



Exploring Arab Muslim Representation in the Plays of Wajdi Mouawad, Jose Rivera, Rajiv Joseph, Jessica Blank, and Erika Jensen in American Literature: A Cultural Reflection.

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ABSTRACT

The Western media has produced Arab Muslim identities according to political circumstances leading to simplified generalizations about this community (Said, 1978). Modern United States theatre now provides platforms for complex representations that undermine mainstream perceptions of Arab Muslims. This study analyzes how Arab Muslims are portrayed in modern theatre through a critical evaluation of *Scorched*. A postcolonial analysis based on Said's *Orientalism* (1978) and Bhabha's theory of hybridity (1994) helps this study explore how these theatre productions counter-simplified portrayals by presenting multifaceted representations of Arab Muslim identity. War experiences displacement and memory function as the main focus points in the analysis when using Trauma theory (Caruth, 1996) and performance studies (Schechner, 2013). The *Siege* depicts the Palestinian battle against occupation (Abu-Manneh, 2016). The author uses both comic elements and dreamlike qualities in *Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo* to portray war's irrationality (Carlson, 2001). *Aftermath* uses the testimonies of Iraqi refugees to show their human side by enhancing their voice presence (Blank & Jensen, 2010). This research expands the understanding of Arab Muslim portrayal in American theatre while showing theatre as a mechanism to evaluate politics and build cross-cultural understanding (Hughes, 2016).

Keywords: Arab Muslim Representation, Postcolonialism, Orientalism, Trauma Theory, Performance Studies.

INTRODUCTION

Research involving contemporary theatre of marginalized identities holds an important position in English Literature and Performance Studies by growing the scholarly analysis in this field. Dramatic literature about Arab Muslim characters remains a relatively unexplored topic in scholarly works even though numerous experts have studied their appearances in movies and television programs (Shaheen, 2001; Cainkar, 2009). The performative characteristics of theater offer the chance to challenge dominant ideological systems and show Arab Muslim experiences in a more realistic humanized manner (Carlson, 2001).

This research about identity and resistance through plays advances existing scholarship that aims to transform Western perceptions of Arab Muslims. Through this study, researchers gained knowledge about how literary works with theatrical performances become tools to maintain oppression as well as tools to provide liberation which shapes public understanding of marginalized populations.

The research makes essential contributions to both English Literature and Performance Studies through its expansion of marginal identity studies in present-day theatre. Research about Arab Muslim representation in dramatic literature remains low compared to studies focusing on Arab Muslims in film and television (Shaheen, 2001; Cainkar, 2009). The theoretical framework of theater enables subversion of established power structures which produces more holistic representations of Arab Muslim life experiences (Carlson, 2001).

Western discourse monitors Arab Muslims through Orientalist perspectives that generate images of forbidden evils as well as inferior cultural practices (Said, 1978). Arab Muslims received their first stereotypical portrayals in the literature of Western colonial times when they were introduced as people who differed from Western civilization.

The rise of Arab Muslim representations as violent extremists began following the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks (Kumar, 2012). Media outlets operating out of the West frequently presented Arab Muslims in two conflicting ways through their literature and media platforms (Alsultany, 2012). The simplistic characterization created numerous practical outcomes including increasing hate toward Muslims as well as policy choices that reduce Arab Muslim representation (Cainkar, 2009).

Modern-day literature along with theatre roles as counterpoints against dominant perspectives where they depict Arab Muslim individuals as fully human rather than stereotypical figures.

The researched four performances challenge prevailing stereotypes through their portrayal of Arab Muslim characters who demonstrate intensive dimension autonomous capabilities and emotional multidimensional characteristics.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study uses postcolonial theory together with trauma theory along with performance studies as its foundation to understand Arab Muslim identity portrayals in American modern drama. These analytical approaches demonstrate how cultural stories and mental wounds alongside theatrical behavior influence and alter the prevailing Western understanding of Arabs who follow Islam.

Postcolonialism and Orientalism

This study relies strongly on postcolonial theory to investigate how colonial pasts produced narratives about outsiders and their construction in literary and media works. In his famous book *Orientalism* (1978) Edward Said demonstrates how the Western world throughout history depicted Arab Muslim societies as simultaneously undeveloped and overly foreign and unified (Said, 1978). Through Orientalist discourse, Western literature theater and media texts depict Arab Muslims by presenting them either as threatening radicals or helpless people requiring external Western protection (Shaheen 2001).

