

## The Political Impact of the September 11 Attacks as Represented in Yussef El Guindi's *Back of the Throat*

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الملخص:

في صباح الحادي عشر من سبتمبر عام 2001، انقلبت حياة ما يقارب من أربعة ملايين من العرب الأمريكيين رأساً على عقب بسبب ما قام به تسعة عشر إرهابياً متطرفاً. لقد تغيرت الحياة بشكل جذري عندما قامت طائرتان ، اختطفهما هؤلاء الإرهابيون التسعة عشر، بتدمير برجى مركز التجارة العالمي في نيويورك والبنتاغون في واشنطن، آخذين معهم حوالي ثلاثة آلاف من الضحايا الأمريكيين. كان العرب الأمريكيون، ولا سيما المسلمون ، الضحايا الحقيقيين لأنهم عانوا أكثر من غيرهم فقط حيث زعمت حكومة الولايات المتحدة أن هؤلاء الخاطفين الإرهابيين مسلمون ينتمون إلى تنظيم القاعدة بأفغانستان. من خلال تحليل دقيق لمسرحية الكاتب العربي الأمريكي، يوسف الجندي، "خلف الحلق"، تسلط هذه الدراسة الضوء على الأوضاع السياسية المتدهورة التي عاشها العرب الأمريكيون بعد هجمات الحادي عشر من سبتمبر. يُظهر الجندي للجمهور كيف تضحّي السلطات الأمريكية بالمفاهيم المنصوص عليها في دستور الولايات المتحدة وإعلان الاستقلال لحماية أنفسهم من أي هجمات إرهابية أخرى. وتشمل هذه التضحيات

إصدار قانون الوطنية الأمريكي ، وتآكل الحقوق المدنية ، وشن الحرب على الإرهاب في العراق وأفغانستان ، والاعتقال والترحيل التعسفي للعرب الأمريكيين ، وآلاف جرائم الكراهية تجاه العرب الأمريكيين ، وبخاصة المسلمين.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** 9 / 11 ، العرب الأمريكيون ، الضحايا ، الجندي ، الخلق ، قانون الوطنية ، الحقوق المدنية ، وجرائم الكراهية.

## Abstract

On the 11<sup>th</sup> of September 2001, the lives of about four million Arab Americans turned upside down with the actions of only nineteen extremist terrorists. Life was changed drastically when two planes, hijacked by those nineteen terrorists, destroyed the two towers of the New York's World Trade Center and the Pentagon in Washington taking with them about three thousand American victims. Arab Americans, especially Muslims, were the real victims because they suffered the most only because the United States government claimed that those terrorist hijackers were Muslims who belonged to Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan. Through an insightful interpretation of El Guindi's *Back of the Throat*, this paper sheds light on the deteriorated political conditions that Arab Americans have experienced after the 9/11 attacks. El Guindi shows the audience how the US authorities sacrifice the concepts

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stated in the United States Constitution and the Declaration of Independence to protect themselves from further attacks. These sacrifices include the passage of the USA PATRIOT Act, the erosion of civil rights, the launching of the war on terror in Iraq and Afghanistan, the arbitrary detention and deportation of Arab Americans, and thousands of hate crimes towards Arab Americans, especially Muslims.

**Keywords:** 9/11, Arab Americans, victims, El Guindi, throat, PATRIOT Act, civil rights, and hate crimes.

### **YUSSEF EL GUINDI**

Yussef El Guindi is a Muslim Egyptian-American writer who was born in Cairo in 1960 to a rich family. He comes from a famous artistic family: His grandmother is the actress and publisher Rose al-Youssef, his grandfather is the director Zaki Toleimat and his uncle is the writer Ihsan Abdel Koudous. El Guindi is one of the pioneers who depict the problems and challenges that Arab Americans faced since September 11 in his plays. Through writing plays, he tries to reach out to the American people and wants them to also reach out to Arab and Muslim Americans by understanding the circumstances they are going through. He

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aims at establishing greater dialogue and understanding between Arab and Muslim Americans and the American people.

El Guindi is the recipient of the 2010 Middle East America Distinguished Playwright Award. In fact, his artistic career appeared earlier before 9/11. He started as an actor then turned to literature, writing, plays, short stories, radio serials and newspaper articles. He has had at least 16 plays produced since 2001 in regional Theaters from Durham to Anchorage. His plays examine frequently the collision of ethnicities, culture and politics that face Arab Americans, especially after the criminal attacks of 9/11. Yussef El Guindi's plays include, *Ten Acrobats in an Amazing Leap of Faith* (2002), *Back of the Throat* (2004), *Jihad Jones and the Kalashnikov Babes* (2006), *Our Enemies: Lively Scenes of Love and Combat* (2008), *Language Rooms* (2010), and *The Mummy and the Revolution* (2012). (Silk Road Rising)

We hold these Truths to be self-evident that all Men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.

