

**Enemies are nearby: The Violent Encounter among Arab Americans in Yussef
El Guindi's Play *Our Enemies***

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Abstract

Our Enemies: Lively Scenes of Love and Combat is a play written by the Egyptian American playwright Yussef El Guindi. It handles many important themes such as identity formation of Arab Americans, the misrepresentation of Arab Americans in the American media and internal conflicts among them. The play illustrates how some Arab Americans are real enemies who involve each other in pranks, serious problems and who can even threaten each other's lives. They can intimidate each other and, according to the play, often-misrepresent themselves in the American media.

The corrupt images and the harsh opinions spread by some Sheikhs, who speak on behalf of Muslims in the American media, are also portrayed in the play as leading to hatred among Arab Americans, especially Muslims. The negative image of Arab Americans in the American media is drawn in the play as perpetuated by the Muslims themselves. As a result, the American media conceptualizes Arab Americans especially Muslims as enemies to the United States of America. Homi Bhabha's two major concepts "mimicry" and "ambivalence" are applied in the analysis of the play.

Keywords: Yussef El Guindi, "mimicry", "ambivalence", Homi Bhabha, Arab Americans, media, enemies, stereotyping

ملخص

تعالج "أعداؤنا: مشاهد حية من الحب و الخلف" - مسرحية للكاتب المصرى الأمريكى يوسف الجندي- العديد من الموضوعات الهامة مثل تشكيل هوية العرب الأمريكيين و تحريف صور العرب الأمريكيين فى وسائل الإعلام الأمريكية و الصراعات الداخلية بينهم. وتوضح المسرحية أن بعض العرب الأمريكيين أعداء حقيقيون لبعضهم البعض ونتيجة لهذا يورطون أنفسهم فى مشاكل خطيرة. فبعضهم يخيف الآخر ويحرف صورهم فى وسائل الإعلام الأمريكية. وقد أدت الصور الفاسدة و الآراء القاسية التي ينشرها بعض الشيوخ إلى الكراهية ما بين العرب الأمريكيين خصوصا المسلمين، حيث يعتقد هؤلاء الشيوخ أن لديهم الحق فى تمثيل المسلمين فى الإعلام والتحدث بالنيابة عنهم. وبناءً على ذلك إنتشرت صورة سلبية للعرب الأمريكيين فى الإعلام الأمريكى، و وضع الإعلام الأمريكى تصورا خاطئا للعرب الأمريكيين خصوصا المسلمين كأعداء للولايات المتحدة الأمريكية. و تقوم الباحثة بتطبيق مفهومى هومى بابا الأساسيين "المحاكاة" و "الإزدواجية" فى تحليل المسرحية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: يوسف الجندي ، "المحاكاة" ، "الإزدواجية" ، هومى بابا، العرب الأمريكيين ، الإعلام، الأعداء ، التمييز.

Arab Americans suffered a lot at the beginning of their immigration to the United States and continue to suffer from stereotyping and misrepresentation till today. In *Our Enemies: Lively Scenes of Love and Combat*, Yussef El Guindi¹ delineates the experience of three different Arab American writers. He depicts their identity formation in addition to their representation in the American mainstream media. The three major protagonists in the play seek to be assimilated and woven in the American community and media. However, they suffer from the conflicts between their countries of origin, and often express their desire to be American citizens.

Our Enemies depicts the social life of Arab Americans and presents the way some Arab Americans treat each other. The paper raises certain questions: who must speak on behalf of Arab Americans? Who is *the* genuine Arab American? Who is the real enemy of Arab Americans? How far are Arab American writers influenced by the negative stereotypical image spread by the media?

The play explores the tense relations among three different Arab American writers: Gamal, Mohsen and Noor. It also shows how the Sheikhs comment on the political issues of their countries and often declare themselves as the spokespersons of Muslims. This issue is represented through the character of Sheikh Alfani who claims to speak on behalf of all Muslims on television.

