

Representation of Middle Eastern Masculinities in Canadian Theatre

By

Arash Isapour
M.A., Soore University, Tehran, Iran, 2013

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We acknowledge and respect the Ləkʷəŋən (Songhees and Xʷsepsəm/Esquimalt) Peoples on whose territory the university stands, and the Ləkʷəŋən and W̱SÁNEĆ Peoples whose historical relationships with the land continue to this day.

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Abstract

This dissertation examines how Middle Eastern masculinities are constructed, disrupted, and contested in Canadian theatre, arguing that cultural representation is not merely a matter of narrative or character but is materially structured and ideologically mediated through dramaturgical form. Drawing on Stuart Hall's theories of identity and signification alongside Fredric Jameson's analysis of cultural production under late capitalism, the study synthesizes two strands of cultural studies to explore how identity is simultaneously produced through representation and structured by historical contradictions embedded in aesthetic systems. Incorporating frameworks from masculinity studies and postcolonial critique, the dissertation offers a structural reading of six theatrical productions, revealing how dramaturgical strategies construct, destabilize, or reify stereotypes of Middle Eastern masculinities. Analyzing works that range from adaptations of Persian epics to collaborative political satires and testimonial solo pieces, the research demonstrates that masculinity is not simply portrayed but actively constituted through choices in genre, staging, visual logic, and narrative structure. It further argues that theatrical form functions as an ideological field, wherein representations of Middle Eastern masculinity unfold along a dramaturgical spectrum, from stereotypical portrayals shaped by abstraction, ambiguity or semiotic incoherence, which render identity susceptible to stereotyping, to historically grounded, formally coherent depictions that offer multi-layered, critical, and nuanced alternatives. The study develops a methodology for analyzing how stereotypes are staged, reinforced, or subverted in Canadian theatre, contributing to discourses in cultural and performance studies on stereotypical representation, to masculinity studies on the staging of non-hegemonic male identities, and to postcolonial scholarship on the aesthetic politics of multiculturalism.

Keywords: Middle Eastern masculinities; Canadian theatre; intercultural performance; dramaturgy; stereotype; representation; postcolonial critique; masculinity studies; identity politics; diaspora; cultural studies; theatrical form.

Table of Contents

SUPERVISORY COMMITTEE	II
ABSTRACT.....	III
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	IV
LIST OF FIGURES	VII
DEDICATION.....	VIII
INTRODUCTION.....	1
INTRODUCTION TO DISSERTATION	1
PURPOSE AND OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY	9
CONTEXTUAL BACKGROUND	10
<i>Case Study Selection and Rationale.....</i>	<i>14</i>
RESEARCH QUESTIONS.....	19
STATEMENT OF DISSERTATION PROBLEM.....	23
LITERATURE REVIEW	28
<i>Masculinity Representation in Theatre.....</i>	<i>28</i>
<i>Middle Eastern Stereotypes in Cultural Productions.....</i>	<i>37</i>
<i>Theatrical Representation of Middle Eastern Masculinities</i>	<i>46</i>
<i>Formation and Deconstruction of Stereotypes in Theatre.....</i>	<i>52</i>
THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK.....	58
<i>Identity as a Discursive Construct</i>	<i>59</i>
Hegemony and Identity	61
<i>Critical Studies of Men and Masculinities</i>	<i>63</i>
Social Construction and Variability	64
Relational Aspect of Gendered Power.....	64
Material and Discursive Aspects.....	65
Intersectionality.....	65
Hierarchical Relations Among Multiple Masculinities.....	66
Subordinated masculinities	67
Complicit masculinities.....	69
Marginalized masculinities	70
Synthesis of Constructs.....	71
<i>Stereotype</i>	<i>72</i>
Middle Eastern Masculinity Stereotypes	76
Characteristics of Middle Eastern Stereotypes	78
<i>Visual and Auditory Markers</i>	<i>78</i>
<i>Violent and Active Threat.....</i>	<i>82</i>
<i>Patriarchal Oppressor and Misogynistic</i>	<i>84</i>
<i>Exotic and Erotic Imagery</i>	<i>86</i>
<i>Victimized and Oppressed</i>	<i>89</i>
<i>Postmodernity and Cultural Production.....</i>	<i>92</i>
<i>Stereotypes and Postmodern Tendencies of Cultural Productions</i>	<i>100</i>
METHODOLOGY	106
<i>Dialectical Criticism: A Jamesonian Framework</i>	<i>106</i>

Political Horizon	107
Discourse Analysis.....	108
Social Horizon	109
Identifying Ideologemes:	109
Historical Horizon	110
Formal Analysis	110
Analytical Concepts	113
<i>Case Studies and Contextual Reading</i>	116
<i>Library Research</i>	117
<i>Data Collection and Interviews</i>	117
CHAPTER OVERVIEW	118
CHAPTER ONE	121
INTRODUCTION	121
INTRODUCTION TO CASE STUDIES	129
<i>A LINE IN THE SAND (1995-1996)</i>	132
<i>Synopsis</i>	132
<i>Two Versions, Two Dramaturgical Stances</i>	135
RECONSTRUCTING STEREOTYPES IN <i>A LINE IN THE SAND</i>	140
<i>Reconstructing via Outer Markers</i>	143
<i>Reconstructing via Power and Gendered Order Positionality</i>	148
<i>The Dramaturgy of an Ineffective Critique</i>	156
Polarization of Characters	157
Melodramatic Narrative Style	166
Ideological Positioning and the Reconstruction of Stereotypes	173
<i>Conclusion: Adopting Melodrama, a Dramaturgy of Pastiche Recreates Simplified Images</i>	176
<i>THE ADVENTURES OF ALI AND ALI AND THE AXES OF EVIL (2004)</i>	178
DECONSTRUCTION OF STEREOTYPES IN <i>ALI AND ALI AND THE AXES OF EVIL</i>	183
<i>Rebuilding Stereotypes via Casting Choices</i>	183
<i>Rebuilding Stereotypes' Racialized Markers</i>	186
<i>Rebuilding Stereotypes via Positionality within Hierarchical Order</i>	195
<i>The Dramaturgy of an Effective Critique: Metatheatre and Satire</i>	202
<i>Distancing from Postmodern Features</i>	217
CHAPTER ONE CONCLUSION.....	220
CHAPTER TWO	223
INTRODUCTION TO CHAPTER TWO	223
<i>Parsa and Modern Times: Inspirations and Adaptations</i>	230
<i>1970s: Embarking on a Theatrical Journey</i>	234
<i>Formative Years: Shaping Parsa's Worldview and Artistic Style</i>	237
In Canada – A New Stage	238
<i>Analytical Trajectory</i>	240
CASE STUDIES: ADAPTATIONS AND PRODUCTIONS	241
<i>Aurash (2010)</i>	243
Synopsis: Aurash.....	246
<i>The Death of the King (2016)</i>	248

Synopsis: The Death of the King	251
EMBODIED MIDDLE EASTERN MALE ON A UNIVERSALIST STAGE.....	253
<i>Political-Historical: Ambiguous Masculinities in a Decontextualized Dramatic World</i>	254
<i>Social-Ideological: Simplified Masculinities in the Duality of Victim and Victimizer</i>	266
FORMAL ANALYSIS: UNIVERSALIZING THE LOCAL.....	274
<i>Dramatic Resignification in The Death of the King: Fragmentarily Historical</i>	275
<i>Dramatic Resignification in Aurash: Ambiguously Mythological</i>	288
<i>Costume Design: Semiotic Disarray in The Death of the King</i>	297
<i>Form: Narrative Deformation and Schizophrenic Masculinities</i>	301
<i>Casting Femininity: Masking Masculinity</i>	309
CHAPTER TWO CONCLUSION	316
CHAPTER THREE	322
INTRODUCTION TO CHAPTER THREE.....	322
ERDAL: FROM SOLDIER TO STAGE	328
<i>IDF's Role in Idealizing the Israeli Masculinity</i>	333
ERDAL'S PLAYS AS CRITIQUES OF ISRAELI MASCULINITY AND IDF INFLUENCE	340
<i>This is Not a Conversation (2016)</i>	341
Synopsis: This is Not a Conversation	342
<i>Soldiers of Tomorrow (2023)</i>	345
Synopsis: Soldiers of Tomorrow	346
WHO, WHEN, WHERE: THREE IDENTITY CATEGORIES ON STAGE	348
NON-CONFORMIST ISRAELI	352
<i>Unfolding Nonconformist Masculinity in Segregated, Occupied Settings</i>	353
<i>Confronting Conformity: Resistance to Militarism and Right-Wing Hegemony in Israel</i>	371
<i>Critical Stance through Staging Narrative Techniques</i>	380
CONFORMIST ISRAELI	387
NON-ISRAELI CHARACTERS.....	402
<i>Presumed Subjects of Threat</i>	404
<i>Unequal Representation of Identity Through Movement and Narrative</i>	408
<i>Non-Israeli Middle Eastern Masculinities: Emotionally Framed and Simplified</i>	414
<i>Non-Israelis' Stereotypical Simulacra vs. Nuanced Non-conformist Israeli</i>	419
CHAPTER THREE CONCLUSION	425
CONCLUSION	428
BIBLIOGRAPHY	443

List of Figures

Figure 1. Guillermo Verdecchia and Marcus Youssef	136
Figure 2. Camyar Chai and Vincent Gale in <i>A Line in the Sand</i> (1996).....	145
Figure 3. Danny Ghantous in the Factory Theatre production of <i>A Line in the Sand</i> (2016).....	147
Figure 4. Gale as Mercer and Tom Butler as Colonel in <i>A Line in the Sand</i> (1995)	149
Figure 5. Gale and Chai in rehearsal.....	152
Figure 6. Butler as Colonel and Gale as Mercer in <i>A Line in the Sand</i> (1996).....	154
Figure 7. Butler as Bin Laden in <i>Ali and Ali and the Axes of Evil</i> (2004)	184
Figure 8. <i>Ali and Ali and the Axes of Evil</i> (2004)	188
Figure 9. Screenshots from Disney's <i>Aladdin</i> (1992).....	193
Figure 10. Butler, Youssef, Chai. <i>Ali and Ali and the Axes of Evil</i> (2004)	197
Figure 11. Chai and Butler, <i>Ali and Ali and the Axes of Evil</i>	201
Figure 12. Chai and Youssef in <i>Ali and Ali and the Axes of Evil</i> (2004)	201
Figure 13. Clergy members in cassocks.....	297
Figure 14. Pope Benedict XVI and Pope Francis wearing traditional cassocks.....	297
Figure 15. Poster of <i>The Death of Yazdgerd</i> (1982).....	299
Figure 16. Magu standing by Private.....	299
Figure 17. <i>The Death of the King</i> (2016).....	300
Figure 18. Miller family reciting King's actions	302
Figure 19. Naqqali by Valiollah Torabi.....	302
Figure 20. <i>Aurash</i> , 2010, Toronto	309
Figure 21. <i>Aurash</i> , 2010, Columbia.....	309
Figure 22. <i>Aurash</i> , 2017, Toronto	310
Figure 23. Erdal as narrator in <i>Soldiers of Tomorrow</i> (2023)	344
Figure 24. Erdal with Ito's picture, <i>Soldiers of Tomorrow</i> (2023).....	346
Figure 25. Erdal's checkpoint scene with figurines	354
Figure 26. Figurines depicting Israeli soldiers.....	363
Figure 27. The opening scene of <i>This Is Not a Conversation</i> (2016)	379
Figure 28. Dima and Erdal exhibit their bags' contents.....	380
Figure 29. Role-Playing Scene- Dima acts as a Palestinian driver, Erdal as an Israeli soldier	386
Figure 30. Dima and Erdal in a driving scene with a gun.....	388
Figure 31. Erdal narrating through objects	391
Figure 32. Erdal performs a checkpoint scene.....	397
Figure 33. Screenshot from <i>This Is Not a Conversation</i> (2016).....	400
Figure 34. Abed and Erdal in the closing scene, <i>Soldiers of Tomorrow</i>	404
Figure 35. Dima and Erdal's movement scene, <i>This Is Not a Conversation</i>	406
Figure 36. Dima and Erdal's movement scene, <i>This Is Not a Conversation</i>	408
Figure 37. Dima and Erdal's movement scene, <i>This Is Not a Conversation</i>	410
Figure 38. Emad, the Syrian musician, plays the oud (عود) in <i>Soldiers of Tomorrow</i>	412
Figure 39. Abed and Erdal in the closing scene of <i>Soldiers of Tomorrow</i>	415

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to the noble calling of teaching.