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Thomas Jefferson, *Declaration of Independence*

On September 11, 2001, a group of nineteen terrorists hijacked four passenger planes and attacked four major United States landmarks on New York, Washington D.C. and Pennsylvania. About three thousand people were killed on those fatal attacks. The victims of these attacks were "people who had been on the planes, in the Twin Towers, and on the streets below"(Fradin 26). Sooner after the attacks of 9/11, the United Nation Security Council condemned these terrorist attacks and asked "all states and the international community to 'work together urgently'—to 'redouble their efforts' it said—to 'prevent and suppress' such acts"(Gearty 30). The American government is the first to respond to the calls of the United Nations by declaring the United States a national security state. C.William Michaels in his book, *No Greater Threat*, explains that national security states are "suspicious of political opposition; they actively target dissent, decrease civil liberties, engage in military adventurism, consolidate power, increase domestic investigation and surveillance, enlist the aid of the media to generate support for the ruling

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regime or actively suppress or eliminate opposition media, and reduce the role or the ability of the judiciary to challenge or hinder the operation of the ruling political apparatus" (14). This means that the United States government with all its agencies will do whatever is necessary to protect its nation from any future attack, whether through military action or through strengthening restrictions and law enforcement policies concerning civil liberties. On the 20<sup>th</sup> of September, 2001, President George W. Bush declares War on Terrorism "at home and abroad"(Fradin 34).

On the one hand, according to the claims of the Bush administration, the 9/11 attacks were carried out by Arab Islamists belonging to Al-Qaeda organization based in Afghanistan. As a result of these claims, the United States "became involved in two wars in other countries"(Fradin 36). In October 2001, the United States' troops invaded Afghanistan. This war aimed to capture Osama Bin Laden, the head of the Al-Qaeda organization, and to get rid of the danger of the Taliban regime that threatens the United States security. In addition to Afghanistan, Iraq is also a United States' target. In most of his speeches about the war on

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terrorism, Bush calls Iraq an "axis of evil". In March 2003, another war began when George Bush's troops invaded Iraq. Bush justified this war by claiming that Iraq creates weapons of mass destruction and that President Saddam Hussein supports Al-Qaeda members by providing them with these weapons. The two wars extended for years costing thousands of lives "without reaching their major goals"(Fradin 37). More importantly, "no weapons of mass destruction have been found in Iraq"(Fradin 38).

On the other hand, the United States' fear of another attack leads to a drastic change in laws and policies regarding civil liberties and freedoms. On October 25, 2001, President Bush and Congress signed the USA PATRIOT Act (Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism Act). The Act ignores most, if not all, the rights guaranteed by the Amendments of the U.S. Constitution. The USA PATRIOT Act grants the U.S. President "unlimited powers to fight terrorism"(Carlisle 156). It also allows "federal agents to arrest suspected terrorists and hold them indefinitely, including those who had no charges

brought against them" (Carlisle 156). In order to achieve the objectives of the war on terror, terrorism should be defined to know who a real terrorist is. Title 18 of the United States Federal Criminal Code, in Chapter 113B, defines international and domestic terrorism as activities that "involve violent acts or acts dangerous to human life that violate federal or state law, or appear to be intended (i) to intimidate or coerce a civilian population (ii) to influence the policy of a government by intimidation or coercion; or (iii) to affect the conduct of a government by mass destruction, assassination, or kidnapping." The only difference between international and domestic terrorism is that international terrorism occurs outside the territorial jurisdiction of the United States, while domestic terrorism occurs within its territorial jurisdiction. Moreover, terrorism has been defined by the Federal Bureau of Investigation as "the unlawful use of force or violence against persons or property to intimidate or coerce a Government, the civilian population, or any segment thereof, in furtherance of political or social objectives."

Domestically, the acts of nineteen people, claimed to be Muslims, turned the life of a group of people upside



down. Of all communities and ethnic minorities in the United States, Arab Americans, especially Muslims, became "the victims of overt discrimination, as well as physical and personal attacks" (Carlisle 144). Unlike the American citizens who live under the protection of the American law, Arab Americans are being violated and stripped off all their rights with the permission of the USA PATRIOT Act. Living under the restrictions of the USA PATRIOT Act, all Arab Americans are suspects. Arab and Muslim Americans are treated as a second inferior class who deserves none of the rights granted to the American citizens. It seems that the United States government has decided to sacrifice the liberties and rights of Arab and Muslim Americans for the security of the American people. With the permission of this Act, the U.S. government with its agents can delve deeply into the private lives of Arab and Muslim Americans ignoring the Amendments of the Constitution concerning/regarding liberties. In a post 9/11 America, Arabs and Muslims are the target of "intense surveillance, investigation, harassment and detention at home" (Michaels 8) in addition to the deportation of undocumented immigrants or even documented ones without any due

process of law. For example, "it has been estimated that more than 5,000 foreign nationals were detained" in the two years followed the 9/11 attacks (Gearty 77). The land of freedom and liberties "authorized the National Security Agency to intercept telephone calls and emails involving suspected foreign terrorists even where this necessarily entailed listening to a side of the conversation...." (Gearty 76). This eavesdropping, that violates the privacy of Arabs and Muslims in America, is defended by the United States government "as something that was legitimized under the inherent power of the president..." (Gearty 76).

