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**Rania Khalil's Flag Piece:  
A New Historicist Approach to The Issue of  
Imperative Patriotism in Post-9/11 Arab  
American «Theatre and Performance»**

**Researcher/ Shaima El-Sayed Mohamed Mowafi**

**English department**

**Faculty of Arts, Ain Shams University**

**shimaa\_mowafi@yahoo.com**



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## المخلص:

لقد شهدت الساحة الأدبية الأمريكية تحولا كبيرا في الفترة التي أعقبت هجمات الحادي عشر من سبتمبر حيث سيطرت فكرة تهديد العرب والمسلمين للأمن القومي الأمريكي على أغلب موضوعات الدراما الأمريكية. حيث ركز الكتاب على إعادة تجسيد المأساة وجعلها حية في الوعي الجمعي من أجل تأجيج الروح الوطنية للشعب الأمريكي لدعم الحكومة في حربها ضد الارهاب. حيث هناك نظرة عامة سائدة للأمريكيين من ذوي الأصول العربية على أنهم مواطنين درجة ثانية أو ليسوا مواطنين امريكيين على الإطلاق لما تشكله هذه الفئة بالنسبة لهم من تهديد داخلي للمجتمع الأمريكي وكأنهم العدو في عقر الدار. وفي ظل هذه الأجواء المشوبة بالخطر، سيطرت حالة من الهلع وشعور داخلي بعدم الأمان كنتك التي كانت سائدة أبان فترة الحرب الباردة. الأمر الذي أدى الى ظهور مصطلح "الوطنية الجبرية"، حيث أصبح لزاما علي الأمريكيين من ذوي الأصول العربية أن يثبتوا ولائهم وانتمائهم للمجتمع الأمريكي وللدارة الأمريكية في سياساتها والاجراءات التي اتخذتها للحرب على الارهاب ومنع وقوع هجمات ارهابية أخرى. وقد انعكست هذه الأجواء على أدب الكتاب الأمريكيين ذوي الأصول العربية، الذي حمل على عاتقه محاولة نقل الواقع الأليم والرد على حملات التشويه والتنميط والترهيب والادعاء بعدم الوطنية التي طالت عرب ومسلمي امريكا في أعقاب أحداث الحادي عشر من سبتمبر. فظهر دور الأدب كمرآة للمجتمع وشكل من أشكال المقاومة، خاصة وقت الأزمات السياسية والاجتماعية. ويعتمد البحث على المدرسة النقدية "التأريخية الجديدة" في تحليله للعرض المسرحي "قطعة العلم" للكاتبة رانيا خليل.

**Abstract:**

Before 9/11, there were no overwhelming matters that thrust Arab Americans into public attention. In general, Americans have a racist and distorted image of Arabs which is almost invariably negative. However, after 9/11, Arab Americans were doubly attacked, as disloyal, unpatriotic, and unwelcoming citizens; they become regular targets of racial profiling and institutional detention. Although they suffered like every American citizen at the horror of the attacks and some lost their relatives and beloved ones too, they were blamed for events in which they have no hand. Arab Americans became guilty by association, i.e. just because they are of Arab origin or Islam followers. Thus, the question of Arab Americans' patriotism has become highly controversial in the sense that they become the devil incarnated and the enemy within. Accordingly, it is important in this paper to explore two interrelated questions: First, what it means to be a patriot; and second, how the concepts of patriotism, belongingness, and Americanness define themselves among the Arab-American community in the period following 9/11. The critical theory of New Historicism is applied in the analysis of the selected representative performance, Rania Khalil's *Flag Piece*.

**Key Words:** September 11 attacks, Arab Americans, American Flag, Patriotism, Imperative Patriotism

## **Introduction**

The American literary landscape has witnessed a big shift in the period following the attacks of 9/11 as the Arab/Muslim threat to U.S. national security took center stage. The writers offer very specific storylines that keep the tragedy of September 11<sup>th</sup> alive in the collective memory and heighten the sense of national patriotism to support the government in its War on Terrorism. What is most strongly conveyed by these post-9/11 literary writings is that the nation is in perpetual danger and the "enemy is within". Similar to that perpetuated during the Cold War, this articulated fear and "the continuing sense of threat provides support for the power of the state. The 'imagined community' of the nation finds continuing rearticulation in the rhetoric of danger" (McAlister 6). Arab and Muslim Americans are casted as threats to the nation; they become the contemporary racialized enemy against which the nation legitimates the abuse of state power. The strategies and procedures, employed across governmental and security agencies together with the approaches of public discourse, operate on a mentally induced state of control. This misrepresentation of Arab Americans compelled many writers of Arab descent to respond, as they felt a responsibility to present a more realistic and accurate depiction of their status as patriotic American citizens, outside the framework of terrorism.

