Fortifying the Roar of Women:
Betty Shamieh and the Palestinian-American Female Voice

Thesis

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Abstract

Palestinian-American playwright Betty Shamieh has written over fifteen plays, earned recognition for her cultural awareness, and is currently writing her first novel. Her plays *Roar, Chocolate in Heat, The Black Eyed*, and *Territories* all challenge the popular cultural myths surrounding Arab-American women living in the United States. Using complex Arab female characters, Shamieh emphasizes identity and assimilation issues. Her female characters are eager to lead productive lives in the United States as opposed to fulfilling traditional societal roles.

In this thesis, I outline Betty Shamieh's early career as a playwright and analyze the strong, non-traditional Arab female characters in these four plays. I will evaluate the struggle women with hyphenated identities experience when attempting to blend into a new culture by defining these female characters and the non-conforming roles they portray. These women declare their own individual opinions using powerful voices that will not be silenced.
Dedication

I dedicate this document to my parents. Thank you for all of your love and support.
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Chapter 1: Betty Shamieh and the Palestinian-American Female Voice

Playwright, author, screenwriter, and performer Betty Shamieh accepted the American Task Force on Palestine (ATFP) Award for Excellence in the Performing Arts on October 20, 2010. The audience at ATFP’s Fifth Annual Gala included Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton (who provided the keynote address), fellow ATFP honoree for Excellence in the Performing Arts Naomi Shihab Nye, and Palestinian comedian Maysoon Zayid. Shamieh informed the audience:

I was told all my life by Palestinians and non-Palestinians that I would never make it in American Theatre if I ever talked about Palestine. That it would be impossible for me to have an impact or a voice. Whatever small success I have achieved has been in spite of the constant messages of defeatism that are rife within our community.

In her acceptance speech, Shamieh went on to recognize the artistic achievements of the Palestinian-American community. She emphasized the importance of teaching young Palestinians about their culture and utilizing the arts to tell these particular stories. In her ATFP award speech, she also said: “The arts are an essential part of every part of the assimilation of every ethnic group in America” (American). As a Palestinian-American female playwright, Shamieh realizes the significance of creating relevant and compelling

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1 For more information on the American Task Force on Palestine in Washington, D.C. please consult http://www.americantaskforce.org/about_us
stories.\textsuperscript{2} In her plays, she includes difficult, ongoing questions related to political ideologies, family dynamics, and identity issues. Shamieh refuses to submit to fear of failure or criticism. Instead, she feels compelled to write about these issues she has been told to suppress. As of April 2012, Shamieh has written fifteen plays, a screenplay, and is currently in the process of completing her first novel.\textsuperscript{3} Shamieh’s plays all differ in theme, form, and structure, yet there is a consistent, assertive, critical-thinking, Arab-American female voice. She strives to emphasize Arab-American women’s ability to articulate their opinions and to elucidate Arab and American social issues. The Arab-American female characters in Shamieh’s plays possess self-assured, resilient voices. These women refuse to be subservient. Rather than identifying themselves with traditional roles such as wife or mother, they actively debate the social injustices within their community. The Arab-American women in Shamieh’s plays function as active individuals who desire their own independence in male-dominated communities. Shamieh explains: “Arab Americans have always been part of the fabric of the cultural scene in America, but we’re for the first time talking about issues, about our identity, more than just trying to assimilate” (qtd. in Baron).

Shamieh’s contributions to Middle Eastern American theatre have earned her a good deal of recognition.\textsuperscript{4} In May, 2011, The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) recognized Shamieh as a recipient of the “Young Artist for Intercultural Dialogue and Western Worlds” (United). Twenty artists under the

\textsuperscript{2} The terms “Palestinian-American” and “Arab-American” will function as interchangeable terms. Betty Shamieh shared with me via email on March 31, 2012 that she sees Palestinian-Americans as a “subset” of the Arab-American community.

\textsuperscript{3} Please consult Appendix A to see a chronological list of Shamieh’s plays.

\textsuperscript{4} A comprehensive list of Shamieh’s awards/recognitions is available in Appendix B.
age of thirty-five received this award. These individuals were acknowledged for their skill in addressing cross-cultural, “widely appreciated” topics. In addition, Shamieh received a 2004 National Endowment for the Arts grant and was selected as a 2004 Clifton Visiting Artist at Harvard University. Shamieh was also declared a Playwriting Fellow at Harvard University’s Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Studies in 2006. Her extensive recognition illustrates the significance of her work.

Shamieh acknowledges her supportive family for providing her with the encouragement and confidence to write about Arab-American themes in her plays. The artistic opportunities presented to her during her early childhood inspired Shamieh to pursue a career in the arts. Shamieh’s father and mother immigrated to San Francisco, California during the mid 1960’s (Shamieh, E-Mail, 1 April 2012). They emigrated from Ramallah and Jerusalem, respectively. Shamieh’s father studied engineering at San Francisco State University while her mother studied health science. Both of her parents embraced the arts and encouraged their daughter to attend local theatre events. A local high school production of the musical Godspell, by Stephen Schwartz and John-Michael Tebelak, instilled in Shamieh the desire to write and to perform. Immediately she became aware of her own artistic skills. While she was still in middle school, Shamieh trained and performed with several local San Francisco theatre companies (Shamieh, E-Mail, 1 April 2012). Although Shamieh enjoyed performing, her desire to write often took precedence. As a student at Mercy High School, she developed and sharpened her skills as a writer (Aslam). In 1992, her first play, One Arabian Night, was a finalist at the San

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5 All e-mails were written directly to the author, Betty Shamieh.
Francisco’s Young Playwrights Festival. In an interview with The Montreal Review, Shamieh shares her reason for selecting playwriting as her profession: “Playwriting allowed me the opportunity to express myself, but also collaborate with others” (Aslam).

To prepare herself for a career in playwriting, Shamieh applied for various playwriting, theatre, and English programs within the United States. She studied three years at University of California, Berkeley and then transferred, as a junior, to Harvard University. Shamieh notes: “I applied to transfer to Harvard on a whim; partially because I was interested in moving [someday] to New York and felt it would be easier to transition to the East Coast if I attended college there” (Shamieh, E-Mail, 1 April 2012). As an undergraduate student at Harvard, Shamieh began to explore her identity as a playwright. In 1995, Shamieh’s first play One Arabian Night was performed at Harvard University. The Harvard Crimson student critic wrote: “One Arabian Night, by Betty Shamieh ’96, is both bold and honorable in trying to address the ways in which Arab-American women must negotiate their sexuality within American and Arab-American society” (Gideonse). However, the reviewer also criticized several aspects of the production calling the plot “heavy-handed” and remarked on the actors’ struggle to believably portray their characters. Despite this criticism, Shamieh still knew she wanted to write. After graduating, Shamieh applied for the playwriting program at the Yale School of Drama. She was accepted and studied playwriting at Yale from 1997-2000. She recalls: “To me, getting into Yale Drama was a very important step in my career as a playwright. I knew that I wanted to study playwriting at Yale when I was in high school” (Shamieh, E-Mail, 1 April 2012).
As a graduate student, Shamieh shared her Middle Eastern themed plays with a select few. During this time, she questioned whether or not these plays would resonate well with an American audience. The *Harvard Crimson* review of *One Arabian Night* reminded her that theatre critics in the professional world may be even more critical. Shamieh remarks in the introduction to her 2008 play *The Black Eyed*: “I wanted to be smart about my career choices. . . . until I felt safe, which is hard to feel when you’re in your early twenties anyway, particularly if you are a minority trying to break into a field where few or no members of your race are working” (7). As a result, she began to experiment with different dramatic structures and forms to enhance the complexity of her work. She challenged herself by writing each play on independent thematic subjects. She used contrasting stylistic structures as well. She explains in her introduction to *The Black Eyed*:

One of my first works was a one-act written in blank verse in which Shakespeare’s tragic characters come to life in order to harass him into changing the endings of their stories. I mention this to highlight that, from my earliest days as a writer, I wrote plays that dealt with my ethnic identity and plays that did not. I continued to do so in graduate school, but I chose not to have my plays that dealt with Arab-American themes be produced. I didn’t want to be pigeonholed. I had seen what usually happened to writers of color and I didn’t like it one bit. Initially, a colorful playwright gets perhaps a bit more attention and has access to a few more grants, but, over the course of a career, it seemed that it was the writers who were seen as ‘truly’ American who were being sustained. Their works were viewed as universal. (7)

Upon graduating from Yale, Shamieh became concerned as to whether her plays would be accepted in a non-academic environment. She considered potential misconceptions which may arise from her plays about Arab-American women. She shared: “Because of my background, people tend to assume that my plays have an underbelly of propaganda
or agitprop which I find extremely frustrating” (qtd. in Reilly). In spite of this, Shamieh soon began to realize that her most emotionally compelling stories involved her own Palestinian-American identity. She elaborated on this insight by writing *The Black Eyed*. During an interview with *Time Out/New York* writer Diane Snyder, Shamieh said: “I was really interested in sinking my teeth into what it was like being a Palestinian-American living in New York after 9/11. I realized that to write political theater with any sort of sense of humor, or humanity, you have to put it in a cultural historic context” (qtd. in Alliance).

It was also at this time in Shamieh’s life that she met an up-and-coming producer named Scott Elliot (Reilly). Elliot founded and currently serves as Artistic Director for the Off Broadway theatre organization The New Group. The New Group produced Shamieh’s 2004 critically acclaimed play *Roar*. Shamieh recalls: “*Chocolate in Heat* and *Roar* were my first works that were produced in New York, and *Roar* became the first play by a Palestinian-American playwright to premiere Off Broadway. Both were plays that I had written, but never shown to anyone in their entirety, while I was a graduate student” (qtd. in Hill 269). After having her plays produced, Shamieh regained the confidence to include Arab-American themes within her plays.

To date, Shamieh has written fifteen plays and earned several awards; however, little has been written on her contributions to Middle Eastern American theatre. As of April 2012, two dissertations include a chapter addressing Shamieh’s theatrical contributions. Dalia Basiouny’s 2009 *The Powerful Voice of Women Dramatists in the Arab American Theatre Movement* and Maysoun Freij’s 2008 *The Lighter Side of Evil:*
*Arab American Artists in New York* provide an overview of the emergence of Arab-American female writers and performers before and after 9/11. Basiouny introduces fifteen Arab-American playwrights/writers and the stylistic choices they each incorporate into their works. She analyzes Betty Shamieh’s characters in *Chocolate in Heat* and *The Black Eyed*. Basiouny describes the stylistic choices Shamieh incorporates in these two plays to convey character, thought, and action. In *The Lighter Side of Evil: Arab American Artists in New York*, Freij outlines the career of Arab-American female writers, performers, filmmakers, comedians, and musicians living in New York City from 2003-2006. Freij searches for similar patterns revealed within these female artists’ work. Freij attended two staged readings of Betty Shamieh’s *The Black Eyed* at Alwan for the Arts in New York in 2004 and at New York Theatre Workshop in 2007. Freij incorporates discussions of these staged readings in her dissertation to address the process and audience reception of plays with Arab-American themes.

In addition to Basiouny and Freij’s dissertations, two published anthologies contain sections on Shamieh. *Shattering the Stereotypes: Muslim Women Speak Out*, is divided into six parts: Non-Fiction, Poetry, Journalism, Religious Discourses, Fiction, and Plays. In addition to Shamieh’s play, three other plays are included in the anthology: Bina Sharif’s *An Afghan Woman*, Maryam Habibian’s *Forugh’s Reflecting Poll: The Life and Work of Forugh Farrokzad*, and Maniza Naqvi’s *That Sara Aziz!* Also, Shamieh is the only non-Muslim woman represented in *Shattering the Stereotypes*. Editor Fawzia Afzal-Khan writes in her introduction, “Playing with Images, or Will the

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6 Sharif’s play is currently titled *Afghan Woman*. 

