



*Egyptian Journal of Linguistics and Translation*

'EJLT'

ISSN: 2314-6699

<https://ejlt.journals.ekb.eg/>

Volume 11, Issue 1

July 2023

Peer-reviewed Journal

Sohag University Publishing Center

## The Immigrant Experience in Yussef El Guindi's *Pilgrims Musa and Sheri in the New World*

### Abstract

**Heba Mohamed  
Abd El Salam**

Lecturer in  
English Literature,  
English Department,  
El-Madina Higher  
Institute for International  
Languages

Arab Americans have experienced discrimination and stereotypes since their immigration to the United States, especially after the violent events of 9/11. Following 9/11, Arab American drama and theatre increased condemning racial stereotyping and prejudice based on color, origin, or faith. Yussef El Guindi is an Egyptian-American playwright who has made significant contributions to Arab American theatre. He has been vocal in challenging stereotypes of Arab Americans in post-9/11 media and literary works. He is inspired by his own immigrant experience and relies on themes of immigration, adaptation, and stereotyping. El Guindi's plays depict the immigrant experience and the position of Arab Americans in American society, using humor, flashbacks, and displacement. This research intends to examine some of the issues that immigrants currently face in America and uses concepts of assimilation, hybridity, and ambivalence to discuss the immigrant experience as exemplified in El Guindi's *Pilgrims Musa and Sheri in the New World*. The play represents a picture of the social life of some Arab American characters and depicts how some interact. It depicts the dilemma of the Arab-Americans who are forced to choose between their present and their future reflecting the effort they make to preserve both their Arab identities and their American ones. The research proves how their attempts to define themselves and their citizenship are reflected through the ambivalence of their behavior and even their language.

**Keywords:** Arab Americans, September 11, assimilation, ambivalence, immigration, pilgrim



*Egyptian Journal of Linguistics and Translation*

'EJLT'

Online ISSN: 2314-6699

<https://ejlt.journals.ekb.eg/>

Volume 11, Issue 1

July 2023

Peer-reviewed Journal

Sohag University Publishing Center

## تجربة المهاجرين في "الحجاج موسى وشيري في العالم الجديد" ليوسف الجندي

### مستخلص الدراسة

**هبة محمد عبد السلام**  
مدرس الأدب الإنجليزي، قسم اللغة  
الإنجليزية، معهد المدينة العالي للغات  
الدولية

لقد عانى العرب الأمريكيون من التمييز والصور النمطية منذ هجرتهم إلى الولايات المتحدة الأمريكية، خاصة بعد أحداث الحادي عشر من سبتمبر العنيفة و بعد أحداث الحادي عشر من سبتمبر زادت الدراما والمسرح العربي الأمريكي من إدانة التنميط العنصري والتحامل على أساس اللون أو الأصل أو العقيدة، وقد قدم الكاتب المسرحي المصري الأمريكي يوسف الجندي إسهامات كبيرة في المسرح العربي الأمريكي فكان صريحاً في تحدي الصور النمطية للأمريكيين العرب في الأعمال الإعلامية والأدبية بعد 11 سبتمبر. و يقدم الجندي أعمال مستوحاة من تجربته الخاصة في الهجرة فهو يعتمد على موضوعات الهجرة والتكيف والقوالب النمطية كما تصور مسرحيات الجندي تجربة المهاجرين ومكانة العرب الأمريكيين في المجتمع الأمريكي باستخدام الفكاهة والذكريات الماضية والتشريد. ويهدف هذا البحث إلى دراسة بعض القضايا التي يواجهها المهاجرون حالياً في أمريكا ويستخدم مفاهيم الاندماج والتناقض والازدواجية لمناقشة تجربة المهاجرين كما يتضح من خلال مسرحية يوسف الجندي "الحجاج موسى وشيري في العالم الجديد" وتمثل المسرحية صورة للحياة الاجتماعية لبعض الشخصيات العربية الأمريكية وتصور كيف يتفاعل البعض كما تصور معضلة الأمريكيين العرب الذين يضطرون للاختيار بين حاضرهم ومستقبلهم مما يعكس الجهد الذي يبذلونه للحفاظ على هويتهم العربية وهويتهم الأمريكية ويثبت البحث كيف تنعكس محاولاتهم لتعريف أنفسهم وهويتهم من خلال اضطراب سلوكهم وحتى لغتهم.

الكلمات الرئيسية: العرب الأمريكيون، 11 سبتمبر، التكيف، الازدواجية، الهجرة،

الحجاج

---

**The Immigrant Experience in Yussef El Guindi's *Pilgrims Musa and Sheri in the New World***

**Introduction**

Political, economic, social, and environmental pressures may be present for Arab refugees and immigrants in the United States. Such pressures affect their identities, self-consciousness, and even sometimes their mental health. Even though most Arab immigrants leave their native countries searching for better opportunities away from certain patterns of oppression and discrimination, they experience new patterns of discrimination and displacement in the new land. Yussef El Guindi is one of the most talented Arab American playwrights interested in reflecting on the social and psychological problems accompanying the immigrant experience.

