ADDRESSING OTHERNESS AND EMBRACING A "DESPISED" DIFFERENCE IN EL GUINDI'S WORK

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Abstract— The current study examines the process of othering through which minorities in the USA experience marginalization and exclusion from the dominant society. It focuses on the concepts of othering and belonging to explain the complexity of Arab Americans' dilemma post 9/11 and problematizes the mainstream's construction of "otherness." The discussion is centered around perceptions of "the other" in the minds of White America, particularly, the Arab American "other" as represented in selections from Yussef El Guindi's literary work. This study contributes to the ongoing dialogue about the insider/ outsider position Arab Americans occupy, simultaneously, and reveals the constant tension and frictions taking place between privileged Whites and "the other" increasing their unbelonging and displacement. It also proposes certain methods to engage with the other and reduce the fear and estrangement of this group. El Guindi's work represents Arab American literature which has worked toward humanizing the Arab race to raise the public's awareness of the injustice inflicted on them, and to unsettle the binaries between "us" and "them" and the hegemonic narratives that perpetuate the rhetoric of fear of "the other."

Keywords— Belonging, "the other," Arab American, El Guindi, September 11, Identity.

The implication of the "war on difference," is that the burden of proof is on the "outsiders," the "foreigners," "to prove" they are one of us. If liberal societies find it necessary to impose such requirements on outsiders, then they should articulate these limits explicitly instead of camouflaging them under the rubric of public safety or terrorism. Otherwise, let us come to terms with our fallacious assumptions about radically heterogeneous cultures, and deal with our self-righteous insecurities as such, rather than punishing others who do not conform to rules that remain unstated.

—Falguni Sheth

I. INTRODUCTION

Otherness and difference have been accentuated specifically of the Arab/ Muslim race post September 11, 2001 and they have been made visible only to condemn and criminalize them**.** Arab Americans have been viewed as the "enemy within" especially after 9/11. Their allegiance to America and their Americanness has constantly been questioned and so many have been preoccupied with resisting the process of their otherization and seeking acceptance in society as "ordinary citizens" (Jamal, 320- 321).

They have been dehumanized and been presented as the "bad guys," but the problem lies in the fact that such negative stereotypical images of them have been internalized in the minds of Americans (Semaan, 17-20). Therefore, Arab Americans have repeatedly found themselves in that uncomfortable position which necessitates action to challenge constructions of them "in terms of inferiority, suspicion, otherness, and foreignness" reinforced by a disturbing history of US intervention in the Middle East (Jamal, 322). This essay tackles issues of othering through examining selections of El Guindi's writings and suggests ways to move beyond difference.

OTHERING POST 9/11

Alinia and Eliassi state that the ethnic slurs many Arab Americans have experienced post 9/11 are part of a "strategy of inferiorization" that contribute to the reproduction of everyday othering and unbelonging to White society (76). The continuity in dealing with Arab Americans as outsiders and frequently disparaging them hinders them from developing a sense of belonging to America and deepens feelings of rejection and alienation which in turn leads to the widening of the gaps between them and the privileged mainstream. This process of othering involves building one's self- worth on the lesser worth of others through their dehumanization and self- other distantiation (Brons, 84). This has been demonstrated through the derogatory terms used against Arab / Muslim Americans such as: sand niggers, camel jockey, towel heads, rag heads, and diaper heads (Shora, 46). In addition, they have been made to feel inferior and unwanted through numerous acts of intimidation, hate crimes, and investigations during which they are humiliated and insulted. When Arab Americans, like any "other," realize they have been forced into the margins through racism, disrespect for their civil liberties, and stigmatization of their identities, they tend to hold on to their cultural origins as an alternative home or space they can occupy while they are placed on the borders of multiple cultures.

