In 1988, a group of Arab American theatre artists formed *Ajyal* theatre (translation: Generations). *Ajyal* theatre produces plays in Arabic and presents comedies on the challenges facing Arab Americans in the United States. The target audiences for *Ajyal* theatre are usually Arab American immigrants. One of their main missions posted on their website is: "to provide quality Arabic theater, arts, and cultural experiences for the Arab immigrants around the world" ("Ajyal Theatrical Group"). *Ajyal* does not target American audiences and it is mainly meant to "provide quality entertainment at affordable prices for the Arab-American communities," according to their mission's statement ("Ajyal Theatrical Group"). "While these . . . Arabic theatres have not directly generated today's Middle Eastern American artists, their portrayal of émigrés' personal and cultural concerns through theatre has built bridges for the new writers, actors, directors and producers who choose to work in English", as incisively noted by Holly Hill (n.d). Other Arab American theatres followed *Ajyal* project like the Golden Thread Theatre in San Francisco which started in 1996 producing plays focusing on Middle Eastern issues including Arab American.

In 2002, after the 9/11 attacks, a group of Arab American artists formed *Nibras* theatre company (Translated: Lantern). *Nibras* is famous for its documentary production *Sajjil* (record) documenting interviews with common American people searching for answers to the question: what does the word Arab mean to you? The responses were recorded and presented on stage to highlight the anti-Arab sentiments in the U.S. after the September attacks. Another post-9/11 Arab American theatre project is Silk Road Theatre which focuses also on political and belonging issues and which was created by Jamil Khoury in Chicago in 2002. Contemporary Arab American theatre witnesses also a new phenomenon; the emergence of a number of Arab American individual playwrights whose plays focus on religious, national and political aspects of Arab America. Names like Betty Shamieh, Yussef El Guindi, Leila Buck, and others are produced on regional and sometimes on off-Broadway theaters. In some cases, their dramas are included in American multicultural courses and discussions on the American literary canon. September 11th, although perpetuating the negative stereotypes of Arab (Americans) as terrorists and anti-western, came with unprecedented opportunities for Arab American theatre artists to be produced and it ushered a new interest in Arab America. Yussef El Guindi, an Egyptian American playwright, states that "for the longest time Arab issue or Muslim issues just had not been on the radar. . . . Then came 9/11. 'Suddenly there were calls for plays'" (qtd in Kan, 2008).

Betty Shamieh is one of the Arab American female playwrights caught on radar after 9/11. She was born in San Francisco to two Catholic Palestinian immigrants from Ramalla. She defines the mission of her theatre as: "to show (Arab Americans) as human beings, to show them as people who can lust, who can be ambitious, who can be mean, who can be loving" (qtd in Najjar, 2004). In her statement, Shamieh does not mention the limitations within which she works and the way she responds to censorship practiced by American mainstream publishing industry which, to a large extent, shapes and defines the representation of Arab America in her plays.

The idea of staging Arab America is very problematic, especially for emerging Arab American playwrights like Shamieh. In post-9/11 America, Arab Americans are understood to be segments of a distant enemy. To turn such an enemy into a partner on stage is to challenge and reshape a popular culture that has historically swallowed misconceptions about Arab (American) culture and has an interest in reading and viewing the Arab (American) as an Oriental. Andrea Shalal-Esa (2009) remarks that after 9/11, the "U.S. publishing has a growing appetite for information about the Arab and Muslim world but many mainstream media remain deeply affected by an Orientalist agenda that focuses on the oppression of women and other stereotypes about Arab society". It is interesting to know that the majority of Arab American playwrights are females, mainly because American publishers and producers find Arab women less dangerous than men. This is highlighted by Muslim Iranian American writer Layla Dowlatshahi: "I think the idea of an Arab man is scary to Americans. Growing up in this country, I've always sensed there's been a fear of Muslim men, and of any kind of ethnic minority, especially male. They're seen as a threat. It's easier to acclimate to a female Arab or Muslim voice than to jump to a male" (qtd in Schillinger, 2004). The U.S. publishing industry created a formula for Arab American writers: in order to be published and disseminated, Arab American writers have to present an image of Arab America that appeals to a wide/white readership or audiences.