To my first teacher, my mother, who instilled in me the principles of equality across identities and genders. From my earliest years, she encouraged me to commemorate March 8th as a reminder of gender equality and to reject patriarchal and authoritarian mindsets. To my father, a teacher of history and literature, who provided me with a library rich in literary, cultural, historical, and theoretical works that formed the foundation of who I am today, a scholar of theatre, drama, and history. His collection of music, from operas to folk music from around the world, allowed my mind and imagination to travel far beyond the limits of the isolated and repressive society I lived in. It was through him that I learned to think freely. This work is dedicated to the memory of my uncle, a legal scholar whom I lost during the course of this research. Despite the injustices he faced, he never bowed to power, resisting corruption and ethical compromise. His devotion to nature and humanity exemplified justice in action. From my adolescence, he taught me to think and speak with reasoned conviction, and never to compromise my integrity and knowledge for expedience. To all these teachers, whose lives, actions, and sacrifices shaped the scholar I strive to be, I dedicate this dissertation in the hope that I may one day follow their footsteps, serving humanity, and nothing else.

INTRODUCTION

Theatrical Representation of Middle Eastern Masculinities in Canadian Theatre

Introduction to Dissertation

Over the past few decades, Canada's cultural institutions have increasingly embraced diversity and inclusion of non-Western cultures, as exemplified by Ric Knowles's study of Toronto's intercultural theatre landscape in *Performing the Intercultural City* (2017).¹ While there has been progress towards equity and inclusion of diverse cultural expressions, the broader Canadian cultural landscape remains rooted in its colonial inheritance, mostly from Western Europe. Theatre, as one form of cultural production within this landscape, is not an exception to this context. In the Canadian cultural landscape, the Orientalist perspective remains embedded and continues to influence contemporary representations, even as the Orientalist gaze encounters critiques from those whose cultural differences have been increasingly gaining recognition.² Thus, this dissertation examines portrayals of Middle Eastern masculinities in English-language Canadian theatre, while acknowledging the exclusion of French-language productions.³ English-language Canadian theatre operates within a broader cultural landscape where Orientalist frameworks have historically framed Middle Eastern men as either hyper-masculine

¹ Ric Knowles, *Performing the Intercultural City* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2017).

² Edward W. Said, *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World* (New York: Vintage Books, 1997), 11-13. Said notes how generalized and unfounded claims are often made, depicting Muslims as inherently violent or resentful of the West without supporting evidence. For example, Said notes that Peter Rodman's commentary describes Islamic societies as driven by rage, hatred, and inferiority to the West. Said critiques how "Islam, as it is covered and (mis)represented in Orientalist thought and media stereotypes, stands charged and convicted without the need for supporting arguments or modulating qualifications of the kind Rodman would routinely make for the Western world."

³ Given the ambiguity of defining what "Canadian Theatre" is, it is more accurate to acknowledge the diversity of perspectives about what constitutes Canadian theatre. Recognizing the diverse ways in which Canadian theatre has been understood, this dissertation focuses specifically on plays that have been staged in English by theatre companies operating within a Canadian context, staged and premiered for Canadian audiences.

aggressors or emasculated figures.⁴ The historically established Orientalist frameworks, as Said demonstrates, oversimplify Middle Eastern identities on a global scale. Within the Canadian cultural context, Orientalist frameworks intersect with colonial legacies and contemporary multicultural policies, shaping representations in theatre that often reinforce harmful stereotypes and obscure nuanced realities. This study investigates how theatre in Canada navigates representations of Middle Eastern masculinities, examining how these stereotypes are perpetuated, subverted, or reimagined across a complex spectrum. Specifically, this study explores how dramaturgical strategies—such as character development, narrative structure, staging elements, and casting choices—approach the representation of Middle Eastern masculinities within Canada’s contemporary cultural context.

In Canadian theatre, where multiculturalism and interculturalism influence cultural politics, the portrayals of groups such as Middle Easterners take on added significance as they contribute to the broader discussions on identity, belonging, and representation. However, even in this progressive environment, portrayals of Middle Eastern masculinities often fall into the same old traps, either reinforcing outdated clichés or introducing new, equally limiting archetypes. Colonial legacies and dominant discourses sustain these stereotypes, shaping public perceptions. This study examines how Canadian theatre navigates these dynamics, showing how dramaturgical choices, when employed effectively, can either deepen or disrupt stereotypical representations.

Canada’s inclusivity policies, influenced by global migration and market expansion, form a backdrop where Canadian theatre navigates portrayals of Middle Eastern masculinities.⁵ In this context,

⁴ Ibid., 12-13. The polarizations of Middle Eastern images as hyper-masculine violence and submissive emasculation are a recurrent theme in Western portrayals of Middle Eastern men, which is further elaborated in the section **Victimized and Oppressed** (page 89), where the trope of the violent oppressor is contrasted with the emasculated victim.

⁵ Government of Canada, *Canadian Multiculturalism Act*, updated October 25, 2017, accessed June 6, 2025, <https://www.canada.ca/en/canadian-heritage/services/about-multiculturalism-anti-racism/about-act.html>. The shift towards inclusivity in Canadian cultural policy began with the introduction of multiculturalism by Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau in 1971, later formalized in the *Canadian Multiculturalism Act*. Richard Day critiques this policy, arguing that it provides superficial recognition of diversity while maintaining power imbalances. Day states, “It has never been much of an achievement to “include everyone” when this everyone has been carefully selected to pose as little challenge as possible to

the convergence of cultural and economic dynamics is relevant but serves only to highlight why stereotypes persist as structurally reinforced phenomena within cultural productions. This dynamic underscores the importance of critically examining how global and local forces intersect to shape cultural representations in Canadian theatre, a focus of this dissertation.

Middle Eastern masculinity stereotypes in Western discourse are rooted in Orientalism and colonialism. Said's *Orientalism* reveals how Western scholarship constructed the East as exotic, backward, and inferior, positioning Middle Eastern men as dangerous outsiders, exotic, backward, uncivilized, and inherently inferior, to justify colonial and imperial ambitions.⁶ Said asserts, "The Arab is conceived of as irremediably hostile to Judeo-Christian values and as a security threat to Western society."⁷ Said's scholarship highlights the portrayal of Middle Eastern men as part of a mysterious and alluring world, inherently violent and hostile to Western values, and fundamentally different from and inferior to Western men. These deeply ingrained stereotypes have not only persisted but have also evolved, adapting to the changing sociopolitical landscape in the Global North, including Canada. Geopolitical conflicts and media portrayals have intensified the stereotype of Middle Eastern men as

the existing order" See Richard J.F. Day, *Multiculturalism and the History of Canadian Diversity* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000), 224. These critiques sparked discussions on interculturalism, particularly in Quebec, where interculturalism emphasizes cultural convergence and the preservation of a common public culture rooted in the French language, distinct from multiculturalism's focus on pluralism. See Nasar Meer, Tariq Modood, and Ricard Zapata-Barrero, *Multiculturalism and Interculturalism: Debating the Dividing Lines* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 111, 116. Recent Canadian cultural policy, driven by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, has prioritized inclusivity and reconciliation with Indigenous communities. For example, the policy shift includes the incorporation of Indigenous languages into public institutions, the commitment to education reform based on Indigenous perspectives, and the establishment of commemorative events and initiatives to preserve Indigenous cultural heritage. These initiatives aim to address the historical and ongoing marginalization of Indigenous peoples in Canada, aligning with the TRC's calls to action for reconciliation and inclusivity. Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, *Calls to Action*, (Winnipeg: Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015), accessed June 7, 2025, https://ehprnh2mwo3.exactdn.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Calls_to_Action_English2.pdf.

⁶ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 1. Said writes, "The Orient was almost a European invention, and had been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences." For further discussion on related themes in Said's scholarship, see Said, *Orientalism*, 72, 98, 207, 216.

⁷ Ibid., 287.

violent.⁸ For example, the Arab Israeli conflicts have been a significant source of these stereotypes. Said highlights how pro-Israeli journals and books have contributed to this stereotype, portraying Arabs as inherently hostile and violent, further inflating the narrative of the Middle Eastern man as a threat to Western society. Said writes:

A steady stream of such characterizations [terrorism, violence, and fundamentalism] is inflated still more by contributions from pro-Israeli journals and books in the hope that more Americans and Europeans will see Israel as a victim of Islamic violence. One Israeli government after another has resorted to the propagation of this self-image in the course of the information wars that have gone on since 1948 around the whole question of the Middle East.⁹

Said's observation of the exotic portrayal of the Orient in Western media is further analyzed by scholars who argue that this depiction, especially in the Israel-Palestine conflict, shows the Arab side as uncompromising and unwilling to engage in peace talks.¹⁰ More than a decade after Said first published *Covering Islam* (1981), his work on the representation of Islamic and Arabic identity in Western media, he emphasized in the second edition the persistent and ongoing tension in Palestine-Israel and its direct link to the perpetuation of stereotypes about Middle Eastern subjects, including non-Israeli Middle Eastern masculinities:

In the fifteen years since *Covering Islam* appeared, there has been an intense focus on Muslims and Islam in the American and Western media, most of it characterized by a more highly

⁸ These stereotypes include depictions of Middle Eastern men as terrorists, patriarchal oppressors, and embodying anti-Western values. Section "Middle Eastern Masculinity" pages (76 - 92) will further elaborate on the different types of Middle Eastern masculinity stereotypes and their historical and contextual foundations.

⁹ Said, *Covering Islam*, 17.

¹⁰ Jonathan B. Isacoff, "Writing the Arab-Israeli Conflict: Historical Bias and the Use of History in Political Science," *Perspectives on Politics* 3, no. 1 (2005): 74. Isacoff writes, "While it is clear to many contemporary analysts, although not necessarily to the public, that Israel 'initiated' the second Arab-Israeli war of 1956, the carefully stylized portrayal of Israel as the victim casts a substantial measure of doubt over the seemingly straightforward matter of who was attacked by whom [...] Zionist history also goes to some lengths to suggest that Israel actively sought peace with the Arabs during the 1950s, but that the Arab world was not interested in reciprocating."

exaggerated stereotyping and belligerent hostility than what I had previously described in my book. Indeed, Islam's role in hijackings and terrorism, descriptions of the way in which overtly Muslim countries like Iran threaten "us" and our way of life, and speculations about the latest conspiracy to blow up buildings, sabotage commercial airliners, and poison water supplies seem to play increasingly on Western consciousness.¹¹

In a more contemporary context, the events of the Gulf War in 1991 and the aftermath of the September 11 attacks brought about a pervasive association between Middle Eastern identities and extremist violence, further cementing the stereotype of Middle Eastern men as inherently dangerous.¹² The Persian Gulf War, in particular, saw a surge in hate crimes against Middle Eastern American citizens, as documented by the American Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee, which recorded a significant increase in anti-Arab hate crimes during and after the war.¹³ The portrayal of Middle Eastern men in the media after the first Gulf War often emphasized these men as having associations with extremism and violence, positioning them as new antagonists following the Cold War era's focus on communist threats.¹⁴ These events have profoundly impacted public perceptions, not only in the United States but also in Canada, where similar stereotypes have been reinforced through media and popular culture.

¹¹Said, *Covering Islam*, 9.

¹² Peter Morey and Amina Yaqin, *Framing Muslims: Stereotyping and Representation after 9/11* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 54. Morey and Yaqin discuss how the events of 9/11 significantly influenced perceptions of multiculturalism in the UK, contributing to a collective sense of threat that affected multicultural policies. They explain that the post-9/11 world conjured up fears that "they"—referring to Muslims or those perceived as Muslim—are present within Western societies, diluting "our" traditions, refusing to integrate, and, in extreme cases, threatening lives. This reflects how shifts in the status and presence of immigrant groups, particularly following events like 9/11, led to the formation of stereotypes.

¹³ Amardeep Singh, *We Are Not the Enemy: Hate Crimes Against Arabs, Muslims, and Those Perceived to Be Arab or Muslim After September 11* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2002), 10.

¹⁴ Hamid Dabashi, *Theology of Discontent: The Ideological Foundation of the Islamic Revolution in Iran* (New York: Routledge, 2017), xxxii. Dabashi says, "Hatred of the West, clash of civilizations, the end of history, and things that went wrong became the chorus mantra of the emerging take on political Islam—proclaiming that acts of violence by Muslim militants were constitutional to their character, definitive of their culture, and fundamental to their faith. It was as if decades of detailed and painstaking scholarship mapping out the trajectory of the rise and fall of Islamic ideology over the last two hundred years did not exist or matter."