As a result of the media's stereotyping of those of Arabic descent and Muslims and linking them with terrorism, hatred towards Arabs and Muslims has been evoked which leads to the appearance of Islamophobia and Arabophobia. The American citizens begin to fear of Arabs and Muslims because they know nothing about them except being dangerous terrorists. Esposito and Mogahed publish the results of a poll conducted by the Washington Post and ABC News in 2006 in which "nearly half of Americans – 46 % have a negative view of Islam, seven percentage points higher than observed a few months after Sept. 11, 2001"

(46). They add that a great number of Americans believe that Islam calls for violence towards non-Muslims and that "about third of Americans (36%) say Islam is more likely than other religions to encourage violence among its followers" (46).

In revenge for the attacks of 9/11, a wave of hate crimes has swept the United States. The Federal Bureau of Investigation has defined a hate crime as "a criminal offense against a person or property motivated in whole or in part by an offender's bias against a race, religion, disability, sexual orientation, ethnicity, gender, or gender identity." During 2001, hate crimes against Arabs and Muslims, in the United States "increased 1,700 percent" (Curtis 100). These crimes include: assaulting Arabs and Muslims violently, spitting on women wearing the headscarf, threatening to kill them, murdering innocent ones, or even telling them "to go back to where they come from" (Curtis 100). Hate crimes also spread to reach places of worship; "In Dallas, Texas, an attacker opened fire on mosque" (Carlisle 155). Carlisle adds that "Officials closed public schools in New Orleans, Louisiana, because of threats to Arab and Muslim students.

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In Chicago, Illinois, a bomb was set off at an Arab-American community center.... The Council on American Islamic Relations reported 411 separate threats to Arab and Muslim Americans. The FBI opened case files on 40 reported hate crimes. Three of those involved murder" (155). In 2014, the FBI reported 7120 hate crimes, including physical assaults. Then came 2015 to report the tragedy of Chapel Hill when an American citizen, Craig Hicks, shot his newlywed neighbors, Deah Barakat and Yusor Abu-Salha, in addition to Razan Abu-Salha, the sister of Yusor. Ridiculously, most of these crimes have not been reported as terrorist or violent acts.

Inspired by his insecurities of being an Arab immigrant in a post-9/11 America, Yussef El Guindi has written his dark comedy, *Back of the Throat*. El Guindi is from the first Arab American playwrights who dare to break the silence and reveal the erosion of civil liberties and the crimes committed by the American government, especially the FBI, under the name of fighting terrorism. The harsh conditions, under which Arab Americans find themselves, urge El Guindi to dramatize the tragic events of the aftermath of 9/11 and the hostility towards anything or anyone Arab or

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Muslim. In a conversation that has been published in Robin Wrights, *Rock the Casbah*, El Guindi expresses his anxiety saying,

Suddenly you weren't sure what your rights were. You heard stories of people being stopped for books they were reading at airports or the FBI going to galleries and questioning artists. I worried about what I might have in my apartment if an FBI agent showed up, because I have a Koran, books on Islam, and research materials on assassins and guns. In my paranoia, I imagined all kinds of things that might happen (217).

In this one-act play, El Guindi introduces the ugly face of racist America through the visit of two FBI agents, Bartlett and Carl, to an Arab American writer, Khaled, in his messy apartment. A visit that begins friendly and ends disastrously. Khaled, in *Back of the Throat*, may be any Arab American or he may be even Yussef El Guindi himself.

The title of the play, *Back of the Throat*, refers to the first Arabic sound in the protagonist's name. Khaled, whose first Arabic sound of his name has no existence in the

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English phonemes, tries at his first encounter with Bartlett and Carl to make them pronounce his name properly.

BARTLETT. (Interrupting) "Kaled"?

KHALED. Er, Khaled.

BARTLETT. "Haled"?

KHALED. More Khaled.

BARTLETT. "Kaled."

KHALED. That's good.

.....

CARL. Khaled.

KHALED. That's it

BARTLETT. It's that back of the throat thing (Back of the Throat 13).

El Guindi intelligently chooses this title and this sound particularly as if to show the reader of the play that if Khaled cannot make the two agents, Bartlett and Carl, pronounce his name correctly, will he succeed in convincing them of his innocence. It is not a matter of a name or a

sound but a matter of identity. Arab Americans were a silent invisible minority live in the United States. Then comes the attacks of September 11, 2001, with a wave of Islamophobia and Arabophobia. Arab and Muslim Americans, now, find themselves more visible in the spotlight. The thing that makes them try all the time to identify themselves and to defend their Arabic and Islamic identity. When Khaled insisted on making Bartlett pronounce his name correctly, he was attempting to make Bartlett, who represents the American people, know that Arabs exist and that they are an integral part of the United States. It seems that Khaled wants to tell Bartlett that Arabs are here and will still be here, so do not try to marginalize them even through ignoring to pronounce their names correctly. Dr. Khaled Saad Serwah explains that "Bartlett's inability to pronounce Khaled's name properly signifies the American institution's inability to accept the Arab ethnicity as part of their country . . . Khaled's name is so problematic in pronunciation, as an alien "other" culture, that it has become a lump in Bartlett's throat" (294). Another suggestion concerning the title of the play and the problem of pronouncing Khaled's initial sound, has been stated in Basma Kamal Muhammady's Ph.D.