El Guindi's depiction of the problems that accompanied the Arab American immigrant experience stems from a personal and real experience. El Guindi himself is an Arab American immigrant and consequently, he has lived or at least witnessed forms of such problems. El Guindi is very keen on introducing ambivalent characters who cannot assimilate easily into the new world. He stresses the importance of assimilation and adaptation in the multicultural community of America. Simultaneously, his plays are real examples of the ambivalence that accompanied the immigrant experience.

*Pilgrims Musa and Sheri in the new world* is a romantic comedy written by Yussef El Guindi. The play tells us about relationships among Arab characters coming from different Arabic countries. They have different cultures, customs, and dreams. They are all Muslims, yet they differ in the degree of their connections to Islamic laws and teachings. The play tells us about a love story between the Egyptian American Musa and the American waitress Sheri. It tells us about the diversity of the cultures included in the American community. Moreover, it focuses on the hybridity and the ambivalent behavior and language of the immigrants who

find themselves torn between their real identities and their desire to assimilate the American identity.

### **Arab American drama**

Arab Americans now make up a sizable portion of the United States population. America includes about four million Arab Americans coming from different Arab countries. When they first immigrated to the United States, Arab Americans experienced a great deal of discrimination, and this discrimination may persist to this day. Thus, “while discrimination against Arabs and Muslims in the post-9/11 era certainly intensified, these events did not mark the birth of discrimination and stereotypes against Arabs and Muslims” (Mamdani, 2002). Anny Bakalian and Mehdi Bozorgmehr commented on the situation declaring:

Tuesday, September 11, 2001, stands as one of the darkest days in modern U. S. history. It will be long remembered by the millions of Americans who witnessed the collapse of the Twin Towers over and over on their television screens. For Middle Eastern and Muslim Americans, ‘9/11’ likewise signifies a shocking and sad day, but it also marks the beginning of a new era in which they became the victims of backlash. For many, the tragic events ushered in a period of hate crimes, profiling, and discrimination. Though stereotypes and discriminatory actions were not new to these minorities, the post-9/11 backlash was overwhelming and relentless. (1)

Most of the Arab immigrants arrived in the United States either in search of better lives or to avoid oppression. They were from quite distinct cultural, linguistic, and religious backgrounds. Consequently, they had to face assimilation, integration, separation, or marginalization issues as consequences of their migration to such a multicultural country.

Before September 11, 2001, Arab American drama was infrequent and uneven in that there was not much Arab American theatre or authors who were heard across the country. However, following September 11, the American theatre landscape saw a rise in Arab American drama and theatre that sought to speak to the American public as a whole and express the worries and concerns of Arab Americans. Arab American playwrights and artists blamed racial displacement and preconceptions based on color, origin, or religion. They sought to introduce themselves and their suffering to the American community.

Following the terrible actions of September 11, “Islam has been viewed as a perennial adversary to the West, and Arabs have been indiscriminately portrayed as backward, sensuous, and violent, lacking restraint and self-control” (Daniel, 2009). Literary Arab-American works in many genres, such as fiction, theatre, and poetry have rapidly increased in the post-9/11 era. The hostility and prejudice towards Arabs in general and Muslims in particular based on various political events, particularly after the 9/11 tragedy, attracted attention to the meaning of citizenship and maintaining identity found in such works.

In order to challenge the negative preconceptions of Arab Americans in post-9/11 media and literature, Yussef El Guindi began to throw light on the immigrant experience. His theatre addresses topics connected to identity development and what it means to be an Arab American, and he has focused the majority of his plays on combating stereotypes that are repeatedly attributed to Arabs and Muslims. Yussef El Guindi asserts, “For the longest time Arab issues or Muslim issues just had not been on the radar ... They were regarded as too complex but after 9/11 suddenly there were calls for plays” (qtd. in Elias 48-49).

### **Yussef El Guindi**

Yussef El Guindi (1960) is a Muslim Egyptian-American author who was raised in a wealthy household. The novelist Ihsan Abdel Koudous is his uncle, while the artist and

publisher Rose al-Youssef is his grandmother. His grandfather is the famous Egyptian director Zaki Toleimat. El Guindi is one of the creators who have devoted their plays to reflecting the issues and difficulties that Arab Americans have faced since September 11th. Through his plays, El Guindi strives to connect with the American people and urges them to do the same for Arab and Muslim Americans by realizing their struggles.