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RE(A)EL Muslim Woman Please Stand Up, Please Stand Up?” about her reason for including Shamieh: “Betty is a Christian Palestinian-American woman, and I decided to include her play, which is structured with interrelated vignettes, because it shows that the issues which are so important in the work of the Muslim women included here are not ‘Muslim’ issues alone” (16). Shamieh’s work is also acknowledged in Salaam. Peace, an anthology dedicated to the work of Middle Eastern American playwrights. Editors Holly Hill and Dina Amin provide an overview of Middle Eastern American theatre groups in the United States prior to and subsequently following 9/11. They also include descriptions of each of the writers whose plays appear in the anthology. They address Shamieh’s early career as a writer leading up to her inspiration to create The Black Eyed. Shamieh’s play, The Black Eyed is published within Salaam. Peace. Hill and Amin selected writers they felt reflected the future direction of Middle Eastern American theatre. Playwright Tony Kushner writes: “The seven enormously talented playwrights chosen by Hill and Amin share a tough-minded refusal of both silence and self-pity, and an insistence on the necessity of incarnating, as writing for the theatre is meant to do, political, historical and theological complexities in human beings and bodies” (qtd. in Jacobs). Although Arab-American women were beginning to voice their opinions, 9/11 caused them to question whether the public wanted to hear them.

It required a great deal of perseverance for these female writers to be acknowledged prior to 9/11. Holly Hill writes in her chapter “New Threads” “that mainstream theatres weren’t producing much Middle Eastern work before 9/11” (xvi). In fact, the only Middle Eastern-American play Hill was familiar with prior to 9/11 was
Shamieh’s *Chocolate in Heat* (xiv). Despite the lack of interest from mainstream theatre producers, several writers and performers within the Arab-American community formed theatre groups prior to 9/11 in order to produce plays of their own selection. *The New York Times* literary critic Liesl Schillinger writes: “Most of these writers work independently, but in the summer of 2001, a handful of them in New York-- playwrights, actors and directors -- formed a collective called Nibras, Arabic for lantern” (2004). Najla Said, the daughter of Palestinian-American theorist Edward W. Said, founded the theatre group Nibras along with Leila Buck, Maha Chehlaoui, Dahlia Sabbour, Omar Koury and Afaf Shawwa (Hill xxi). Leila Buck, a Lebanese-American performer and playwright said: "Initially, we were like, 'Wow, there are seven Arab-American theater artists?' Who knew?" (qtd. in Hill xxi). Their devised piece, called *Sajjil*, was developed in June 2001 and was performed at the New York Fringe Festival in 2002. The production centered on the word “Arab” and the common associations which come to mind when hearing that particular word. Nibras used tape recorders to interview the public and to ask them their opinions on the term “Arab.” The group then would use these responses to re-enact each interviewee’s responses on-stage. According to Najla Said: "The point we were trying to make was that Arab culture is linked to Islamic culture, but not all Arabs are Muslim, and not all Muslims are Arab; and not all people from the Middle East are Arab; that we're a varied culture” (qtd. in Hill xxii). *Sajjil* won the New York International Fringe Festival’s Best Ensemble Award. Maha Chehlaoui, director of *Sajjil* noted: “People at that time were hungry for any work by actual Middle Eastern people…*Sajjil* brought a lot of confidence to people in our company and to individuals who had been doing work alone”
Five years after their initial meeting, the members of Nibras all became resident artists at New York Theatre Workshop. A majority of Nibras consisted of female artists who would each go on to produce their own individual work as well as continue to participate in collaborative theatrical pieces.

Golden Thread Productions also started in a similar way as Nibras. In 1997, Iranian-Armenian producer, director, actress, and author Torange Yeghiazarian founded Golden Thread Productions in San Francisco, California. From 1997 to 2000, Yeghiazarian led Golden Thread, and with the help of family and friends, she ensured her company maintained access to rented theatre spaces. This was not an easy task for her as she was also working full-time as a medical researcher. In 1999, Golden Thread began to hold events for the public to observe staged readings of one-act plays. This eventually became the annual ReOrient Festival. In 2001, Yeghiazarian decided she would no longer pursue a career in the medical field. Instead, she dedicated all of her time toward Golden Thread Productions. The company evolved and became a not-for-profit theatre. Golden Thread’s mission statement emphasizes dedication to “exploring Middle Eastern cultures and identities as expressed around the globe [and presenting] alternative perspectives of the Middle East by developing and producing theatrical work that is aesthetically varied and politically and viscerally engaging” (qtd. in Bakalian). Yeghiazarian’s work at Golden Thread provided opportunities for writers such as Shamieh to expose their work to the public. Shamieh’s work has continually been included in the Golden Thread’s Festival. In fact, Yeghiazarian states: “The ReOrient Festival helped launch the careers of such award-winning playwrights as Yussef El Guindi and Betty Shamieh at a time when very
few theatres would even consider them, Golden Thread championed their work with pride and commitment” (qtd. in Bakalian). Although Golden Thread Productions has provided an accessible outlet for Arab-American writers to display their work, there was a time when artists such as Yeghhiazarian wondered if the ReOrient Festival would continue to be as successful.

Two weeks prior to the opening of the Golden Thread’s second ReOrient Festival of Short Plays, 9/11 occurred. Golden Thread avowed: “Now more than ever it is crucial to go forward with a cultural event that we hope will foster a deeper understanding of our shared humanity” (qtd. in Hill xvii). 9/11 triggered an uncertainty in many of these Arab-American female artists. Many producers were advising them to discontinue the run of their shows. Shamieh’s play Chocolate in Heat had a successful run in August 2001 at The New York Fringe Festival and was scheduled for an extended Off Off Broadway run at Theater for the New City. Following 9/11 the Chocolate in Heat production team emphasized the importance of continuing to perform a show “that emphasized the humanity of its characters” (Shamieh Official). Despite their concern over audience response, the theatre artists were pleasantly surprised with the public’s newfound interest in their work. Yeghiazarian noted: “At least half of [Golden Thread Production’s] audiences are white and younger. We get a lot of students. We do outreach to campuses, we provide students with big discounts, we hire them as interns” (qtd. in Hill xviii). Hill also emphasizes the American public’s desire to learn more about the Middle East: “Before the 2001 terrorist attacks made the American public acutely aware of Middle Eastern people and subjects, few were interested. In September 2001, [while she was
working part-time at a Borders bookstore in Dallas, Texas] suddenly there was a huge demand for books about the Middle East, about Islam” (xvi). This unexpected interest in Arab-American literature encouraged theatre companies, such as Golden Thread, to continue their work.

Although the public was now developing more of an interest in Middle Eastern-American performance, the Arab-American community still felt tension between themselves and the American community. This caused them to question their own hyphenated identity. Schillinger wrote in her article, “The New ‘Arab’ Playwright:”

Their [Arab-American women’s] religious roots vary: they are Christian, Muslim or Zoroastrian (a faith that advocates good thoughts and deeds), and their national ancestry may be, to name a few, Iranian, Palestinian, Lebanese or Indian. But they are united by a commitment to take their hyphenated experiences to the New York stage, and by their perception that, although many of them are not Arab, that is how they often are seen in the United States at this tense moment in the country's history...

It is not surprising that their voices are only being heard lately; the women belong to a new demographic. They are breaking a path not only creatively, but socially, overcoming pressures from the immigrant community to find husbands, not agents. (1)

Arab-American women began to develop their own opinions about identity and assimilation. Columbia University Professor Berel Lang argues: “The hyphenated identity dramatizes that condition through the divided self it represents between two (or more) vying traditions or allegiances” (4). Additionally, an Arab-American woman is at risk for potential prejudice on two fronts: race and gender. As a result, there are additional social barriers to overcome. Young Arab-American women must learn to provide their peers with an explanation for their hyphenated identities. Dina Amin writes in her chapter “What’s In A Hyphen?” that:
Pure breeds usually do not need identity definitions, they are already defined... Such prefaces may typically explore definitions of hybridity and raise such questions as: ‘Can a person belong to two worlds equally? It is hard enough to understand an immediate cultural heritage, so how does one begin to understand/belong to a distant past or even an imaginary homeland?’ (x-xi)

It can be challenging for an Arab-American woman to balance two disparate cultures. If she decides to pursue a profession in which she will be visibly dominant, she may be subjected to stereotyping or misunderstanding from the public. For instance, dramatic performance can be a risky profession for Arab-American women to engage in and participate. Fawzia Afzal-Khan, editor of *Shattering the Stereotypes: Muslim Women Speak Out*, states:

> For as long as I can remember, I wanted passionately to be an actor... but it was not to be. At least, not while I was still living under my parent’s roof, a young, marriageable girl growing up in a middle-class respectable Muslim home in a traditional society like Pakistan of the 1970s and 80s, where performing on stage in full public view was akin to prostitution for the fairer sex. (14)

The negative connotations originally associated with acting on-stage still linger. An Arab woman’s parents may believe a career in the arts will lessen their daughter’s chances of a decent marriage prospect. In contrast to traditional values, many Arab-American female performers and writers challenge these expectations by allowing for their own careers to take precedence. In Shamieh’s plays, she constructs young Arab-American female characters struggling to live in accordance with the dominant majority.

In *Roar* and *Chocolate in Heat*, young Palestinian women assert their own opinions over their parents. For example, in *Roar*, Karema attempts to teach her young daughter Irene about the Palestinian culture; however, Irene would much rather purchase
designer clothes and listen to American music. N. Pawliuk writes in the study “Acculturation Style and Psychological Functioning in Children of Immigrants,” that “immigrant children, due to their exposure to mainstream culture in school and their eagerness to be accepted by their peers, often assimilate or integrate Western culture faster than their parents” (114). In a further study entitled “The Dilemma of Adolescent Arab Girls in an American High School,” Charlene J. Eisenlohr comments on the social pressures young Arab women constantly face and states: “To be accepted by peers at school, they can feel pressured to deny their own heritage” (57). This may lead to poor performance in their academic subjects (Ferran 8). In order to fit in with the norm, young Arab-American women cleverly mask their differences assuming a new identity will guarantee approval from their peers. Fawzia Afzal-Khan recalls how friends treated her differently prior to 9/11:

When I first got here as a young woman from Pakistan, I attended graduate school in Massachusetts. Back then, I was merely ‘exotic,’ a ‘dark princess from a faraway land’ . . . . I played the role to the hilt when I wanted to seduce certain gullible young men or gain entry into the homes of the rich and famous who loved showing me off as their exotic find from the East . . . . or when I wanted to get into exclusive dance clubs like the now defunct but then highly fashionable Studio 54 in Manhattan simply by going ‘native’—that is, by donning the embroidered togs, jingly ankle bracelets, and tons of silver jewelry on my neck and arms, with, of course, the requisite kohl eyeliner alluringly spread on my dark brown eyelids. (1)

Khan played up to others’ expectations as it allowed for her to temporarily have a voice, to be heard, and to be admired by her peers. Since she effectively “performed” the part of the mysterious exotic, she was now required to consistently dress and behave in accordance with this hypersexual image.
After 9/11, these alluring, exotic characteristics commonly associated with the Middle East shifted into even more undesirable stereotypes and placed the Arab community into greater yet unwanted visibility. Dina Armin writes: “This wholesale negative perception has resulted in stereotyping the denizens of this region as fanatical and religiously intolerant among others. While this attitude is not conducive to a global dialogue and understanding, it is particularly taxing on immigrants whose image in their new homelands has been tarnished by association” (x). As an aspiring Palestinian-American playwright living in New York during 9/11, Shamieh recalled:

Of course I also knew that if I produced my plays that dealt with my ethnic identity first, I would have to talk about my personal and family history, which have been very much shaped by the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Why tackle a subject as polarizing and controversial as the modern Middle East?” (qtd. in Hill 268)

Instead of fearing the conflict, Shamieh seized the opportunity to comment on identity issues and political conflict in her plays (16). It is important to understand the basic foundations of the Arab-Israeli conflict in order to fully grasp the tension an Arab immigrant may experience when assimilating.

The Arab-Israeli conflict is straightforward and yet complex. David Ben Gurion, the first Prime Minister of Israel, said in 1919: “But now everybody sees that there is no solution to this question…We as a nation, want this country to be ours, the Arabs, as a nation, want this country to be theirs” (qtd. in Middle). Throughout the 1800’s, the Zionists colonized the area of Palestine to create a Jewish state. Immediately, conflict

began to arise due to the sudden increase in Jewish immigrants in the Arab region. As a result, violence and hostility between both of the groups escalated. The fighting became so constant and widespread that the United Nations attempted to resolve the situation. However, they opted to allow an outside country, Britain, to make the decisions regarding the division of land.