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Dissertation in which she argues that "Bartlett's inability to pronounce that sound . . . indicates that Arab ethnic groups are not part of that place in spite of their long existence. They are immigrants and their names still seem old. It hints that they are aliens despite their success and progress in the United States" (94).

As Bartlett and Carl begin to search every inch in Khaled's apartment, their suspicion is aroused by what they found. For them, Khaled is an "unnormal individual" (19) who should be suspected of what he has in his apartment. In fact, what Khaled is suspected of is having the Koran, books in Arabic, a porn magazine, and some books, entitled "*Getting Your Government's Attention Through Unconventional Means, A Manual for the Oppressed, Theater of the Oppressed, Covering Islam, Militant Islam.... Quotations from Chairman Mao Tsetung*" (17). Khaled tries to explain that he has these books because he is a writer who should read any book that may help in enriching his knowledge in any topic he wants to write about, but unfortunately, all his explanations go in vain. Khaled, then, notices that their visit is not an ordinary one, but he is targeted and is about to be interrogated despite the absence



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of any clear evidence of his accusation. Khaled's interrogation is based on his race, religion and some assumptions that he may be engaged in some terrorist acts or is preparing to commit a new one, as Bartlett told him that he will not be surprised if he opens his computer and "find(s) plans for tunneling under the White House"( 20).

As Khaled discovers that it is not a casual visit but an interrogation based on unknown suspicions, he knows that he is in a trouble and begins to claim his rights. According to his American Dream, Khaled believes that he has rights, granted to him by the U.S. Constitution, the same as any American citizen. So, he begins to act as an American citizen in the light of the Constitution and the slogans of the American Dream. Meriam-Webster dictionary defines the American Dream as "a happy way of living that is thought of by many Americans as something that can be achieved by anyone in the U.S. especially by working hard and becoming successful." The phrase, American Dream, was coined by James Truslow Adams in his book, *The Epic of America*, in 1931. Adams describes the American Dream as "the belief that anyone, regardless of where they were born

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or what class they were born into, can attain their own version of success in a society in which upward mobility is possible for everyone"(Investopedia). According to Adams, the American dream can be achieved through "sacrifice, risk-taking, and hard work, rather than by chance" (Investopedia).

The United States Constitution, in which Khaled believes, asserts in its sixth Amendment, that "In all criminal prosecutions, the accused shall enjoy the right to a speedy and public trial . . . and to be informed of the nature and cause of the accusation; to be confronted with the witness against him . . . and to have the assistance of counsel for his defense" (Constitution 34). Unlike what has been stated in Amendment VI, Khaled has not been informed of what he is accused of and has not been allowed to call a lawyer.

BARTLETT. Er, Khaled, you can't have a lawyer.

KHALED. Yes, I can, I know my rights.

BARTLETT. No, you don't, you've been misinformed (21).

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Moreover, Amendment IV of the U.S. Constitution admits "the right of the people to be secure in their persons, houses, papers, and effects, against unreasonable searches and seizures, shall not be violated . . . ." (Constitution 33). Through Khaled's argument with Bartlett and Carl about his rights as an American citizen, El Guindi shows the reader the violations of civil rights and liberties, committed by the FBI. Khaled, who has been prevented from calling a lawyer, now is forced by Bartlett to switch on his personal computer in order to be searched while Carl is inspecting everything in Khaled's apartment even the laundry basket:

BARTLETT. . . . Could you switch on your computer, please?

KHALED. I don't have to do that.

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KHALED. (*Quiet.*) I have rights. (*Slight beat.*) I do have rights. This is still—I don't have to show you anything if I don't want to unless you have a—which doesn't mean I'm trying to hide anything, it just means I care enough

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about what makes this country—you know—to exercise the right to say no.

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CARL. I was searching the pipes (21-2).

It seems that, in a post-9/11 America, Arab and Muslim Americans, are insecure even in their apartments.

In his book, *Journey into America: The Challenge of Islam*, Akbar Ahmed states that "Muslims were contemptuously referred to as "ragheads," "towelheads," "sand niggers," and "Arabs" (despite the fact that only some 20 percent of Muslims in the world are from Arab lands)" (216). In fact, the stereotyping of Arabs and Muslims does not appear after the events of 9/11, but it dates back to years ago, as Edward Said in his book, *Orientalism*, states that Arabs "are thought of as camel-riding, terroristic, hook-nosed, venal lechers whose undeserved wealth is an affront to real civilization" (108). Also, Nawar Shora states that:

Since the time of the early settlers, America has been plagued by a deep strain of nativism, which Webster's New English Dictionary defines as "the practice or policy of favoring native-born citizens as against immigrants." This

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has led to discrimination, first against what are now termed Native Americans, then against African-Americans, Irish, Italians, Jews, Chinese, and Japanese. The most recent groups targeted for discrimination are Mexican and Latino immigrants, as well as Arabs, Muslims, and Arab-Americans following the 9/11 attacks (72).