Staging an Arab American experience with anti-western signals and treating sensitive issues like the Middle East conflict from an Arab point of view, on the other hand, means that Arab American writers may lose the chance to be produced or even known.

2. *Roar: De-Politicizing the Arab American Diaspora*

Roar is one of Shamieh's major plays that had its Off-Broadway premiere in 2004 and one of the plays taught in some multicultural theatre courses in America. It is a family drama that follows the diasporic lives of the Arab American Yacoub family living in Detroit. The family's inability to achieve social mobility is largely due to their Arabness. To be visible, the Yacoub family members have to keep their Arabness invisible when they confront the outdoor America. In order to maintain his financial success in the U.S., Ahmed acts as the superintendent of the apartments his family owns because the tenants may refuse to live in Arab-owned apartments as "all Arab men are dirty" (Shamieh, 2004, p. 4). Ahmed also- who had a promising music career back in Jordan- is relegated into a handyman in the U.S. where he can play his *tubleh* only in the basement of his apartments because "no one likes the music I can make here" (p. 57).

Ahmed's silencing of his talent and Arabness is not voluntarily but dictated by a society unwelcoming of the Arab voice. Karima, on the other hand, chooses to self-silence her Arabness through distancing herself from the American public in order to secure the financial success she could hardly achieve in America. Karima limits her world to the borders of her liquor store and the above apartment they live in. In order to get a job in the music industry, Ahmed's brother Abe hides his Palestinian roots and passes himself as an Egyptian Jew because Egypt "made peace with Israel" (p. 65). Irene, their daughter, chooses to totally ignore her Arab history and to look at Arabs as others for the sake of assimilation; a price which is never enough for societal recognition of her Arabness. Like Abe, Irene's ambition to become a famous singer in America could not be visible without subduing her Palestinian roots. She introduces herself as an Egyptian blues singer because "a blues singer with roots in the continent of Africa is an easy package to sell. Who in America ever heard of a Palestinian blues singer. . . . Who in America has ever heard of Palestine anything?" (p. 6).

The characters' search for the American dream in *Roar* turns into losses and the suppression of their *hyphenated* Arab part is found essential for finding a place in America. The characters' Arab American culture is popularly seen as "a transplanted culture" that fits more into the Arab world than into an American multicultural mosaic. Unlike other ethnic groups in the U.S., the hyphenation of Arab-America is popularly conceived to be discordant. To use Samuel Huntington's famous conclusion, Arab Americans belong to two mutually incompatible civilizations: one that inheres in the old East and another that belongs to the modern West. This incompatibility makes the Arab American identity understood to be "transnational" rather than "hyphenated" (Majaj, 2008). The Yacoub family are shadowed on account of this conclusion and are conceived to be aliens rather than American citizens.

The Yacoub's silencing of their Arab roots in public turns into celebration of the Arab culture in private. This celebration of Arab cultural legacy is stressed through different cultural signs in the play: food, language, and music. Like in other ethnic literatures, food images are used as metaphors to establish bridges of connection with a mother culture and "serve as figures of speech which depict celebration of families and communities, portray identity crisis, create usable histories to establish ancestral connections, subvert ideology and practices of assimilation, and critique global capitalism" (Gardaphe & Xu, 2007, p. 5). Karima, the mother, is busy throughout the play picking leaves of parsley and arranging them, cleaning mint leaves, and preparing a tray of nuts and various Middle Eastern dips for the family; which is typical of Arab housewives' activities. Aroma of Middle Eastern food fills the stage carrying ambiance of the Arab culture and history. The tea pot whose whistle "seems kind of Third World" (p. 18) to Irene is always present in the play as a reminder of the Arab origin and cultural affiliation. Ironically, by the end of the play, Abe offers only one condition for a compromise and a job to Irene; getting a falafel sandwich: "Fresh falafel! God, how I would like some fresh falafel if only someone would be kind enough to offer it to me" (p. 62). A weekly Middle Eastern meal is all he wants to help Irene get into the music industry: "Well, there might be something I can do. But, as you know so well, Karima, nothing in this life is free. I miss Arabic food. Invite me over for dinner every Sunday, and I can probably get Irene a job" (p. 68).