This UN Partition Plan resulted in even more conflict since a greater quantity of Palestinian land was given away to form a Jewish State. At that time, the Palestinians outnumbered the Jewish population, and yet they were forced out of their land after the UN Partition Plan took effect. The British Government’s introduction of The Balfour Declaration complicated these land entitlement issues even further. This declaration, issued by Britain in 1917, supported the Jewish people making Palestine their national homeland as long as they did not violate the Arab communities’ civil and religious rights. However, the conflict would prove to be ongoing as there continued to be a disagreement on both sides regarding who the land belonged to as both the Palestinians and Jewish population believed it to be their rightful homeland.

After World War II, the Jewish population was significantly affected by the death toll from The Holocaust. This resulted in increased pressure from the Zionists to further permit Jews to immigrate to the region of Palestine. Previously the British had restricted Jewish immigration, but after The Holocaust, the Zionists believed it would benefit displaced Jews to immigrate to Palestine. On November 29, 1947, the United Nations adopted Resolution GA 181 which divided Palestine into two equal parts: a Jewish state
and an Arab state with open borders. This was a plan destined for failure, particularly because the Jewish state accepted the plan whereas the Arab community rejected it.

All of this political tension contributed to the 1947-1949 War. The Israeli forces outnumbered the Palestinians and were therefore able to take over the majority of the land as well as enforce their cultural norms upon the non-Jewish communities. The Palestinians were isolated from political involvement and no longer permitted to identify themselves with their land. Later, as a result of the 1967 War, Israel succeeded in occupying the rest of the Palestinian land. This included the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. Again, the Palestinians were isolated. Palestinians believed they had been forced out of the land they had occupied for centuries, and they lacked the resources, community, and opportunities to sustain their social integrity. In contrast, the Jewish people believed this was actually their ancestral homeland and also felt the need to relocate after the afflictions committed against their community during The Holocaust. Both sides wanted to re-establish their communities after massive loss and destruction. This is what makes it very difficult to solve this continuous issue.

Many writers have used elements from the Arab-Israeli conflict to address social issues. For example, Palestinian-American and post-colonial theorist, Edward W. Said, describes undesirable characteristics typically associated with the Arab community as a result of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict:

The life of an Arab Palestinian in the West . . . is disheartening . . . the web of racism, cultural stereotypes, political imperialism, dehumanizing ideology holding in the Arab or the Muslim is very strong indeed, and it is this web which every Palestinian has come to feel as his uniquely punishing destiny. (27)
Said also notes: “Every writer on the Orient assumes some Oriental precedent, some previous knowledge of the Orient, to which he refers and on which he relies” (42). These stereotypical images of Arab-Americans are constantly reused within Western literature and media. Said defines the Occident as the “dominant west” and the Orient as the “middle and far east.” In his opinion, the Occident possesses more control over the Orient. It is a “relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of a complex hegemony” (7). Said also addresses the problematic habit of grouping individuals of Middle Eastern descent and labeling them as “the Other” (45). This stems from dominant ideologies perpetuated throughout the Western world. These favored dominant values, present in leading institutional organizations, can prevent ethnic minority groups from ever fully succeeding. Said believes Western writers have “discovered and in a sense invented the Orient. . . .Orientalism reveals more about the West and its fantasies than it does about the actual people, culture, and history of the East” (52). According to Said, these misconceptions mark the Arab people as inhumane and deceitful (41). Therefore, the Arab-American voice is silenced due to fear and misunderstanding. Said attempts to prove that these are inaccurate social constructions of the Arab community and they are by no means realistic representations. Palestinian writers, including Shamieh, believe Said contributed to global awareness about their community. In 2002, Said attended the first public reading of Shamieh’s play The Black Eyed. Shamieh remarked: “His support emboldened me. I have no doubt I could not do the work I do if he hadn’t paved my way” (qtd. in Hill 275). The Palestinian community, regardless of gender, worked together to produce introspective texts that were applicable to global issues.
Shamieh discovered non-Palestinian theatre writers to also be supportive of Arab-American rights despite the risk of public criticism. She credits Tony Kushner, an American, Jewish playwright, as one of her inspirations to write. She states: “Tony continually inspires me to be a better artist and a better person” (qtd. in Hill 275). In June 2002, several American playwrights including Shamieh, Kushner, Naomi Wallace, and Kia Corthron traveled to the Palestinian Occupied Territories to learn more about Palestinian theatre artists. Their research findings were compiled in the 2003 “On the Road to Palestine.” Kushner’s active search to discover solutions for the Arab-Israeli conflict have resulted in some criticism. In 2011, Kushner was refused an honorary degree from City University of New York. A single trustee member perceived Kushner’s verbal and written statements regarding politics to be anti-Israel. Particularly controversial were Kushner’s political statements in a 2002 interview: “I deplore the brutal and illegal tactics of the Israeli Defence (sic) Forces in the occupied territories. I deplore the occupation, the forced evacuations, the settlements, the refugee camps, the whole shameful history of the dreadful suffering of the Palestinian people; Jews, of all people, with our history of suffering, should refuse to treat our fellow human beings like that” (Sidman 3). By expressing his opinion, he immediately received criticism and was initially refused his right to an honorary degree. If this happened to a popular male playwright, is it possible for an Arab-American female writer to freely speak upon political issues if she also risks censorship and criticism? Also, if men tend to dominate the field of playwriting, and if someone as revered as Tony Kushner receives overt disapproval, this produces an even greater challenge for an Arab-American female.
playwright to publicize her work, especially if it deals with political topics. This may prevent women, in particular Arab-American women, from speaking out on issues they feel passionate about for fear of retaliation. Although City University of New York and a majority of trustee members did not support this decision to revoke Kushner’s honorary degree, this situation makes it challenging for Kushner to continue supporting and writing about Palestinian social issues.

Due to the fear of failure, many female writers remain unknown and unproduced. This significantly limits a diverse range of voices within the theatre. Although there is a high chance of public disagreement, Shamieh proves that a Palestinian-American woman is capable of asserting herself in politics and that a female perspective on social issues constructs additional, valuable meanings. Betty Shamieh confirms that a Palestinian-American female writer can achieve success in the United States. After 9/11, Shamieh felt even more compelled to write upon Palestinian gender and social issues. She questioned her identity as a Palestinian-American woman living in New York as well as the reactions she may receive from non-Arabs. Although Shamieh realized Arab-American topics may produce controversy, she believed that these unheard and misunderstood stories needed to be addressed, especially after an emotionally and politically charged event such as 9/11.

In this thesis, I will analyze the Palestinian-American [Arab-American] female voice in Betty Shamieh’s plays: Roar, Chocolate in Heat, The Black Eyed, and Territories. I will provide a brief description of each play and then analyze each distinct female character’s voice. Shamieh’s Arab-American female characters often disagree on
political and social matters. I will address each character’s perspective. Roar and Chocolate in Heat both address the young Arab-American women’s attitudes on assimilating and co-existing with their peers. I will analyze the young Arab-American female perspectives on assimilation in these two plays along with the tensions they experience with their mothers and family members who desire them to embrace traditional customs. In The Black Eyed and Territories, Arab-American women seek answers to political questions and to their own identity. Although these women share different viewpoints, they are all affected by the men in their lives. I argue that Shamieh allows Palestinian-American women to function as more than mothers, wives, and subservients and instead to function as politically, socially active leaders. Shamieh’s plays Roar, Chocolate in Heat, The Black Eyed, and Territories will be used to provide insight into the Arab-American woman’s voice which is often ignored and/or misrepresented in popular culture. Betty Shamieh depicts strong-willed, outspoken female characters that refuse to be silent. Instead, they will Roar.
Chapter 2: The Struggle to Assimilate: Shamieh’s *Roar* and *Chocolate in Heat*

*Roar* opened Off Broadway and made an immediate impact. It deals with a family of outsiders who, like the Younger family in *A Raisin in the Sun*, are also struggling with the concept of assimilation. . . . although it deals largely with the Palestinian experience, *Roar* is fundamentally about the American Dream (Theatre).

Betty Shamieh’s *Roar* examines the cultural adjustments often required of an ethnic minority group assimilating to Western culture. *Roar* premiered Off Broadway on April 7, 2004. It was produced by The New Group and directed by Marion McClinton. This production starred Annabella Sciorra and Sarita Choudhury and was recognized as *The New York Times* “Critics’ Pick” in 2004. The 2004 New Group premiere of *Roar* marked the first time a theatrical work by a Palestinian-American playwright appeared Off Broadway. Additionally, it was the first play about a Palestinian-American family to premiere Off Broadway (Shamieh *Official*). By setting the play in Detroit, Michigan, during 1991, Shamieh is able to illustrate the social struggles of Palestinian-Americans. In 1991, there was a significant increase of Arab-American immigrants living in
America, particularly in Michigan. Many Arab-American families arrived in Dearborn, Michigan, to begin a new life. Andrzej Kulczycki writes in the article “Deepening the Melting Pot: Arab-Americans at the Turn of the Century:” “The suburb of Dearborn is home to the largest concentration of Arab immigrants in North America” (6). These Arab-Americans were aware that a majority of Americans felt unsettled about their presence due to the constant depiction in the news of their perceived role in the Gulf War. Shamieh depicts this tension between the Arab and the American communities by setting her play Roar in the wake of the first Gulf War. In Roar, Shamieh addresses the challenges Arab-American women face when trying to assimilate.

Shamieh depicts a Palestinian-American family struggling to manage a small business in Detroit, Michigan, as well as establish themselves as successful musicians. After leaving their home in Jordan in the wake of the First Gulf War, Karema and Ahmed Yacoub desperately want to settle their family in the United States, yet find it extremely difficult to develop their own identity and still accepted by their community. Their store “Ahmed’s Liquor and Snacks” sells American-based products, and Shamieh emphasizes in her stage directions that “there is one [of these types of stores] on practically every corner of downtown Detroit” (1). The Yacoubs realize that in order to maintain a sufficient income, they need to sell items that will be pleasing to the majority. Although Karema and Ahmed Yacoub find it difficult to fit in with their new surroundings, their teenage daughter, Irene, seems to be more easily acclimated to the American lifestyle.
Irene is a young Palestinian-American teenager who wants to have a successful career as an American blues singer. She enjoys wearing designer clothes, listening to popular music, and following stylish new trends (Roar 37). Irene, with the support of her father, performs in open mike nights at local Detroit venues. In order to construct Irene’s identity as a Western blues singer, her father, Ahmed, suggests she identify herself as Egyptian on her open-mike night programs. When her mother questions this decision, Ahmed says: “Irene sings the blues and that’s an African American thing. Egypt is part of Africa, Palestine is technically—part of Asia. . . . a blues singer with roots in the continent of Africa is an easy package to sell. Come on, Karema. Who in America has ever heard of a Palestinian blues singer? (5). Irene finds it necessary to disassociate herself with her Palestinian culture to ensure she will be accepted by Western music producers and audiences. Instead of embracing her unique identity, Irene believes she needs to acquire a more “normal” identity which will allow her to blend in with the majority. Irene tells her Aunt Hala: “My dad wants me to pretend to be Egyptian in case it might make it easier for my uncle to help me in my career” (8). Although Irene’s uncle is a local music producer, Karema forbids her family to associate with Abe because he has also masked his Palestinian identity. He is passing for an Egyptian Jew so he appears more likable to potential clients. Karema does not want her daughter to follow her uncle’s direction. Karema attempts to teach Irene about her Palestinian culture, but Irene really has no interest to learn. Her mother encourages her to learn Arabic music but Irene

refuses: “Nice of you to offer, but I can’t. You see, this really important music producer is interested in my work and he’s going to call any day now” (19). She does not want learning Arabic music to interfere with her aspirations to become an American blues singer. Also, Irene possesses assumptions about her culture which she most likely obtained from her peers at school. For example, she describes a whistling tea kettle to her Aunt Hala. Hala responds: “We have whistling tea kettles in Kuwait” (18). Irene says to her: “Sorry. I didn’t know. It seems kind of Third World to me” (18). Irene also finds Kuwaiti men to be rather undesirable: “I would not want to get with a Kuwaiti guy. They’re darker than we are. Weird-looking, too. Why do they wear those dresses and scarf thing-y’s on their heads?” (9). Irene has adopted the assumptions and language of her peers, and her family finds it difficult to teach her about their own heritage.