Canada's adoption of multicultural policies has been pivotal in shaping the nation's cultural landscape, fostering an environment where diverse cultural expressions are encouraged. However, this same environment has also led to the continuation of certain stereotypes rather than dismantling them. Sociologist Richard Day suggests that multiculturalism as state policy often leads to a superficial celebration of difference, which can mask deeper power imbalances and historical injustices.¹⁵

The persistence and adaptation of stereotypes within societal narratives reflect how collective perceptions evolve in response to cultural policies and frameworks like multiculturalism yet remain deeply embedded in the collective consciousness. Over the past few decades, cultural shifts in Canada have evolved from multiculturalism to interculturalism, aiming to enhance inclusivity by addressing the limitations of earlier multicultural policies. Similarly, Truth and Reconciliation efforts established in 2008 have raised awareness of injustices faced by Indigenous peoples, fostering broader discussions about their experiences across diverse groups, a process that continues today. Despite these efforts and shifts in cultural and identity politics, the recognition of diverse and minority groups often retains stereotypical characteristics that adapt to new cultural frameworks rather than being dismantled. For instance, Middle Eastern men, historically perceived through various stereotypes such as violent aggressors or oppressors, are increasingly framed as victims of displacement and violence, potentially reflecting broader awareness of war and conflict in the Middle East and the rising number of refugees. Similarly, Indigenous Canadians, once depicted through colonial tropes such as the "Noble Savage" or

¹⁵ Day, *Multiculturalism and the History of Canadian Diversity*, 3-4. A substantial body of scholarship has examined multiculturalism in Canada and other diverse Western societies. Augie Fleras, *The Politics of Multiculturalism: Multicultural Governance in Comparative Perspective* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009). Fleras's scholarship critically analyzes the evolution of multiculturalism, its global impact, and the ways governments manage diversity, highlighting the tensions between inclusivity rhetoric and power imbalances; Meer, Modood, and Zapata-Barrero, *Multiculturalism and Interculturalism*. Meer, Modood, and Zapata-Barrero explore the debate between multiculturalism and interculturalism, emphasizing Quebec's distinct approach and the importance of cross-cultural dialogue. These works, along with earlier critiques by Richard Day, engage with foundational texts like Will Kymlicka's scholarship; Will Kymlicka, *Multicultural Citizenship: A Liberal Theory of Minority Rights* (Oxford: Clarendon Press; New York: Oxford University Press, 1996); and Charles Taylor, *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*, ed. Amy Gutmann (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

the “bloodthirsty warrior,” are now frequently portrayed as victims in need of saving or as symbols of cultural purity.¹⁶ The institutional approach to recognizing diversity under multicultural policies sometimes comes at the cost of eroding various identities’ historical depth and distinctiveness. The practice of reducing cultural identities to recognizable stereotypes within multicultural frameworks often fails to engage with the complex realities of the communities it seeks to represent.

The recognition of diversity through policies and cultural frameworks intersects with postmodernity, contributing to the reinforcement and perpetuation of stereotypes. Since the early 1970s, Western societies, including Canada, have increasingly implemented policies like Canada’s Multiculturalism Policy to address socio-cultural diversity.¹⁷ This shift coincides with the rise of postmodernity, which Fredric Jameson describes as the cultural logic of late capitalism.¹⁸ The relationship between multiculturalism and postmodernity is not coincidental but interdependent: multiculturalism institutionalizes diverse identities, while postmodernity celebrates the plurality of those

¹⁶ For the historical and evolving stereotypes of Indigenous Canadians, see Daniel Francis, *The Imaginary Indian: The Image of the Indian in Canadian Culture*, 2nd ed. (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2011), 23–24, 120, 176. Francis examines how non-Native Canadians have constructed and perpetuated stereotypes of Indigenous peoples, which reflect the uncertainties and desires of the dominant culture rather than the realities of Indigenous lives. He discusses how these stereotypes oscillate between various archetypes, including the “Noble Savage,” the “bloodthirsty warrior,” the “debased alcoholic,” the “wise elder,” the “monosyllabic ‘squaw,’” and the “eloquent princess,” shaped by the anxieties and needs of mainstream society. While Francis focuses on historical stereotypes, Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang’s 2012 essay highlights more recent narratives, critiquing the romanticization of Indigenous peoples as symbols of cultural purity or victims in need of saving. These portrayals, they argue, reinforce colonial narratives by framing Indigenous identities through reductive and depoliticized lenses. See Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, “Decolonization is Not a Metaphor,” *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 1, no. 1 (2012): 1–40. For additional foundational insights into Indigenous representation, see Gerald Vizenor, *Manifest Manners: Narratives on Postindian Survivance* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999).

¹⁷ Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau introduced the Canadian Multiculturalism Policy in 1971 to preserve cultural heritage and promote equality among ethnic groups. The *Canadian Multiculturalism Act* of 1988 further institutionalized this policy, encouraging the preservation of cultural heritage while promoting equal access to opportunities. Over time, the Act has shifted from merely celebrating cultural differences to addressing social cohesion, integration, and anti-racism through initiatives like the Action Plan Against Racism (2005) and Canada’s Anti-Racism Strategy (2019).

¹⁸ Postmodernity is not merely a philosophical condition, but a socio-economic phase characterized by the dominance of fragmented and pluralistic cultural narratives devoid of historical depth. (For further elaboration, see this chapter’s section, ‘Postmodernity and Cultural Production’ on page 92). Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991). Jameson explains how postmodern cultural forms emerge from the dynamics of late capitalism, which commodifies cultural difference while retaining economic hierarchies. This idea is central to understanding how both postmodernity and multiculturalism, while seemingly promoting diversity, do so within systems that prioritize market expansion.

identities.¹⁹ Here, the market-driven integration of cultural differences contextualizes but does not centralize this research, which focuses on stereotypes as structurally reinforced constructs within Canadian theatre. Both frameworks—focusing on diversity and postmodernity—operate within capitalist structures, emphasizing the strategic recognition of cultural differences to serve economic and political agendas rather than addressing social inequalities. Recognizing cultural differences becomes necessary to broaden markets and cater to various cultural groups within nations and across the globe, but these efforts rarely aim at dismantling underlying power dynamics or structural inequalities.

The interconnection of these paradigms—addressing diversity, identity politics, and the cultural logic of late capitalism—can lead to the reinforcement of stereotypes. Multiculturalism, focused on cultural representation and rights recognition, often fails to engage with the complexities of minority identities, reducing them to surface-level understandings that fit neatly into easily recognizable frameworks of inclusion. For instance, narratives about Indigenous communities in Canada often emphasize victimization and the need for recognition without delving deeper into issues of self-determination and decolonization.²⁰ Similarly, postmodernity, with its embrace of fragmented, plural narratives, often results in shallow representations lacking substantive critique. This interplay between the necessity to recognize diversity and postmodern cultural production perpetuates stereotypes by acknowledging multiple identities without profoundly engaging with their complexities. Sociologist Day remarks that multicultural policy embodies a postmodern ethos: “Canadian multiculturalism as state policy can also be seen as an attempt to evolve a new form of state articulation appropriate to a social

¹⁹ Day, *Multiculturalism and the History of Canadian Diversity*, 18, 177, 179. Day discusses how multiculturalism as state policy often serves a managerial purpose in integrating diversity into a postmodern state’s political and cultural fabric without necessarily confronting the deeper systemic inequalities that persist.

²⁰ Tuck and Yang, “Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor,” 19. Tuck and Yang critique the “multicultural” approach in settler-colonial contexts for reducing complex issues, such as Indigenous sovereignty and land rights, to symbolic recognition without addressing deeper power structures. Recognition without addressing deeper issues is a form of “equivocation” that perpetuates colonial dynamics by avoiding meaningful engagement with settler colonialism, reinforcing stereotypes through superficial acknowledgment rather than substantive change.

condition of postmodernity.”²¹ While Canadian theatre often addresses issues of diversity and inclusion, structural dynamics continue to shape cultural representations, presenting an ongoing challenge to move beyond oversimplified and misrepresented identities toward nuanced, historically and culturally layered depictions.

This dissertation explores how Canadian theatre deconstructs stereotypes, examining dramaturgical strategies that critique entrenched images. It argues that deconstructing stereotypes requires a dramaturgical approach that engages narrative structure, characterization, staging elements, and casting to impact portrayals of Middle Eastern masculinities. Stereotypes are not just cultural representations but products of broader systemic dynamics. The critical intervention of this work emphasizes the importance of an artist’s understanding of formal choices and the ideological implications of dramaturgical strategies. An effective critical representation arises when theatrical forms are used to expose and challenge the structures that sustain stereotypes. This requires a conscious, innovative use of form and content to critically examine stereotypes on stage, prompting the audience to reconsider their preconceived notions. Ultimately, this work demonstrates that successful strategies must engage not only with artistic representation but with the underlying power dynamics that shape and perpetuate these stereotypes.

Purpose and Objectives of the Study

Given the historical misrepresentation of Middle Eastern masculinities, this study critically analyzes the representation of Middle Eastern masculinities in Canadian theatre, examining how these identities are constructed, deconstructed, and reimagined on stage. By focusing on dramaturgical strategies and theatre-making elements that impact the portrayal of gendered and racialized identities, the research aims to deepen the understanding of how these artistic choices shape perceptions of identity

²¹ Day, *Multiculturalism and the History of Canadian Diversity*, 204.

categories, particularly Middle Eastern masculinities. Through analysis of character development, narrative structure, and various staging elements and styles, the study seeks to reveal how such choices contribute to or challenge stereotypical portrayals.

The study identifies dramaturgical strategies that foster nuanced portrayals of Middle Eastern masculinity and examines how oversimplified representations reinforce existing stereotypes. The analysis centers on the practical application of dramaturgical strategies, grounding itself in actual theatre practices rather than abstract theory, with primary emphasis on the artwork. Furthermore, this study addresses the historical misrepresentation of Middle Eastern masculinities, challenging entrenched Western stereotypes reinforced by popular works like *Aladdin* and *Alibaba*.²² Emphasizing the need for socio-historical awareness in dramaturgy highlights how structural and cultural conditions contribute to these stereotypes. Furthermore, this study examines how Canadian socio-political factors—diversity policies like multiculturalism and public discourse on inclusion—contextualize portrayals of Middle Eastern masculinities in theatre. By analyzing how these external factors (factors external to the theatrical works themselves) influence dramaturgical choices and audience perceptions, the study highlights the conditions that perpetuate or challenge stereotypes.

Contextual Background

In Canadian theatre, portrayals of Middle Eastern masculinities remain shaped by historical stereotypes and current socio-political dynamics. Despite multicultural initiatives, Orientalist perspectives persist, reducing complex identities to oversimplified and marginalized characters. The growing presence of Middle Eastern communities in Canada, driven by geopolitical tensions and

²² Ruth B. Bottigheimer, “East Meets West: Hannā Diyāb and *The Thousand and One Nights*,” *Marvels & Tales* 28, no. 2 (2014): 302. Alibaba and Aladdin were introduced to Western audiences through the work of French translator Antoine Galland in the 18th century. Galland included these stories in his French translation of *One Thousand and One Nights* (also known as *Arabian Nights*), but they were not part of the original Arabic compilation. Galland claimed to have heard the stories from a Maronite Christian storyteller named Hanna Diyab from Aleppo.

immigration from regions such as Syria, Iraq, and Iran, underscores the need to examine how these identities are constructed and deconstructed in Canadian theatre.²³

The increasing visibility of Middle Easterners in Canada underscores the importance of this research, which critically examines the effectiveness of dramaturgical strategies in moving beyond the stereotyping of these groups. According to Statistics Canada, the number of foreign-born individuals in Canada has risen significantly, with immigrants from the Middle East and West Asia experiencing notable growth.²⁴ Immigrants from West Asia and the Middle East increased from 0.0% in 1871 to 6.7% in 2011.²⁵ Between 2016 and 2021, Middle Eastern immigrants comprised 12.3% of Canada's foreign-born population, with a substantial influx of 60,795 Syrians due to refugee resettlement efforts.²⁶ This demographic shift underscores Middle Eastern communities' increasing presence and cultural influence in Canada.

The immigration rate from the Middle East has increased significantly in recent years. Between 2016 and 2021, the number of immigrants from "West Central Asia and the Middle East" to Canada

²³ Contributing factors include the Syrian civil war (since 2011), the Iraq War (2003), Egyptian civil unrest (since 2011), ongoing conflicts in Israel-Palestine and Lebanon (since 1948), rising social anxiety and fundamentalism in Jordan, and Islamic totalitarianism in Iran (since the 1980s) alongside the erosion of civil rights.