The theoretical framework of this paper is based on the critical theory of New Historicism which examines the historical and cultural contexts of the literary production and views the literary text or a theatrical performance as both a product and producer of history, culture, and social experience. In 1982, Stephen Greenblatt coined the term 'New Historicism' in his introduction to *The Powers of Form in the English Renaissance*. Initially focused upon Renaissance texts, New Historicism is defined as "a mode of literary study which attends primarily to the historical and cultural conditions of its production" (Abrams 182). It is mainly interested in figuring out the



various relationships between texts and the social and cultural contexts in which they are produced. According to New Historicists, a literary text is "a form of social significance which is produced by the society and in return is active in reshaping the culture of that society" (Montrose 24). Crossing over its cradle in the United States to operate on a wider range, New Historicism effectively contributes to the birth and evolution of post-colonial and multi-ethnic discourses in the occupied countries and those striving for liberty or independence all over the world.

After 9/11, most Arabs and Muslims are presented as stock terrorists, and one-dimensional villains just because of their ethnic background and religious beliefs. The Arab-American community rejects their perpetual connection to terrorism and criticizes the mainstream media for capitalizing on post-9/11 fear inaugurated to support the American government in its War on Terror. All these political, governmental, administrative, and societal pressures put the Arab-American community in a precarious position; they find themselves in a continuous state of self-justification, self-defense, and a necessity to assert loyalty and patriotism. In such atmosphere of fear, some Arab Americans preferred to mask their identity in order to protect themselves and their jobs, while many writers felt the need of forcefully claiming it. In response to this blatant racial profiling, many Arab-American writers and organizations reject the constant portrayal of Arabs and Muslims within the context of terrorism and show a growing sensitivity to the negative impact of such stereotyping and its subsequent bias and discrimination. They intend to produce plays and performances that deal with Arab Americans not as ethnic objects, but rather as an integral part of the American society. They seek to delineate them as real American citizens who are engraved and affected by the bloody attacks just like their other fellow citizens. In doing so, they attempt to depart from stereotypes and convince the mainstream public opinion that not all Arabs are terrorists and not all terrorists are Arabs.

Arab or Muslim Americans who are presented as good or patriotic are only those who cooperate with and assist the U.S. government in its war against terrorism. Salaita argues that 9/11 attacks provide anti-Arab racism "with pragmatic legitimacy to advocates of imperative patriotism" (160). Imperative patriotism is enacted to mobilize support for the war on terrorism by propagating further racist policies and social emergencies. From a New Historicist perspective, it can be seen as the product of the post-9/11 hegemonic discourse in the sense that it enforces Arab-American subjects into supporting the racist state that perpetuates their own subjugation. The public debate post 9/11 has involved a discourse about 'good' and 'bad' Arabs/Muslims in the sense that all Arabs/Muslims are assumed to be malevolent until they demonstrate their loyalty, devotion, and commitment to the American state and its retaliative policies. According to Evelyn Alsultany, the efforts of American writers and media producers to create complex Arab and Muslim characters and storylines are, in fact, "representational strategies that produce the illusion of complexity and sensitivity while continuing to perpetuate stereotypes" (170). Under this guise, these representational strategies reinforce a narrow conception of what constitutes a 'patriotic' and 'non-patriotic' Arab/Muslim. In this respect, Arab and Muslim identities are presented and evaluated primarily in relation to and within the framework of terrorism; they are verified only through notions of either victimization or patriotism.