Although Irene initially has no desire to learn about her family’s customs, she gradually becomes more informed and appreciative throughout the course of the play. Like Karema, Hala also desires for Irene to understand her Palestinian culture. Hala encourages Irene: “You look like an Arab. You’ve got to live like one” (13). During one of their Arab music sessions, Hala asks Irene why singing is the only profession she is currently considering. Irene responds: “A homeless woman used to sing Billie Holiday for change on our corner. I’d rush home after school to sit in that window and listen—Mom didn’t let me play outside. Her voice made me want to live on the streets. In my mind, I connected being homeless with being able to sing like that” (30). As a Palestinian-American woman, Irene feels disconnected from her peers and desperately wants to find her place in society. She associates singing with personal expression and
desires to be heard. However, she soon realizes that in order to express herself, she cannot deny her race. As Hala continues to share her Arabic music, Irene begins to enjoy learning Arabic music. When discussing her music career with her Uncle Abe, Irene mentions: “I was planning on changing my name to something easier to pronounce,” in which he responds, “No! Don’t do that. It’s not necessary. If you make people money, trust me, they learn to pronounce your name. Don’t try to mask who you are, because, if you do, nothing you achieve will be worth a damn” (68). At first, Irene concerns herself with public approval; however, she begins to value her unique background as a Palestinian-American woman. She exclaims to her mother: “Maybe—out of the million of songs I’ll make—there will be one or two that is the kind of song that, when you hear the first note, you know you have to stick around to hear the last” (72). Although Irene refuses, at first, to learn about her cultural background, she eventually develops an appreciation for her culture through Arabic music.

In contrast to Irene, Karema has always hoped for her resistant daughter to become more aware about Arab culture. She shares with her sister, Hala: “I’ve got an idea. While you’re here...you can make yourself useful. You can teach Irene how to sing the mow’alla’at...Traditional Arabic songs. For every day you spend here, Hala, you will spend one hour teaching Irene. Starting tomorrow” (17). At first, Irene is resistant to learn this traditional Arabic song, yet she soon becomes excited by the idea of learning a new skill. Although Karema disapproves of Irene concealing the fact she is Palestinian on her open mike night programs, she is also supportive of her daughter. Karema calls the music producer on the phone to see if he is interested in working with Irene: “I’m calling
because I want to see if he would be more interested in working with her if I paid for everything it cost for him to help her” (39). When she is informed it will cost six hundred thousand dollars to produce a record, she attempts to negotiate. However, they refuse her offer. Karema replies: “I have to tell my daughter your boss doesn’t want to work with her. You tell people that all the time, so I was wondering if you could tell me…how to tell my daughter in a way that won’t hurt her?” (39). Karema is hopeful that Irene will focus less on music and more on her school work, but she also wants her daughter to be happy and to pursue a career of her choice. She just does not want Irene to mask who she truly is. Karema despises the fact Abe pretended to be a Moroccan Jew in order to be successful in the music business, and she does not wish for Irene to follow his example. Whenever anyone mentions Abe, she exclaims: “I don’t want his name mentioned in my house!” (8). Despite her belief that a Palestinian-American should take pride in his or her culture, she does not embrace all of the traditional values.

Karema’s goal is to acquire financial and personal independence. Although she embraces traditional Arab customs, she also realizes the women are treated unfairly. She understands that Detroit apartment owners may not wish to live in apartment buildings owned by an Arab family. She persuades Ahmed to pose as the handyman in order to place less emphasis on their managing role. Nonetheless, Karema takes advantage of her new life in Detroit and begins to demonstrate her business skills. In the first scene of Roar, Karema “sits at a table, methodically counting large stacks of money” (1). It is clear that Karema takes care of financial matters in the Yacoub household. She not only manages the liquor and snack store but also owns the apartment buildings they help
supervise. Her husband, Ahmed, informs Hala about his wife’s business skills: “Karema saves every penny to buy property and property always goes up” (20). Karema has spent a significant portion of her life taking care of her irresponsible sister and trying to support her unappreciative husband. When she discovers Hala and Ahmed are having an affair, she forces him out of their home. She tells Ahmed as she throws a cleaning tool given to him by his father: “Fuck you and your father! Get out of this house!” (58). At this point, Karema no longer wants to be used by her sister for money or to permit a man who no longer loves her to remain in her home. She tells Hala: “Money from the store has been feeding your face for the past week. It’s not always a good idea to fuck what feeds you” (38). Karema detaches herself from her husband and sister because they are threatening her financial and personal stability.

Hala has a different attitude than her sister Karema. Hala asserts her opinions whenever possible and embraces her sexual independence, but there is much more complexity and emotional struggle to her character that she is unwilling to reveal. She calls Karema and tells her she will be staying at their home for some time. Karema is not certain about the reasoning behind her visit, but she suspects she is in need of financial support. Upon arriving at the Yacoub’s home in Detroit, Hala boasts: “Oh, by the way, an American man asked me to marry him on the plane…it’s nice to know that American men appreciate my charms as much as Arabs” (7). Hala emphasizes her ability to seduce men and uses her sexuality to her advantage. She declares to Irene and Karema: “Judge [a man] by how quickly he is ready to get undressed and when you use that as your standard, you’ll find that men are the same no matter where you go. Unless you can make
men fall in love with you the way they fall in love with me” (10). Irene comments: “I’m sure you had a lot of, you know, wild times in Kuwait, Aunty. Tell me everything” (8). Although Irene is unwilling at first, Hala begins to teach her Arabic music and Palestinian culture. Hala begins to translate Arabic lyrics for Irene. One set of lyrics, “Junnelee wa Kudoo Aynaya,” emphasizes the importance of singing out loud and with passion. Hala says: “When you translate it, it’s more like . . . I’m going to hum and sing and roar, make my listeners drunk on sound” (31).

The truth about Hala’s present situation is soon unraveled. Karema asks Hala: “Are the rumours true? We heard the Kuwaiti men threw all the Palestinian women out into the streets.” (14). However, Hala is resistant at first to share her life in Kuwait. Instead, she changes the subject: “No, of course not. It was a really boring takeover. At first, I thought there was going to be some action! You know I’ve always had a thing for Iraqi men. Now, Jordanians are another story . . . You should have seen the one at the American embassy I had to fuck to get to a visa to come here” (14). Hala is prone to fabricating stories so she does not have to reveal the painful truth. She has been emotionally affected by the men in her life, and overemphasizes her sexuality to appear desirable. Her most recent Kuwaiti love interest, Muhammed, no longer wants her because it is “unpatriotic to have a Palestinian piece of ass” (14). She soon reveals that due to Iraq’s invasion in Kuwait, the women were forced out of the state. Unlike her exaggerated stories about the men in her life, she does not overtly discuss the Kuwait conflict. She shares with Karema: “While I’m here . . . let’s get one thing straight. I’m not going to talk about things I don’t want to talk about. You don’t really want to know what
went on in Kuwait. You think you do, but you don’t” (16). Although Karema and Hala often have a tense relationship, they both survived living in a Jordanian refugee camp during Black September. Hala recalls the painful memories: “Hussein—I won’t call him king, I won’t call any man king—sent his soliders to clean up the camps of revolutionaries. . . . we were living through a Black September but we didn’t know it—we thought we were just having breakfast—and in they came and I see them hit and hit and hit my dad and my mom is crawling” (47). Hala is affected by her lack of a consistent place to call home and she grapples with her identity. She believes Abe will make her feel wanted again, and she is desperate to regain his romantic interest so she will be assured a secure life: “I hurt his pride, so I’ll give up mine. I’ll beg for him” (25).

Hala’s urgency to obtain a sense of security propels her to develop a closer relationship with Ahmed. They recall their past memories in Jordan when Ahmed would perform his music. Hala compliments his past success: “You were really something. I bet if you went back today and started holding concerts, people would come out in droves” (21). As Ahmed and Hala frequently reminisce, her desire for Abe lessens and she becomes attracted to the possibility of returning to Jordan with Ahmed. Also, Abe no longer wants a romantic relationship with Hala. She tells Ahmed: “I wanted to have a home with him. And children! Never wanted things like that before. Then, I did. All at once, so sharply, like a person born blind who figures out that everyone else can see. But he said he never really loved me in the first place” (41).

Her emptiness propels her to take action to fill her void, even if this requires having an affair with her sister’s husband. Hala urgently explains to Karema: “I need to
borrow your husband for a few weeks. . . . I need a man and I can find one quicker when
I have one on my arm… I need him, Karema. . . . You have everything” (55). Hala resents
that Karema was able to escape the political turmoil and violence in Kuwait and start a
new life in America whereas she was left behind to defend for herself. She is haunted by
her past and it affects all of her decisions and interactions with others. Tennessee
Williams’s *A Streetcar Named Desire* inspired Shamieh to write a character like Hala. In
particular, Shamieh used the character of Blanche Dubois in *Streetcar* and applied some
of Williams’s elements to a Middle Eastern story. Shamieh states: “To me, *A Streetcar
Named Desire* is about a woman who is destroyed for being overtly sexual… she is
destroyed because of her reputation… and that to me that felt like a very, very Middle
Eastern story, and I wanted to highlight that, for me, that’s a woman story and it’s about
what it is to be a woman and how easily you can become nothing in a culture [based on
your sexual experience]” (Reilly). Shamieh’s depiction of Hala is complex because her
personality is constantly shifting to adapt to her new environment and to avoid additional
pain.

I believe the three Palestinian-American characters in Shamieh’s *Roar*—Irene,
Karema, and Hala—possess contrasting female voices, and yet each of them are
influenced by dominant, masculine voices in their community. Irene is uncertain about
her cultural background and depends on her father, who wants for her to shift her identity
to appeal to the masses. Karema embraces her Arab culture and, at the same time, she
conceals these values from her local community in order to maintain her business. Hala
uses sexual dialogue to assert power over the men who have physically and emotionally
mistreated her. I observed the tension an Arab-American immigrant may experience when assimilating through examining these three female characters. When an Arab-American family arrives to a new place, they are at a risk of being labeled as “outsiders” who do not belong. I believe Shamieh’s female characters attempt to make sense of their new culture while also maintaining their own. In Roar, Shamieh’s female characters are defiant, independent, and emotionally complex Arab-American women.

**Chocolate in Heat:**

Rather than incorporating multiple, diverse female voices, as in Roar, Shamieh focuses particularly on a young Arab-American female voice in Chocolate in Heat. At its world premiere at the August 2001 New York International Fringe Festival, Chocolate in Heat instantly grabbed the audience’s attention. Although there was no budget or press agent and merely a chair as a set piece, Chocolate in Heat had sold-out crowds for its performances during its New York International Fringe Festival run. It was directed by Damen Amir Scranton and performed by Betty Shamieh and Piter Maret. In 2002, The Chocolate in Heat production and creative team prepared for an extended Off Off Broadway run at Theater for the New City. The original full title was Chocolate in Heat: Growing up Arab in America. Shamieh says: “I wanted to bill a show as an ‘ethnic’ show in which I don’t deal with race at all as a means to force the audiences to confront their own preconceived notions of what ‘ethnic’ shows entailed” (Shamieh, E-Mail, 24 April 2012). Then, September 11 happened. According to Shamieh, the subtitle “Growing up Arab in America” no longer made as much sense and she decided to remove it from the
full title. Shamieh also had to consider whether or not to continue with an extended run of the show. Despite concerns about potential hate crimes, the *Chocolate in Heat* team decided it was important to continue to support a show that addressed pertinent social issues. One year later, Sam Gold directed the Off Off Broadway run of *Chocolate in Heat* with Shamieh and Piter Maret. This production was so successful that it had a sold-out, extended run and eventually toured to universities. The tour included New York University, University of Pennsylvania, The New School, University of Illinois, University of Massachusetts at Amherst, University of Michigan at Flint, Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), and Georgetown. The Georgetown production was co-sponsored by the American Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee. When *Chocolate in Heat* opened at the American Repertory Theatre in Cambridge, Massachusetts, it was co-sponsored by the Harvard Foundation for Intercultural Relations, The Harvard Society of Arab Students and Hillel. This marked the first time ever an event at Harvard was co-sponsored by these two student groups. This is significant because it fostered collaboration between Arab and Jewish students. When 9/11 occurred, the public recalled the Arab-Israeli conflict as it was constantly being depicted in the media. These two student groups worked together to bring awareness about Arab-American social issues. Shamieh’s play extended to multiple, diverse audiences. To date, over ten thousand students have had the opportunity to see and learn about Shamieh’s *Chocolate in Heat*.