It is because of the attacks of 9/11 that the real racist face of the land, once stood for equality, appears. Bartlett and Carl, the two representatives of the U.S. government, follow their government's policies that marginalize and stereotype Arabs and Muslims. They target Khaled for his religion and ethnicity, not for real evidence of accusation. Khaled, who has long considered the United States his homeland, wakes up from enjoying his American Dream to experience the new American nightmare. El Guindi summarizes such acts of discrimination and racism in his master quote when Bartlett explains to Khaled the reason for targeting him:

BARTLETT. One more thing: 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

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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 will 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 (23).

Bartlett's racist discourse, which represents the prejudice against Arabs and Muslims, contradicts with what the United States pretends standing for. The attacks of 9/11 prove that equality, liberty and political and religious freedom are just slogans in a post-9/11 America.

Attempting to show the reader the real face of the United States government, El Guindi uses the theme of violence throughout the rest of the play. Bartlett, who has just told Khaled that they "will not overstep certain lines" (23), or violate his boundaries, is now justifying the violent acts, he is about to commit, to make him confesses.

BARTLETT. I understand your getting nervous. I don't care for this part myself. We're switching from being civil and congenial to being hard-nosed and focused. It will

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have the effect of taking away from your humanity and it doesn't do much for ours. Plus we're trying new approaches. It's all new territory for us" (24).

Protected by the new American legislations and laws, especially the USA PATRIOT Act, which permits the United States government to do whatever is necessary to protect its land and citizens from any further terrorist attacks, the two FBI agents, Bartlett and Carl, turn their friendly visit to be a very brutal investigation. Khaled is about to be humiliated both verbally and physically. Violence starts as Khaled insists on being an American citizen who knows his rights and he still repeats the same words and sentences: "I know my rights," "This is my country! It's my fucking country"(25)! Bartlett, who has power and authority guaranteed by the USA PATRIOT Act, begins to subjugate Khaled by using physical violence. El Guindi's stage directions give us a full description of what is happening to Khaled. El Guindi shows us how Bartlett violently "*walks over to Khaled, grabs him by the arm and drags him into a corner of the room — away from the door*" (25), and then he pushes Khaled "*into a corner and stands*

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*inches from him*" (25). Each time Khaled tries to say something or to defend himself and asks for his rights, he is interrupted by Bartlett who forces him to shut up. Bartlett shifts easily from verbal violence to physical violence and then he returns to verbal violence simultaneously.

BARTLETT. First thing: Shut up.

KHALED. No, I—

BARTLETT. (Interrupting.) Second thing, shut up.

KHALED. No, I won't, I —

BARTLETT. (Interrupting.) If I have to tell you what the third thing is, I will shut you up myself. .... (25).

After abusing Khaled, physically, and forcing him to shut up, Bartlett and Carl start a conversation with each other, paying no attention to the presence of Khaled. This deliberate negligence significantly symbolizes the negligence of Arab and Muslim Americans, by the U.S. government, before and after the 9/11 attacks. Khaled, who is neglected in his apartment, refers to Arabs who are neglected in the United States, the country they consider their homeland. In a series of contradictions, Bartlett and



Carl, who represent their hypocrite government, talk about immigrants very friendly as Bartlett says that he has "nothing against immigrants"(27) and declares that his "great grandfather was an immigrant"(27). Bartlett who has just prevented Khaled from speaking and stripped him of all his rights, only because he is not an American citizen but an immigrant "from shit countries" (26), who "got here two hours ago" (26), is now praising the role played by the immigrants in the United States: "This country wouldn't be anything without them. God bless every fucking one of them" (27) and he adds that his "family worked damn hard to make this country the place it is" (27).

Bartlett's schizophrenic attitude towards immigrants resembles that of the U.S. President, George W. Bush. President Bush, who declares "war on terrorism", divides the world into "us and "them", calls Iraq "axis of evil", and decides that "whether you are with us or with the terrorists", is the same person who uses kind remarks about Arabs and Muslims and calls them "our fellow citizens". Sooner after the 9/11 attacks, "President Bush visited the Islamic Center in Washington, D.C., asserting that Islam was a religion of

peace and that most Muslims were not engaged in terrorist acts" (Carlisle 158). In fact, Bush's "powerful rhetoric appears bizarre to those who know of the negative impact of this president's policies on the liberty of many within his country and on the security of even more without" (Gearty 73). "Bush, who signed the USA PATRIOT Act, is also the same person who used to quote former president Abraham Lincoln speech: " '[t]hose who deny freedom to others deserve it not for themselves; and, under the rule of a just God, cannot long retain it'" (Gearty 73).