Music signs are also present in the play to help dismantle the stereotype of the artless Arab and to present an Arab culture that roars with music and art. Shamieh brings on stage the treasures of Arabic classical music which not only dispel stereotypes of artless Arab culture but also establish it as aesthetically charming and genuinely human.

Arabic music also stands as an icon that stresses the characters' nostalgia for their homeland. Songs of Um Kulthoum and Fayruz- two of the most celebrated Arab singers-fill the stage to inspire Irene with a sense of home and to inspire the audiences with a sense of appreciation of Arab culture. Nostalgically, Ahmed remembers the concerts he used to make in Jordan in an attempt to teach Irene about her artistic Arab history. Ahmed, Hala, and Irene start belly dancing and clapping while singing Faiyuz's famous song: "*Biktub ismak ya habibi alla' hawr a-teek. (Translation: I carve your name in the wood of old trees/You write my name in the sand in the street/ Tomorrow when it rains, yours will remain, but my name will be erased, obliterated, gone, forgotten)*" (p. 22). It is also in Um Kulthoum's song "*Junnelee sh-waya sh-waya, Junnelee wa kudoo Aynaya, da el maghna yorod el rouh,*" translated as: "hum and sing, and roar, make my listeners drunk on sound" (p. 31) that the family find a sense of unity and admiration for their Arab legacy.

Hala warns Irene that these *mow'alla'at*: "In Arabic, it sounds like perfection, like a combination of words that existed before humans were here to make up words. Learn it in Arabic or don't learn at all. But I'm telling you, Irene, if you learn to sing this song, then you can sing just about anything" (p. 31). The *mow'alla'at* are actually symbols of the Arab cultural heritage which may lose their uniqueness and power if completely melt into another culture. Irene, who thinks the Arabic singing "sounds like spitting," finally discovers that "when you hear the first note, you know you have to stick around to hear the last" (p. 72). Also, with the help of Hala, Ahmed could play his *tubleh* (drums) openly in open-mike nights, and Karima encourages her daughter Irene to learn Arabic music and pursue a singing career.

Arab Americans in *Roar* are given faces when their saga and struggle to achieve the American dream are depicted. Shamieh is repeatedly quoted stressing that her plays aim at humanizing Arab Americans through depicting their dreams, successes and failures. In a recent blog for world theatre, Shamieh (2011) explains:

Theatre can remind us that the vast majority of people are not heroes or villains, but simply ordinary human beings. . . . In short, their lives, deaths, hopes, fears, and fantasies are not fundamentally different from one's own. What would it mean if there were more stories that sensitized audiences to the fact that there is an indefinable, yet recognizable human essence that unites us, both throughout the globe and across the ages? In a world that is divided into nations that wage wars on one another, it is theatre's ability to humanize that makes it so politically potent.

In her blog essay, Shamieh considers her plays politically potent because they stress human brotherhood. But this sophisticated definition of political drama ignores the fact that political drama uses political discourse to examine the impact of politics on certain communities, races, or ethnicities. Arab America is a politically conscious community which is deeply affected by real politics. Arab American theatre itself emerged after 9/11, an event which is highly politicized. As a matter of fact, the overseas political tensions shape to a large extent the daily lives of Arab Americans, especially the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. The inseparable connection between the personal and the political is one of the unique features of the Arab American experience as incisively remarked by Amiri & Andria (2007): "For Arab Americans in this time, in this place, the political is in fact the personal" (p. 5). Speaking about the Arab American experience, then, without examining the impact of the Middle East conflict is like talking about the American Civil War without mentioning Abraham Lincoln.