Shamieh’s performance as Aiesha earned distinguished reviews from theatre critics. Chikako Sassa wrote in *The Tech* review “Food for Thought: ‘Chocolate in Heat’ Leaves a Bittersweet Aftertaste” that “Betty Shamieh starred in three of the five
monologues as vivacious and volatile Aisha. Her stage presence is at once earnest, delightful, and charismatic, and consequently makes Aiesha endearing. Shamieh alternately dances, acts, belts out her anger with a spoken word-like cadence and flits about the stage as if consumed by a flame from within” (1). Sassa discusses Betty Shamieh’s post-performance interview: “The point of Chocolate, as Shamieh explained in a post-performance interview, is to present a show about humanity when her audience comes in expecting a show about Arabs. It is about transcending the ‘poor me’ mentality of minority issues, and also about creating roles for Arab actors that do not involve desperate and violent manners of suicide” (2). Shamieh tells stories which differ from common stereotypical associations of the Arab community. Her characters are not seeking to harm others or disrupt society. Instead, they are dealing with similar issues as the majority: broken relationships, financial matters, and social acceptance. Sassa notes in this review: “Despite current misgivings toward Arabs and Arab-Americans in the popular media, and despite the obvious cultural nuances particular to individual ethnic identities, the Arab experience actually differs little” (2). In Fawzia Afzal-Khan’s afterword, Shattering the Stereotypes in a Post-9/11 World, she writes: “Betty Shamieh gives us a taste of what it’s like to grow up Arab and female in America through a multiplicity of perspectives, thus helping shatter monolithic myths about Arab women” (326). In Chocolate in Heat, a young Arab-American woman comments on the inequalities in society and her hopes to lead an independent, productive life.

Chocolate in Heat is divided into five monologue sections—“Need,” “Love,” “Ignorance,” “Sex,” and “Justice”—yet it maintains a consistent, opinionated young
The play provides an account of Aiesha who is a young Arab-American student wanting to fit in with her peers. Each monologue provides more insight into her life as a young Arab woman living in America. It also addresses her relationships with the men around her. In the first monologue “Need” Aiesha is seeking the approval of her fellow peers. She prepares for an upcoming Society event at the university, and she speculates on an appropriate outfit to wear which will impress her friends. However, she must settle for whatever clothes are currently available at a local consignment shop as she does not have as much money as her peers. Aiesha discovers a less expensive version of her ideal outfit: red, spiked heels and a borrowed dress.

Although the shoes she purchased are half a size too small, she knows she needs them to win the approval of others and insists on buying them. Her friends are excited that Aiesha will be attending The Society event with them as she can play the part of the local exotique” (303). Aiehsa announces: “I was a scholarship kid, complete with a picture of me in my college’s propaganda pamphlets that seemed to say, ‘see this face! Here’s your proof we’re making outcasts like this one overeducated enough to know that they’ll always be underprivileged in this world!’” (“Chocolate” 303). Aiesha is aware that her identity differs from the majority, so she continually plays the part her peers expect her to enact. Acquiescing into her role as the “local exotique,” she leaps on top of the table and declares to everyone present at the event that they should all raise their glasses and “brink it and clink it with [her].” She raises her champagne glass repeatedly throughout the night.

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and everyone is amused with her clever catchphrase. She becomes quite popular with the crowd: “A thousand hands, quite a few more than necessary, lifted me on the carved oak table and asked me to make the traditional final toast as I towered and tottered above them. I raised my glass, like a Viking calling his comrades to war, and screeched, ‘To the most beautiful of the best and the brightest’” (304). As the crowd begins to disperse, she takes notice of a popular, rich young man and she leaves the event with him. This man is not a Society member; he is a cocaine addict whose father has a powerful position in the media.

Aiesha realizes playing the part of the “local exotique” has its consequences. The rich, young man, Graham, drives her to a nearby beach, and she expects he will kiss her; Instead he spits in her face and yells: “Wanna know why I can kill you and get away with it?! Cause you’re just a brown piece of…” Aiesha acknowledges in her monologue that “[she] know[s] exactly what that’s about” (305). She takes courage from some past words of wisdom from her mother—“I named you Aiesha. . . .She that lives. Bite the apple, bite into the seed till you reach the need”—and she kicks her bright red, spiked high heels into his eye: “He caught my spiked heel in his right eye, which I left lodged in him. For remembrance” (‘Chocolate’ 305). As Aiesha runs away from Graham, an Arab woman stops to see if Aiesha needs a ride home. Aiesah accepts and is grateful that the woman does not mind that she stained her “clean cream carpet” with her blood from her injury (305). Aiesha’s last lines reveal: “I left school that day, leaving only one trace, but knowing I was safe. If Graham forces the only thing I left him on each girl in the
kingdom, he won’t find who he’s looking for. The shoe never fit me” (306). Aiesha realizes the need is to always fit in with the majority but the fit may not be right.

In the following monologue, “Love” more details regarding Aiesha are provided by a Jordanian prince character. The prince is also taking classes at the same university Aiesha attends. He recalls: “The president of the Arab society was a loud girl named Aiesha who visited her homeland only once. She was extroverted, always talking, always shouting, always laughing loud, acting silly, and trying to compensate for the deep-rooted shyness whose grip on her she was desperately trying to loosen” (307). The Jordanian prince is the opposite. He keeps to himself and finds it difficult to articulate and to express his thoughts and opinions. Aiesha eagerly invites him to a dinner with the Society of Arab Students, and he accepts her invitation despite being nervous about fitting in with the group. When he arrives at the meeting location, he takes a moment to reflect before entering the room. He never opens the door. Instead, he overhears Aiesha declaring: “I would never flirt with him. I’m Palestinian, and Palestinian women don’t last long when they marry Jordanian royalty. Look at the guy’s mother. The king killed his own wife. Sabotaged her helicopter. I bet his grandmother even knew and was in on the murder” (307). Aiesha also reminds her peers: “They didn’t want a Palestinian queen in Jordan. She became too popular. Jordan is seventy percent Palestinians who don’t swear allegiance to any Jordanian king, so the King—his father—got nervous. He had to get rid of his mother” (307). Aiesha criticizes gender issues currently present in Jordan and wonders what the prince’s viewpoints are concerning these problems. Her unapologetic opinions unsettle the Jordanian prince to the point he is unable to open the door and
defend himself. He even has bodyguards on hand, but he still becomes anxious to confront Aiesha. He acknowledges that she is taking a risk expressing her opinions out loud. If she did that in Jordan territory, she could be killed (308). He leaves and never attends the student group session led by Aiesha.

As time passes, the prince realizes Aiesha is no longer at the university. He thinks to himself:

I wonder where she is, this girl who said things I had never even heard whispered out loud. I wish I answered her that day, acknowledged that I had heard what she said about my family. I wish I told Aiesha the real question is not whether or not my grandmother or my father knew that the helicopter my mother boarded was going to blow up. The real question is: Did my mother know? That day the guards, who normally spoke so softly to her and adhered to her every wish, burst in and demanded that I not board the plane with her. ‘We have orders to keep the prince here . . . your son will join you later’ . . . Did she know? Is that why she ignored the change in the guards’ tone, didn’t put up an argument, and forced me to go to my father though I always traveled by her side? All I know was my mother was firm about me staying on the ground. She wiped my tears roughly as if it could erase the cause of them. She whispered, ‘I love you. I’ll always love you,’ and left me alone. (“Chocolate” 309)

Aiesha’s opinionated statements truly vexed the Jordanian Prince and caused him to think about his past, his mother’s mistreatment, and his own identity. In his opinion, love becomes complicated by our past and our politics.

In the monologue, “Ignorance” Aiesha participates in a new arts program for inner-city girls. Her high school counselor acknowledges her intelligence and is extremely impressed with Aiesha’s high test scores. She firmly encourages Aiesha to further increase her academic skills because she has the potential to earn university scholarships (309). While attending a session at the arts program, Aiesha notices a dance class taking place in a nearby room and instantly wants to take part in it. Red, a tall black
man with an outspoken manner, realizes that Aiesha “had the nerve” to conduct her warm-up exercise in the front row. Because Aiesha asserted herself and was not afraid to take charge, all of the other dancers follow her motions [except a thin, young woman named Nina—Red’s current favorite student].

Red cannot believe that the majority of the dancers imitated the steps of an inexperienced dancer. He says: “You followed her! Every single one of you except Nina…you’ve been dancing this number for weeks. It should be in your bones. This new girl learned it today. You don’t know her. She don’t look like no dancer. She ain’t even in good shape. And you followed her!” (312). After this incident, Red forces Aiesha to remain in the back of the group. This lasts for many months. Aiesha even works as an apprentice with Red’s company—eagerly waiting her turn. Whenever she does attempt to dance, he berates her in front of the ensemble. He criticizes the awkward manner in which she holds her arms. Aiesha informs Red she is incredibly embarrassed by her large chest and that it makes it challenging to let go and dance. Red tells Aiesha: “Just don’t put yourself on stage and expect people not to look at you. Or only at the parts that you want them to. That’s not what it’s about, baby” (313). Red becomes very intrigued by Aiesha’s tenacious personality and teaches her ballet. He eventually agrees to teach her a dance he originally intended to give his most experienced dancer, Nina.

One day, Aiesha is late for a dance rehearsal with Red, and she leaves a scribbled note on his classroom door. Red is unable to understand her message letter because he cannot read and Aiesha soon discovers his secret. After this exchange, he becomes distant toward Aiesha. A new, inexperienced dancer begins taking classes with the group, and
Red begins to pay more attention to her than to Aiesha. He even says the same thing he once told Aiesha. When the new dancer forgets a step, he exclaims: “Since you’re so fine, why you going to go and do something so ugly?” (315). The tension between Aiesha and Red escalates.

At the night of the final performance, Aiesha notices a boisterous group of men in the front row. They point at Aiesha’s chest while she is performing and shout over the music: “Hey, look at that pair,” They started chanting, “Bounce. Bounce. Bounce” each time her breasts moved up and down to the rhythm of the music. Aiesha cries, “I could no longer concentrate on the beat of the drum, the depth of my breath, or the feel of the floor” (315). Red races toward her after the performance and encourages her to redo her routine. He praises her talent and charisma on the stage. Aiesha shouts back at him, “I don’t want to be a damned dancer, doing tricks with my body for money. I’m going to get a scholarship to college. I am going to be an intellectual. I don’t want to end up like you. Working on rag-a-tag student productions that no one wants to see. Washed up at thirty-nine. Washed up and ignorant. . . .” (316). She senses his anger and humility: “[He] asked me the question I ask myself every time I sell myself short for the sake of safety or gain or give up the chance to be a human being because of cruelty or shame, a question I finally understood never had anything to do with looks. He asked me, ‘Why would a person who is so fine do something so ugly?’ I still don’t have an answer for him” (316). Aiesha recognizes her own prejudices and realizes how easy it can be to judge another person based on social status or gender.
The next monologue “Sex” is about Ahmed El-Far who is a nephew of Lou, a local Arab storeowner. Ahmed occasionally works for Lou although most of his time is spent dedicated to writing his upcoming book entitled “The Different Kinds of Rapists (dash) How To Never Be A Victim.” Ahmed strives to analyze and understand the causes for sexual violence associated with rape. In his opinion, his masculine viewpoint will provide a useful outlook into understanding the relationship between the predator versus the victim. In order to acquire more information, he contacts Liza, a prostitute, and they frequently meet one another at a local McDonalds to discuss his research. She charges him a monetary fee in exchange for her knowledge about a prostitute’s life (317). Liza is frustrated by the way she has been treated by men in the past, however, she does not want a new profession. She asks Ahmed: “What do you do when you’re sexy and sex sells?” (318). In spite of hearing this, Ahmed is concerned for her safety and attempts to provide her suggestions on how to protect herself. Eventually, Ahmed brings Liza to Lou’s store. Lou offers her free candy and begins to flirt with her. Ahmed describes how he often offers free candy bars to women: “It’s his tactic. Give a little, expect a lot” (319). Ahmed begins to suspect they are sleeping with one another as Lou constantly invites Liza to play “tawlet zaheir,” a game Ahmed’s family plays every Sunday. During one particular Sunday, Liza and Lou follow one another into a back room and pretend that Lou is taking advantage of her. They do this because they are eager to see Ahmed’s reactions. Ahmed is taken by surprise and does not immediately react. When he finally does, Liza cries: “What took you so long, Mr. Hero, Mr. I’m-going-to-help-all-women-with-my-stupid-book?” (320). She continues to berate him and Lou cuts her off: “Shut up, bitch” (320).
He continues to say that as he slaps her. Liza leaves in tears, and Ahmed finds it difficult to process what has just occurred. “Sex” sets up the next monologue “Justice” in which Aiesha meets Ahmed’s Uncle Lou. Ahmed says: “It’s the day after [Liza left] and a little girl comes into Lou’s Liquor Store to buy a chocolate bar. Lou gives it to her for free and feels her up and I don’t stop him. Because last night I figured out what Liza must have known a long time ago—that I can’t write a book that will prevent women from becoming victims. No one can. There’s no way to teach or learn how to survive” (320). Ultimately, Ahmed realizes that both men and women face complicated sexual issues.