²⁴ Statistics Canada, "150 Years of Immigration in Canada," *Statistics Canada*, updated June 15, 2016, accessed August 14, 2024, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/11-630-x/11-630-x2016006-eng.htm>. The number of foreign-born (first-generation immigrants) in Canada increased from 500,000 in 1871 (16.1% of the Canadian population) to over 8.3 million in 2021 (23.0% of the Canadian Population). The database notes that "In the past, immigrants were mainly from European countries. During the first few censuses after Confederation, the British Isles were the main source of immigration, accounting for 83.6% of the foreign-born population in the 1871 Census, or close to half a million people." Statistics Canada, "Immigrants Make up the Largest Share of the Population in over 150 Years and Continue to Shape Who We Are as Canadians," *The Daily*, October 26, 2022, accessed August 14, 2024, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/221026/dq221026a-eng.htm>; this document shows that "In 2021, more than 8.3 million people, or almost one-quarter (23.0%) of the population, were, or had ever been, a landed immigrant or permanent resident in Canada."

²⁵ Ibid. See description for Chart 5.

²⁶ Statistics Canada, "Focus on Geography Series, 2021 Census - Immigration and Ethnocultural Diversity," *Statistics Canada*, October 26, 2022, accessed April 22, 2025, <https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2021/as-sa/fogs-spg/page.cfm?lang=E&topic=9&dguid=2021A000011124>. In the 2021 Census, 452,640 Arabs and 259,375 West Asians were recorded in Canada, together accounting for around 711,000 people. This represents a notable increase from 2016. Arabs made up 7.8% and West Asians 4.5% (i.e., a total of 12.3%) of the total immigrant population, with these groups steadily growing as part of the larger demographic shift in Canada's overall population. Statistics Canada. "Immigrants Make up the Largest Share." The article notes that "According to the 2021 Census, there were 218,430 new refugees admitted as permanent residents from 2016 to 2021 and still present in Canada at the time of the census. The primary places of birth of refugees have changed considerably over the decades, in tandem with conflicts and international events."

increased by 70% compared to the 2011-2015 period; this represents a 34.7% increase in the total population of this group in Canada over five years, underscoring the sustained growth and rising significance of this demographic in Canada’s multicultural landscape.²⁷ As of the 2021 census, the majority of the Middle Eastern population in Canada is from Iran (182,940), Syria (97,595), Lebanon (95,730), and Iraq (84,130).²⁸ The following table shows the population changes over the past several decades (since before 1980).

Country of Birth	From “Before 1980” to the 2021 Census	Percentage Change Since 1980
Syria	2,735 to 97,595	3,471.9%
Iraq	1,310 to 84,130	6,322.1%
Afghanistan	165 to 62,450	37,781.8%
Lebanon	13,275 to 95,730	620.9%
Iran	2,320 to 182,940	7,782.8%

Table 1. Changes in the Immigrant Population by Place of Birth from Before 1980 to the 2021 Census. The extraordinary percentage increases reflect the low base populations before 1980 and significant geopolitical events leading to increased immigration from these countries. *Source: Statistics Canada. “Immigrant Population by Selected Places of Birth, Admission Category, and Period of Immigration, 2021 Census.”*

These demographic shifts have brought a stronger presence of Middle Eastern narratives into Canadian society. Combined with ongoing geopolitical tensions in the Middle East, this has heightened cultural and media focus on Middle Eastern communities. In Canadian theatre, the heightened attention toward Middle Easterners has led to an increase in productions engaging with Middle Eastern themes and characters, though their approaches vary significantly. Some productions, like Wajdi Mouawad’s *Scorched*, delve deeply into questions of Middle Eastern identity in the diaspora, offering portrayals that

²⁷ Calculation based on the comparison of the total immigrant population from West Central Asia and the Middle East during the periods 2011-2015 and 2016-2021. The 2011-2015 period registered 132,031 immigrants, while the 2016-2021 period registered 225,530 immigrants. As of 2021, the total immigrant population from this region reached 749,440, up from 556,350 in 2016. See Statistics Canada, “Immigrant Population by Selected Places of Birth, Admission Category, and Period of Immigration, 2021 Census,” *Statistics Canada*, updated October 20, 2022, accessed August 14, 2024, <https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2021/dp-pd/dv-vd/imm/index-en.cfm>; Statistics Canada, “Immigrant Population by Selected Places of Birth, Admission Category and Period of Immigration, Canada, Provinces and Territories, Census Metropolitan Areas and Areas Outside of Census Metropolitan Areas, 2016 Census,” *Statistics Canada*, updated April 3, 2019, accessed August 14, 2024, <https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/dp-pd/hltfst/imm/Table.cfm?Lang=E&T=21&Geo=01>.

²⁸ Statistics Canada, “Immigrant Population 2021 Census.”

invite deeper examination of these complex identities.²⁹ However, several productions in Canadian theatre have engaged with Middle Eastern subjects through more reductive approaches that risk reinforcing existing stereotypes. For instance, in productions such as Jason Sherman's *Reading Hebron* (1996) and Caryl Churchill's *Seven Jewish Children* (staged in Toronto in 2009), Palestinian characters are rendered only through dialogue about them, lacking physical embodiment or dramatic development on stage, a representation that reduces lived experiences to abstract concepts.³⁰ While reductive representations have long dominated portrayals of Middle Eastern identities, recent productions increasingly gesture toward more embodied and complex representations. The increased presence of Middle Eastern narratives in Canadian theatre, while reflecting demographic changes, reveals ongoing efforts to move beyond stereotypical representations toward culturally and historically nuanced portrayals of Middle Eastern masculinities.

Within the context of Canadian theatre, this research examines the significant and ongoing stereotyping of Middle Eastern masculinities, which has been culturally and historically constructed, particularly in response to Western perspectives of the East.³¹ While engaging with multiple disciplines, this study concentrates on cultural representations, particularly in theatre and the performing arts, focusing on the study of men and masculinities. The core issue of this dissertation is how theatre contributes to the formation and deformation of stereotypical images, particularly regarding the increasingly visible Middle Eastern population and their gendered identities. This research also problematizes existing dramaturgical approaches that claim to critique stereotyping yet are rooted in empathetic realism and humanistic universalism, which rely on emotional identification and shared

²⁹ Wajdi Mouawad, *Scorched*, trans. Linda Gaboriau (Toronto: Playwrights Canada Press, 2005).

³⁰ Caryl Churchill, *Seven Jewish Children: A Play for Gaza* (London: Nick Hern Books, 2009); Churchill's play was performed in 2009 in Toronto at the theatre Passe Muraille; See Ben Spurr, "The Fight over Seven Jewish Children," *NOW Magazine*, May 15, 2009, accessed June 7, 2025, <https://nowtoronto.com/culture/the-fight-over-seven-jewish-children/>. See Jason Sherman, *Reading Hebron* (Toronto: Playwrights Canada Press, 1996).

³¹ In the section "Middle Eastern Masculinity on page 76 of this chapter, the characteristics and historical evolution of misconceptions surrounding Middle Eastern masculinities will be elaborated upon.

human experience.³² By evaluating these methods alongside other dramaturgical strategies, this study examines their strengths and limitations within broader cultural, economic, and political contexts, aiming to identify which approaches effectively address and dismantle stereotypes in theatre.

A key challenge in this investigation is defining what constitutes “effective” dramaturgy in critiquing or supporting these stereotypes. This requires a deeper analytical and theoretical exploration of gendered Middle Eastern subjects within the complexities of artwork and its context. It necessitates the incorporation of frameworks that consider structural influences, such as postmodernism’s cultural dominance, which play a significant role in perpetuating stereotypes. The current research often overlooks structural dynamics without considering the role of economic and socio-political factors in sustaining and evolving stereotypes. This study begins by analyzing the artwork to uncover and explore the underlying socio-economic factors influencing it. By prioritizing the artwork, the research identifies how these factors connect the representation of Middle Eastern masculinities to broader socio-economic forces. The study aims to fill the gap by examining these constructs as cultural phenomena and intersections of power dynamics that necessitate challenging entrenched narratives through informed artistic practices. By establishing these objectives and situating them within Canada’s socio-historical context, the following section details the criteria and rationale behind selecting specific theatrical productions, illustrating how the study’s goals inform which works are analyzed.

Case Study Selection and Rationale

To examine how structural, socio-political, and dramaturgical factors shape portrayals of Middle Eastern masculinities in Canadian theatre, this dissertation focuses on selected productions that portray, question, or transform these identities on stage. The following section presents the rationale for choosing

³² Empathetic realism encourages emotional engagement by fostering identification with characters, while humanistic universalism emphasizes shared human experiences, often at the expense of addressing specific socio-historical and political contexts. While both approaches offer surface-level critiques of stereotyping, they can inadvertently reinforce stereotypes by neglecting the structural and historical forces that produce and sustain them.

these specific works and artists, clarifies the scope of analysis, and explains how each case study aligns with the research questions.

The case studies selected for this dissertation are all (co)created and co-produced by artists of Middle Eastern heritage, whose lived experiences of displacement, cultural negotiation, and identity formation provide a unique lens for exploring and navigating stereotypes on stage. This choice ensures that the analysis is informed by voices directly engaged with the complexities of Middle Eastern masculinities, enriching the examination with lived realities and cultural depth. However, to fully understand the significance of these choices, it is essential to consider the broader context of theatre production in Canada and how it shapes the representation of Middle Eastern masculinities.

In a culturally diverse society like Canada, where there have been continuous efforts to recognize diversity both at the political level and in public social discourse, performing arts often operate within two distinct frameworks: productions in heritage languages that primarily serve specific cultural communities or productions in official languages that reach broader Canadian audiences but frequently align with dominant cultural perspectives.³³ Both approaches, while valuable, face limitations in addressing stereotypical representations.

Productions in heritage languages, while deeply connected to their cultural origins and fostering cultural pride, have limited reach beyond their immediate, culturally specific communities. Conversely, theatre productions that aim to reach broader Canadian audiences often operate within institutional constraints that can limit their capacity for critique; if funded by private or non-governmental entities, theatre makers need to meet specific expectations to receive funding. For instance, corporate sponsors may prioritize productions that align with their brand image or avoid controversial content. If publicly

³³ Knowles, *Performing the Intercultural City*, 27-29. Knowles examines how funding structures created “separate and unequal support structures” for different types of cultural production in Canadian theatre, where certain productions were specifically directed at “ethnic” communities while others were aimed at broader audiences. These institutional frameworks, as Knowles notes, influenced how different cultural groups could present their work and reach their audiences.

funded, the theatre productions must rely on grants, which come with their own criteria and priority areas that shape programming choices. In Canada, the Canada Council for the Arts, a major public funder, outlines strategic priorities such as promoting diversity, inclusion, and accessibility, which organizations must address to receive funding.³⁴ While important, these criteria can steer organizations toward certain approaches.

The interplay between funding-associated limitations and community expectations creates complex pressures on theatrical productions, particularly regarding identity representation. This dynamic was starkly illustrated in 2009 when B'nai Brith Canada petitioned Toronto's mayor to shut down the staging of Churchill's play *Seven Jewish Children* at Theatre Passe Muraille in Toronto, arguing that a publicly-funded theatre should not stage what they viewed as anti-Semitic content.³⁵ *NOW Magazine's* coverage of this incident highlighted a broader pattern where culturally specific communities challenge productions they believe misrepresent their heritage, especially when public funding is involved.³⁶ The previous example illustrates the complex dynamics between culturally specific communities, theatres aiming to reach diverse audiences, and the constraints imposed by both public and private funders.

The tensions between cultural representation, community advocacy, and funding constraints inform this study's methodological approach and its choices of case studies; these tensions have led to the prioritization of collaborative productions, which navigate multiple intersections of identity while fostering inclusivity. The approach to case study selection aims to minimize potential limitations or criticisms that might attribute stereotypical or unnuanced portrayals to factors such as cultural unfamiliarity or merely serving funding criteria. Rather than examining productions by individual artists

³⁴ Canada Council for the Arts, "Commitments," accessed December 15, 2024, <https://canadacouncil.ca/commitments>.

³⁵ "Artists Fear Censorship after Outcry over Seven Jewish Children," *CBC News*, May 13, 2009, accessed June 7, 2025, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/entertainment/artists-fear-censorship-after-outcry-over-seven-jewish-children-1.838768>.

³⁶ Spurr, "Fight over Seven Jewish Children." The article notes that "B'nai Brith Canada called on Toronto Mayor David Miller to prevent readings of the play at Theatre Passe Muraille, arguing it should not put on in a theatre supported by public money."

or selecting works solely based on Middle Eastern backgrounds, this research deliberately focuses on collaborative productions where Middle Eastern Canadian artists played creative roles while working with non-Middle Eastern Canadian practitioners. This approach prioritizes productions that integrate multiple intersections of identity and collaboration, enabling a nuanced exploration of how diverse perspectives engage with stereotypes. Collaborative works function as social acts of creativity that bridge cultural divides in Canada's diverse landscape, offering an opportunity to examine how such efforts critique or reconstruct stereotypes.