El Guindi graduated with a degree in higher education from the American University in Cairo, Egypt. He received a Master's in Fine Arts with a concentration in creative writing from Carnegie Mellon University in 1985. El-Guindi's plays have been presented in numerous theatres all throughout the United States. He was acknowledged by the America Theatre Critics Association by earning the coveted M. Elizabeth Osborn New Play Award for Emerging Playwrights three years after the publication of the play *Back of the Throat*.

Yussef El Guindi was born in Egypt in 1960. He left Egypt and traveled to London with his family when he was just three years old. He received his early education in London, yet he never forgot his homeland. He returned to Egypt to join the American University in Cairo and graduated in 1982. After that, he traveled to the United States to study for a Master of Fine Arts and an MFA in playwriting. El Guindi himself lived the dilemma of the immigrant who leaves his origins and begins a new life in a new world. He admits that Egypt is an essential part of his identity and he loves it. Influenced by his own immigrant experience, Yussef El Guindi becomes interested in depicting themes of immigration, adaptation, and ambivalence in his drama. El Guindi asserts:

Even when I'm not directly writing about immigrants, that experience leaving something familiar, and then trying to acclimatize to a radically different environment, naturally affects my choice of subjects and characters. The question of —home comes up a lot. Either my characters

are trying to get to it, are excluded from it, have cast themselves far away from it, or are simply trying to define it. (qtd in Ahmed El-Bardisy 109)

Yussef El Guindi is considered an influential Arab American playwright. He received the Middle East America Distinguished Playwright Award in 2010. *Pilgrims Musa and Sheri in the New World* is one of Yussef El Guindi's most famous plays. It earned him numerous honors, including the coveted Harold and Mimi Steinberg/American Theatre Critics Association New Play Award. The Steinberg/ATCA award honors the top American scripts that had their professional debuts outside of New York City during the previous year.

El Guindi spent the majority of his age away from Egypt. He was employed by Silk Road Theatre. In San Francisco, he worked as a literary manager for Golden Thread Productions. He resides in Seattle. El Guindi is a playwright from the third generation of Arab Americans. Among his contemporaries, he is regarded as one of the most notable playwrights. He portrays Arab Americans as immigrants who try to blend in with the mainstream of American society in his plays. He experienced the 9/11 attacks, thus his plays professionally address the status of Arab Americans in the United States of America following these awful occurrences. El Guindi dives into the political and social life of Arab Americans in his writings.

The immigrant experience and the struggles of Arab Americans in American society are both depicted in El Guindi's plays. The writing style of Yussef El Guindi sets him apart from other playwrights in his period. He talks sarcastically and has a great sense of humor when discussing serious subjects. Additionally, he mixes the private with the public. He employs the flashback technique in some of his plays. He also uses the concept of "displacement" to show how Arab Americans are viewed as the "other" in the American mainstream. Commenting on the depiction of the immigrant experience in his plays, El Guindi declares:

Because there are so few depictions of Arab-American life in our theatre, people have wanted me to just give a very, very affirmative view of who we are ... But in order to humanize a people, you need to show their warts and all. Our humanity lives in our cracks and wounds. How can you affirm something, without talking about everything? (qtd. in Berson 50)

### **Assimilation and Ambivalence:**

The United States of America has always been a melting pot throughout its history. People immigrate to the "new world" from a variety of ancestries, beliefs, races, and countries in search of better possibilities for themselves and their families. However, blending in and erasing the line between natives and immigrants is never easy. Many different ethnic groups have trouble integrating. Some of the main barriers to assimilation are federal legislation, prejudice, discrimination, and stereotypes.

The barriers to immigrant assimilation cause the Arab immigrants to feel like colonists in a foreign land. The American culture serves as the colonizer. Trying to fit into the new customs of American society causes immigrants a lot of suffering. Suddenly, the American Dream turns into an uprooting nightmare. The colonized eventually suffer dual awareness of the world, one that is composed of two civilizations.

The colonized attempt to imitate the colonizers as much as possible in terms of appearance, speech, behavior, and lifestyle. This imitation reflects both the colonized 's desire to be accepted by the colonizer and “the shame experienced by colonized individuals concerning their own culture, which they were programmed to see as inferior.” (Tyson 421)

Indeed, acculturation is very necessary for immigrants who live in the multicultural community of America. No doubt, the first acculturation technique places emphasis on assimilation and maintaining harmony between the two cultures—the culture of origin and the

culture of the host nation. There must be "an interest in both maintaining one's original culture, while in daily interactions with other groups." (Berry and Kim). The coexistence of the two cultures is necessary for integration. The original culture should not be neglected or diminished in any way during this process. Without neglecting the origins of their background, immigrants would be able to relate to the culture of the host nation. "For integration, both cultures should live in harmony. People who maintain their heritage and embrace the new culture of the host country are unlikely to have mental health issues resulting from acculturation" (qtd. In MAAFA 25).