“Justice” is the final monologue of Chocolate in Heat. Aiesha reveals more about her experience growing up as an Arab-American female in Spanish Harlem. She remembers how her mother “would pass, oblivious to the noise and rumble and its hush, as the world held its breath with her every step. The stares and the catcalls from cars did not penetrate her mind” (321). Her father left them one day without any hint as to his whereabouts. Aiesha wants to break away from all of the frustration in her life. One of the ways she copes with the pain is to eat chocolate. One day, Aiesha and her mother shop at Lou’s Liquor store to purchase candy. Lofti is Lou’s Arabic name but he prefers his customers refer to him as “Lou.” Aiesha recalls: “He greeted my mother loudly in Arabic, ‘Salamah aleykum.’ My mother greeted him not at all and headed straight for the refrigerator” (322). While he chats with the women, Aiesha notices: “He was speaking to her [Aiesha’s mother’s] breasts. Aiesha’s mother senses they need to leave the store immediately. They try to pay for their items, but Lou refuses to accept their payment. He boasts: “It’s on me this time. You being a woman all alone, raising a child. . . .” (322).
Her mother responds with a deliberate, “No” (322). Lou offers Aiesha a free candy bar and her mother insists they pay for it. He attempts to persuade them and says: “It’s free, a gift, so the girl can grow up sweet like her mother” (323). Again, Aiesha’s mother firmly states, “[No,] Everything has to be paid for sooner or later, Aiesha,” and Aiesha thinks to herself: “Though [my mother] addressed me, it was clear her words had a message marked for him” (323).

Despite her mother’s warnings that she is not to buy candy from Lou’s store ever again, Aiesha constantly craves chocolate. Aiesha steals money from her mother and eventually enters Lou’s store to purchase candy bars. She remembers this moment very well: “I was quick at picking my usual chocolate bar that day, afraid I would be late and my mother would get suspicious. Against my better judgment, I was beginning to believe with the blind faith of adults that things that come in the same packaging can’t be that different” (323). Aiesha realizes she made a mistake not listening to her mother’s warnings. Lou compliments Aiesha’s large breasts and again attempts to win her over by offering her free candy bars (324). As he urges her to take a candy bar without a wrapper she vividly recalls what happened next: “Then I felt his thumb press upon my left breast quick as a hammer hits a nail. As he let my hand go and I soared backwards against and out the glass door, I heard the roar of his laughter rush after me like a river, as Lou said, “Take it, so you grow big tits like your mama” (324).

Aiesha flees from Lou’s store and attempts to regain her composure at a local schoolyard. While sitting on a nearby swing, her unwrapped chocolate bars melt in her hands. Aiesha decides to take action: “When the clock from the nearby church struck
seven, I went back to Lou’s and smeared the words ‘I hate you’ a million times in melted chocolate on his window” (325). When Aiesha returns home, her mother senses Aiesha is upset. Aiesha states: “She knew no matter how much she asked me without asking, she could never make me tell what happened to me and how it made me feel, because I had learned from her how not to” (325). Eventually, Aiesha discovers Lou died of a stroke—alone—in his store. She decides: “I felt that was justice” (325).

I find that Aiesha’s challenges to assimilate in the school environment are similar to anyone her age, regardless of race or gender. Just like her American peers, Aiesha wants to impress her friends and purchase appealing designer clothes. However, as she becomes more comfortable with the American lifestyle, her own culture gradually diminishes. As Fawzia Afzal Khan noted, it can be tempting for a young Arab-American woman to play into the stereotype of the “exotic dark princess from a faraway land” (1). I believe Khan’s opinion to be true based on Shamieh’s depiction of Aiesha and this character’s initial desire to assimilate. Eventually, Aiesha realizes she wants to concentrate on her education as opposed to on her physical appearance. She wants to articulate her own opinions as opposed to agreeing with the majority in her community.

In Roar and Chocolate in Heat, a Palestinian-American family and an Arab-American young woman attempt to make sense of their hyphenated identities. I observed the ways these female characters attempt to discover a balance between co-existing with the American majority while also maintaining their own culture. In my opinion, this places emphasis on the internal conflict many Arab-American women frequently experience when reflecting upon their own identity. An Arab-American woman may
possess values which contradict with the traditional values they grew up learning. I believe both plays contain forthright, female characters with greater aspirations in life than being identified as a wife or a mother. Rather, they strive to lead businesses, educate themselves, and pursue careers of their choice. *Roar* and *Chocolate in Heat* are about the Arab-American assimilation process and the challenges these women frequently experience when adjusting to a new culture.
Chapter 3: Political Conflict and Gender:

Shamieh’s *The Black Eyed* and *Territories*

Shamieh’s writing is powerful! Violence haunts the four Palestinian women occupying an anteroom of the afterlife. . . . these souls in Samuel Beckett-like transit are The Black Eyed which happens to be the title of Betty Shamieh’s provocative theater piece (International Herald Tribune qtd. in *Black Eyed* 2008).

Shamieh began writing *The Black Eyed* immediately after 9/11 (Hill xiii). She felt compelled to address gender issues within the Arab-American community but was hesitant to express those ideas because 9/11 affected her on a personal level. On her second day teaching at Marymount Manhattan College, one of her students shared with her that his father died in The World Trade Center. She recalls: “It was a devastating time for me personally. I was living in New York and trying to teach a traumatized class of college freshmen. Not only did I fear for my safety in the event of more terrorist attacks, I was also afraid of hate crimes against Arab-Americans like myself” (Shamieh, E-Mail, 24 April 2012). Although Shamieh is Christian and not Muslim, many Americans began to assume that all Arabs were affiliated to some degree with the Islamic terrorists. As a
result of this, The Arab American Association of New York developed shortly after 9/11. Their objective was to provide knowledge about Arab-Americans to the New York community and to prevent hate crimes from occurring. Director of the Arab American Association of New York, Linda Sarsour, remembers the increase in hate crimes against Arab-Americans immediately after 9/11. For example, mosques were frequently vandalized and Muslim women wearing their hijab were often confronted on the streets. Strangers would pull off Muslim women's hijabs because they assumed these women were affiliated with the Islamic fundamentalists (Woolley 2011). Jennie Goldstein, the Associate Director of the Arab American Association further addressed these misconceptions: “It’s not that we learned about Arab-Americans on 9/11. It’s that we learned about al-Qaeda and from that we decided to learn about terrorism and from that we extrapolated to domestic terrorism and to our neighbors who are Arab-Americans or Muslim” (Woolley 2011). Shamieh decided to address these misconceptions in her play. Despite the uncertainty of Middle Eastern American theatre being successful after 9/11, Shamieh wrote the The Black Eyed in order to provide Arab-American characters a chance to express their own opinions.

Her poetic drama, The Black Eyed, depicts four Palestinian women from different time periods waiting with one another in the afterlife. As they anticipate their outcomes, they begin to share with one another stories from their previous lives which often relate to political matters. With only four women in this play and an emphasis on minimalism, The Black Eyed provides a theatrical space for these Arab female characters to explore questions relating to their identity. Due to its political themes and unique structure,
Shamieh wondered if producers may not be interested in it. She states in her introduction to *The Black Eyed*: “Because it is an extremely political and nonlinear play written in free verse with a chorus, I half believed I would never find a major producer willing to take it on, and that freed me to write in a way I had not attempted to write before” (*Black Eyed* 9). *The Black Eyed* premiered at Magic Theater in New York City on May 14, 2005 under the direction of Jessica Heidt. Theatre critic Robert Hurwitt wrote: “Each [character] will eventually tell her tale, and the modern ones contain the sharpest, most provocative surprises. Sex plays a key role in their narratives—from seduction, rape and virginity to repressive sex roles and ironic fantasies” (2005). In 2006, *The Black Eyed* opened at the Off Broadway New York Theater Workshop directed by Sam Gold. Charles Isherwood, a *New York Times* theatre critic wrote: “Picture ‘The View,’ with the wisecracking, sweethearts of that ABC television show replaced by a panel of embittered, suffering, or enraged Arab women, itching to air a couple of millenniums of grievances. Even the formidable Barbara Walters would have a tough time keeping this crew in line” (2007). Shamieh refused to permit critics’ reception of *The Black Eyed* to dictate the future run of her play. She realized more people needed to hear the Palestinian-American female voice. Shortly following The New York Theater Workshop opening in 2006, Shamieh met a Greek actress and offered the woman a copy of her script. Shamieh shared with her, “I think Greek audiences might dig this play. It has a chorus” (*Black Eyed* 10). The play opened in 2007 at Fournos Theatre in Athens and was directed by Takis Tzamargias. Shamieh traveled to Greece to see the opening and to meet with the director and actors prior to their performance. Rather than asking Shamieh about Middle Eastern
political conflicts, the cast was much more interested in the structure of her play and the objectives of the characters (Black Eyed 10). This pleased Shamieh because she has always wanted the focus to be on her female characters and the stories that they share. Shamieh asked The Black Eyed producer why the Fournos Theatre was so interested in performing a play about four Palestinian women. Shamieh recalls the producer’s reactions: “She looked slightly surprised at my question. Then she said that she never really thought about the play as being about four Palestinians. She said she thought the story was about four strong people” (Black Eyed 10).

The four Palestinian female characters in The Black Eyed are relentless in their pursuit of unanswered questions while waiting for their ultimate fate in the afterlife. They each recite their desires and fears in poetic passages, chorus sections, and monologues. Although each character possesses a distinct opinion, they often all function as one voice and speak as one chorus. This occurs to emphasize the emotional pain each woman has endured throughout her life on earth. Each of the characters are Palestinian women: a suicide bomber [Aiesha], a biblical figure [Delilah], a woman from the Crusades [Tamam], and a contemporary woman who recently died during a terrorist attack in the United States [The Architect]. In her stage directions, Shamieh indicates that “the stage is very sparse” (Black Eyed 5). The use of a minimal stage emphasizes these Palestinian female voices as they speak about these concerns.

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Aiesha, a strong-willed, outspoken former suicide bomber, has been waiting in the afterlife for quite some time when she is suddenly greeted by three Palestinian women. Before the other women arrive, Aiesha asks herself: “What is the point of revolution that begins with the little hand? Any little hand? This little hand? (13). She states: “I am a martyr. There are female martyrs too, you know” (33). The three women inspect their surroundings and question Aiesha about their new environment and the mysterious door which stands before them. Aiesha makes it known that she will serve as their guide and that she will be the one who asks them questions. Aiesha suggests to the women that the door is unlocked and, if they are so willing, they may enter at any given moment. Instead of entering right away, they begin a conversation with one another.

Another character, named Tamam, desperately longs to find her brother, Muhammed, who was killed during the Crusades. She constantly questions Aiesha as to the whereabouts of Muhammed, although Aiesha is not inclined to provide any insight. Tamam reveals her story: “I am the last of seven sisters, good luck for the family. Because, after me, a brother was born. The only one” (Black Eyed 38). As a chorus, the women question: “Why do our people rejoice when a boy child is born?” (38). Tamam shares that she decided to go to the jail, by herself, to where the crusaders had imprisoned her brother. She went with the intention of paying ransom for his release. The crusaders take notice of her beauty and allow her to venture past enemy lines and into the jail. Tamam is aware of her feminine charms: “I am a pretty woman. It’s not a boast,” and the chorus recites with her: “It’s a fact. Looks are a commodity, an asset, a possession I happen to possess” (39). Tamam hopes to persuade them to release her brother. Instead of
accepting her offer, they rape her in front of her brother to demonstrate their power over her and her people (40). She recalls: “The crusaders believed rape would enrage our men” (40). The chorus considers her statement and replies: “Enraging a man is the first step on the stairway that gets him to a place where he becomes impotent, helpless” (40).