By moving beyond the scope of works created solely for specific cultural communities or individual artists, the criteria for case study selection expand the analytical framework for navigating stereotypical representations across various intersections. Productions aimed at specific communities may demonstrate effective dramaturgical strategies for subverting stereotypes within familiar contexts; however, their methodologies may not address broader applicability for diverse audiences. Similarly, works by non-Middle Eastern practitioners risk displaying cultural unfamiliarity, potentially resulting in unnuanced portrayals or reliance on stereotypes. In contrast, collaborative productions offer a middle ground where intersectionality can enrich the understanding of how dramaturgical strategies navigate these complexities. Thus, the study seeks to uncover how the interplay of lived experiences, cultural heritage, and dramaturgical approaches can challenge or reinforce stereotypes within Canada's diverse theatrical landscape.

Another key factor for case study selection is the deliberate effort to move beyond the stereotypical language and discourses that often frame Middle Eastern identities as a singular category of "Middle Eastern masculinity." The choices of case studies reflect the research's commitment to critically examining its own framework before engaging with the material, ensuring it does not replicate the very stereotypes it seeks to analyze. By foregrounding the diversity of themes, contexts, and Middle

Eastern artists who co-produced these works, the selected case studies offer an intersectional lens, encompassing cultural, gendered, and diasporic perspectives, on the varied identities within a traditionally simplified gender category. The literature review section of this chapter will demonstrate that a considerable number of studies examining Middle Eastern male subjects have often taken a limited and exclusive approach to the plurality of masculine identities in the Middle East. Non-Middle Eastern audiences, influenced by these simplifications, often equate Middle Eastern men exclusively with being Muslim or Arab.³⁷ Researchers with specific cultural, ethnic, or national affiliations also tend to focus on particular, thus limited, contexts, regions, or singular intersections such as gender, overlooking the multiple intersectionalities that shape these identities. This study consciously incorporates diversity in its methodology to avoid these reductive approaches.

While acknowledging that no selection can fully encompass all aspects of diversity, the selected case studies strive to reflect varied perspectives within the broad category of Middle Eastern masculinities. The productions feature co-creators with diverse backgrounds: Marcus Youssef, a second-generation Canadian of Egyptian descent; Soheil Parsa, an Iranian-Canadian director; and Itai Erdal, an Israeli-Canadian artist. The themes span various historical points, regions, and cultures, from Persian mythology to the Israel-Palestine conflict and the Persian Gulf Wars. These selection criteria deliberately highlight the heterogeneity of Middle Eastern identities, challenging the common conflation of Middle Eastern with specific religious, linguistic, or ethnic categories. Additionally, the diverse lived experiences and backgrounds of co-creators, an expat, a refugee, and a second-generation immigrant, mirror the complex realities of Middle Eastern diasporic life in Canada.

³⁷ This oversimplification persists even in academic settings. As a West Asian, Iranian, Persian-speaking individual, I have encountered this lack of awareness among scholars firsthand. Colleagues have mistakenly assumed I speak Arabic or follow certain religious practices, presumably based on broad generalizations about Middle Eastern identities. While these instances often stem from lack of awareness rather than bias, they highlight a significant gap in cultural scholarship, particularly in approaches to studying masculinities from West Asia, a region typically oversimplified under the label Middle East.

By examining productions where these artists were involved in the creative process, this study investigates how their distinct perspectives and experiences of both being associated with the Middle East and masculinity inform the dramaturgical approaches in the case studies of this research to navigate stereotypical representations.

As it will be discussed, the representation of Middle Eastern masculinity in these case studies and other artworks stands on a spectrum between reconstructing stereotypes and criticizing stereotypes. If a case study's representations exhibit stronger stereotypical traits and align more closely with the stereotype-recreating end of the spectrum, it invites a critical examination of why artists with firsthand experience of marginalization might adopt dramaturgical approaches that undermine more complex portrayals of their own identity categories. Thus, this dissertation bridges the gap between dramaturgy, structural social relations, and historical contexts, providing an analytical framework that emphasizes the social role of theatre. The research aims to prove the hypothesis that theatre practitioners' historical and social awareness is not merely a choice but a crucial factor influencing how identities are portrayed and critiqued on stage. This adds a unique layer of nuance to the existing research, contributing insights that are relevant to both theatre criticism and broader Cultural studies.

Research Questions

By focusing on plays produced, premiered, and initially received within Canada, this study aims to examine how these artworks' representations operate and are understood within the framework of Canadian theatre.³⁸ The study acknowledges that "Canadian theatre" is a diverse and multifaceted conceptual category shaped by the country's cultural, linguistic, and regional complexities, which

³⁸ The dissertation focuses specifically on English-language Canadian theatre due to several factors: the linguistic medium of the case studies, which are predominantly English-language productions; the researcher's linguistic fluency, which enables deeper critical engagement with the texts and performances; and the wider availability of archival materials, recordings, and scholarly discourse surrounding English-language productions. This delimitation enables a more focused and methodologically consistent analysis within a clearly defined cultural and linguistic field.

inevitably influence the interpretations and receptions of these works.³⁹ Within this scope, this research integrates and develops the subject of Middle Eastern masculinities into these central questions, which form the foundation of the dissertation argument:

- How are stereotypes of Middle Eastern masculinity represented or critiqued in theatre, and through what dramaturgical choices?

Understanding ideas about Middle Eastern masculinity requires clarifying the perspective from which this concept is approached. Middle Eastern masculinity, like other gendered, ethnicized, and racialized constructs, is inherently ambiguous and continuously redefined by cultural, historical, and discursive contexts. Given this complexity, this research focuses on the stereotypical articulations of Middle Eastern masculinity that, while perpetuated within a fixed framework, have traits that have gradually evolved over time.

- How are representations of Middle Eastern masculinity conveyed through dramaturgical choices in theatre within the Canadian context?

Answering this question requires a layered analytical approach. Initially, a close reading that prioritizes the artwork itself is necessary, analyzing elements such as dialogue, character depiction, stage design, *mise-en-scène*, actor choices, and stage arrangements to uncover how the production constructs and delivers masculinities. This step aims to reveal what the play communicates about these masculinities through its artistic choices and narrative strategies. Drawing on theories from masculinity studies will deepen the understanding of how these depictions are presented within the text and performance. Next, situating these representations within their broader contexts is crucial for assessing how the conveyed masculinities resonate with, challenge, or reinforce societal attitudes and stereotypes

³⁹ While some artists may resist or complicate the label of Canadian theatre in their self-identification, this study approaches these works based on their production, reception, and institutional framing within the Canadian theatrical landscape.

of Middle Eastern masculinity. This contextual analysis clarifies the interaction between the portrayed masculinities and prevalent stereotypes, examining whether these representations perpetuate or disrupt fixed perceptions. Finally, examining the narrative and performative structures of the theatre will offer insights into how the medium's form contributes to the stage delivery of masculinity. This layered approach prepares the groundwork for integrating additional theoretical frameworks and methodologies, providing a nuanced understanding of how these ideas are constructed, conveyed, and potentially challenged on stage.

- What criteria can be used to evaluate the effectiveness of dramaturgical strategies in deconstructing stereotypes of Middle Eastern masculinity?

In addressing the question of whether an artwork “critiques or supports” a fixed identity perception, it is essential to establish clear criteria. Simply opposing a stereotype may not be enough to disrupt it, as the analytical challenge lies in the fluidity of stereotypes—they evolve while their underlying framework remains fixed. Therefore, this analysis must go beyond content to explore what sustains or deconstructs the stereotype's form, determining what constitutes a critique or reinforcement. Relying solely on concepts like hegemony is insufficient, as both hegemony and stereotypes are fluid and can adapt while retaining their core structures.⁴⁰ Additionally, limiting the analysis to a single discipline or specific area of study fails to capture the complexity of identity and stereotype. For instance, while ethics and psychoanalysis offer some insights, they are limited in scope; stereotypes are social constructs, not merely individual issues, and ethical perspectives can introduce cultural biases. Therefore, a multi-dimensional analysis that integrates historical, economic, cultural, and social forces is

⁴⁰ Hegemony refers to the way in which a dominant group in society exercises control not only through coercion but also through the consent of the subordinate groups. This dominance is achieved by influencing cultural norms, values, and beliefs so deeply embedded in the societal fabric that they appear natural and inevitable. See John Scott, *A Dictionary of Sociology*, 4th ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), s.v. “Hegemony,” accessed June 7, 2025, 2024, <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780199683581.001.0001/acref-9780199683581-e-993>.

essential for effectively critiquing and understanding the persistence of stereotypes. This research aims to distinguish between critiques that address the underlying structures of stereotypes and those that only engage with their surface expressions.

- What dramaturgical strategies are used to critique or reinforce representations of Middle Eastern masculinities in Canadian theatre?

As outlined earlier, analyzing dramaturgy and the writing of a play requires a multifaceted approach. This involves close reading of the texts and productions, examining the context in which they were produced, and analyzing the formal dimensions of the play. Through this process, the research aims to uncover how imagery and production elements serve as mediums for either critiquing or reinforcing stereotypical representations. This approach reveals the intricate ways these dramaturgical strategies contribute to the overall portrayal and reception of these identities on stage.

- What insights does this study offer for artists and directors seeking to create nuanced representations of Middle Eastern masculinities in theatre?

This research focuses on Canada's unique cultural and political landscape, offering contextually relevant insights that can guide artists and directors in creating more nuanced representations. It aims to provide a roadmap for theatre practitioners to challenge reductive stereotypes and develop dramaturgical strategies that are both artistically innovative and socially impactful. By integrating complex theoretical concepts with grounded artistic critique, this study analyzes and synthesizes effective dramaturgical strategies that have emerged from these productions, identifying approaches that successfully challenge or inadvertently reinforce stereotypes. By examining these varied approaches alongside their conceptual underpinnings, this research provides a framework for understanding how theatre can engage with and potentially transform cultural narratives around identities that have been Othered and simplified, such as Middle Eastern masculinities.

Furthermore, the outcomes aim to inform academic discourse by providing a deeper understanding of how stereotypes can be dismantled on stage. Unlike studies focused on single works or authors, this research examines multiple dramaturgical approaches across various case studies, offering a broader and more integrated understanding of identity portrayal. This methodology provides a more comprehensive, contextualized perspective beyond isolated examples. Moreover, while some scholarship focuses on theoretical exploration without practical application, this study balances theoretical analysis with practical critique. By grounding analysis in specific theatrical productions, the research ensures that theoretical frameworks serve to illuminate rather than overshadow the artworks, offering practical and actionable insights that directly inform artistic practices.

Statement of Dissertation Problem

Despite initiatives promoting diversity and inclusion, Middle Eastern masculinities in Canada continue to be simplified and stereotyped. Even with widespread efforts toward cultural understanding, identity politics have not eliminated these reductive portrayals. Over the past half-century, Canadian society has experienced significant shifts in cultural and identity politics, marked by progressive immigration policies and an increasing emphasis on diversity. One of the earliest and most notable efforts in this regard was the adoption of multiculturalism as an official policy in the 1970s. Despite initiatives to foster cultural diversity, hate crimes, misunderstandings, and a lack of mutual understanding among different groups have not disappeared today.⁴¹ Scholars such as Day, Hall, and

⁴¹For more details on this trend, see Jing Hui Wang and Greg Moreau, “Police-Reported Hate Crime in Canada, 2020,” *Juristat*, Catalogue no. 85-002-X, Ottawa: Statistics Canada, March 17, 2022, accessed June 7, 2025, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/85-002-x/2022001/article/00005-eng.htm>. Before the 1970s, race-based crimes were often not categorized as hate crimes, with acts of discrimination frequently embedded within Canadian policies, such as those targeting Indigenous peoples and anti-Asian immigration. The rise in hate crime statistics today reflects not only the persistence of the issue but also improvements in frameworks for identifying and reporting incidents. Statistics Canada reports that hate crimes motivated by race or ethnicity saw significant increases between 2009 and 2020, while motivations such as religion and sexual orientation showed smaller or unchanged trends during this period. For instance, the proportion of race- or ethnicity-motivated hate crimes grew significantly, underscoring shifting societal tensions (see Statistics Canada, chart 11). Similarly, from 2020 to 2023, race or ethnicity remained a predominant motivating factor in the increase of hate crimes in Canada, with Statistics Canada offering detailed yearly reports on this trend. See Statistics Canada, “Police-

Jameson argue that early diversity policies were implemented more to manage societal changes than to genuinely embrace cultural differences.⁴² Managed diversity aligns with hegemonic processes that recognize cultural differences under a dominant logic, often depoliticizing them, often flattening complex identities into oversimplified portrayals. Hall notes that the proliferation of differences does not signify equality but reflects how diversity is segmented and strategically framed within broader sociopolitical systems; he addresses that while corporations now market to niche audiences, employing cultural fragmentation for strategic ends, this process ultimately reinforces the dominant cultural logic.⁴³ Jameson agrees with Hall, adding that the process of managing diversity extends beyond cultural differences, reflecting a broader historical pattern where even individuality and rebellion have been appropriated and incorporated into dominant systems.⁴⁴ These perspectives support this research's stance: that today, under the cultural dominance of postmodernity, cultural differences are prone to be reframed into representations that prioritize visibility over substantive engagement, while even subversive identities are co-opted into hegemonic structures of power and influence. Thus, this

Reported Hate Crimes, by Detailed Motivation, Canada, 2020 to 2023," *The Daily*, July 27, 2023, accessed August 14, 2024, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/240725/t006b-eng.htm>.