### **Patriotism among Arab Americans**

The term patriotism is derived from the Latin word patria which means 'country'. It includes a sense of national pride and generally refers to a feeling of love, belonging, and loyalty to one's country. It is a very complicated concept which is closely related to citizenship. According to Doob, Patriotism is a group-oriented feeling or psychological inclination that governs the



relationship between the individual and his society (6). It embraces a deeply-rooted belief in the country's ideals which can be extended to the willingness to defend that nation under any threat. According to Philip Abbott, patriotism carries out three major roles: first, to stimulate and tolerate public engagement; second, to perpetuate national policies; and third, to help the assimilation of immigrants (46). Many scholars and intellectuals find the term patriotism to be quite perplexing, as its drive is more passionate than rational. Cultural studies scholar Phillip Bratta observes that for Americans, patriotism "often refers to redundantly expressed ideals— freedom or liberty, democracy, law, and the American dream" (233). In his discussion of patriotism, DuBois points to the paradox that exists in the United States between the reality of America itself and the idealized society to which one aspires (79). Thus, it can be said that patriotism is a double-bladed weapon, as it may be productive for enhancing love and devotion to one's country. While, on the other hand, this national enthusiasm may lead citizens to antagonistic actions to the 'other' and inaugurate feelings of dogmatism, racism, and ethnocentrism.

Patriotism may take many shapes in relation to the levels of belongingness, whether high, moderate, or low. This spectrum of patriotism ranges between two ends: the prototypical patriot, and the non-patriotic citizen. In this case, it refers to one who has high or low levels of identification with Americanness respectively, in addition to the feeling of duty and obligation associated with this identification. In assessment of Arab Americans' loyalty and patriotism, there are two contradictory and differing attitudes. The first is more dominant and it includes that Arab Americans are not pure Americans and they are just hangers-on the American society. In this respect, Arab/Muslim Americans are forced to redefine themselves in response to what has been long presumed about them. Their self-produced responses in the face of media and public criticism are few and not sufficient to demonstrate their own Americanness in face of their distorted image and perception in the mainstream public

opinion and collective awareness. This may be attributed to the fact that they are not given the right chance or space to do so. The second view is more tolerant and less racist; as it entails that Arab Americans are a part and parcel of the American society as long as they are naturalized with the American citizenship.

The Arab-American experience can be seen as one that is both general and very specific at the same time. As an ethnicity in the United States, Arab Americans confront three major problems regarding their role as American citizens. First, the preconceived Orientalist perception of Arabs in general an inferior and malicious race; second, the dilemma of how to negotiate two conceptually and geographically different cultures; third, the crisis of identification in face of particular social and political preferences. In his book *How does it feel to be a problem: Being Young and Arab in America*, Moustafa Bayoumi links the Arab-American experience of double-consciousness with the Dubosian question. Thus, a social and political engagement becomes imperative in order to benign this tension. Taking into account that patriotism is usually affected by public opinion which may deem an individual or a group to be loyal or not. From a New Historicist perspective, minority groups usually suffer from anticipatory exclusion, i.e. the feeling of being excluded which makes an individual or a group politically and socially powerless or unable to influence or participate in the decision making process in comparison to other individuals or social groups (Fung 2004). In this respect, Arab Americans are usually viewed as non-belonging or not real patriots, therefore they are usually denied the privileges of the American citizenship granted to other citizens. In addition to this, they are recently treated unfairly and are unduly characterized as a threat to the society and the U.S. national security.

After 9/11, the discourse of patriotism has taken a more racialized form. The wave of patriotism has heightened at the expense of the 'other' social groups. According to Falk, "September 11th lead to mobilizing symbolic patriotism, celebration of national



unity, and suspension of governmental criticism" (88). The media channels and the narratives are implemented to mold public opinion. The rhetoric on Arab Americans has been occupied with fallacies and binary oppositions; such as 'us versus them' and 'good versus bad'. Arab-American identity becomes more questionable; it becomes more torn between the concepts of what constitute a mere citizen and a true patriot. In fact, a considerable part of the patriotic concept is based upon the impact of rhetoric. Abowitz and Harnish assert that "ideologies are constructed and circulated through discourse, and by labeling a concept one can assert and reproduce certain truths and ideologies" (655). From a New Historicist perspective, this accounts for the gap between the idealized citizenship propagated by rhetoric and that what is actually experienced on ground (Abowitz & Harnish 681). Sometimes, peoples are overwhelmed by their partial look and national pride and do not apply standards upon themselves as they do to others. This is actually the case in post-9/11 America where the paradigm of either "with us" or "with the terrorists" pervades with appalling effects.