The theoretical framework of the paper is based on the post-colonial concepts of Homi Bhabha, particularly those of "mimicry" and "ambivalence". Bhabha first handled these two concepts in an essay entitled "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse" in his book *The Location of Culture*. Bhabha defined "mimicry" as "the

desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite"(86). This means that there is an ambivalent relationship between the colonizer and the colonized. The colonized copies the colonizer's habits, accents and behavior. According to Bhabha, "mimicry" means trying to resemble the person in power. This imitation results in a vague copy of the colonizer. It is clear that the colonized is obliged to mirror the image of the colonizer which results in neither identity nor difference.

The colonized mimicking the colonizer is a reflection of the former's rejection of their identities and cultural habits, and their attempts to be approved by their colonizer. Barbara Bush states, in her book *Imperialism and Postcolonialism*, that "mimicry undermines the colonial project to 'civilize' the colonized by presenting the colonizer with a distorted reflection" (133). Therefore, the colonized feel that they are alienated because of their hybridity. They are torn between their origins and the customs of their ex-colonizer. As a result, they suffer from contradictions and "ambivalence". The United States of America is the colonizer. Arab Americans are culturally colonized by the American colonizer who represents power. Arab Americans copy the behavior of the American colonizer. For instance, Mohsen, one of the protagonists of the play, decides to say farewell to his country of origin. He does not want to remember any details of the habits of his country of origin and he wants to be like a white American despite his love of his country of origin.

Bhabha considered "mimicry" as a form of mockery (86). Eleanor Byrne agrees with Bhabha stating that "Mimicry might initially appear to provide a source of humour" (88). Bhabha defined this term as something which "marks those moments of civil disobedience within the discipline

of civility: signs of spectacular resistance"(121). This means that "mimicry" determines a paradoxical area between "civil disobedience" and "civility" at the same time and that it is also a means of resistance of the colonial effect. In this regard, Anne McClintock states that "In Bhabha's schema, mimicry is a flawed identity imposed on the colonized people who are obliged to mirror back an image of the colonials but in imperfect form"(62). Bhabha referred to this imperfect form, in his book *The Location of Culture*, when he stated that the colonized is "almost the same, but not white" (89).

Lois Tyson explores the term "mimicry" and states, in his book *Critical Theory Today*, that many colonized individuals:

tried to imitate their colonizers, as much as possible, in dress, speech, behavior, and lifestyle... and it reflects both the desire of colonized individuals to be accepted by the colonizing culture and the shame experienced by colonized individuals concerning their own culture, which they were programmed to see as inferior. (421)

This means that the colonized have "double consciousness" of the world which consists of two cultures: one of the colonized and that of the colonizer. (438)

Regarding "ambivalence", Peter Childs and Patrick Williams state in their book *An Introduction to Post-Colonial Theory* that Bhabha has taken this concept from Freud (124). For Freud, ambivalence means that there are two instincts struggling with one another within somebody. Ambivalence consists of both attachment and alienation. This contradictory mixture depicts the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized. The colonized is incomplete and he is a bleary copy of the colonizer (Ashcroft 12).

For Bhabha, the colonized, in the colonial or the post-colonial era, is regarded as the "Other", the alien and the outsider (86). In her book *Colonialism and Postcolonialism*, Ania Loomba affirms that "Bhabha's writings are indeed useful in insisting that neither the coloniser nor the colonised is independent of the other" (148). This means that both the colonizer and the colonized are of slightly different however, they resemble each other.

Our Enemies: Lively Scenes of Love and Combat presents various characters such as Mohsen, the best-seller writer; Gamal, the frustrated writer; Noor, the female charismatic writer; Sheikh Alfani, "the representative" of Arab Americans on television; Hani, Sheikh Alfani's son; Olivia, the publisher; Russel, Olivia's assistant; and Earl, the interviewer. In this play, El Guindi shows that Arab Americans do not respect the opinions of each other especially if these opinions are different from their own. For instance, Gamal does not give any attention or respect to Mohsen's newly published book. Instead, he disguises himself as a make-up man and degrades Mohsen drawing a clownish appearance on his face.

The play explores Arab American internal relationships. It focuses on the Arab voices in the American media and how Arab Americans represent themselves. The play addresses the complex Arab life in America and shows how the media is a dangerous weapon directed against Arab Americans. Moreover, Arab Americans spread negative stereotypes against themselves. In other words, some Arab Americans confirm the negative attitude that the American media shapes about Arab Americans and Muslims.