⁴² Richard J.F. Day, *Gramsci Is Dead: Anarchist Currents in the Newest Social Movements* (London: Pluto Press, 2005), 6. Regarding the idea of utilizing diversity for management and control, Day introduces the concept of 'hegemony of hegemony,' which describes how even social movements that meant to challenge the system often get trapped within its logic: "Populations must be sorted into apparently 'natural' hierarchies if the differential distribution of social goods that capitalism creates is to be reconciled with the values espoused by a liberal politics [...] These allow 'populations' to be divided and managed." Furthermore, in an Interview with Fredric Jameson, Stuart Hall addresses how capitalism manages diversity for consumption rather than genuine inclusion, referring to the commodification of cultural differences: "It's as if the era of mass production and mass culture has now yielded not standardization, but a proliferation of difference, of Otherness. Corporations don't advertise to a mass public anymore. It's now niche advertising—addressing the subtle differentiation between one consumer public and another, exploiting cultural fragmentation." Fredric Jameson and Stuart Hall, "Interview with Stuart Hall," in *Jameson on Jameson*, ed. Ian Buchanan (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 116.

⁴³ Jameson and Hall, "Interview with Stuart Hall," 116. See Hall's comment in the previous footnote (i.e., 42). Fredric Jameson, in this conversation, agrees with Hall that the recognition of cultural differences in the postmodern era is not necessarily about liberation but about commodification and management within the capitalist system.

⁴⁴ Jameson and Hall, "Interview with Stuart Hall," 116. Jameson adds that "Massification, 'Fordism,' and the standardized products also went along with the individual rebel. That is what allowed revolt, as well as all of the other ideologies, such as authenticity and so forth, that we associate in a positive sense with the modern. What you describe is the way in which the economic system itself, in a post-Fordist way, has now become a machine for differentiation."

dissertation casts doubt on the effectiveness of any critical approach in theatrical representation in an era where even critiques are subject to political and sociocultural forces.

Nearly half a century after multiculturalism became policy, we witness another significant shift—the emergence of a new phase of capitalism that influences cultural dominance. These shifts underscore the persistence of stereotyping, framed within a postmodern context where cultural production and structural forces intersect.⁴⁵ However, this dissertation will emphasize the structural reinforcement of stereotypes in Canadian theatre over the market-driven lens as an analytic focus. Despite what may appear to be a promising world where a single master narrative no longer prevails and where multiple perspectives and groups are recognized and given equal standing in politics and culture, stereotyping persists. This ongoing issue of stereotyping of identities, such as Middle Eastern masculinities, raises critical questions about the true effectiveness of these political and cultural shifts and the depth of the changes they promise.⁴⁶ Importantly, these representations exist on a spectrum, ranging from those that lean heavily on stereotypical tropes to those that critically engage with and challenge such reductive depictions. This study's argument is grounded on the idea that portrayals of Middle Eastern masculinities in Canadian theatre rely on dramaturgical strategies that operate along this spectrum.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Postmodernity offers context for how cultural dominance influences the portrayal of stereotypes in this study, particularly through concepts like pastiche. This context will be further discussed in the theoretical framework (Page 92), and a brief definition is provided here. See Marshall Berman. "Postmodernism," in *The Oxford Companion to Comparative Politics*, ed. Joel Krieger (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), accessed June 1, 2024, <https://www-oxfordreference-com/view/10.1093/acref/9780199738595.001.0001/acref-9780199738595-e-318>. Postmodernity refers to a cultural condition marked by skepticism toward grand narratives, emphasizing plurality and fragmentation. It commodifies culture by repurposing traditional forms and meanings for aesthetic consumption, blurring boundaries between high and low culture, art and commerce, and reflecting mass media's and consumer culture's pervasive influence. This challenges the notion of universal truths, instead framing the world as a complex interaction of diverse perspectives.

⁴⁶ Stereotyping of Middle Eastern men has persisted from Orientalism to the present, with narratives portraying them as violent misogynists and religious fanatics remaining prevalent. The history and characteristics of this stereotype of masculinity will be discussed in detail later in this chapter.

⁴⁷ This study conceptualizes stereotypical/non-stereotypical representations as positions on a continuum shaped by dramaturgical choices rather than binary opposites. Drawing on Hall's fluid identity concept and Jameson's "ideology of form," I analyze how narrative structure, characterization, and staging reinforce or challenge dominant ideologies. Representations incorporating socio-historical depth and resisting pastiche move toward the critical end of this spectrum, while those employing decontextualized elements reinforce stereotypical frameworks despite surface variations. These concepts are further developed in the Identity as a Discursive Construct and Postmodernity and Cultural Production sections.

This study argues that representations featuring fewer stereotypical traits and resisting reductive narratives about Middle Eastern masculinities rely on dramaturgical strategies that emphasize socio-historical depth and specific cultural contexts, creatively integrating formal elements to construct a layered, context-rich portrayal that resists the reductive effects of pastiche.⁴⁸ These strategies underscore an ideology of form, where each dramaturgical element—such as narrative structure, characterization, and staging—intentionally contributes to a nuanced, multi-dimensional portrayal that challenges reductive ideas of Middle Eastern masculinities. Conversely, dramaturgies that employ postmodern features—such as floating signifiers, ambiguous references detached from specific contexts, pastiche, or reliance on aesthetic appeal without critical engagement—risk perpetuating familiar tropes. These approaches can reduce complex identities to mere symbols, as the reliance on ambiguity risks abstracting cultural context, leading to depthless and flattened images detached from Middle Eastern masculinities' lived realities. Floating signifiers leave references open to interpretation, which can be problematic when portraying racialized masculinities. Without explicit socio-historical anchoring, these portrayals risk reinforcing stereotypes, as audiences may fill in ambiguities with preconceived notions rather than engage with the nuanced identities presented on stage.

This analysis shows that works attempting to critique stereotypes often fail when they lack historical depth, rely on ambiguous signs, or prioritize emotional resonance and visual allure over critical substance. Such portrayals remain trapped in superficial engagement, presenting an identity that devolves into a simulacrum of Middle Eastern masculinity rather than offering a nuanced or layered

⁴⁸ Pastiche refers to imitating or blending styles from different sources, often without a critical or satirical intent. Unlike parody, which mocks or critiques the original, pastiche replicates stylistic elements neutrally, lacking an underlying ideological stance. It frequently combines disparate influences to create a composite representation, sometimes evoking nostalgia rather than critique. Jameson writes, "Pastiche is, like parody, the imitation of a peculiar or unique, idiosyncratic style, the wearing of a linguistic mask, speech in a dead language. But it is a neutral practice of such mimicry, without any of parody's ulterior motives, amputated of the satiric impulse, devoid of laughter and of any conviction that alongside the abnormal tongue you have momentarily borrowed, some healthy linguistic normality still exists." See Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 17-18.

representation.⁴⁹ Ineffective critical portrayals ultimately fail to transcend superficial engagement, rendering Middle Eastern masculinity as a simulacrum rather than a layered identity. Therefore, dramaturgical choices play a decisive role not only in how they convey ideas about Middle Eastern masculinity but also in how they support or critique simplified conceptions. These choices encompass formal and thematic elements, staging techniques, narrative style, and the conscious integration of stylistic elements.

This study contributes to academic discourse by identifying dramaturgical strategies that dismantle stereotypes and foster a multi-dimensional portrayal of identities, emphasizing Middle Eastern masculinity. By examining how socio-historically grounded dramaturgical choices counteract reductive representations, this work provides insights for theatre practitioners and academics concerned with identity portrayal in diverse cultural landscapes. In a context where Middle Eastern masculinity is increasingly visible due to political escalations in the Middle East and rising immigration, this research emphasizes the necessity of art to capture the plurality and complexity within such identity categories, thereby reducing misconceptions. Consequently, the study offers a practical foundation for theatre practitioners who focus their work on identity perception and their related contextual issues, ultimately enabling deeper societal understanding that counteracts biased views within an increasingly diverse society like Canada.

Focusing on Middle Eastern masculinity as a construct continuously subjected to gendered, racialized, and simplified representations, the study investigates how stereotypes—adaptive yet seemingly fixed—resist change by reorganizing themselves in response to superficial critiques. Through

⁴⁹ A “simulacrum” refers to a representation that imitates something but is entirely disconnected from its historical or cultural origins, existing as a fabricated construct. While a stereotype simplifies complex realities by reducing them to exaggerated traits and overgeneralizing these traits across a group, a simulacrum replaces reality altogether with a fictionalized image. For example, a stage production might depict a Middle Eastern man as a timeless, desert-dwelling nomad wielding a curved sword. This portrayal combines stereotypical traits (e.g., traditional attire) but constructs a simulacrum—a wholly fictional figure detached from Middle Eastern identities’ real diversity, history, and modernity. For more explanation, see page 271.

this lens, the research reveals how hegemonic forces shape identity portrayal by co-opting critiques that lack depth, thereby reconfiguring stereotypes to persist within the ideological state apparatus. In this way, the study highlights stereotypes' fluid yet resilient nature in cultural contexts, showing how and why some critiques succeed in challenging prevailing ideologies while others merely reconfigure or sustain these stereotypical images.

Critical portrayals strive to challenge simplified images by engaging with the complex realities of Middle Eastern masculinities. This study will examine these dynamics through the lens of dialectical criticism, employing analytical tools such as intertextual analysis, narrative analysis, cultural and historical contextualization, character development, and discourse analysis. By doing so, this dissertation aims to provide an understanding of how Middle Eastern masculinities are (re-)presented on the contemporary Canadian stage, situating these portrayals within the broader context of postmodern cultural logic and its implications for identity politics.

Literature Review

This literature review examines key themes related to the representation of masculinity in theatre, the construction of Middle Eastern stereotypes in cultural productions, and the specific portrayal of Middle Eastern masculinities on stage. While existing studies offer valuable insights into male identity construction across various contexts, there is a significant gap in understanding these dynamics within Canadian theatre. By critically engaging with current scholarship and highlighting its limitations, particularly the lack of focus on Middle Eastern masculinities in Canada, this review sets the stage for a comprehensive analysis of these representations and their broader implications for identity, race, and cultural politics in the performing arts.

Masculinity Representation in Theatre

The representation of masculinity in theatre has been widely studied, with research exploring how male identities are constructed, performed, and perceived on stage. These studies have examined diverse masculinities across different cultural and historical contexts, providing insights into the complexities of male identity in dramatic arts.

Dennis Klein's essay, "Breaking Masculine Stereotypes: The Theatre of Peter Shaffer" (1986), examines how Shaffer's plays challenge traditional masculine stereotypes, focusing on hegemonic masculinity characterized by emotional repression and patriarchal authority.⁵⁰ The essay highlights how Shaffer's characters subvert hegemonic masculinity norms through vulnerability and complexity, offering a critique of dominant masculine ideals. This analysis is valuable for understanding how theatre can question and dismantle established notions of masculinity, particularly within the context of traditional Western male archetypes. While insightful, this essay's limitation lies in its focus on a singular playwright and a specific context within British theatre. While insightful for understanding how theatre engages with hegemonic masculinity in British dramatic contexts, Klein's essay focuses specifically on Shaffer's work rather than examining intersections between masculinity and other identity categories. Building on these insights, this dissertation engages with similar questions of masculinity representation, expanding the analysis to examine how gender intersects with ethnicity, immigration status, religion, and nationality across multiple playwrights. The specificity of the analysis may overlook the complex intersections of cultural, ethnic, and racial identities that influence the portrayal of masculinities across different cultural contexts. By analyzing multiple playwrights and their dramaturgies, this study examines how different works navigate stereotypes and masculinities across various factors, including gender, ethnicity, immigration status, religion, and nationality. Addressing these intersections within the context of a diversified society like Canada expands the scope of

⁵⁰ Dennis A. Klein, "Breaking Masculine Stereotypes: The Theatre of Peter Shaffer," *University of Dayton Review* 18, no. 2 (1986): Article 9, <https://ecommons.udayton.edu/udr/vol18/iss2/9>.

discussions on masculinity and cultural stereotypes in Canadian theatre. This study's focus on diverse playwrights and varied dramaturgical strategies offers an exploration of Middle Eastern masculinities that aims to move beyond the focus on individual works or artists or frameworks that fail to include intersections and factors that capture the diversity of Middle Eastern masculinities.