Since 9/11, the practice and perception of freedom has been seriously exploited and appropriated by the discourse on patriotism, in which any opposition or disagreement with state policies seems unpatriotic and an act of betrayal. "Imperative patriotism assumes (or demands) that dissent in matters of governance and foreign affairs is unpatriotic and therefore unsavory" (Salaita 154). This is not surprising, taking into consideration that the concepts of nationalism and patriotism as forms of social identification "increase in response to an outside threat" (Li & Brewer 728). In *Hellfire Nation*, James Morone notes that immigrant groups are often seen as a threat to the nation. He adds that "immigrant groups, whose religious worldview is substantively different from the Protestant narrative, have had to engage in political battles to earn the right or privilege to seen as American" (67). This feeling reaches its peak after 9/11, placing increased focus, fear, and scrutiny on Arab and Muslim Americans and framing them as 'outsiders' and potential threats to the

American national security. In such atmosphere, raising the American flag above the house or on the car has become imperative, especially for Arab Americans, as a sign to prove their Americanness. The flag has turned out to be a metaphor for patriotism and loyalty to the extent that those who did not fly it were suspicious and vulnerable to different sorts of racism.

This post-9/11 backlash is not surprising anymore, as the U.S. has had a long history of antagonism against the ethnic Others, which is evident in the various incidents of anti-immigrant and hostile responses to the different migratory waves. From a New Historicist perspective, George W. Bush's use of the phrase "patriotic Arab Americans" the day after the attacks is very telling of the American legacy of questioning the loyalties of its immigrant citizens and casting accusations of national disloyalty based on ethnic descent. In his speech in Congress, Bush gave out the threat, "either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists" to those who are living in the United States and to other countries abroad. By delivering the patriotic norm as being imperative, any opposition to government policies, whether on the communal level or overseas, becomes more than an issue of partisan politics, but a necessity to survive and attain international security. The difficulty in determining the patriotic-ness has enabled the regime to heighten the state of emergency. In such atmosphere, mass panic, paranoia, and urgency are mobilized and implemented as tools of social and political subjugation that cast the regime as the only authority capable of saving the country from any form of imminent or projected danger. The months and years that follow the tragic events of 9/11 have demonstrated that Bush's administration managed in producing a crisis state, resulting in an unequal confrontation between government authority and a targeted group of discrete minorities.

In post 9/11 America, policies like the 'Ground Zero mosque' debate, the Patriot Act, and the National Defense Authorization Act are intentionally issued to segregate, and further marginalize the



Arab-American communities, and to restrict their basic rights of complete citizenship to a great extent. The in-group identity of Arab Americans turns out to be an out-group threat to those who see an Anglo-American to be a true patriot in largely racial and religious terms. The American cultural landscape frames "Islam as a threat because such a tactic keeps U.S. media on the patriotic side of the debate and on the side of power" (Mortiz 352). This excessive focus on the *threat* dimension is usually consistent with wartime politics and ideologies of what really constitutes the real American patriot. From a New Historicist perspective, what Arab Americans are facing today had happened, in some way or other, to the Japanese Americans after Pearl Harbor attacks when the American government issued the state of emergency and decided to imprison the Japanese American citizen Korematsu v. without judicial procedures (Chin 64). To prove their devotion to the American nation, a considerable number of Japanese Americans joined the Army and fought for America during the WWII. This atmosphere of fear and charges of betrayal and disloyalty has been renewed in the period following 9/11 attacks and put Arab Americans amid the hammer of victimization and the anvil of unpatriotism, with a threat of losing their civilian rights in both cases.

### ***Flag Piece: A New Historicist Approach to the Paradigm of Imperative Patriotism***

From a New Historicist perspective, the post-9/11 enthusiastic exhibition of patriotism and national pride in the form of the nation's flag inspires Rania Khalil's *Flag Piece*. The American flag was everywhere in streets, above buildings, printed on cloth, and painted on walls. Created almost immediately after the attacks, Khalil's short solo performance is one of the earliest productions staged in the calamity's aftermath. It marks a major shift in style and approach and differs greatly from the pre-9/11 plays. It demonstrates the complex sociopolitical climate facing Arab and Muslim Americans