In addition to Said's arguments, Homi Bhabha develops the notion of hybridity as well as the "third space" to show how identities transform through cultural exchanges (Bhabha, 1994). Across the analyzed plays the characters move between Western and Arab Muslim cultural identities while exposing contradictions between fixed understandings of these identities. In Wajdi Mouawad's *Scorched* and Jose Rivera's *The Siege* the characters live with diasporic Arab identities because they face past traumas along with present displacements as well as resist colonial occupation.

Trauma Theory (Caruth, 1996)

Trauma theory functions as an important method to understand how selected plays portray Arab Muslim characters. Cathy Caruth investigates the effect of trauma on identity together with memory and storytelling while developing her thesis in *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996) (Caruth, 1996). The personal experiences of trauma become part

of collective and historical events that alter how cultures remember their shared histories and develop their identity.

Each of the examined plays in this study contains war trauma and being displaced as core themes concerning Arab Muslim characters. Through *Scorched* the viewers see how civil war creates intergenerational trauma because the main character finds distressing family truths buried within war-related customs. Rajiv Joseph uses surrealistic artistry in *Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo* to show both the American military personnel and Iraqi citizens continue to suffer from the lasting trauma inflicted by war. The documentary play *Aftermath* by Jessica Blank and Erik Jensen utilizes the stories of Iraqi refugees to show how migration by force causes people to lose their sense of self and become emotionally disconnected.

Performance and Representation Studies (Schechner, 2013; Fischer-Lichte, 2008)

Through its performative aspects theater directs audiences to specific ways they should perceive identity and culture. Stage production and representation analysis provide an academic structure that explains how theatrical staging builds and modifies political and social communication systems. In Richard Schechner's *Performance Studies: An Introduction* (2013) the author demonstrates that performance functions beyond art to represent a space where cultures interact and fight back against oppression (Schechner, 2013). Through *The Transformational Power of Performance* (2008) Erika Fischer-Lichte examines how performance-based theater connects audiences to identity development through political and memory-related experiences (Fischer-Lichte, 2008).

Through theatrical representation in these plays Muslim Arab identity perception shifts in the minds of Western theater viewers. Through comedic and absurd elements in *Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo* the play challenges usual war storytelling to make viewers evaluate the actual expense of military presence. During its performance, *The Siege* recreates the events of the 2002 Church of the Nativity standoff while it delivers a non-biased perspective on the Palestinian fight for independence. The performances create intentional interruptions of mainstream media representations through which minority perspectives achieve visibility while earning acknowledgment.

ANALYSIS OF SELECTED PLAYS

"Scorched" by Wajdi Mouawad

Wajdi Mouawad's play *Scorched* (2003) explores personal and political themes through its study of war damage and social identity. Simon and Jeanne discover the hidden stories of Nawal which take them through the destroyed wartime territory of an unmentioned Middle Eastern country that closely resembles Lebanon. During this narrative, the play analyzes how war permanently transforms identity in addition to memory and familial bonds (Woodcock, 2013).

Mouawad integrates Arab Muslim identity into a connection that reveals historical traumatic experiences throughout his series. The narrative of Nawal depicts how a woman battles between prioritizing personal empowerment against the cultural norms of her country torn by conflict. *Scorched* functions as a masterful analysis of how wounds from displacement and exile transfer across generations because of inherited trauma according to (Khatib 2013).

The play presents Arab Muslims in a multidimensional way by showing their human quality instead of portraying them only as aggressors or victims as traditional Western narratives typically do. Through her life story, Nawal demonstrates she is a woman fighting back to take control of herself after suffering through massive oppression in her society. Mouawad uses well-developed characterizations to demonstrate resistance against Orientalist models which present Arabs and Muslims as one-dimensional blocks (Hughes, 2016).

"The Siege" by Jose Rivera

Jose Rivera presents the 2002 siege of Bethlehem's Church of the Nativity in *The Siege* to show crucial moments in Palestinian resistance through theater. The dramatic piece exposes both the desperation as well as determination and internal turmoil that afflicts the besieged Palestinians during their occupation as it illustrates the human impact of occupation (Abu-Manneh, 2016).