Christopher Irmscher's essay, "The Absolute Power of a Man? Staging Masculinity in Giacomo Puccini and David Henry Hwang" (1998), examines the performative aspects of masculinity as depicted in *M. Butterfly*.⁵¹ Irmscher highlights David Henry Hwang's adaptation of Giacomo Puccini's opera *Madama Butterfly* and critiques hegemonic images of masculinity, specifically those centred on heterosexuality and whiteness, through the lens of gendered and cultural scripts. Irmscher underscores how the play portrays hegemonic masculinity as a constructed performance shaped by cultural expectations, challenging its perceived stability. Irmscher's analysis also examines the perpetuation of Orientalist fantasies within Western constructs of the East and how these intersect with notions of masculinity and power. His focus on how cultural scripts underlie Orientalist fantasies resonates with this dissertation's examination of similarly exoticizing frameworks for Middle Eastern masculinities in theatre. This focus contributes to understanding how theatre interrogates and reinforces the cultural scripts that shape masculinities, though it remains limited by its predominant focus on East Asian cultural contexts. While insightful, the essay does not engage with intersections such as ethnicity or immigration status, which limits the broader applicability of its analysis to more diverse representations of masculinity. Moreover, its vision of Orientalism is centred on East Asian identities, excluding any discussion of Middle Eastern subjects.

Carla McDonough's *Staging Masculinity: Male Identity in Contemporary American Drama* (1997) is among the first explorations of representing a marginalized identity under social, political, and

⁵¹ Christopher Irmscher, "The Absolute Power of a Man? Staging Masculinity in Giacomo Puccini and David Henry Hwang," *Comparative Drama* 32, no. 4 (1998): 487–507.

economic circumstances.⁵² McDonough focuses on how masculinity is portrayed during times of social, political, and financial crises, such as the Vietnam War, shifts in social values, economic crises, and family roles. McDonough's exploration primarily concerns American dramatists like August Wilson and Arthur Miller, offering a lens to analyze the traditional and evolving depictions of masculinity in American theatre. Notably, McDonough's emphasis on how external social and economic disruptions shape theatrical portrayals of men provides a valuable conceptual tool for examining how shifting contexts might similarly influence depictions of Middle Eastern masculinities. Although this scholarship focuses on various crises associated with masculinity, none of them are concerned with how immigration or diaspora contexts affect male identity.

Immigration introduces a set of challenges that profoundly affect the diasporic subject, especially for those from regions like the Middle East. These individuals often migrate due to complex circumstances associated with globalization, colonial legacies, economic injustices, political instability, and civil rights issues in their home societies. However, not all immigrants come from problematic backgrounds; some migrate from economically stable environments to capitalize on opportunities in the Global North and benefit from the contemporary economic establishment and the social order associated with it.⁵³ Yet, regardless of their economic background, immigrants face socio-cultural challenges in integrating into the host society due to differences and the nuances of identity negotiation that arise in the immigration process.⁵⁴ The migration experience is intertwined with issues that are relayed in mass

⁵² Carla J. McDonough, *Staging Masculinity: Male Identity in Contemporary American Drama* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 1997).

⁵³ While wealth might afford them certain advantages or distinctions, it does not necessarily shield them from the complexities of integration or the nuances of identity negotiation in the host society. Therefore, immigration status, regardless of the immigrant's economic background, plays a crucial role in shaping male identity.

⁵⁴ Immigrant subjects often adopt familiar narratives, such as self-victimizing stories, to gain asylum or present themselves socially, as these evoke sympathy from the host society. In a study on refugee theatre in England, Alison Jeffers identifies two storytelling models: (1) narratives used to convince authorities of the right to remain and (2) stories aimed at fostering understanding of refugees' experiences. The former, often laden with traumatic imagery, can be troubling as their truths carry life-altering consequences. See Alison Jeffers, *Refugees, Theatre and Crisis: Performing Global Identities* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 1.

media to the immigrant as narratives, such as being victims of oppression, war, fundamentalism, or lacking adequate social services in their home societies.⁵⁵ Therefore, immigration status becomes an important factor that creates a unique identity experience for the individual, contributing to a form of masculinity arising from navigating these multifaceted experiences. Significant shifts in the ethnocultural composition of a diversified society like Canada necessitate reassessing masculinity categories by expanding the analytical scope beyond racial and sexualized identities to include factors such as ethnicity, geocultural background, immigration, religion, and nationalism. Therefore, this dissertation introduces the underrepresented Middle Eastern masculinity into the expanding literature on masculinity, representation, and stereotypes.

Michael Mangan's work, *Staging Masculinities: History, Gender, Performance* (2003), which is on the representation of masculinity in historical and contemporary theatre, extends the analysis by examining the relationship between the image of masculinity on the mainstream stage and the social qualities of this figure across different historical periods. Mangan investigates the development and co-dependence of the two images (i.e., troubled and traditional) from the Middle Ages to contemporary theatre, revealing how the concept of masculinity has evolved and how theatre reflects these changes. Mangan's work provides a broader historical context for understanding the shifts in masculine representation and the ongoing challenges non-traditional masculinities face. Notably, by tracing how theatre mirrors each era's social conditions, Mangan emphasizes that portrayals of masculinity are shaped by specific historical forces—a premise this dissertation adapts when examining how Middle Eastern masculinities respond to cultural and diasporic contexts in Canadian theatre. However, the idea

⁵⁵ It must be noted that these understandings of Middle Eastern subjects in the common sense of Western host societies are not solely derived from everyday perceptions but rather from ideologies internalized in language and thought, which trace back to Orientalist perspectives. This topic is further elaborated on page 76 of this chapter.

of masculinity in its diversified conception remains unexplored and limited to troubled versus traditional, which are fluid and constantly changing through time and in different contexts.

In a related analysis, the representation of non-traditional masculinities on the Australian stage is examined by scholars Jonathan Bollen, Adrian Kiernander, and Bruce Parr in *Men at Play: Masculinities in Australian Theatre since the 1950s* (2008).⁵⁶ The authors examine how the image of masculinity has evolved over time on the Australian stage, focusing on various forms of masculinity, including Traditional Masculinity, Subversive Masculinity, Queer Masculinity, and Ethnic Others. The focus is on the staged man not only as a traditionally interpreted figure (i.e., father, brother, or son) but also as a non-heterosexual and non-white figure. Hence, the book further diversifies the idea of masculinity in other intersections. By foregrounding multiple identity categories, Bollen et al. illustrate that theatrical performance can challenge normative masculine constructs—a perspective this dissertation adopts by probing how Middle Eastern men's experiences further enrich or complicate these categories. While the book discusses the representation of Othered men, it primarily addresses how these men are stereotyped as cultural and religious others, with less emphasis on exploring the depth and diversity of their masculinities. In comparison, this dissertation, while focusing on the category of Middle Eastern masculinity, acknowledges that recognizing the diversity within this category is the crucial first step toward moving beyond the stereotypical perceptions embedded in our collective unconscious and language. *Men at Play* highlights the broader discussion of ethnic masculinities in theatre, though it leaves room for further exploration of Middle Eastern masculinities.

While each of these studies contributes valuable perspectives on masculinity, their collective emphasis on single-axis analyses reveals a broader tendency within the field to prioritize hegemonic

⁵⁶ Jonathan Bollen, Adrian Kiernander, and Bruce Parr, *Men at Play: Masculinities in Australian Theatre since the 1950s* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2008)

constructs over intersectional understandings—a pattern this dissertation seeks to redress by foregrounding ethnicity, immigration, and cultural specificity.

The conversation over the contemporary images of men has been growing for the last two decades. Due to the increasing interest of scholars in Masculinity Studies, comprehensive explorations on the depiction of the 21st-century male are increasingly presented in publications, including Elwood Watson's *Performing American Masculinities: The 21st-Century Man in Popular Culture* (2011).⁵⁷ Watson explores the contemporary problematized masculine identity as it intersects with race, ethnicity, religion, and sexual orientation. Watson's work is significant for exploring how modern masculinity is performed and perceived in various popular cultural contexts, including theatre, providing a framework for understanding how diverse masculinities are represented and challenging the traditional, monolithic views of male identity. Watson's focus on how social markers (race, religion, sexuality) reshape male performance parallels this dissertation's approach to Middle Eastern masculinities in Canada, underscoring that multiple layers of identity can disrupt any fixed notion of "normative" manhood. Again, this scholarship, like other scholarship, is concerned with masculinity deviating from the traditional heterosexual image as if the traditional image, unwantedly, functions as a measure of a standard for these scholars to work on other forms of masculinity. In contrast, the deeper problem in this dissertation is not the traditional becoming the norm but the condition that constructs and perpetuates the norm and the abnormal.

Similarly, Jennifer Rudolph's *Embodying Latino Masculinities: Producing Masculatinidad* (2012) explores how minority groups, such as Latino communities in the U.S., defy stereotypical conceptions of men through performing arts.⁵⁸ Rudolph's work is valuable for understanding how ethnic

⁵⁷ Elwood Watson, ed., *Performing American Masculinities: The 21st-Century Man in Popular Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011).

⁵⁸ Jennifer Domino Rudolph, *Embodying Latino Masculinities: Producing Masculatinidad* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

masculinities are constructed and represented in theatre, offering insights into the broader discussion of masculinity in multicultural contexts. Her analysis of how Latino artists challenge stereotypes highlights theatre's potential for reshaping public perceptions, a dynamic this dissertation extends to Middle Eastern masculinities.

Similar to Rudolph's approach, Sam McKegney's *Masculindians: Conversations about Indigenous Manhood* (2014) focuses on the image of Indigenous men in cultural activities and literary works. McKegney's exploration of Indigenous masculinity deepens the discourse on how ethnic and cultural identities intersect with gender in the performing arts, showcasing the diversity of masculinities and highlighting the importance of extending this discussion to include Middle Eastern masculinities in theatre.⁵⁹ McKegney's emphasis on intersectional identity resonates with this study's commitment to exploring how factors like diaspora, religion, and migration shape Middle Eastern men's portrayals on stage.

While studies like McKegney's expand the understanding of masculinity through intersectionality, others offer historically situated analyses of masculinity's construction. There are several works of literature about staged masculinity throughout history in different epochs, such as the Greek Golden Age or the Roman Empire. Erik Gunderson's *Staging Masculinity: The Rhetoric of Performance in the Roman World* (2010) provides a focused analysis of how rhetorical practices in ancient Roman oratory constructed and projected idealized masculinity, positioning these practices as instrumental in shaping hegemonic ideals of manliness.⁶⁰ However, Gunderson's exploration centers on staging hegemonic masculinity, with limited engagement with the diversity of masculine identities or their intersections with broader socio-cultural dynamics, even within the European context that

⁵⁹ Sam McKegney, *Masculindians: Conversations about Indigenous Manhood* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2014).

⁶⁰ Erik Gunderson, *Staging Masculinity: The Rhetoric of Performance in the Roman World* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000).

Gunderson examines. While Gunderson's scholarship illuminates the construction and performance of hegemonic masculinities, its Eurocentric scope limits its applicability to broader discussions of diverse representations of masculinity in theatre. Nonetheless, Gunderson's emphasis on how performance—through rhetoric—manifests social ideals underscores that masculinity is always a constructed identity, a principle this dissertation adopts when analyzing how Middle Eastern men are culturally positioned on stage in Canada. By focusing exclusively on gendered identity in this context, the analysis overlooks critical intersections—including ethnicity, social status, and diasporic experiences—that deepen our understanding of masculinities. This singular focus on hegemonic constructs overlooks the multiplicity of masculine identities and the hierarchical relationships among them. Consequently, much of the existing scholarship on masculinities in theatre reflects a similar tendency to prioritize single-axis analyses, often neglecting how intersecting factors shape representations of masculinity. This approach precludes a comprehensive understanding of how compounded factors reshape normative constructs of masculinity in theatre. Drawing on critical studies of men and masculinities, this dissertation emphasizes the importance of exploring the multiplicity of male identities and their hierarchical relationships. Without this approach, research remains limited to particular constructs, such as Eurocentric hegemonic masculinity in Gunderson's work. Addressing these gaps, this study adopts a multifaceted approach to representations of Middle Eastern masculinity, contributing to academic discussions on non-hegemonic masculinities by integrating intersectionality into the analytical framework.