A closer look at Shamieh's *Roar* reveals that politics lie at the core of the Arab American experience and the Yacoub family marginalization. Hala explains to Irene why they should talk about politics saying: "What happened to your mother and her sister affects you in a thousand ways that you yourself will never be able to explain" (p. 47). However, the picture is reversed when Arab Americans become politically blamed rather than victims of world politics. Palestinians' suppression under Israeli occupation and American interference in the Middle East is ignored, while Arab-Arab clashes are stressed in the play. Hala left Kuwait and travelled to America after the first Gulf War because "Kuwaiti men threw all the Palestinian women out into the streets. . . . It was considered unpatriotic to have a Palestinian piece of ass" (p. 14). The Yacoub family's memories of their homeland suffering are pregnant with traumatic experiences back in Jordan after the Black September events when King Hussien attacked their Palestinian camps. In her attempt to teach Irene about the history of her people, Hala remembers with agony the Black September war:

You come from a long line of people with delusions of grandeur. In other words, idiots. The biggest one of all was your grandfather. . . . He should have known you don't flee the Israelis to Jordan, then try to fight the Israelis when they're both working together. To be fair, the poor bastard didn't know that Hussein-I won't call him king, I won't call any man king-would sent his soldiers to clean up the camps of revolutionaries. Scores had to be settled. We were living through a Black September but we didn't know it-we thought we were just having breakfast-and in they came and I see them hit my dad and my mom is crawling, then the man with the cigars says "get the little one" and the biggest one comes towards me. (pp. 46-47)

This image of Arab soldiers torturing Arabs repeats a western view of politically blamed Arabs and distorts the picture of Arab Americans in Diaspora the play is trying to establish. Contrarily, references to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict in the play are always marginal. Serious talks about the Middle East conflict are often cut short because, according to Hala, "it is easier to get yourself all worked up about stuff you can't change than to deal with the things in your life that you actually can" (p. 10).

3. Recycling Stereotypes in *The Black Eyed*

Shamieh's *The Black Eyed* emphasizes the misrecognition of Arab Americans in the U.S. but it also gives anti-Arab signals. The play was written in response to the 9/11 attacks and had its off-Broadway premiere in 2005. Shamieh introduces the play as: "It just came out of me. I was really interested in sinking my teeth into what it was like being a Palestinian-American living in New York after 9/11. I realized that to write political theater with any sort of sense of humor, or humanity, you have to put it in cultural historic context" (qtd in Snyder, 2007). The play, however, repeats western stereotypes of Arabs. In a western context, the title is very stereotypical and is always associated with fundamentalism and terrorism. The Black Eyed, or *houris* in Arabic, refers to virgin beautiful young girls whose virginity is continually renewed. They are believed to be rewards for Muslim martyrs in Paradise. They have been often a source of western sarcasm against Arab Muslim culture.

The Black Eyed tells about four Palestinian women from different ages gathered in the hereafter before what they have been told to be the door of martyrs. They discuss controversial issues of violence, love, terrorism and martyrdom. The three women believe they are martyrs and should enter the secret room of martyrs. It is only Aiesha, the Arab suicide bomber, who has been in the room but left it willingly because she discovered she does not fit in there as she has done the suicide bombing wrongly. Delilah is the Biblical figure. She is in heaven looking for her Samson. Delilah has lived before religion and she is a martyr who sacrificed herself for her nation. She tells her version of the biblical story of Samson and Delilah. Delilah sacrificed herself to save her country, philistine, and her people from Samson, the womanizer who killed most of her people in the banquet hall. Tamam is from the crusades times and she is in heaven looking for her brother killed by crusaders who raped her before her brother's eyes and spoiled her reputation among her people. Aiesha is a modern-day Arab Muslim suicide bomber and the Architect is a modern-day Arab American Christian secular woman who died on a 9/11 plane on the hands of Arab terrorist hijackers.

Aiesha and the Architect take a lion's share of attention in the play. *The Black Eyed* itself is a reworking of an original 40-minute one-act play called *The Architect* dealing with the architect's diasporic life and death on a plane hijacked and exploded by Arabs. The Architect is a talented woman but her Arabness makes her stigmatized as Half-Breed. Her talents as an architect are ignored and she finds her solace only in a world of fantasy that gives meaning and validity to her identity as an Arab American. Her invisibility in America makes her a fantasy addict. She loves, has sex, marries and saves others' lives only in fantasy. She defines herself as: "I'm the architect of unseen structures and buildings that never be built. I am the mother of children who will never be born" (Shamieh, 2008b, p. 49). The Architect's flaw is her father's Palestinian blood which makes her an alien in America. She is a "virgin at thirty," starving for sex; a taboo for her that is postponed till "a man takes me from my father's house" (p. 53). The Architect falls for another Arab American Half-Breed who, ironically, rejects her because of her Arabness.