It starts with a frightening scene; Mohsen is being interviewed by

Earl in a television talk show. In the break, Gamal disguises himself as the make-up man. Out of jealousy, Gamal draws the word "whore" over Mohsen's forehead. Mohsen looks like a clown with such make-up and he continues the interview with a clownish appearance. This proves the existence of the harsh and manipulative conflict among Arab American writers who do not love or respect one another.

Sheikh Alfani, for example, is presented in the play as one of those Arab American Muslims who distort the image of Muslims in the American media. Gamal questions the reasons why the American media invites Sheikh Alfani to speak for all Muslims. The latter replies that the most important reason is that he is "a sheikh at the most prominent mosque in the area" (El Guindi 24). Gamal, however, disagrees; he thinks that the Sheikh is a tool that is used by the American media against Islam and Muslims. The former states "Don't you see how you're being used? They love you. They love you for all the reasons that make most of us Muslims cringe" (24). He mentions a situation within the television show when Sheikh Alfani was asked a question about the position of gays in Islam to which he replies using the word "abomination" (26). Gamal tells Sheikh Alfani that "They understood what they had to say, but you just had to spew out your garbage" (26).

El Guindi, thus, probes into the negative stereotypes of Arab Americans in the American media. He criticizes the intra conflicts among Arab Americans especially writers. He reveals how the American media spreads negative stereotypes of Arab Americans who, through their own words and actions, reinforce such stereotypes.

Gamal is portrayed in the play as an activist who defends Arab Americans in the media and rejects any negative stereotypes spread by

Sheikhs, especially Sheikh Alfani who appears in the media and speaks for Arab Americans which makes Gamal very furious. Gamal tells Sheikh Alfani that he needs to stop "seeming like you speak - for all Muslims" (24). Being furious at what Sheikh Alfani has said in the television show, Gamal throws the birthday cake at his face. Gamal admits his own irrational and irresponsible behavior to his girlfriend Noor stating that " I - used the chocolate cake as a - projectile weapon to throw at Sheikh Alfani" (38). Gamal considers himself a man of action because he searches for change. Yet, he mocks his own actions saying that he is the "Cultural crusader against the spread of lies and ignorance. The new Arab Zorro, armed with birthday cake and lipstick" (40). Gamal plays the role of an awakened and stimulator who represents his nation and seeks to change the negative image of his Arab nation in the American media. Unconsciously, Gamal plays the same role Sheikh Alfani has played. Just like the latter, the former defends all Arab Americans through his impulsive actions and distorts their images as well.

Gamal is a violent and aggressive character as he expresses his opinion in a barbaric way; however, he is a person who feels loyal to his people and does not like them to be misrepresented in the media. Gamal "has turned into an activist aggressively attacking spokespersons on matters of Arab and Arab Americans as well as on Islam, who are, in his view, reaffirming stereotypes and prejudices held up in mainstream media." (Esch-Van Kan). He is "sometimes twitchy, sometimes explosive, with righteous rage" (Janiak).

The play highlights the truth that one's enemy can share the same background, be from the same country and have the same profession. The three protagonists Noor, Mohsen and Gamal share the same background and origin. They are all Arabs; they are all writers. However, they hold

grudges against one another and are in constant conflict. Noor , Mohsen and Gamal neither love nor respect one another. The three Arab American writers attempt to find a place for themselves in the American community to achieve their dreams of getting freedom, popularity and justice.

The title "*Our Enemies*" is related to the main theme of the play which is hostility, jealousy, hatred and arrogance among Arab Americans, especially Arab American writers. The title becomes very clear when Mohsen declares a significant fact about some Arab Americans: "It seems the one thing we do well is be our worst enemies" (89). This is a very daring confession that Arab Americans are their own worst enemies. This may mean that they have to confront their internal wars before they search for an appropriate place for themselves within the American mainstream community.

Degrading the Arabs and their culture is a serious issue which constantly occupies Gamal's mind. He believes that Mohsen misrepresents Arab Americans in his book and enhances the negative stereotypes of Arab Americans in the American media. According to Gamal, Mohsen has been turned into a doll at the hands of politicians. For him, Mohsen wants to appear in television talk shows to be a well-known popular writer. He assures Mohsen that "they expect you to say certain things on these, er, talk shows, otherwise you'd never get on them-I imagine" (6). Gamal claims that Mohsen has strengthened the negative stereotyped image of Arab Americans in his writings by narrating negative stories which give an impression to the readers that Arabs are negative, passive and backward. This means that Mohsen's writings distort the image of Arab Americans and Islam in the West, a distortion which irritates Gamal.