Mais Qutami comments on the negative role hegemonic discourses play in this age of imperialism and mental and cultural colonization as they tend "to erase contexts and histories to create misunderstandings of certain demonized cultures, especially in representations of Muslim cultures [and] the Middle East..." and also "promote viewing Arabs and Muslims not only as different from the mainstream but also as constituting a "despised difference" that contributes to the divisive binary of "us" and "them" (Qutami,159). Such rhetoric has

naturally heightened their sense of unbelonging and alienation from the dominant society.

According to Amaney Jamal's "Civil Liberties and the Otherization of Arab and Muslim Americans" posing the difference between "us" and "them" as a dangerous threat helps to legitimate violations committed against minorities, and their civil liberties, in particular (117). Ironically, their belonging is being questioned at the same time all security measures taken are put into place to guard against them and their civil rights are being violated only resulting in deepening their sense of "unbelonging" and exclusion, and thus they have every reason not to feel they are equal Americans with equal rights. These issues of (un)belonging to the mainstream and the question of home and identity are prevalent in El Guindi's writings (Arlin). El Guindi reflects in his work the unease, feelings of rejection, and exclusion the "Arab Other" experiences because of his cultural origins as they are represented as "undesirable" elements and a "despised" difference threatening an assumed homogeneity. Nevertheless, he portrays some as eager to integrate and pursue the American dream if only their belonging and Americanness were not constantly being questioned. This study exposes the Arab American experience and struggle with belonging through voices from the mainstream and the Arab "other" represented in El Guindi's play *Back of the Throat* and "Trading in my Arab."

II. BACK OF THE THROAT

Back of the Throat revolves around an Arab American writer, Khaled, who is subjected to interrogation and intimidation by government officials. He is treated as a suspect although there is no evidence that he has committed any crime. His only problem is his Arab/ Muslim identity. In the play, Khaled, shows cooperation and answers questions because he himself wants to live in a safe America and understands the complexity of the situation post 9/11. But his cooperation is still met with hostility and disrespect. Throughout the dialogue, he reminds the detective of his rights as an American citizen but his words fall on deaf ears. His request for a lawyer is denied and his statement about his right to have one is followed by the response, "No… you've been misinformed" (33). These recurring practices of othering only prove that accusations of Arab American unwillingness to integrate into American society are not accurate since it is not really an option left to them. There is that possibility that they may be faced with great resistance and their loyalty and Americanness with denial as demonstrated in the play.

El Guindi represents in his play the construction of immigrants as "other" by the mainstream who refuses to accept them as citizens with rights. He specifically represents the attitude of government officials and law enforcement when Bartlett is infuriated by Khaled's mentioning of rights and laws since he thinks an immigrant does not get to act like a native because of his non- white status. Khaled attempts to give a context for the types of books found in his apartment by asserting he is a writer, and therefore, needs references on different subjects but having a Quran and a book on oppression and guns do not help his case. Bartlett, who represents many Whites but surely not all, can only see him as an "other" and a threat to security making any violations to this "suspect's" rights seem acceptable and even applauded. Bartlett justifies his acts of racism and dehumanization directed at Khaled:

At no time should you think this is an ethnic thing. Your ethnicity has nothing to do with it other than the fact that your background happens to be the place where most of this crap is coming from. So naturally the focus is going to be on you. It's not profiling, it's deduction. You're a Muslim and an Arab. Those are the bad asses currently making life a living hell and so we'll gravitate towards you and your ilk until other bad asses from other races make a nuisance of themselves. Right? Yesterday the Irish and the Poles, today it's you. Tomorrow it might be the Dutch (34).

This only shows the dynamics that are at work when a whole ethnic group becomes a target of discrimination and victimization as they become scapegoats for the actions of others who do not represent them or share their belief system. Nevertheless, to target a whole race is not logical just as all Whites cannot be criminalized when a White individual commits a crime. Cahoon (2003) argues that othering entails privileging one party while the other experiences continuous opposition, deprivileging, or devaluing in various ways (11).