In the afterlife, Tamam is granted authority over these particular men as she is the first person to “greet” them upon their arrival. She is permitted to cut off each man’s genitals, but refuses this option saying: “But I chose not to and said I’ll be back to do it later, because I didn’t want to hurt them once and be done with it. I wanted them to fear me forever” (48). Tamam’s decision shows calculated thinking and reveals her ability to control her emotions. She is rational and refuses to allow these men to get the best of her, even in the afterlife. Tamam realizes that even in this afterlife, everyone feels more comfortable associating with people of the same race and background. These groups of people who were acquainted with one another while they were living now gravitate to each other and function as a unit in their death. Tamam emphasizes: “Even in heaven, you can breathe more easily with your own people” (31).

Similar to Tamam, Delilah is also searching for someone in the afterlife. She is looking to find Samson, the Philistine who possessed great strength. As opposed to the traditional biblical story, Delilah speaks from her own point of view. She discusses the ways she used her sexual prowess to help kill Samson even though her people referred to her as a “whore” (16). She explains how the elders forced her to seduce Samson, eventually causing her to think it was actually her own idea. Delilah always wanted to be a leader and not viewed as a sexual object. Although Delilah is more than an alluring
female, the elders do not want her to function as a leader and demand she operate as a subservient, seductive woman. They silence her whenever she provides them with insightful suggestions. Delilah explains: “I told them my ideas about how to prevent the cattle from dying and why our well always ran dry….he [the head elder] said the only weakness that man has is for women. And then in perfect time, they all turned and looked at me. It was then that I offered to try” (16-17).

Although Aiesha, Tamam, and Delilah freely speak about their stories, the Architect barely speaks a word until she finally commands attention. At first, she comes across as inarticulate and does not have very much to add to the conversation: “I may be inarticulate. Have always been. It’s not that I’m not thinking clear thoughts, I’m thinking too many of them” (48). Gradually, she inserts her opinions which soon evolve into a full-fledged monologue. She discusses her work as an aspiring architect during her life on earth: “You see I do little projects. I take the requirements and dimensions that clients give to far too many overrated white men like Gehry to make a museum and make my own drawings of how I would do it if someone gave me . . . [The chorus also states] a chance”(50). The Architect imagines a life in which her supervisor becomes her husband. She says: “Occasionally a female architect like Zaha Hadid succeeds, but it’s mostly men like Gehry and you, Half-Breed husband, who get to design museums. . . . I content myself with helping you with your work, showing you where you falter, and you falter often enough.” The Architect reveals what she would really like to say: “Was your head up your ass when you designed this?! But I can’t say that. I’ll have to be vague and

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11 Shamieh further emphasizes The Architect’s voice with her play titled “Architecture” which includes all of the lines recited by this particular character.
suggest a reinforcement or two. I have to be careful not to bruise your ego” (56-57). The female chorus chant: “Take up less space! Take up less space!” (59). As time passes, The Architect decides to contact her former supervisor. She thinks he could be a potential mate for her, and she is humiliated to be thirty-five years old and still a virgin. She becomes desperate to see him, so she schedules the earliest flight that she can.

The Architect recalls boarding her flight and noticing a group of Arab men on the same flight as her. When she senses they are about to hijack the plane, she wishes she could inform them they are from the same culture. The Architect emphasizes to the chorus: “It’s not about blame. What’s the point of being articulate when no one can hear anything they aren’t ready to hear? I died a virgin, but that was just bad luck. While I was alive, I did the hardest things imaginable, more wonderful than a million buildings that will one day crumble. I am a woman who was born with a good heart and I designed and executed my life in a way that made sure that’s how I would stay” (73-74). The Architect comes to terms with her death and is the first woman to head toward the door to exit. As she walks away from the women, the Chorus declares:

Here I only have unanswered questions. Because there, I only had unquestioned answers. Unanswered questions, unquestioned answers. I do someone good dead. I do someone dead good. What is the point of the revolution that begins with the little hand? Any little hand? (85)

Shamieh’s characters in *The Black Eyed* are each from a different time period, they all represent Palestinian women who were mistreated at some point in their lives. I viewed them as not perfect women. They are aware of their faults and hope to discover answers to the complex conflicts they experienced on earth. I appreciated the use of a female chorus, as I believe it allows for each woman’s individual message to be further
emphasized and explored. For example, Shamieh demonstrates the chorus’s concern for
the universal woman by having Delilah address the diverse variety of women who, just
like them, have entered the after-life in search of fellow martyrs. Delilah exclaims:
“There must be the Japanese women, whose men kamikazied their way here and haven’t
been seen since” Tamam adds: “Over there are Iranian mothers, who helped convince
their children it was their duty to run through land riddled with land mines.” Delilah says:
“Here are the Tamil women, sisters of the Black Tigers who sit for centuries. . . . There!
Those are the Buddhists, mostly mothers of monks who made love to fire and died in its
embrace.” The Architect responds: “The Irish girls are over there, whose fathers starved
themselves in the hope of tasting freedom” Tamam says: “There are the Jewish ladies, the
relatives of the unsung heroes of the Holocaust, unnamed, because anyone who might
have seen or been told about their brave acts died almost immediately after them.” The
Architect emphasizes that all of these women were: “Unknown” (30-31). The chorus of
Palestinian women reassures the audience: “There is no hatred here. Each of us wishes
each of them well” (31). I observed that although the plot describes distinct, four
Palestinian women, there is a universal emphasis on every woman’s struggle. Ultimately,
I view Shamieh as emphasizing that each of these Palestinian women were never given
the full credit and appreciation they deserved while they lived on earth. Instead, the men
in their lives had the opportunity to be seen and revered. It always was the men who were
provided with the resources needed to succeed. I believe in The Black Eyed Shamieh
allows these Palestinian women to take command of the stage and to articulate their
political opinions.

54
Territories:

*Territories* gives us the name, face and bold deeds of one woman, and we leave the theater reminded that history rarely tells the whole story. It’s up to art to help fill in the blanks (Jones).

In Shamieh’s play, *Territories*, Shamieh emphasizes a Muslim woman’s contributions to The Crusades.\(^1\) Although Alia persuaded two powerful leaders to go at war with one another, her contribution has been unrecorded and erased from history. Alia’s tactful approach plus clever dialogue illustrates an Arab woman’s competence for large-scale politics. *Territories* had its world premiere at The Magic Theatre on January 19, 2008. It was directed by Jessica Heidt who also directed Shamieh’s *The Black Eyed*. *Chronicle Theater* critic Robert Hurwitt wrote: “It’s an intriguing idea, and Shamieh succeeds in depicting some now little-known history (at least in this part of the world) and raising some provocative questions about the untold stories of women through the ages” (2007). A European premiere in German translation premiered at the Landes Theatre on January 31, 2009. It was co-produced by the European Union’s Capital of Culture Festival and the Landes Theatre. In Shamieh’s director’s note, she states: “In

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\(^1\) Betty Shamieh sent me a recently updated draft of *Territories* on April 28, 2011. She informed me that *Territories* is only published in German translation and that I could use the draft she sent me for scholarly purposes.
1187, a caravan was captured by Reginald of Chatillon, a middle-ranking French nobleman and ruler of the Crusader city of Kerak. A high-born Muslim woman was among the captives and was held as a prisoner by Reginald. She was believed to be the sister of the Islamic ruler Saladin” (3). Shamieh’s play shifts back and forth in time to illustrate Alia’s life before and after her kidnapping. Shamieh emphasizes that the stage should be divided to represent Saladin’s royal room in Damascus and the underground prison located in Reginald’s Kerak castle. Alia moves back and forth between these two spaces; she controls the action of the play.

Alia wears “a traditional Muslim woman’s clothing (not a burka but rather a headscarf, handkerchief to cover her face except for her eyes, and a light robe)” (Territories 4). Throughout the play, she begins to removes her headscarf to demonstrate her independence from authority. Her brother, the Islamic ruler Saladin, is extremely proud and thinks highly of himself: “I will be praised for my chivalry in poems and epics for hundreds of years. It won’t only be my people who speak of my valor as a soldier and a king” (4). Alia realizes she will lack this sort of recognition in her society. She says: “No one will think it worthwhile to write down my name” (4). In the battles fought, no one bothered to write down her name or give her credit although she proved to be more competent and self-assured than her brother. Later, Saladin reveals that, after his death, his men opened his treasury to find not even enough money to bury him. During his life, Saladin spent all of his money and died with barely anything left. He emphasizes: “But, my people built me a glorious tomb in Damascus anyway” (5). Eight hundred years later, Saladin’s tomb would be opened and the French would declare victory “of the Cross over
the Crescent” (6). Alia notes: “And I will know that I was right to do what I did. I, who
was just a nameless, faceless woman” (6).

Alia desires to go to Mecca to pray, but her brother does not want her to make this
visit. He warns her that Reginald has been ransacking caravans on this particular road.
Alia reminds her brother that Reginald attacked the holy city and that he needs to take
action. She provides him with suggestions, but he refuses to listen: “Do you want me to
be forever known as the ruler who lost Mecca?” he asks her (18). Alia attempts to
persuade him to develop a new strategy as the Crusaders possess more sophisticated
weapons than the Muslims. He interrupts her suggestions: “You should have gotten
married” (32). She replies: “Why? A husband to keep me down? To feed me my
medicine…I sneak out dressed like a man and I hear men talk. They laugh about me and
about what it would be like to have sex with me” (36). Saladin informs her about the
importance of marriage in their culture: “Look who I married! My predecessor’s widow.
She’s fifteen years older than I am. I married her to secure my throne, I married her for
power. Everyone does it” (937).

Again, Alia requests to travel to Mecca, and her brother again refuses to give his
approval: “Men are never at as much risk as women are. Look, Sister, I didn’t make the
world this way…[also] I’m going to look like a fool if I let my own sister be captured”
(27). Alia ignores her brother’s commands and travels to Mecca, but she is soon
kidnapped by Reginald’s army. While she is his prisoner, she reminds him: “There’s a
funny thing about power. You don’t have to declare it if you possess it” (10). Alia refuses
to submit to Reginald’s power: “Let me tell you one thing, Sir. I do what I want. Do you
understand me? You don’t fool or trap me into anything. In good time, you will see. I do what I want” (21). Reginald acknowledges Alia’s intelligence as he recognizes her shield displays the family name of Izz Al-Din. Reginald says: “I thought to myself— the only reason someone would pretend to be in his family is if they were from a greater one” (13). He also recognizes her bravery despite having an uncontrollable sickness. Alia frequently experiences convulsions but refuses to let this inhibit her objectives. She says: “When the seizures come, I think this time it won’t end. I won’t stop shaking till I stop breathing. When I realize it won’t matter that I will be gone, even to me, everything shifts. It is not me shaking. It is the world that is moving and I’m the only one standing still” (29). She reveals to Reginald that she believes her brother is humiliated by her condition: “My brother despises me because I am not whole. He hates it that I shake and show everyone our family I’m not perfect, blessed by God. Many of our people think my condition is a sign that I am possessed. I can’t help but feel that he thinks I am too. He is humiliated by me” (29). Reginald listens to Alia but refuses to let her go and holds her for ransom.

It is soon revealed that Alia hoped she would be kidnapped by Reginald on her way to Mecca. She uses this as an opportunity to maneuver between both the Crusaders and the Muslims. Alia says to Reginald: “How weak are you if you can’t keep a woman you want? Convince the knights not to be afraid of my brother. I’m telling you, Reginald. My brother is afraid of you. Don’t you think if he had the power to throw you out he would have a long time ago?” (60). Alia says: “I know he can’t do it. We don’t have the
weapons, we don’t have the strength. The Crusaders will eventually rule over us forever” (61).