Each immigrant undergoes acculturation at different levels, like adaptation to ideas and values and retention of norms existing in the culture of the country where he or she came from. It was also revealed that the identity of an immigrant experiences particular alterations as well, at the level of both cultural and personal identities. (Chen, 2012)

The primary question raised by the immigration debate is whether immigrants can successfully assimilate into American culture by following native-born Americans' economic, social, and cultural norms. Or, are they more likely to continue to be an alien presence within America? Usually, this debate produces more heat than light. Although there are many different viewpoints on the matter, there is comparatively little empirical data on how quickly and completely immigrants assimilate into American culture.

Certainly, assimilation encourages immigrant groups to gain complete citizenship. Assimilation is a hotly debated idea in which immigrant groups are urged, through social, political, and cultural practices to embrace the culture, values, and social behaviors of the host country in order to gain full citizenship status. Some authors stress the value of assimilating into American society and accepting its culture. However, others repeatedly urge their readers to hold on to their true traditions and original customs and to reject anything that goes against them.

Though many Arab immigrants came to America from different places trying to escape racial or religious discrimination, the connection between immigration and doubleness has been a defining feature of the history of America. Moreover, the gap between the two worlds (the native world and the host world) resulted in an ambivalent state, which is characterized by conflicting emotions, thoughts, or ideas. Carol Fadda-Conrey comments on the tension experienced by Arab-American immigrants saying:

The sense of doubleness or splitting captured by the Arab American label adequately donates an inherent tension between these two terms. The tension, however, is not based on some epistemic or ordinary difference between the two entities but is largely based on history and politics, including colonial histories and neo-imperial US ambitions. (11)

Unfortunately, the cultural, political, and religious pressures that face Arab immigrants affect their behavior and even their psychology. They are more likely to have mental health issues because of the differences between their original culture and the American one. For example; they are expected to suffer from a deep sense of ambivalence.

Arab Americans face the dilemma of being torn between their past and their future. Many try to maintain both their Arab and their American identities, without sacrificing one or the other. The ambivalence of their language shows their trials to form an identity and define nationalism only to discover that nationalism cannot be preserved by segregation. It is holistic and can only be explicable by its reference to the whole. ( Elias 47-48)

Ambivalence, according to Freud, is when two tendencies within a person are at odds with one another. It is a psychological struggle between competing assessments, that is frequently felt as being in a quandary between options. As defined in the APA Dictionary of Psychology, ambivalence is “the simultaneous existence of contradictory feelings and attitudes, such as pleasantness and unpleasantness or friendliness and hostility, toward the same person, object, event, or situation”. Merton asserts:

As has been noted, the concept of ambivalence in psychology refers to the experienced tendency of individuals to be pulled in psychologically opposed directions, such as love and hate for the same person, acceptance and rejection,

---

affirmation and denial. The concept leads directly to distinctive problems: How is it that these opposed pressures persist? Why doesn't? (6)

### **The immigrant experience in *Pilgrims Musa and Sheri in the New World***

*Pilgrims Musa and Sheri in the New World* examines the challenge of residing in a multicultural society. It is a story of hopeful flawed individuals searching for chance and meaning in a chaotic world. It follows the tale of Musa, an Egyptian immigrant who struggles to choose between his Muslim fiancée Gamila and an American waitress named Sheri. The play's plot revolves around the relationship between Musa and Sheri, as the title suggests.

The play explores the universal search for identity. It depicts the dilemma of the immigrants who hoped to find their lost identities in America. Moreover, it reflects the darker aspects of feeling safe while struggling to reach the American dream of freedom. The first scene is between Musa and Sheri. Musa meets Sheri and they have a spirited conversation about cultural origins, beauty standards, the perils of dating, and more.

Yussef El Guindi tells us more about the immigrant experience through the characters of Musa's friends and family members, including Tayyib, Gamila, and Abdallah. Star-crossed lovers, unexpected obstacles, uncertainty, and human infirmity are all present in the play. The events bring to life the souls and struggles of the Arab immigrants living in America. By integrating Musa's close group of friends and potential relatives, the drama broadens its examination of the immigrant experience.

The play *Pilgrims Musa and Sheri in the New World* tells the tale of Musa, a recent immigrant from Egypt who works as a cab driver, and Sheri, a vivacious American waitress, who soon come to know one another and fall in love. Despite the challenges presented by variety, they could care less about the religious and cultural barriers separating them and would not listen to anyone who disagreed with their connection. Musa is also oblivious to his engaged Egyptian-American fiancée Gamila, who is getting ready for their wedding in Egypt.

Musa and Sheri made the decision to live together despite their cultural differences. Sheri also agreed to quit her job and go on a lengthy journey with Musa on his exploration of America. The play's upbeat conclusion emphasizes the idea that everyone should follow their own desires rather than what is expected or asked of them.