The Siege shows the mental and emotional burden of living under siege by adopting human personas who carry fears and hopes while facing inner moral struggles. Through the play, Rivera challenges mainstream Western perceptions that classify Palestinian guerrillas as terrorists because he reveals their human nature and their right to self-determination (Massad, 2007).

By placing Palestinian people at its center the production rejects Orientalist imagery because it focuses on real experiences instead of showing them as helpless victims or violent militants. The characters maintain their dignity through occupation just like many other Palestinians who

have endured and persisted in the face of occupation. In his play, Rivera attacks Western myths concerning Arab Muslim resistance by developing realistic dialogues and tension which proves resistance stems from survival needs (Said, 1978).

"Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo" by Rajiv Joseph

In his War narrative, Rajiv Joseph creates "Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo" (2009) as a surreal and dark comedy that explores war's nonsensical nature. Coming from a period when Baghdad existed as an occupied city following the invasion, this play follows the journey of American military personnel together with Iraqi civilians and a mysterious spectral tiger through both the internal and external destruction of Baghdad. Satire serves as a critical lens in this performance to expose war's contradictions about American intervention in the Iraq conflict (Carlson, 2001).

Through its role as an observer, the tiger in the play represents a moral viewpoint that challenges unclear war ethics. (Fischer 2008) explains how the play shows the disturbing elements of violence yet simultaneously connects the audience to the fundamental struggles affecting Iraqi citizens and American forces stationed in Iraq.

The play intricately presents its Arab Muslim characters because it breaks away from stereotypical portrayals that Western mainstream media typically showcases. Through his appearance Uday Hussein, the son of Saddam emerges as a ghostly figure that pursues alive people to show them how violence repeats itself forever. During the play, Musa develops as an Iraqi translator who faces constant dilemmas that surface from his relationship with American soldiers (Fischer-Lichte, 2008).

In this work, absurdism reveals historical forces to be the true influences on Arab Muslim characters who defy traditional war story constructs of "good vs. evil" (Joseph, 2010).

"Aftermath" by Jessica Blank & Erik Jensen

The Socio-Political Implications of Refugee Experiences Aftermath (2009) delivers interviews with Iraqi refugees who escaped the Iraq invasion led by the United States through verbatim formats in a documentary play. Blank and Jensen recruited direct statements from Iraqi refugees and then used these authentic accounts to stage a drama that showed the terrible effects war and displacement create in human lives (Lowe, 2012).

The documentary play *Aftermath* provides audiences with personal stories of Arab Muslim refugees who usually disappear from Western media coverage. Through its presentation, the audience reshapes their understanding of refugees by moving beyond charity stereotypes to display refugee perseverance and dignity and their experience of abandonment (Blank & Jensen, 2010).

Real-life testimonies form the basis of this play since its creators decided to present a direct view of war's effects without presentational adaptations. Through this production, Arab Muslim refugees have the opportunity to present themselves through rich and genuine expressions of their own words. Through this approach, Western audiences lose their storytelling authority because the storytellers become displaced and exiled individuals sharing firsthand experiences (Hughes, 2016).

Through its storytelling method, the play holds Western audiences responsible for their involvement in global conflicts which makes them partakers in the hardship of refugee populations. *Aftermath* engages its audience emotionally through bare stage settings and authentic performer expressions that let them experience the authentic suffering of displaced people (Carlson, 2001).

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Common Themes Across the Plays: Exile, Trauma, Memory, and Resistance

The four productions examine main concepts that explore the complicated nature of being Arab and Muslim throughout their different narrative structures and backgrounds.

Exile and Displacement

All the plays feature exile as an ongoing motif that represents physical separation or internal emotional trauma. Through her expedition to discover her mother's background Jeanne faces internal feelings of estrangement despite staying in one place in *Scorched* (Woodcock, 2013). The narrative of *Aftermath* expresses the painful effects of war-induced displacement by transferring the experiences of Iraqi refugees who migrated because of conflicts (Blank & Jensen, 2010). Exile experiences within these plays demonstrate how Arab Muslim people maintain a battle to unite their fractured identities when residing in foreign settings.