Eventually, Reginald allows Alia to leave his castle. She tells her brother: “There is a weak spot in the fortress guarding his castle near the southern gate. We could attack” (67). Alia says to herself: “Being captured by this Reginald is the only way I can make my brother go mad as every military leader must be mad” (78). During the battle scene, Alia initiates the action by declaring, “Go!” (71). Reginald and Saladin fight one another to the death, however, Alia is at the forefront of their minds. Reginald declares: “She lied to you and me both…she hated that you respected Crusaders and made truces with [traitorous] men” (78). Alia announces: “I am a nameless, faceless woman. I don’t matter, but the men that I will force to fight one another do. They will decide the fate—the destiny—of both their civilizations. I will make them decide it” (80).

Shamieh’s depiction of Alia further explores the complexity of the Palestinian-American female voice and how it is often silenced by dominant authority figures. Although Alia possesses effective strategies for furthering the success of her people, everyone, including her own brother, refuses to listen. She puts herself at risk by allowing herself to be kidnapped to gain information about the crusaders. She is able to cleverly persuade both sides to fight one another in hopes for a decisive battle. Alia propels her brother to take action, and she also incites Reginald to engage in battle. This caused the men to rethink their own strategies. Reginald is known for violently punishing his enemies. In spite of this, Alia risks her own life to assert her cause and to remain as his prisoner. Territories illustrates the role women, regardless of race, often contribute to
political events and the lack of recognition they receive. Alia, despite her illness, did not allow for any conflicts to interfere with her political cause. As a Muslim woman, she removed her headscarf as a symbol of her refusal to be a “nameless, faceless” woman. Instead, she prefers to be at the forefront. Alia’s ability to effectively persuade the two leaders allows for her voice to be heard even though she knows she will never receive the recognition she deserves. The male counterparts in this play never override her focus to accomplish her tasks. Shamieh’s *The Black Eyed* and *Territories* both contain strong political themes. Many female characters thrust their views and opinions in spite of men trying to suppress them. The result of their articulateness and persuasion allowed for them to rise above the societal expectations assigned to them. Shamieh uses strong Arab-American female characters in *The Black Eyed* and *Territories* to project the viewpoints of the female voice in the political sphere.
Conclusion

Theatre is not about teaching people what they do not know, but rather it is about awakening within them the truths that they already do. Theatre can remind us that the vast majority of people are not heroes or villains, but simply ordinary human beings. They work, have their hearts broken, dream of owning a slightly bigger house than they can afford, get aggravated by their family members, and struggle valiantly to be admired by those they admire (Betty Shamieh qtd. in Blog).

Betty Shamieh’s plays depict the struggles Palestinian-American women often face when assimilating into a new culture. By including complex social questions in her plays, she enables the characters to each possess their own unique outlook on political and social ideologies. She explores stereotypical misconceptions of Palestinian-American women and emphasizes these misunderstandings in her plays in order to gradually break them down and dispel them.

The themes of immigration and assimilation dictate the Arab-American female characters’ voice in Roar and Chocolate in Heat. In Roar, a Palestinian-American mother, teenage daughter, and single woman each provide their perspectives on complicated social issues. In order to fit in with her American peers, a young Arab-American female may decide to shift her identity, values, and appearance to mask her culture. An Arab-American mother may decide to teach her daughter about her cultural background while still pursuing an independent life for herself in America. A single woman may feel pressure to present herself as a sexual object in order to be accepted.
These perspectives are further obscured by conflict from both Arab and American values and this complicates the traditional expectations Arab-American women are frequently required to uphold. All three Palestinian-American female characters in Roar struggle to find the balance in order to assimilate. Shamieh illustrates that assimilation is never an easy process as one may feel tempted to suppress his or her identity in order to easily blend in with the majority.

Shamieh utilizes connecting monologues in Chocolate in Heat to present a variety of viewpoints on assimilation and Arab-American gender issues. Aiesha is a complex character as she openly disagrees with the dominant norms around her while she also contends with how men and women perceive her. She represents a typical paradox for many Arab-American women. At first, Aiesha is considered alluring and seductive because she is of Middle Eastern descent. However, when her community becomes more aware about the Arab-Israeli conflict, they begin to disassociate themselves from her. In spite of this, Aiesha proves be still actively engaged with her community wanting to have the same academic opportunities as her peers. She is not afraid to try a new skill, such as dancing, and to assert her opinions with a group of people she does not know. Aiesha tries not to allow the struggle to assimilate prevent her from succeeding at this task.

Shamieh wrote The Black Eyed right after 9/11. She still wanted to support the Palestinian-American female community and share their voices and stories. The four Palestinian female characters in The Black Eyed debate political, religious, and social matters. Often, they function as a chorus to address concurring beliefs. Aiesha and the Architect provide perspectives from the modern day era. They introduce themes of
terrorism both from the point of view of a suicide bomber and from the victim of an unrelated attack. Delilah and Tamam offer their viewpoints and discuss their lives as Arab women living in male dominated communities during biblical times and The Crusades. Shamieh wrote about four Palestinian female characters that each express themselves and take advantage of sharing their stories.

In *Territories*, Shamieh presents a courageous Muslim woman whose strategies dictate the outcome of a significant battle fought between two powerful male leaders. Although Alia is never recognized for her role in the battle, her contribution cannot be denied by the male leaders. She risks her life to fight for her beliefs and is not concerned about behaving in a manner her brother deems appropriate. Instead, she controls the entire battle from beginning to end. In *Territories*, the female voice is emphasized and explored through Alia’s accomplishments and displays of courage during a time of war.

I had the wonderful opportunity to personally meet Betty Shamieh when she visited The Ohio State University on February 27 and 28, 2012. I coordinated her campus visit along with co-sponsors from various departments: Department of Theatre, Multicultural Center, The Women’s Place, Diversity and Identity Studies Collective (DISCO), Diversity and Inclusion Committee of the Council of Graduate Students, and Committee for Justice in Palestine. These organizations collaborated with one another to create events intended for a diverse campus audience. Shamieh gave a lecture at The Ohio Union and performed excerpts of her work at Drake Performance and Event Center in the Roy Bowen Theatre and spoke at The Women’s Place “Women of Color Conversation Series.” She answered questions pertaining to her work as a playwright and
her insights into gender and performance. She discussed how to construct potentially controversial themes as a playwright and to cope with potential criticism that may result from such topics. Through storytelling, Shamieh contradicts popular cultural myths by including the Arab-American woman’s perspective. She realizes it is impossible to instantly change someone’s opinion but believes the theatre is an effective outlet to introduce these frequently ignored themes. Whereas the masculine voice in playwriting is constantly produced in the majority of theatres throughout America, a female playwright must be more assertive in getting acknowledged by American producers. She addressed The New York Times review of her play The Black Eyed and how potentially damaging this review was, at first, to her self-esteem as a writer. She described her frustration with the reviewer of this newspaper who referred to her female characters as “a panel of embittered, suffering, enraged Arab women, itching to air a couple of millenniums of grievances” (2007). When well-known sources such as The New York Times reinforce female stereotypes, it becomes even more difficult for female writers to attract audiences and producers. Shamieh educates her audience by dispelling common stereotypes. Realizing this is not an easy task, she uses humor, compelling characters, and unique stories to engage an audience. Currently, Shamieh is working on a solo show titled The Alter Ego of an Arab-American Assimilationist which explores social inequalities from a female lecturer’s viewpoint. She is also exploring other themes which do not relate to her cultural background. For example, she is also currently working on a play based on Shakespeare’s Twelfth Night character Malvolio.
During her visit at The Ohio State University, Shamieh addressed the extensive amount of work yet to be done on Middle Eastern American theatre and Palestinian-American history. There is so much information to cover that it is difficult for one person to emphasize every aspect. Other potential research topics to research on Betty Shamieh might include the sexual violence present within her plays as well as examining the masculine voice because she often dispels stereotypes associated with Arab-American men. In this document, I have looked exclusively at the Palestinian-American female voice in four of Shamieh’s plays. *Roar* and *Chocolate in Heat* were two of her earlier works and in them she dealt with the Arab-American immigrant experience. *The Black Eyed* and * Territories* were written after 9/11. They both deal with the Arab-Israeli conflict and Middle Eastern politics. Although politics are present within her plays, Shamieh shared with me that her objective is not to assert her political opinions. Instead, politics may shape a character’s identity in a social context. Shamieh chooses to concentrate on creating humorous yet emotionally unsettling stories with complex characters. In her plays, she strives to create compelling and strong female characters to address complicated gender issues. In fact, Shamieh shared with me on the first day of her Ohio State visit that she believed she will eventually be more known as a feminist playwright than as an Arab-American playwright. This is because her work deals with gender inequalities and emphasizes the universal female voice.

Shamieh strives to teach young, aspiring Middle Eastern-American female writers the importance of perseverance. Shamieh stated in her American Task Force on Palestine award speech that she “had two wonderful and unique parents who believed in [her] and
encouraged [her] dreams.” She said: “So, as we continue to assimilate, I ask those of you who have children who want to pursue a non-traditional career path to think about giving them a message other than, ‘You’ll never make it in a field that requires creativity or innovation. Better be a doctor or lawyer. Better play it safe.’” Shamieh went on to question: “What if we told our children instead, ‘There is no door that is closed to you. I know you can achieve anything you set your mind to. Be prepared to work hard. In fact, you might have to work twice as hard as anyone else. But, if there is anyone who is going to succeed, I know it will be you.’” Shamieh inspires young Arab-American women to share their opinions and to pursue a career which they--and only they--decide. Shamieh demonstrates that a Palestinian-American woman can produce critically acclaimed plays containing themes of her own selection. In her play Territories, Shamieh’s character Alia announces: “I am a nameless, faceless woman” (6). However, Betty Shamieh and her plays will not go unnoticed. Instead, she will be recognized as one of the most relevant Palestinian-American female voices of the 21st century and her work will always continue to resonate with a diversified audience. Betty Shamieh will fortify the female voice.
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Appendix A: Chronology of Betty Shamieh’s Plays

2001: Chocolate in Heat
World Premiere at New York International Fringe Festival. Directed by Damen Scranton.

2002: Tamam
Betty Shamieh performed the role of Tamam at the Imagine: Iraq event in November 2002. This event was curated by Naomi Wallace and the Artists Network of Refuse and Resist.

2002: Architecture
One-act play. Based on the same character portrayed in The Black Eyed. Shamieh collaborated with Sam Gold on a workshop production at the Hangar Theater Lab in 2002.
2004: **Roar**


2005: **The Black Eyed**


2007: **The Machine**

One-act poetic drama produced by Naked Angels at Duke Theatre.

Directed by Marisa Tomei.

2008: **Territories**

Commissioned by Trinity Rep and developed with Al-Harah Theatre where it was presented at the Bethlehem Peace Center (with support from the Doris Duke Foundation).

2008: **Again and Against**: Playhouse Theater, Stockholm


2008: **As Soon as Impossible**

Commissioned as part of the Time Warner Commissioning Program.

2009 **The Alter-Ego of an Arab-American Assimilationist**:

Developed by the 2009 Hip Hop Theatre Festival and Voice & Vision. As of 2012, this is Shamieh’s latest solo work.

2010: **Fit For the Queen**:

Developed at a workshop production at Yale School of Drama. Directed by Lisa Peterson.
2010: **The Strangest:**

Developed at HERE Arts Center and New Dramatists with support from the Creativity fund. Directed by May Adrales. Workshop production took place February 4 and 5, 2012, as a part of Culturemart 2012 in New York.

2012: **Free Radicals**

Slated for production in Dutch translation. Commissioned by Het Zuidelijk Toneel in The Netherlands.
Appendix B: Additional Recognitions/Awards

Fall 2001-Spring 2004: Professor of screenwriting at Marymount Manhattan College

2004: Recipient of the National Endowment for the Arts grant
      Clifton Visiting Artist at Harvard University

June 2005: Resident at Rockefeller Foundation Bellagio Study Conference Center

2005: New York Foundation Award

2006: Playwriting Fellow at Harvard University's Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Studies

2007: NEA/TCG playwright-in-residence at the Magic Theatre


2009: Artist-in-residence at Het Zuidelijk Toneel of Holland

Sept. 2010: Artist-in-residence at Here Arts Center (New York)

April 2011: UNESCO Young Artists for Intercultural Dialogue
Appendix C: Photos

Allison F. Brogan and Betty Shamieh at The Ohio State University, Department of Theatre. 2012. Photo taken by Thomas Hallal.