A good illustration of such othering taking place is the fact that it is a White official, Bartlett, who is given the authority and power to investigate a non-White, Khaled, and devalue him in ways he sees fit under the banner of homeland security. He is granted such a position and privilege based on his Whiteness that connotes loyalty, trust, and clearance of any criminal act. It is common to perceive Whites as sincere belonging citizens as an individual's identity as an American is defined through Whiteness thereby othering and marginalizing all other racialized identities (Kobayashi and Peake, 2000). In light of such perception, it is not surprising that Bartlett views Khaled as un- American because he was not born with the dominant group's skin color, hence his belonging will continually be doubted. Khaled cannot dispose of what makes him an "other" and cannot completely conform to the mainstream due to his identity that will never make him "White" or American enough, and so the Arab American will more often than not face this problem as belonging is

generally conceived as "conforming to White America" as Helga Leitner puts it (830).

It is this perception of belonging and unbelonging that hinders Bartlett from possibly treating Khaled with objectivity as any other American free of any negative associations attached. Bartlett states: "To hear these people who got here two hours ago quote back to me Thomas Jefferson and the founding fathers. They're not his fucking fathers" (36). He does not believe an Arab can actually integrate and become a true American who respects the "founding fathers" and principles ingrained within the culture and adopts them as his own merely because of his race. Bartlett later on emphasizes that he has nothing against immigrants as the entire country depended on them for its development. He mentions his family who worked hard to build the America they have today and warns Khaled about taking all the good this country has come to and not contributing to it:

My family worked damn hard to make this country the place it is. And if you came here to do the same I will personally role out the red carpet for you. But if you've come here to … take from us. Pick all the good things this country has to offer and give nothing back and then dump on us?…then I don't think you're making a contribution, not at all (36).

El Guindi represents the way hegemonic discourses circulate a rather distorted narrative of the immigrant as an unproductive member of society who has no skills and nothing to offer but only comes to the USA to reap all the fruits others worked for. Bartlett's comment reveals the ignorance of many Whites about "the other's" achievements and active roles in society as scholars, scientists, physicians, filmmakers, activists, teachers, and engineers. El Guindi highlights this issue to subvert the image of Arab Americans and remind the mainstream of their many contributions throughout the years which have been erased from the media and US dominant discourses. In Bartlett's eyes, when Khaled experiences a writer's block which is common for writers, he is not contributing in any way but becoming a burden and all he is doing is "taking from the system" (36). He is unable to see beyond his racial prejudice or to find value in this individual's work. He is rather blinded by his outsider name and skin color.

III. "TRADING IN MY ARAB"

In "Trading in My Arab," El Guindi unpacks the complexities of being an Arab in the United States in the last few decades. This identity has become a magnet for investigators, the police, and FBI agents only bringing about interrogations, mistreatment, humiliation, and misplaced suspicion. The speaker expresses his rage about having to read about his race being demonized and misrepresented by public discourses and rhetoric, in newspapers, magazines, and all kinds of media. He wonders if there is a way to escape or find an exit from all of this. He is so agonized to the extent he wants to renounce his identity and adopt a new one if possible that is devoid of a complicated history.

Wood and Waite explain that belonging is a dynamic emotional attachment that relates people to the material and social worlds that they inhabit and experience. It is about feeling 'at home' and 'secure', but it is equally about being recognized and understood. (201).The speaker in "Trading in My Arab" realizes that his sense of belonging is contingent upon his relation to the world around him and his feeling of security and feeling at home, nevertheless, he is aware that it is also about being "recognized and understood." But he feels his label as Arab will not give him that security because he can be interrogated at any time and he will not be understood or recognized for the individual he is because people are misguided by the negative associations attached to his Arab identity. He wishes to rid himself of these factors and identifying markers that stand in the way of demonstrating his belonging and attachment to American soil. He declares:

I would like to put in an application to expunge my history, my records, and any identifying markers that might label me with the "A" word. "No, honestly, I'm much too delicate a person to follow through on being an Arab. I don't have the balls, frankly. You need balls to be an Arab these days. Or a skin thick enough to be able to respond with something more than invectives (9-11).