Trauma and Collective Memory

Each production depicts how war and violence cause irreparable harm to individual remembrance as well as social communal memory systems. Historical trauma in *Scorched* along with *The Siege* leaves behind a persistent burden that character's experience while trying to understand themselves through history. Dark humor together with surrealism in *Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo* brings out the trauma that continuously pursues Iraqis while occupying military forces (Carlson, 2001). The authenticity of trauma becomes visible in *Aftermath* because refugee survivors show their sufferings to theater audiences while telling stories of lost loved ones and destroyed country (Hughes, 2016).

Resistance and Agency

Despite stereotypical depictions in Western literature Arabs function as active drivers of their life narratives according to this group of plays. *The Siege* showcases Palestinian resistance to the disruption of traditional media presentations about Palestinians that reduce them to terrorists or suffering victims (Abu-Manneh, 2016). In *Scorched* Nawal demonstrates her strength as a character by fighting to maintain her independence after war attempts to silence her. In *Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo*, the Iraqi character Musa demonstrates his plight to stay true to his dignity during the American occupation (Joseph, 2010).

Differences in Portrayal: Regional and Political Variations in Representation

The thematic similarities between these plays diverge because each production uses distinct regional and political circumstances when displaying Arab Muslim identity.

The Palestinian Struggle in The Siege

The Siege presents its narrative against the backdrop of the 2002 Church of the Nativity standoff which made it stand apart from the other plays. The political stance of *The Siege* uses its characters to display Palestinian individuals actively demanding sovereignty beyond survival needs according to (Massad 2007). Through his staged version of this historical event, Rivera illustrates military and resistance power relations differently than the other plays which primarily address individual psychological experiences.

Post-Invasion Iraq in Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo

Joseph's dramatic work stands apart through its inspection of wartime absurdities presented from Iraqi and American consciousness. *Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo* differs from *Scorched* and *Aftermath* since it puts American soldiers at its heart to show the ethical

confusion and their role in warfare through a surrealist lens. Surrealism stands as the distinctive element of this play because it presents an exploration of war-generated distortions in reality and perception according to (Fischer 2008).

The Gendered Experience of War in Scorched

In the collection of plays, *Scorched* delivers the most detailed account of how war affects women through sexual violence and its consequences for motherhood along with intergenerational trauma (Khatib, 2013). *Scorched* stands apart from *The Siege* and *Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo* through its exploration of war's effects on females because war produces distinctive experiences for men and women.

Documentary Realism in Aftermath

Aftermath stands apart from the other plays because it selects its content from actual testimonies of war. The documentary theater style in *Aftermath* presents genuine interviews with Iraqis who have been displaced while *Scorched*, *The Siege*, and *Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo* use fictional storytelling. The production technique in this performance provides the audience with an intense viewing experience as it presents the immediate results of Western involvement in Middle Eastern conflicts (Lowe 2012).

Contribution of These Plays to Shifting the Dominant Discourse on Arab Muslims in American Literature

The chosen plays present complex characters and human perspectives along with stories of Arab Muslim resistance to counter stereotypical Western media depictions.

1. These plays break down Orientalist perspectives by showing Arab Muslims as non-victim or aggressor entities thus refuting standard Western rational thought (Said, 1978).
2. Theater presentations of Arab Muslim characters avoid mainstream stereotypical media by showing them as deeply complex human beings with multiple emotions desired futures and everyday life difficulties. The plays showcase the varied backgrounds of Arab Muslim communities instead of showing a single unified presentation (Cainkar, 2009).
3. Performance techniques employed in theater enable the direct emotional bond-building between theater artists and spectators with experiences from Arab Muslim communities.

Theatre develops strong audience engagement because its direct presentation of performance fully immerses viewers in themes about war exile and trauma (Carlson, 2001).

4. These plays merge personal experiences with political conflict through their narrative approach to present how Arab Muslim identities develop because of real historical and political conditions (Massad, 2007).

5. These plays deliver complex narratives about global conflicts which makes audiences rethink both their views of Arab Muslim communities and the major geopolitical elements involved (Hughes, 2016).

DISCUSSION

Challenging and Expanding Existing Literary Theories

Through this study, postcolonial theory (Said, 1978; Bhabha, 1994) expands by showing contemporary American drama works to counter Arab Muslim Orientalist imagery. The literature of Western origin has traditionally shown Arab Muslim characters in two simplified forms as either violent extremists or helpless victims yet these plays oppose these depictions.