The protagonist of the play is defined by his needs and moral dilemmas. A taxi driver named Musa picks up a white waitress called Sheri in an unnamed American city. They return to Musa's flat after striking up a surprising chemistry and have a lively discussion of cultural roots, ideals of beauty, the difficulties of dating, and other topics. The conversation between Musa and Sheri can be described as a conversation between two different cultures and it becomes clear that their personal differences may confuse their relationship.

The following morning, Musa and Sheri decide to get married, starting a turbulent path of love and conflict. A touching conversation in Musa's cab is interrupted by Tayyib, a street-smart Somali businessman. Tayyib describes his previous engagement with an American woman and how their different origins spoiled their relationship and even made him feel like a "double foreigner". Tayyib, a fellow Muslim and service employee, tries to advise Musa not to go on his relationship with Sheri.

Tayyib believes that innocent love is incapable of bridging cultural divides. He believes that a cultural difference was the main factor in the dissolution of his relationship with his ex-American partner. Tayyib asserts, "I let someone make me feel more of a foreigner than I already was, where I genuinely felt ashamed of who I was"(36). He, therefore, does not desire Musa to experience the same level of anguish that he did. Tayyib affirms, "Musa: - You cannot be a foreigner twice in this country. You are a foreigner when you are in your home country, but you should be allowed to shed your foreign identity when you are back there" (36).

Tayyib's advice is a reminder of the difficulty of marrying outside one's own culture. He cautions Musa against this unsuitable connection since he believes the latter is merely drawn to Sheri's white culture. Due to the disparities in language, race, beliefs, and traditions, Tayyib's relationship with his American sweetheart ended. Although they were initially drawn to one another because of these differences, they later turned into roadblocks that complicated their relationship. Tayyib declares:

... like all lovers, we thought we were different. But by the end, everything was kicking our behinds. Everything. Small things, and very quickly. My speaking two languages for instance, and how she felt shut out when I invited my friends over and spoke in my own tongue. Or the smells from the kitchen when I cooked my food and how that made me sweat taste funny and could we eat —normal food for once. And even that I went to the mosque, or rolled out my mat to pray at home. And all of these were charming to her in the beginning. Don't think they weren't. It was like a little spice for her, and for me, the different ways she did things. I loved it. But eventually, and simply, she began to miss home. Her idea of what home-life should be. And so, did I. (35).

When a woman from Musa's recent past abruptly enters the picture, things become pretty heated. Gamila, an American-educated Muslim who is fiercely devoted to her traditions, offers an intriguing contrast to Musa's progressive defiance of these traditions. Gamila's presence throws a wrench into Musa and Sheri's relationship. The appearance of Gamila makes a striking impact on Musa's future with Sheri highlighting the obstacles of assimilation and culture.

GAMILA. Sheri. Please listen. Musa isn't- he isn't my... he isn't my brother.

I'm sorry I haven't been honest with you. But finding you here was a shock to me, to say the least. I needed to find out what was going on. I

like to be straightforward myself so I apologize for that. Musa is my – well. He’s my fiancé. We’ve been engaged for the past ten months. I’ve just returned from visiting his family in Cairo. I was raised in this country, not too far from here. Went to the local high school. Musa omitted more than just a few important facts. (38)

The meeting between Sheri and Gamila provides the climax of the play. Sheri does not want to abandon Musa. She is prepared to stand up for him and go through any challenges that could stand in their way. Sheri does not consider the differences in language, belief, or race to be obstacles that might obstruct her connection with Musa. However, Gamila tries to persuade Sheri that Musa is taking advantage of her in an effort to break up with her. Gamila tells Sheri: “to save you time and before you really get hurt, that knowing Musa he’s not going to go any further with you, whatever he said. You were just keeping him company while I was away. (40)

A critical moment in the lives of these three individuals occurs in this scene. Gamila learns that Musa does not love her, forcing her to reevaluate their relationship. Sheri realizes she needs to confirm whether Musa truly cares for her or whether they are just having a good time. In addition, this incident helps Musa appreciate how he really feels about Gamila and Sheri.

Gamila is an Arab American Muslim clinging to her traditions. She is able to maintain harmony between her two cultures. She is a prime illustration of a matched cultural mixture. Gamila was raised in the United States. As a result, the environment in which she was raised had an impact on her. Indeed, young individuals who immigrate to a new nation as children or who are born to immigrants are expected to create a cultural identity that is based on both their family's original culture and the culture of the society in which they live. Consequently, Gamila

---

is able to fully assimilate into American culture while maintaining her Arabic and Islamic roots. She is a real Egyptian American character.