after the frantic increase of nationalistic feelings and expression. Khalil, the Egyptian-American visual and performance artist, narrates that she was given a small American flag by a store owner who felt she had to use it to demonstrate her empathy with Americans. This action seems to imply that he did not consider her American, a belief that represents most of the Americans' perception of Arab Americans. Thus, she decided to use this flag in her silent solo performance, where she appears on stage, wrapping her jacket around her head to cover her hair and neck to evoke an image of a Muslim woman wearing hijab. Then, she raises the American flag above her head and smiles, making it closer to her face and covers her eyes, then her mouth. She places the flag horizontally with the stick inside her mouth, using it to push down on her bottom lip and then rotating the bottom end so that it presses against her upper lip, making her unable to utter or express as her head twists and arches back. Finally, she draws the flag up her face, pushing her eyelids and brows up to further deform her features, titling her head, as though the flag were forcing her backwards.

Through its telling images and implications, the performance, despite its three-minute duration, succeeds to encapsulate several significant issues facing Arab and Muslim Americans in post-9/11 world. It offers both an expressive and impressive case study for the complex ideologies of nationalism and patriotism in the immediate aftermath of 9/11. Though it takes the silent and mimic mode, the performance tells so much about the clash of identities that heightens the atmosphere of mistrust amid charges of disloyalty against Arab Americans. In post-9/11 context, patriotism becomes imperative with further distortion of the identity of Arab Americans. When the flag comes to be an indicator of one's Americanness, the identity of self is enacted at the expense of the exclusion of others. From a New Historicist perspective, this post-9/11 flag fanaticism can be seen as a physical embodiment of the 'us versus them' paradigm; it turns into a tool of discrimination rather than a symbol of national solidarity and integration. In her performance, Khalil makes use of the



flag and the veil, which were employed to promote the 'othering' of Arabs and Muslims in post-9/11 world. The way in which she covers her eyes and mouth with the flag evokes a sense of imperative patriotism and blind oppression. There was a dire need for Arab and Muslim Americans to raise the American flag above their houses a demonstration of belonging in an attempt at self-protection and to somehow evade hate crimes that have been violently perpetuated against them.

In post-9/11 context, the notions of patriotism and nationalism have been exploited by the state's leaders through media rhetoric and discourses to promote a culture of unquestioning support for their policies and agents. While displaying a national symbol in the wake of a tragic event is certainly plausible, yet its conversion into rather an exclusionary and racist indicator is quite appalling. Khalil embodies this growing tension, illustrating the transformation of the American flag's implications through its interaction with her body. From a New Historicist perspective, though the flag appears at first sight as a representation of American patriotism, the way in which it symbolically blinds, silences, and distorts the features of the veiled woman provides a condensed and powerful depiction of the condition of Arabs and Muslims in both the United States and abroad. As Somaya Sabry notes, "Hegemonic discourses on American nationalism and patriotism post-9/11 served as the intersecting point where the discursive construction of crises and identity change crossed... further consolidated the binarisation of Arab and American identifications, validating discourses of supposedly clashing civilisations" (128). Under these circumstances, theatre by Arab and Muslim American artists, particularly one-woman shows, tend to foreground themselves as sites of resistance to such discursive features.

Khalil's *Flag Piece* is a pioneer to this post-9/11 theatrical resurrection, not only because of its timing, but also for its revolutionary themes and techniques. It foretells the direction of most of the Arab-American theatre that follows in the beginning of the twenty-first century. Most performances either search for an identity in an attempt to identify the self and explain the self to the other; or try to explore the complicated relation of the self in its relation to the American culture. On the technical level, it is significant that the artist does not use language in this performance, as the verbal failed to encapsulate the wide range of emotions evoked by the attacks and their aftermath. Instead, Khalil chooses a corporeal visual language, embodying the confusion and suffering of the Arab/Muslim community represented by the woman performer. The complex relationship between the performer and the American flag condenses the fears and confusion that face the Arab-American community in their attempt at assimilation and hybridity. Ending up with the haunting image of the suffering face of the Arab woman, deformed/distorted by the American flag, sums up the pressure of the harsh realities and implications of the post-9/11 world on this ethnic minority.



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• وسائل التواصل:

جامعة عين شمس - شارع الخليفة المأمون - العباسية - القاهرة، جمهورية مصر العربية، ص.ب: 11566  
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