The three Arab American writers struggle to be assimilated in the Arab American community even if they have to abandon their Arab heritage. Unlike Gamal, Mohsen represents another kind of writers who play a game in the American mainstream community. He surrenders to the American policies and agrees to be the American "goddamn houseboy" (63). He accuses Noor of submitting to the American policies as well because she agrees to meet Olivia and come to Russel's apartment because she yearns to success and popularity. Certainly, Mohsen is criticized because he ignores his origins and asserts the negative image of Arabs and Muslims in his writings. Mohsen confesses that he wants to be free from any bond which relates him to his peoples' history. He wants to formulate a new history in America. Mohsen states: "And say goodbye to everything I've come from"(76). In addition, Mohsen admits that he has forgotten his past and that he wants to turn a new leaf in his life. He states " That I've buried the real me somewhere and all this is an act to make myself agreeable with the people here" (77). In this regard, it is affirmed in a review entitled "Our Enemies: Lively Scenes of Love and Combat/Silk Road Project that "the three central characters, [are] all immigrants navigating the tricky waters of Western assimilation, all three consumed with issues of race and representation via the media machine" (Luce). Maysoun Freij stated that the three characters "explore what it means to be a successful "representative" of Arabs in America without "selling out" one's culture or identity to discriminatory stereotypes" (157).

The play is a relationship drama. It presents different relationships among many characters. There is a relationship among Gamal, Noor and Mohsen. Gamal has been the boyfriend of Noor. Then, they break up because he does not attend her birthday. It is a surprise that on the day Noor leaves Gamal, she is seen with Mohsen in Russel's apartment.

Gamal feels that the prank he has made in the talk show for Mohsen has returned to him again. Gamal tells Mohsen that "You get to write 'whore' right back at me" (86).

Enmity and hatred among Arab American writers are highly emphasized towards the end of the play. Gamal insults Mohsen telling him that he is "a fraud" (88). He declares that all they can do as Arab Americans is to insult one another. Mohsen states "But all we know how to do well is hurt each other" (89). As Arab Americans, all what they can do is to despise each other. Intra-violence is practiced by Arab Americans towards themselves. Noor also insults Mohsen telling him that he is "a fake Arab" (60). Arab Americans hurt and insult one another instead of respecting and supporting themselves.

The end of the play is very melancholic. Sheikh Alfani's mosque has been burnt. Hani, the Sheikh's son, accuses Gamal of having burnt the mosque. He also accuses him of attempting to kill his father. In order to take revenge, he uses a knife and hurts Gamal who is left bleeding in the final scene. This bloody scene proves that Arab Americans do not trust each other, but they can hurt each other not only verbally but also physically. The scene is a climatic evidence of the animosity from within the Arab American community that the play communicates.

Homi Bhabha's "mimicry" is best revealed through the character of Mohsen who always imitates the American accent. He has forgotten his mother tongue and has adopted the English language especially the American accent. He also behaves as if he were American. Moreover, He adopts the American style of life, customs and habits. He makes a "martini" and offers it to Noor. Mohsen deeply believes in the American Dream and regards immigration to America as a miracle. His dream has

always been to start a new life in America, put an end to his Arab roots and become an American citizen.

Bhabha's "mimicry" is also displayed through the character of Noor who also imitates the American way of living as she yearns for the freedom she lost in her country of origin. She wants to be a freewoman and adores the freedom which America offers its citizens. However, she loves her country of origin as well. Noor's behaviour reflects Bhabha's saying that "Mimicry represents an ironic compromise" (86).

As Bhabha pointed out that "ambivalence" is a mixture of two struggling feelings within an individual, Noor has a mixed feeling for America because she believes that America will grant her freedom; however, her new country makes her feel alienated and lost to the extent that she wants to shout. The States gives her freedom and, at the same time, makes her isolated.