El Guindi aims to shed light on the social and economic conditions that led the Arab immigrants to flee their homes from the very beginning of the play. For example, the humble American home that Musa lives in emphasizes the severe financial circumstances that led him to leave his native country and relocate to the United States. Musa himself describes his home asserting: “It’s cheap; not nice...I sleep here, that’s all. Later when I save enough, I buy a place” (10). Besides, Abdallah, Musa's flatmate, describes his trip from the war-torn Sudan to America in quest of a better life there, declaring:

ABDALLAH. I do very well for myself here. Three years in this new country and I turn a poor boy from Khartoum, me, into a businessman with much cash, as thick as a deck of playing cards. With my English, a language I must say almost as beautiful as my own, which I learn before coming here, with this language, I quickly learn to figure out things as soon as I come to this new country with all its strange customs. Its different ways of doing things, and seeing the world. The different foods, the huge portions of food and the amazing size of buildings. As well as of course, to be honest, the fantastic cleavage of women I see everywhere. (21)

Though the play is titled *Pilgrims Musa and Sheri in the New World*, we realize that Abdallah is the character who actually goes on a pilgrimage. “Abdallah is going on his Hajj to give thanks for his good fortune in America.” (4). El Guindi introduces Musa and Sheri in the title of the play as two pilgrims though they never travel for an actual pilgrimage. The symbolism of the title becomes clear later when we realize the ambivalent state that Musa and Sheri live in the new multicultural community of America.

Musa's Muslim flatmate from Sudan, Abdallah. Makes two presences in the play and expresses his innermost sentiments and ideas about America. At his first appearance, Abdallah demonstrates that he is the kind of immigrant who can easily integrate into a new society. Abdallah admits that he did not have a problem working in a supermarket shop or even cleaning offices during his stay in America. During his second and last presence, Abdallah stresses how it is rewarding to coexist with people from diverse cultural backgrounds. Abdallah draws parallels between the experience of pilgrimage and that of living in a multiethnic community saying:

The everyday pilgrimage you make when you open your mouth to a stranger and hope to God you are understood. The everyday Ka'bah you walk around, the everyday Mecca you head towards. The people you meet who don't know you. The way you have to open up and travel to the place someone is coming from. Before my body washes ashore, I remember that, not the immigrant I was, but the pilgrim I became by coming here. (81)

Abdallah's comments during his first and second appearances coincide with what Allah says in the Holy Qur'an, "Oh mankind! We created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that you may know each other (not that you may despise each other). Verily, the most honored of you in the sight of Allah is (he who is) the most righteous of you"(49-13). Abdallah's two appearances reflect his religious background. They demonstrate his commitment to religion and his adherence to Islam's teachings, which encourage the peaceful coexistence of people of many faiths and cultures.

Musa's devout Muslim flatmate Abdallah makes a speech near the end about how he went on a pilgrimage to Mecca but died when his ship sank. Abdallah, who is invisible to the

---

others and is dressed in a customary white robe and headgear, offers a prayer-like monologue.

ABDALLAH: One more look. Before my body washes ashore and they bury me.

Before they find my suitcase floating and identify me. Look where my memory— my spirit, takes me. To this place. To the struggles I here. I went—I traveled to give thanks. To walk with strangers gathered for something. To walk in what I knew would be a crush of too many people gathered to give thanks. A coming together. Of people from everywhere; with different tongues and looks and ways of seeing things. And for all of us to remember a time before we were—before we were strangers to each other.... (58)

Abdallah is referring to the Hajj, which is a great gathering of pilgrims in Mecca, literally. But one might also detect a benevolent metaphor for the dream of peace among all humans in his powerful words.

Quite the opposite of Abdallah, Musa is not merely a man torn between two women, yet he is an immigrant torn between two different backgrounds and cultures. He is forced to choose between the poised, traditional Muslim Gamila and the apparently inappropriate—but incredibly alluring—American waitress Sheri. Musa stands as a good example of the confusion and misperception that Arab immigrants face in America. He tells Sheri:

.... Why did I- why did I come to this country? So I can stay in this same world? I am like a fish in a bowl and what has changed? I look out on America in my taxi instead of Cairo but it is still the same fish bowl I am in, the same story. What is the point? (51)

Musa's speech always contains a combination of Arabic and English vocabulary. He regularly utilises Egyptian words like *Ana asaf*, *Argukee*, *Inti magnoona*, *Ana mishader atnafas*, *Ahlan*, *Hamd'illah assalam*, *Salaam 'alaykum*, *Al Hamdulillah*, *masjid*, *shay*, *kahk*,

---

ummar adeen, etc. Musa says he learns English by reading mysteries or crime books, "I learn English by reading crime books...Raymond Chandler. Dashiell Hammett... Sometimes, in my taxi, I pretend I am like American tough guy, investigating something"(7-8). He has a weak Arabic accent and speaks terrible English. Gamila has linguistic confusion as well. She could not speak Arabic while expressing her rage at Musa's infidelity to her. She asserts, "I can't do Arabic when I'm upset. Except I am not going to get upset"(47). She speaks less Arabic and more English than Musa, in contrast.