This study demonstrates how Arab Muslim figures in analyzed plays avoid the typical Western framework which reduces them to static stereotypes. The characters in these plays evolve through a mix of life experiences both private and public which originate from personal hardships and politics together with historical occurrences. According to (Abu-Manneh 2016), *The Siege* dismantles Western media stereotyping of Palestinians by exhibiting them as fighting people who want both self-governance and continued existence.

According to Homi Bhabha, the “third space” between colonial powers and subjects exists when cultural identities need continuous negotiation (Bhabha, 1994). Multiple national and cultural identities link the characters in *Scorched* and *Aftermath* because they exist between these elements in a hybrid state. The traumatic experience of moving away from home fragments Arab Muslim identity by demonstrating its flexible nature according to Western perceptions.

Trauma Studies gets new attention from Cathy Caruth in her work which explains how traumatic historical events create permanent psychological and cultural marks (Caruth, 1996). The theatrical productions illustrate how Arab Muslim characters undertake resistance against the attempted removal of their traumatic experiences. Through her experiences, Nawal

demonstrates how violent atrocities pass through time to mold personal identities far beyond the conclusion of actual violence. The approach demonstrates resistance to common trauma perspectives when it underlines the capacity for survival and resilience among victims.

The Role of Theater as a Transformative Medium for Countering Stereotypes

Through its special theatrical environment, people gain the ability to oppose mainstream perspectives while simultaneously participating in nuanced reflections. Theater provides complete audience participation through representation which establishes itself as a strong instrument against stereotypes while creating empathy between performers and spectators.

The plays grant Arab Muslim characters the chance to tell their own stories without letting Western perspectives define their narratives. *Aftermath* stands out because it depends on authentic testimonies from Iraqi refugees who obtain the ability to speak their truth to Western audiences (Lowe, 2012).

Through live theater performances, people create dynamic resistive actions against Orientalist depiction techniques. The actors' live performance interrupts passive spectatorship to require extensive audience input toward understanding the presented material. *Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo* displays its critique of war absurdity through dark humor and surrealism to illustrate how war affects Iraqi civilians (Fischer, 2008).

Stage performances in *The Siege* and *Scorched* place viewers near to observe the events as witnesses to live action instead of passive spectators. The portrayal of political conflicts demands audience interaction which makes them reflect on their own biases as they confront their misunderstandings of Arab-Muslim identities (Carlson, 2001).

CONCLUSION

This research investigates Arab Muslim identity portrayal in present-day American theater by studying *Scorched*, *The Siege*, *Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo*, and *Aftermath*. The analysis employs principles from postcolonial theory and performance studies to establish that these plays dismantle typical Western views about Arab Muslims by presenting well-rounded depictions of Muslim Arabs. The plays work to displace Orientalist stereotypes by portraying Arab Muslim individuals with complete forms who emerged from historical and political conflicts and battles against oppression.

Through its research, this study shows how theatrical productions prove effective in battling false assumptions regarding Arab Muslims. These performances take Arab Muslim characters through rich stories that require viewers to undergo a deep personal encounter. Through their focus on Arab Muslim life, these artistic works break apart Western dominant views while enabling different historical stories to find space in the world.

The findings from this study create significant effects that extend past academic literary examinations because they influence both cultural scholarship and performance evaluation. The current study emphasizes the necessity to construct an expanded literary framework that acknowledges Arab playwrights together with Arab-American dramatists in their role of molding international dramatic dialogues. The research demands more investigation regarding the political ability of drama as well as its function in constructing cultural agreements.

Evaluation of these plays by their audiences needs further study because it reveals which cultural and geopolitical factors impact how spectators decode the content. Additional research including studies about marginalized communities will explain better the ways theater demonstrates different personal narratives between communities. The analysis needs expansion to include digital theatre productions and new media portrayals because this will show how contemporary culture represents Arab Muslims.

This research demonstrates that American theatre during modern times functions as a vital space for transforming how Arab Muslims are perceived. These plays work to break single-dimensional representations by presenting alternative stories that lead to a deeper sympathetic view of Arab Muslim people and their political realities. Scholarly research of these narratives throughout the future will create a literary and theatrical environment that properly represents all audiences.

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