Unable to have a full life with the Half Breed, the Architect fantasizes a relationship with him from marriage to funeral. Trying to create reality, she decides to fly to New York to meet the Half Breed to fulfill her promise: "If I'm not married by thirty-five, I would stop being precious and just have sex with a man I wanted to love me, whether or not he did" (p. 63). Before going on board, the architect had another fantasy, but this time it is a fantasy of Arabs hijacking her plane.

The Architect fantasizes that the hijackers are some people who have “lived lives that would break the hardest of men. . . . They only want to be heard” (p. 65). In her fantasy, the Architect is very articulate in Arabic and she could work as a bridge between the Arab hijackers and the on-board American passengers. The Americans in the plane listen to the hijackers and are highly moved by “stories of those they feared” (p. 67). The passengers refuse to leave the plane before the hijackers’ demands are met which are: “Palestinians are allowed the right to self – determination, Iraqis are not killed so their oil can be stolen” (p. 67). This peacefully concluded fantasy turns into a nightmare when in actuality, she gets on the plane to find ruthless Arab hijackers who blow the plane and end up her life with a news headline: “Finally, they are killing one another” (p. 80). The accident ends with *Arab terrorists killing an Arab artist*.

Aisha in *The Black Eyed* is an Arab from Palestine. She saw her brother being killed by Israelis and decided to revenge. Why and how her brother was killed is not explained in the play while her terrorist act becomes a focus and sometimes a source of satire and comedy. She is a Muslim Arab suicide bomber who believes: “If I blew myself up and took others with me, because no one would give a shit about my people’s plight unless I did, I would have a hundred men of every hue who were lined up like fruits at the market” (p. 35). Aisha’s premises are mocked through sexual jokes like: “you blew yourself up and ended up with a hundred male virgin when any girl could have twice that number on earth if she wanted to” (p. 36). What is sarcastic about Aiesha’s situation is her detonation of herself which left only one victim; a Palestinian child called Amal (means HOPE) from the town of Abu Ammar, who was offered a falafel sandwich and ice cream by nice Israeli teenagers Aiesha was trying to kill. The accident ended up with the news headline: “Finally, they are killing one another” (p. 80). There is no other way to read the character of Aiesha in the play but as Lucy Komisar, an IPS theatre reviewer, simply describes her as: “Aiesha, in baggy pants and shirt, is a terrorist.” The Architect, the Arab American character in the play, refers to Aiesha as a “murderer.” (Shamieh, 2008b, p. 48)

4. Conclusion

Arab Americans in *Roar* and *The Black Eyed* are represented as victims of orientalism and western prejudice against their culture. Like other minorities in the U.S., they suffer from discrimination based on historical stereotypes that relegate them into unwanted immigrants. The plays put Arab Americans within the context of immigrants’ saga in the U.S. in an attempt to give their experience validity and identification within larger ethnic experiences. However, Arabs in the two plays are presented to be politically blamed. They are either victimizers or suicide bombers. While Shamieh gives a vibrant picture of Arab Americans as human beings who have dreams and ambitions, the playwright fails to address political aspects that in many ways influence the Arab Americans’ experience and define their position in America. Themes of belonging, prejudice, assimilation, ambition, and love –which are parts and parcels of most ethnic experiences in America-are discussed in the plays while the political background of the Arab American experience is overshadowed.

Why Shamieh refutes a cultural stereotype and recycles a political one is questionable, yet understandable. Shamieh’s reluctance to examine and criticize Israeli and American practices in the Middle East is what she herself terms in another context as “a calculated compromise”; by offering a less political monologue, she ensures the existence of an Arab Palestinian playwright in the theatre market (qtd. in Mintcheva, 2009). Shamieh’s reluctance to examine the Middle East conflict is understandable since Anti-Israeli discussions and views are usually censored and met with “anti-Semitism” accusations. The case is even worse when the critics of Israel and America are Arabs or of Arab origin, which adds terrorism to the list of accusations. The block of some Arab American voices in the U.S. and the under-representation of Arab American literature are largely based on political reasons. Zionism, Palestine, and the American interference in the Middle East are all literary taboos. When these terms are mentioned, there is usually censorship.