The play tells us much about the ambivalent language of the immigrants. Simultaneously, the ambivalent behavior is never neglected. For example, Musa invites Sheri to his place in order to start an illicit connection with her, yet he is keeping a photo of the Ka'bah and declaring his hopes to visit it someday.

Sheri: I know that. I saw a special on TV. People dressed in  
white, going around that

Musa: (points to calendar photo) Ka'bah.

Sheri: Yeah. Have you done that?

Musa: One day I will.

Sheri: (walks over to look at photo) It looks so intense. With all  
those people. Like Woodstock, you know. On steroids,  
without the music. Well, maybe not like that. But it looked  
like everyone was so into it. I'd love to be able to lose  
myself in something like that.

Musa: Yes...I dream of it sometimes.... You still want drink?

Sheri: Sure. (10)

Another example of ambivalent behavior is Musa's and Tayyib's indulgence in alcohol despite the fact that it is prohibited for Muslims to do so. They either actively or

---

unconsciously imitate Americans in an effort to fit into American society. Since his arrival in the United States, Musa has started drinking alcohol in an effort to feel like an American. Similarly to this, whenever Musa provides him with a ride in a taxi, Tayyib always offers him bottles of wine rather than cash:

Musa: I have alcohol if you want.

Sheri: Great. That's what I thought you meant.

Musa: Scotch.

Sheri: I'll take it.

Musa: This Somali friend, he give me Johnny Walker as payment after I help him take merchandize across a bridge a few times. Says he not believe in money between friends. (10-11)

Sheri: Alcohol is okay though.

Musa: I say, so you corrupt me with drink? He say now you test your faith with drink. Money is like invisible evil. But drink, you know what it is. I give you good way to prove your faith. (11)

When Musa and Sheri consume alcohol and start an illicit relationship, Musa does not want her to bring up God or religion. This demonstrates the internal conflict Musa experiences and draws attention to his fight with two competing forces in the play—his Egyptian norms and customs and the American ones:

Sheri: (picks up book) What's this one?

Musa: Oh. Not mystery. This is translation of Qur'an

Sheri: A holy book, right?

Musa: I learn English also this way too, since I know original.

Sheri: (reading from random passage) —Allah knows what the

heavens and the earth contain. If three men talk in secret together, He is their fourth; if four, He is their fifth; if five, He is their sixth; whether fewer or more, wherever they be, He is with them.

Musa: (wanting to take the Qur'an from her) Maybe this is not the time. (13)

Musa does not follow most Islamic laws, yet he is not pleased with the Muslim salesmen who interact with people in an immoral manner. Moreover, despite coming from an Arabic and Islamic background that forbids illegal partnerships, Musa and Tayyib have illicit connections with women. While Tayyib is afraid to say that he intends to love or marry any of his women, Musa is open about the fact that he is ready to be with Sheri, the American girl with whom he has an unlawful relationship.

Musa: Don't be angry just because you don't have a woman.

Tayyib: Me? My friend. I have more women than suitcases. I just don't go smiling like a fool about it.

Musa: What women? Those who stand by the corners?

Tayyib: The difference between you and me? When I go with women, I know what I'm doing. I'm having a nice time. And so are they. I am not falling in love. (27)

Gamila is a better Muslim than Musa. She does not suffer the same religious ambivalence, and he is aware that she does not fit with him. Musa states, "I am a terrible Muslim. I go to the mosque to see friends, not God. Of course God. But God is not happy with me. I fail him too (51.) Musa knows that Gamila needs "A good man. A good Muslim".

He adds:

.... You want to keep in touch with your roots? I don't want roots! I want things I know nothing about. I want a life where I don't know where it goes. With us,

the story it would be—it would be very clear—and customs and tradition and family; and this is who we are and where we started and this is where we are going. All the way to when they bury me. I don't want the rest of my life to be what I know. This story where I know beginning, middle and end. Yes, Sheri is not you. She is very strange and perhaps wrong for me, but maybe that is what I need. The wrong woman. Maybe I need the wrong woman in my life. (52)

Tayyib is another ambivalent character in a dilemma between his original culture and his desire to find a place in American society. Even though he has numerous illicit connections with American women, he would rather wed a devout woman from a respectable Eastern family. He speaks about Gamila saying, "Your Gamila is a jewel. And wants you for a husband. She is beautiful. Comes from a good family, and is respectable, and religious. She wants to finish school and become a nurse. And she's a citizen. You don't need an American to get you a green card" (29).