Events of the play have reached a climax with the appearance of Asfoor and the three female characters in the play: Shelly, the librarian, Beth, Khaled's ex-girlfriend, and Jean, a dancer, as the reader gets to know the list of accusations Khaled is charged off. In the introduction of the play, El Guindi noted, "Shelly, Beth, and Jean are to be played by the same actor" (10). This might be to indicate that although Shelly, Beth, and Jean have different social backgrounds, they share the same prejudiced attitude towards Arabs and Muslims. So, the three female characters symbolize the entire American citizens, whose consensus is to hate anything that is Arab or Muslim. In the course of the

events, we will discover that the indictments they accused Khaled of are mere assumptions based on the stereotyped image they know about Arabs and Muslims through the U.S. media. Bartlett and Carl's evidence of accusation are a receipt from a club, a blurred photo of someone assumed to be Khaled, a jacket, a hat, and some testimonies from Shelly, Beth, and Jean. Using the flashback technique, El Guindi skillfully merges the past with the present in an attempt to inform the reader of the role played by Shelly, Beth and Jean in accusing Khaled and linking him to Asfoor. Gamal Asfoor is a terrorist who is supposed to have been arrested and killed after the attacks of 9/11. Throughout the whole investigation, Bartlett and Carl are trying to prove Khaled guilty and that he has had a connection with Asfoor. Bartlett explains: "From his letters we know he shared similar interests with you: writing, poetry, Middle Eastern stuff, politics, radical books, porn, didn't much like women. Said some nasty things about women in his letters" (34).

The first witness to Khaled's guilt is Shelly. Shelly is a librarian in the library, which Khaled and Asfoor sometimes

visit because it is "the only library for miles, everyone uses it"( 31). In fact, Shelly says nothing as real evidence against Asfoor or Khaled that proves their being involved in the attacks of 9/11. More importantly, she does not even make sure she saw them together as Bartlett tells Khaled that "Ms. Shelly can't be definite she saw you two together" (32). The other witness is Jean Sommers, a dancer in a club Khaled is believed to have been visited before since he has a receipt from this club. Jean, who does not know either Khaled's name or Asfoor's, asserts their connection to one another. Although she twice admits that "it was dark" (46), and she barely remembers that "both of them were Middle Eastern" (47), Carl and Bartlett consider her testimony evidence proving Khaled's relationship with Asfoor.

Shelly and Jean's testimonies are influenced by the stereotyping of Arabs and Muslims after the attacks of 9/11. Before 9/11, Shelly paid no great attention to Asfoor's abnormal behavior even when he had harassed her, she did not report that assault. But when Arabs and Muslims are in the spotlight and become the focus of the government and media's attention, Shelly or Jean, like any American citizen, react according to their stereotyped image. Shelly explains,

"You know, how new information about a person suddenly makes you see the person in a different light. I'm sure if you'd told me he'd saved the lives of a family from a burning house I'd be remembering him differently" (30). Also, it seems that Jean's point of view, concerning Asfoor and Khaled's involvement in the attacks, is based on their stereotyped image. By accusing Khaled and Asfoor, Jean is taking her revenge because of feeling insulted by the men who are claimed to be Khaled and Asfoor as they did not pay her dance any attention or even did not notice her. Being influenced by their stereotyped image is obvious when Jean says: "If I had him again . . . I know what I'd do with him. Coming here to do that to us [. . .] Coming here to get off on me while all the time wanting to do shit to us. Wrapping your women in black and then sneaking in here and getting your rocks off" (47). Jean is influenced by an Orientalist point of view that presents negative stereotypes of Arab and Muslim women. Muslim woman, in the United States media and news, is represented as being veiled and wearing the burqa and is being mocked for being treated as a minority group in a Muslim patriarchal society.

Most importantly is Beth, Khaled's ex-girlfriend, whom we know later in the play that she is the one who called the FBI agents and informed them of Khaled's name. In order to take revenge on Khaled for having a "falling-out"(15) after betraying her, Beth supplies Bartlett and Carl with Khaled's photo in addition to some information that may increase their suspicion and condemn him. Before knowing what Beth has told the two FBI agents, Khaled defends himself by trying to assert that it is a personal matter that has nothing to do with politics. He asserts that his "ex holds a grudge" (35), so she is twisting truths to make Khaled pays back his betrayal. To raise their doubts towards Khaled, Beth describes Khaled, saying: "His whole life seemed to be one big lie. I don't think he has an honest bone in his body" (35). Beth adds, "He never seemed to come clean about anything. Always keeping things close to his chest, like he had another life going on. It wouldn't surprise me if he was involved" (36).

Following in their government's footsteps, Carl and Bartlett manipulate truths and facts. Despite the fact that, it is very obvious that Beth is trying to turn the tables on Khaled, and that like Shelly and Jean, she has no authentic

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evidence condemning Khaled, Carl and Bartlett are now dealing with Khaled as a real terrorist, who is already involved in the attacks, not just a suspect. Thus, Bartlett and Carl decide to harden their violent methods to force Khaled to confess his relation with Asfoor and being involved in the attacks of 9/11.

CARL. I don't think what we're doing now is getting us anywhere.

.....