Censorship is often present when the Middle East conflict is handled from an Arab perspective or from an anti-Israeli or anti-American view. In 2009, Kevin Coval and Josh Healey, two Jewish writers in America, were disinvited from the J Street “Pro-Israel, Pro-Peace” conference because their poems call for a more rigorous peace process. The response of the conference executive director was: “I know what I’m doing is wrong . . . but there are some battles we choose not to fight” (Coval & Healey, 2009). This is the case with writers who try to open up a dialogue that might disclose truths or create sympathy for Palestinians. The battle is not only chosen not to fight but also not to let others bring to light, especially Arab American writers. It is not a fear of imprisonment or political suppression that fills Arab American writers like Shamieh but rather a fear of not being published or produced.

In the words of Sunaina Maira and Magid Shihade, “speaking about Palestine is to commit academic “suicide,”” (Maira & Shihade, 2011, P. 132) which left writers with two difficult options: “censoring ourselves and becoming silent hostages to powerful forces of intimidation or speaking out and becoming academic martyrs” (Maira & Shihade, 2011, p. 133). Offered the choice of censoring herself or getting blocked, Shamieh chooses the first. This self-censorship is manifest in her comment on her reluctance to discuss the Palestinian-Israeli conflict in her plays. Shamieh justifies this reluctance in her introduction to *The Black Eyed and the Architecture* as saying: “Why tackle a subject as polarizing and controversial as the modern Middle East? Especially if you enjoy being well-liked as much as I do? The answer, of course, is that you absolutely should not. Unless you have to” (Shamieh, 2008a, p. 8). She is quoted also saying: “I’m not going to change anybody’s mind about the Middle East. I am going to show a human story” (qtd in Schillinger, 2004).

Majaj’s analysis of Arab American writers’ views of the Arab American identity may also help in giving an explanation for Shamieh’s unfocused presentation of Arab America in her plays. Majaj defines two viewpoints of the Arab American identity. The first viewpoint considers the Arab American identity “in essence a transplanted Arab identity, turning upon a preservation of Arab culture, maintenance of the Arab language, involvement in Middle Eastern politics, and a primary relationship to the Arab world” (Majaj, 1999). From this perspective, failure to present a positive image of the Arab world is considered sort of moral betrayal of one’s heritage. The other viewpoint argues that “Arab-American identity is intrinsically American and should be understood in relation to the American context and American frameworks of assimilation and multiculturalism” (Majaj, 1999). From this perspective, the Arab American identity is distinct from the Arab heritage. Shamieh seems confused between these two viewpoints. While she stresses her involvement in the Arab world affairs, her representation of the Arab world seems to distance her Arab American identity from her Arab heritage than to connect with it. In both *Roar* and *The Black Eyed*, Arab Americans are victims and Arabs are victimizers.

Shamieh is confused between using drama as an art of resistance to establish a postcolonial image of Arab America and her desire to cross the hyphen of Arab-Americanism and establish herself as a successful American playwright. This confusion between resistance and crossing the hyphen distorts the image of Arab America in her plays. To use Lara Deeb’s conclusion, “It’s impossible to belong, without silencing something, and there is violence in that act of silencing” (qtd in Majaj, 2008). Shamieh silences the wrong part when, like her characters, she finds her visibility as an Arab American playwright in mitigating, and sometimes silencing her Arabness and her political views towards one of the most definitive issues that shapes Arab America’s marginalization, namely the Middle East conflict. Shamieh’s working within a room not of her own produces an unfocused image of Arab America, mostly to the satisfaction of publishers and the search for popularity and dissemination. In doing so, Shamieh responds not only to a mainstream censorship but also to a self-censorship represented in “the interiorization of the repressive voice of the political censor” (qtd in Mintcheva, 2009). Shamieh’s failure to stage a coherent positive picture of Arab America confirms that Arab Americans are still looking for artistic freedom and that they need a room of their own to have their obsessions expressed without being repressed.

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