Tayyib alternates between the world of his native culture and the culture of the United States. Despite the fact that he enjoys living in America and intends to stay there for the rest of his life, he is not totally satisfied with the manner of life here. Tayyib criticizes Sheri, calling her a lady who doesn't uphold any moral values, despite Tayyib's lack of morality and his countless illegal interactions with women. He admires "the free spirit" and aspires to freedom, yet he opposes Musa and Sheri's union because Sheri personifies the very spirit that drove him to leave his country of origin and come to America. He says to Musa:

The final thing I will say is I went to this diner where your Sheri works. Perhaps our friendship will end after I say this but I am obliged to tell you that the way she carries on with other men in the diner would make me very nervous. Yes, the women here are whatever, but even American men would have problems seeing their girl sitting on the laps of her customers. And joking and laughing and God knows what else. We all love the free spirit here, that is why we came, but there's free and then there's no

morals or anything. (30-31)

The play emphasizes the concept that one's home is crucial to maintaining their sense of self. Tayyib and his lover split up because they both missed their homes. Tayyib tells Musa, "Do not mistake the woman who gives you pleasure .... Gamila is a beautiful woman. She will make you feel at home. And without this home, this country will eat up little by little" (30). As Tayyib mentions, when you are outside of the country, you are a foreigner, but when you return home, you should be free to put your foreign identity aside and be who you are.

By the end of the play, Musa makes the decision to live with Sheri and respect their individual diverse backgrounds. Musa and Sheri make the decision to take full use of their different cultural backgrounds. Now El Guindi declares an important message that people must live in harmony with one another, keep their individualism, and admit and appreciate their cultural variances.

## **Conclusion**

The romantic comedy *Pilgrims Musa and Sheri in the New World* (2012) is about immigrants' difficulties to live out the American Dream. Yussef El Guindi is particularly interested in introducing conflicted individuals that struggle to fit into a multinational society. Throughout the play, El Guindi hopes to deliver a significant message. The message is that although America is a diverse country that welcomes immigrants from all over the world, there is a conflict for immigrants who have to choose between their own culture and the culture of the host country. In such a globalized environment, people must acknowledge cultural variety.

Yussef El Guindi is very keen on emphasizing the value of integration and adaptation in his play. According to Yussef El Guindi, the immigration debate is about whether immigrants can successfully assimilate into American culture or remain an alien presence. The major issue raised by the immigration debate is whether immigrants can successfully integrate into

American culture by following native-born Americans' economic, social, and cultural norms. Or, if they live there, are they more likely to continue to be an alien presence within the borders of the American community?

He introduces assimilation, hybridity, and ambivalence as topics related to the immigrant experience of Arab Americans. He demonstrates how the ambiguities of the behavior of the immigrants and even their language reflect their attempts to define themselves and their identities. For Yussef El Guindi, the interaction between Musa and Sheri symbolizes the interaction between two pilgrims coming from two different countries and holding two different identities.

---

## References

- Abdulrahim, Sawsan. "Arab Immigrant Experience." *Race and Arab Americans before and after 9/11: From invisible citizens to visible subjects* (2008): 131.
- Ahmed El-Bradisy, Reem. "The Melting Pot or the Salad Bowl?: A Bhabhian Reading of Yussef El Guindi's *Pilgrims Musa and Sheri* in the New World." *مجلة البحث العلمي في الآداب* 21.3 (2020): 104-134.
- Alba, Richard, and Victor Nee. "Rethinking assimilation theory for a new era of immigration." *International migration review* 31.4 (1997): 826-874.
- Ali, Abdullah Yusuf. *The Holy Qur-an: English Translation of the Meanings of Commentary* Presidency of Islamic Research, IFTA., 1990.
- Berry, John, Unichol Kim, Thomas Minde, and Doris Mok. "Comparative Studies of Acculturation Stress." *International Migration Review* 21 (1987): 492. Web. 14 May 2019.
- Berson, Misha. —Yussef El Guindi: Are we Being Followed? *American Theatre*, January 2006. Web.
- Chen, Fang Fang, and Yiming Jing. "The impact of individualistic and collectivistic orientation on the judgment of self-presentation." *European Journal of Social Psychology* 42.4 (2012): 470-481.
- Conrey, Carol Fadda. *Contemporary Arab- American Literature: Transnational Reconfigurations of Citizenship and Belonging*. New York University Press, 2014. Print.
- El Guindi, Yussef. *Pilgrims Musa and Sheri in the New World*. Dramatists Play Service Inc, 2014.

Elias, Silvia. "The Ambivalent Holistic Nature of Nationalism explored in Arab-American Drama; the Long-Ignored Genre." *الاداب* 4.85 (2017).

MAAFA, Abdennour. "The Acculturation of Arab Americans in USA post 9/11." (2019).

Mamdani, Mahmood. "Good Muslim, bad Muslim: A political perspective on culture and terrorism." *American anthropologist* 104.3 (2002): 766-775.

Merton, Robert King. *Sociological ambivalence and other essays*. Simon and Schuster, 1976.

Tyson, Lois. *Critical Theory Today: A User – Friendly Guide*. 2 nd ed., Routledge, 2006.

VandenBos, Gary R. "APA dictionary of psychology. American Psychological Association", 2007.