CARL. No, he's going to hold off because he's fixated on some idea of procedure. He thinks there's some script we're supposed to follow and that will protect him. He'll keep us a few facts shy of the truth and piss us off. The photo is too dark. And the clothes are generic. Important, but.

BARTLETT. The receipt is pretty damning.

CARL. We need him to spill his guts.

BARTLETT. What are you suggesting?

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CARL. There's an imbalance of authority right now and we need to correct that (40-1).

Carl who believes he is fully aware of Arabs and Muslims, only because he "spent some time in the Mideast" (13), suggests changing their investigative techniques because he knows better how to deal with such people. He thinks that they deserve nothing but violence and humiliation.

BARTLETT. Carl — we're not allowed to do that.

CARL. (Gets out a small guidebook.) Actually, if we don't hit any vital organs, we can.

.....

CARL. (Reading.) "Section Eight, paragraph Two. Willful damage is not permitted but a relaxed, consistent pressure on parts of the body that may be deemed sensitive is allowed. As long as the suspect remains conscious and doesn't scream longer than ten seconds at any one time. Some bruising is allowed" (41).



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In the light of the USA PATRIOT Act and with the guidance of a guidebook which "has surprisingly useful tips" (41), Carl and Bartlett decide to practice the full of their power and authority to subjugate Khaled and force him to confess a guilt no one knows whether he has committed or not.

BARTLETT. You're suggesting what?

CARL. To bring the full weight of our authority to bear on him. With the aim of making him adjust his expectations as to what options are available to him (41).

In fact, the two agents are the best representatives of the misuse of power and authority by the United States government. Carl who pretends being calm and friendly, at the beginning of their visit, now reveals his true ugly face. He begins switching between physical and verbal violence; sometimes he humiliates Khaled by kicking him and some other times insults him verbally. Carl kicks Khaled harshly and Khaled begins to express his pain by crying and asking for neighbors' help.

CARL. Khaled. (Walks up to him.)... (Carl kicks Khaled.) .... If you were innocent, why would I have kicked you? ....The responsibility for that kick lies with your unwillingness to assume responsibility for the part we know you played. We need to know what that was.... (Khaled doubles over and and lets out a strangled cry.) .... (Khaled topples over as he lets out a more sustained cry.) .... Enough with the dramatics or I'll give you something to really scream about.

.....

CARL. It's under control. ....

.....

BARTLETT. This has to lead to something.

CARL. The info is in the bag (41-2).

Carl pays Khaled's pain no attention. Instead, he continues to insult him and accuse him of something Khaled knows nothing about. Khaled "winded; to neighbors"(42), and "starts crawling towards the door"(42) to ask for his neighbors' help. It seems that Khaled is crying not because of being kicked only, but his cry is a scream to break the

silence of all Arab Americans in order to be heard by their neighbors who symbolize Native American citizens. He may be asking them not to stop the pain of kicking, but rather to stop all the pain of racism, ethnicity, violence, hostility and invisibility.

Actions speak louder than words. However, in a post-9/11 America, words can be used easily to justify tyrant actions. Carl's aggressive actions towards Khaled contradict with his justifications. Carl does not feel sorry for being a brute, but instead, he blames Khaled for being the cause of using violent techniques. Carl resembles Bartlett in the sense that his words contradict with his resentful actions against Khaled. Carl blames Khaled for being a bad representative of immigrants: "You really give a bad name to immigrants, you know that" (42). He explains to Khaled that their actions and the new tough laws, like the USA PATRIOT Act and other laws, are some sort of counterattacks to protect their country from any further attack from the terrorists whom Khaled belongs to: "Because of you we have to pass tougher laws that stop people who might be good for us" (42-3). For the first time

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in the play, Carl speaks to Khaled in a manner that reveals the Americans' inner struggles and fears resulting from what they have experienced in the traumatic events of 9/11.

CARL. You know what I really resent? ... What you force us to become. To protect ourselves. We are decent bunch and do not want to be dragged down to your level. But no, you just have to drag us down, don't you. You have to gross us out with your level of crap. I personally hate this, you know that. I hate it when I have to beat the shit out of someone because then by an act of willful horror, whose effect on my soul I can only imagine, I have to shut out everything good about me to do my job to defend and protect (43-4).

Carl, as any American citizen, is influenced by the traumatic events of 9/11, and his words still indicate his hatred and prejudice towards Arabs and Muslims whom he pretends to know everything about so well. Although the previous quotation shows Carl as emotional and arouses our sentiment, Carl continues his abusive dehumanization of Khaled. Through stage directions, El Guindi shows the reader the most horrible scene in the play when Khaled refuses to be physically violated by the two brutes, Carl and

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Bartlett, who want to look out for a hidden tattoo that may be a sign or a secret code. Khaled's refusal goes in vain when "Carl pins him down, wrapping his arms around his chest, immobilizing his arms" (48).