He is labeled and by that label he is being othered. It is this location in which he has been positioned in the world that the Arab American suffers from as it haunts him wherever he/ she goes and denies him the chance of belonging and becoming the individual he aspires to be. Nira Yuval- Davis et al point out that one of the main dimensions of belonging is that of how individuals feel about "their location in the social world" (526). El Guindi's speaker wishes to pursue his dreams and fulfil his potential as an ordinary citizen with ambition and goals for the future and not an assumed "suspect" because of his Arab roots who cannot let his guard down and must always be prepared to defend himself and justify every action he takes and every word he writes. He does not want to remain an outsider and hopes to become a self- accomplished individual and consumer of the American dream.

I wish to trade in my Arab. I wish to walk away without a trace of my past. I want to be cleansed of these sticky identifying markers … It's not that adolescent thing of resenting your parents and ethnic background for making you different the "in" crowd at school. No: this is a calm adult assessment of what is in my best interest. Of how best to secure an environment that will enable to engage in that very important activity of fulfilling my potential, and

becoming an enthusiastic consumer of the American dream (12).

The speaker expresses a strong desire to belong and bond with society around him and become an active citizen who longs to pursue the American dream making it his own. By adopting the dream, he confirms his attachment to the land and manifests a commitment to American values. This type of belonging reinforces Probyn's definition of it as "longing to be" and a yearning for attachments through various bonds with others and to place. Adopting the values and norms of White Americans, as Leitner's research suggests, is actually what locals expect of "the other" or of immigrants to become more like them for they are seen as out of place unless they conform (836). Thus, an "other's" belonging depends on conformity (839). Leitner's findings show that the less educated Whites' rejection of immigrants stems from their fear of losing white dominance while this opinion was not voiced by the more educated and well- off whites. On the contrary, they thought it was their duty to provide leadership, help educate them about American culture, teach them English, and welcome their children to the new environment (840). Through these acts of support, they believe immigrants will become more able to conform.

Sandercock, on the other hand, proposes a different method of engaging with "the other" that does not involve absolute conformity. It is that model of intercultural coexistence which should replace the assimilationist approach as it requires sufficient knowledge of and a desire to learn from the other, and recognize value in them. This certainly makes a move away from national belonging based on ethnicity and race a must and creates opportunities to adopt a new model of belonging based on a shared commitment to political community, a willingness to address fears of the other, and negotiate boundaries instead of maintaining and fortifying them. According to this model, people do not just tolerate difference and deal with it as a cancer that cannot be overcome but approach it as a new experience that is promising and part of a process of cultural growth within a more globalized and pluralistic community. Furthermore, exposing children at a young age to narratives and stories written by and about minorities could enhance their learning of "the other," their commonalities, and differences and prepare them for a more diverse society which only becomes the norm and nothing to be feared as they get older and more mature. This can be achieved if multicultural literature is integrated into school curriculum.

A positive step toward engaging with "the other" from Askins' perspective would be emulating the achievement of a British project through which different communities were brought together (Askins). Through this project, Whites from the local community volunteer to befriend a member of the immigrant community or a given ethnic group, interact informally, and engage in activities such as going to cafes, for walks, cooking, or shopping together (472). These encounters have been successful in deconstructing hegemonic discourses of exclusion that construct minorities as different, seeing beyond their difference, and building relations based on commonalities (473). The volunteers later on no longer thought of minorities as "the other" or merely partners in a project but referred to them as friends. But if similar success in de- othering minorities were to take place in the USA, the dominant rhetoric and policies would have to end the process of demonizing and dehumanizing them. When the general atmosphere is no longer too hostile toward Arab Americans, perhaps then positive change, that entails accepting "the other" and their differences, becomes possible. Further research needs to be done about success stories in terms of embracing "the other" and engaging with them in a productive manner in order to provide alternatives to othering and inferiorizing minorities as they have proven ineffective and even destructive for nations and future generations.

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