In addition, the relationship between Noor and Olivia recalls Bhabha's "ambivalence". The former has written a romantic novel about an American woman and her boyfriend, but the latter does not admire such a topic. Olivia is so authoritarian that she obliges Noor to change the theme of her novel. Noor agrees and changes the topic of her novel. In addition, she changes the names of the protagonists from "Melanie" to "Hela" and from "Rafael" to "Waleed". Moreover, she asks Noor to change the subject matter of her novel to write about an Americanized woman who immigrates to the States and wants to be free from restraints. Noor is a passive woman as she does not attempt to stick to her subject matter: she surrenders to Olivia's opinion and changes her topic in order to have her novel published. Robert Young comments on the ambivalent relationship between the colonizer and the colonized clarifying the result

of such a relationship: "... the identity of colonizer and colonized becomes curiously elided" (188). Both the character of Noor and the character of Olivia are merged together. Noor produces a blurred copy of Olivia:

... So beautifully drawn, we don't see [Noor] simply as a spokesperson for her birth country or her religion or for all writers or all women. Rather we see her as Noor, an incredibly intelligent woman of complexity and beauty and talent and sensuality and temper and flaws. (Jones)

Noor is a complicated character. She is a talented sensitive writer; however, she has her mistakes. First, she obeys the publisher for the sake of becoming a famous writer. Then, she breaks with Gamal and makes a relationship with Mohsen on the same day. However, she has learnt a lesson which is how to select a real friend.

Bhabha's "ambivalence" is also shown in the relationship between Gamal and Olivia. Gamal is the only writer who refuses to surrender to Olivia's orders. He refuses to change his style of writing. He is that kind of writer that cannot be controlled by publishers. He is not seduced by fame and popularity. For Gamal, it is not important to publish a book and be a famous writer; but what is important is to stick to one's principles. Robert Young comments on Bhabha's "ambivalence" stating that it "describes a process of identification and disavowal" (188). Young's words mirror Gamal's mind which wants to identify with Olivia and, at the same time, he denies selling his own values.

Noor is a successful writer and she succeeds in her field although she surrenders to Olivia's orders concerning the theme of her novel. Her novel was a best-seller. She has also conducted several interviews in

television talk shows. For instance, at the end of the play, she was interviewed in many television shows on the occasion of publishing her novel which is entitled "The Crescent's Horns". The novel is about three Arab Muslim immigrants and the plight of one of them whose father wants her to wear the hejab against her desire.

Olivia is interested in the Middle Eastern issues and she wants to correct the negative image of Arabs and Middle Eastern people who are misrepresented in media. She states that "We have recently opened up a book division that will focus exclusively on the Mid-East. We think this is a region that has been terribly misrepresented and we want to do our bit to correct that" (15).

To conclude, there are certain questions that have been raised by this paper. The first one has been an inquiry about who should speak on behalf of Arab Americans. Through the analysis of the play, it has been proved that they should express themselves, to avoid misconceptions created by Sheikhs. The second question has been related to the requirements of an Arab American to be authentic. It has been demonstrated that the genuine Arab American should unite with his people rather than degrade them. Concerning the third question, it has been related to the definition of the real enemy of Arab Americans. Unfortunately, it has been indicated that they are enemies to themselves through total assimilation. The final question has been related to the negative effect of media on Arab Americans, spreading stereotypical casts related to them. The paper has reached the conclusion that some Arab American writers have adopted these negative stereotypes in their writings. These answers have proved that to be respected by others, they should respect themselves first, avoiding assimilation.

Endnote

¹ El Guindi was born in Egypt in 1960. He left Egypt when he was three and travelled to London. Now he lives in Seattle. He worked at Silk Road Theater. He also was a literary manager for Golden Thread Productions in San Francisco. El Guindi belongs to the third generation of the Arab American playwrights. He is one of the most distinguished playwrights among his contemporaries. In his plays, he presents Arab Americans as immigrants who attempt to fit in the American mainstream community. He lived 9/11 attacks; therefore he discusses the situation of Arab Americans in the United States of America after these tragic events professionally in his plays. In his writings, El Guindi delves into the political and social life of the Arab Americans in the American community. His plays also reflect a great sense of humor. Moreover, he mingles in his plays both colloquial Arabic and English.

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