Carl and Bartlett are about to leave as they have just finished examining every inch in Khaled's apartment even his body. Before they leave, the two agents informed Khaled that he is not allowed to take "any long distance trip" (49), and to expect another visit from them. Bartlett tells Khaled that they will take few things with them and he "nods to Carl to take the laptop" (49), in addition to some books. Apparently, they take the laptop and some books, but in reality, it is Khaled's dignity that has been taken. Khaled has been left with a stolen dignity and violated privacy. Khaled, the American Dreamer, wakes up suddenly to face his horrible American nightmare. He shifts from considering himself an American citizen to being a suspect alienated in his apartment. El Guindi's excellency is that he left the reader perplexed as we do not know; whether Khaled is innocent or not, or whether he is really in a relation with Asfoor or not, and most importantly, whether he is a

terrorist or not. In his introduction to *Back of the Throat*, El Guindi notes that "the ending is intentionally ambiguous. Perhaps this encounter actually took place. (In which case the agents have good cause to feel Khaled is a "person of interest," if not more.) Or, it is a mental/emotional projection of Khaled's. Either way, the idea with the ending is to say that innocent or guilty, Khaled will forever be associated with Asfoor and the attacks, and that nothing he can do or say will ever clean him" (6).

It is worth mentioning that, although El Guindi does not give any authentic evidence that proves Khaled to be a real terrorist or pose a threat to the United States security, he cunningly proves that Bartlett and Carl's actions are the epitome of real terrorism. As mentioned previously, the Federal Bureau of Investigation defines terrorism to be "the unlawful use of force or violence against persons or property to intimidate or coerce a Government, the civilian population, or any segment thereof, in furtherance of political or social objectives." Bartlett and Carl's inability to control their rage, prejudice and discriminative attitude towards Arabs and Muslims, lead them to act violently throughout most of the investigation. They use harsh

practices of violence to degrade Khaled's dignity by shifting between physical and verbal violence, simultaneously. Bartlett and Carl unlawfully use force and violence against Khaled because of his ethnicity. They insult him verbally and humiliate him physically. Astonished by the most horrible experience in his life, Khaled feels coerced, intimidated, terrified, and in pain. Therefore, according to the definition of terrorism, stated by the FBI, the two FBI agents are real terrorists.

*Back of the Throat* is a dark comedy play. The rapid progression of violence arouses fear and anxiety. In order to reduce the tension of the play's events, El Guindi "is drawn to absurdist comedy"(Wright 217). Although violence is the main theme in *Back of the throat*, humor overwhelms some of its scenes. El Guindi illustrates to Robin Wright that he resorts to absurdist comedy to tackle and tame the fear that leads to nervous laughter. El Guindi explains that "humor becomes the element most needed to clear the air and balance things out. Besides, one has to laugh sometimes just to get through it all"(Wright 217). At the beginning of their visit, Bartlett, one of the two FBI agents, hands over an

evaluation form and asks Khaled to fill it out and Khaled welcomes that. The aim of this evaluation form is "to get direct feedback from the public" (18), especially their target ones. Ironically, after misusing their authority and performing horrible acts of violence, Bartlett asserts to Khaled the importance of filling out the evaluation form as it is not a "joke"(50). This is satirical as it means that Khaled is going to file a complaint against the FBI agents to the FBI that permits them to mistreat him.

El Guindi ends his play with Khaled and Asfoor, alone on the stage, after the two FBI agents have left. Asfoor says a monologue to which Khaled pays no attention. In this monologue, Asfoor explains the importance of learning the English language. He also explains that he fails to achieve his dream of learning English. It seems that Asfoor's dream symbolizes the failure of all Arab Americans to achieve their American Dream.

ASFOOR. . . . I have need to — to learn . . . . When first I came to this country—I not know how to speak . . . . But in my head? It is a river of beautiful speech. Like in Arabic. Arabic is ... It is the way into my heart. But everywhere . . . is English . . . . Even back home, before I



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come, I hear it more and more in people who do not speak it. I say, I must learn language that is everywhere . . . . What if I know it? . . . I want to learn . . . . (50).

In this monologue, Asfoor regrets not learning a language during his life. He wonders, "what if I know it?" Maybe he is not a real terrorist who has been indulged in these attacks as a result of his ignorance of the English language. Or, maybe he does not know how to defend himself since he knows no English. The end of the play is ambiguous as El Guindi left his audiences and readers perplexed whether Khaled and Asfoor are real terrorists or not, or, whether they have known each other or not. By the end of the play, *Back of the Throat* evokes the readers' and audiences' catharsis. According to Britannica.com, "Catharsis" is the purification or purgation of emotions (especially pity and fear) primarily through art. In [criticism](#), [catharsis](#) is a [metaphor](#) used by [Aristotle](#) in his [Poetics](#) to describe the effects of true [tragedy](#) on the spectator. The use is derived from the medical [term](#) *katharsis* (Greek: "purgation" or "purification"). Aristotle states that the purpose of tragedy is

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to arouse “terror and pity” and thereby affect the catharsis of these emotions. (Britannica) After reading or watching *Back of the Throat*, readers or audiences feel pity and fear. They feel pity for Khaled and Asfoor and fear that they may face the same destiny as them.

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