These explorations of masculinity on stage provide a foundation for understanding how cultural and ethnic stereotypes, particularly those related to Middle Eastern identities, intersect with and shape their representations in broader cultural productions. While research on diversity and representation in Canadian theatre are growing, the absence of specific studies on Middle Eastern masculinities, their stereotyping and the diversity of representations in Canadian theatre reveals a critical gap in the

scholarship. Incorporating insights from evolving disciplines, including critical studies on men and masculinities, postcolonial studies, and immigration studies, the expanding focus on diverse voices and experiences in Canada provides a robust foundation for further exploration of Middle Eastern masculinities.⁶¹ This dissertation addresses this gap by examining portrayals of Middle Eastern men in Canadian theatre and their intersections with broader themes of identity, race, and cultural politics.

Middle Eastern Stereotypes in Cultural Productions

The representation of Middle Eastern identities in cultural productions has been critically examined through various scholarly lenses, focusing on how these representations contribute to the construction and perpetuation of stereotypes.

Said's *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* (1978) is foundational in studying Middle Eastern stereotypes in Western cultural productions. Said argues that the Western portrayal of the "Orient" is not a neutral or objective representation but rather a constructed image designed to reinforce the cultural and political dominance of the West over the East. This text provides a critical framework for understanding how stereotypes of Middle Eastern men, such as the violent terrorist or the oppressive patriarch, are rooted in long-standing Orientalist discourses that serve Middle Eastern identities and justify Western hegemony. By conceptualizing stereotypes as extensions of broader ideological power structures, Said's work underscores the idea that representations are never merely descriptive but carry embedded political and cultural agendas—a notion central to this dissertation's interrogation of theatrical portrayals.

⁶¹ Jeff Hearn and Richard Howson, "The Institutionalization of (Critical) Studies on Men and Masculinities: Geopolitical Perspectives," in *Routledge International Handbook of Masculinity Studies*, eds. Lucas Gottzén, Ulf Mellström, and Tamara Shefer (London: Routledge, 2019), 19–30. The disciplines of critical studies on men and masculinities, postcolonial studies, and immigration studies have evolved significantly over recent decades. Critical studies on men and masculinities, for instance, emerged prominently in the 1980s, focusing on the social construction of masculinities and emphasizing power relations and intersectionality. Similarly, postcolonial studies have developed to examine the lasting impacts of colonialism on cultures and societies, while immigration studies have expanded to explore the complexities of migration and its effects on identity and social structures.

Building on Said's work, Ella Shohat's chapter, "Stereotype, Representation, and the Question of the Real: Some Methodological Proposals" (2011), originally presented as a lecture and later published in an edited volume, examines how stereotypes are constructed and maintained within broader socio-economic and political structures.⁶² Shohat emphasizes the importance of interrogating how these stereotypes function as part of a more extensive ideological apparatus, which not only shapes cultural representations but also reinforces power dynamics. The methodological proposals in Shohat's lecture are particularly relevant to the dissertation's analytical approach, which includes economic, social, and political factors in the representation assessment. These proposals encourage a deeper examination of the structural forces that shape these representations. Shohat's insights are crucial for understanding the structural forces that sustain stereotypes in cultural productions, including theatre and film. Shohat's framing of stereotypes as social and ideological constructs further complements this dissertation's focus on how theatrical narratives negotiate power relations and cultural discourse in depicting Middle Eastern masculinities.

In the same vein, Stephen Spencer's *Race and Ethnicity: Culture, Identity and Representation* (2014) extends these discussions by critically examining how racial and ethnic identities, including Middle Eastern masculinities, are constructed and perpetuated in Western socio-cultural contexts.⁶³ Spencer's work provides a theoretical foundation for understanding the broader narratives that inform the stereotyping of Middle Eastern and Muslim identities, particularly in media representations. While his analysis is more general and does not focus specifically on masculinity or performance arts, it offers essential insights into the cultural dynamics that underlie the stereotypes addressed in this dissertation. By highlighting how racialized identities are repeatedly framed in mass culture, Spencer's approach

⁶² Ella Shohat, "Stereotype, Representation, and the Question of the Real: Some Methodological Proposals," in *Racial Representations in Asia*, ed. Yasuko Takezawa (Kyoto: Kyoto University Press, 2011), 20–31.

⁶³ Stephen Spencer, *Race and Ethnicity: Culture, Identity and Representation*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2014).

clarifies the mechanisms by which Middle Eastern masculinities may be similarly stereotyped or contested on the Canadian stage.

Building on Said's work, Anthony Shay's chapter "Choreographing Masculinity: Hypermasculine Dance Styles as Invented Tradition in Egypt, Iran, and Uzbekistan" (2009) critically examines how Western cultural dominance, from the colonial era through globalization, has reshaped traditional expressions of masculinity in the Middle East.⁶⁴ Shay examines how Western norms transformed fluid male dance forms from the Middle East into hypermasculine styles, shaping perceptions and reinforcing stereotypes of Middle Eastern masculinity both locally and in the West. While Shay focuses on dance rather than narrative-driven theatre, his insights into how artistic forms are manipulated to conform to specific gender norms provide a broader context for understanding the cyclical nature of stereotype formation. Although Shay's insights are useful for understanding how artistic forms are manipulated to conform to specific gender norms, the chapter does not explore how these stereotypes are presented or challenged in broader cultural representations, particularly in narrative-driven theatre. Nonetheless, Shay's argument that artistic practices are susceptible to redefinition under external cultural pressures reinforces this dissertation's premise that theatre productions can similarly reshape or reaffirm stereotypes of Middle Eastern men in Canadian contexts. Additional sources directly engaging with representing Middle Eastern masculinities in Western performance contexts will be necessary to fully explore these themes within Canadian theatre.

Together, these works demonstrate that racial, cultural, and artistic representations of Middle Eastern masculinities are shaped by intersecting historical, ideological, and performative forces. This

⁶⁴ Anthony Shay, "Choreographing Masculinity: Hypermasculine Dance Styles as Invented Tradition in Egypt, Iran, and Uzbekistan," in *When Men Dance: Choreographing Masculinities across Borders*, eds. Jennifer Fisher and Anthony Shay (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 77–98.

dissertation builds on this foundation to investigate how Canadian theatre uniquely negotiates these complexities.

James R. Vaughan's chapter, "Western Voices, Arab Minds: Orientalism, Stereotypes, and Propaganda in the Middle East" (2005), offers a historical perspective on how Orientalist stereotypes were deliberately crafted and disseminated through American and British propaganda during the Cold War to manipulate public opinion and serve Western geopolitical interests.⁶⁵ Vaughan's analysis offers valuable insights into the historical roots of these portrayals, conceptualizing stereotypes as tools of political and cultural influence rooted in colonial-era power dynamics and transmitted via mass media (newspapers, radio, and cultural programs). Although his emphasis on propaganda limits the chapter's direct relevance to theatrical representations, Vaughan's conceptual framing informs this dissertation by demonstrating how stereotypes of Middle Eastern masculinities arise and endure through dominant media structures and broader geopolitical agendas. By approaching stereotypes as historically constructed narratives for geopolitical manipulation, as Vaughan does, this dissertation builds on his framework to analyze how contemporary theatrical productions may reflect, reinforce, or reconfigure these narratives. This dissertation adopts Vaughan's notion of stereotypes as socio-political instruments while recognizing that such representations often operate along a nuanced spectrum. His research contributes to understanding how stereotypes are deeply embedded within the cultural apparatus of mass media. However, the chapter does not explore how stereotypes are challenged or deconstructed in cultural productions, nor does it offer a framework for understanding stereotypes' persistence in artistic expression through examining elements such as form and structure. While Vaughan's discussion reveals the political underpinnings of Middle Eastern stereotypes, his research does not engage with the

⁶⁵James R. Vaughan, "Western Voices, Arab Minds: Orientalism, Stereotypes, and Propaganda in the Middle East," in *The Failure of American and British Propaganda in the Arab Middle East, 1945–1957: Unconquerable Minds* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 48-69.

stereotypes' potential reinterpretation in artworks, including theatre, a central focus of this dissertation. Additionally, his historical approach overlooks diversity within the broad label "Middle Eastern," which can perpetuate a simplifying lens that ignores the variations within this masculinity group.

Like Vaughan's historical approach, Minou Reeves's chapter "The Enduring Power of Stereotypes: Images of Islam in Western Writings" (2011) meticulously charts how negative stereotypes about Islam and Muslims have been reinforced over centuries through religious texts, literary works, and cultural discourse.⁶⁶ Reeves's analysis demonstrates the persistent textual nature of these stereotypes and their rootedness in historical and religious narratives, offering a valuable lens for understanding their longevity and influence. Reeves's emphasis on the religious dimension of identity demonstrates that these stereotypes often intersect with perceptions of Muslim men, thereby illuminating how religious narratives can shape masculinity. This connection is significant for understanding how these inherited images impact contemporary portrayals of Middle Eastern masculinities, particularly in Canadian theatre. By highlighting the deeply rooted, textual nature of these stereotypes, Reeves shows how certain Western discourses on Islam have persisted and adapted over time. This insight is valuable, as it underscores the historical weight behind images of Muslim (and, by extension, Middle Eastern) masculinity—an inheritance that contemporary theatre practitioners may reproduce, contest, or reconfigure. Reeves's notion that religious and historical narratives sustain such images informs this

⁶⁶ Minou Reeves, "The Enduring Power of Stereotypes: Images of Islam in Western Writings," in *Europe and the Asia-Pacific: Culture, Identity and Representations of Region*, ed. Yasuko Takezawa (Kyoto University Press, 2011), 20–31. By "negative stereotypes," I refer to overtly disparaging or demeaning characterizations (e.g., labelling Middle Eastern men as "terrorists"). This conceptualization aligns with Steele and Aronson's research on stereotype threat, wherein they describe negative stereotypes as self-characteristics that individuals risk confirming if they belong to a stigmatized group. In other words, a "negative stereotype" can cause stigmatized subjects (e.g., Middle Eastern men labelled as "terrorists") to fear inadvertently confirming the stereotype through their actions or behaviour. See Claude M. Steele and Joshua Aronson, "Stereotype Threat and the Intellectual Test Performance of African Americans," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 69, no. 5 (1995): 797–811. Meanwhile, "positive stereotypes" denote seemingly sympathetic but still homogenizing generalizations (e.g., casting an entire group as "victims of war"), which remain reductive and fail to capture the diversity within any demographic. Finally, "non-stereotypical" representations refer to depictions that avoid essentializing or oversimplifying characteristics and instead strive to highlight varied, context-specific experiences.

dissertation's exploration of how deeply ingrained tropes might be reworked in live performance contexts. However, Reeves's analysis remains primarily text-based and historical, focusing on how stereotypes are established in writings rather than examining how they survive at the granular level of literary and cultural forms or how they might be critiqued or reimagined. While Reeves prioritizes historical textual analysis, her findings inform this study's exploration of how such inherited narratives transition from static texts to dynamic performances on stage. By doing so, this dissertation extends Reeves's insights to consider how stereotypes are reconfigured in performance, incorporating social and ethnic dimensions that broaden the framework for analyzing Middle Eastern masculinities. Thus, while Reeves's scholarship helps elucidate the tenacity of certain stereotypical images and the cultural logic that sustains them, this dissertation builds on her insights by examining how theatre artists in Canada navigate such longstanding images. In doing so, this study addresses not only the religious but also the ethnic and social dimensions of Middle Eastern masculinities, exploring how these intersecting identities are performed, challenged, or reconstructed.

Imagined Masculinities: Male Identity and Culture in the Modern Middle East (2006) by Mai Ghousseub and Emma Sinclair-Webb comprehensively explores the diverse constructions of masculinity within Middle Eastern societies.⁶⁷ The book aligns with key principles in masculinity studies, including the recognition of multiple masculinities and their hierarchical structure. It examines how masculinities are constructed, contested, and dominant across cultural, social, and institutional contexts, considering influences such as cultural practices, art, memoirs, and social institutions. By emphasizing the interplay between cultural practices and male identity, the book offers valuable theoretical grounding for this dissertation's focus on performance as a medium for engaging with Middle Eastern masculinities. In mapping varied masculinities across contexts, Ghousseub and Sinclair-

⁶⁷ Mai Ghousseub and Emma Sinclair-Webb, eds., *Imagined Masculinities: Male Identity and Culture in the Modern Middle East* (London: Saqi Books, 2000).

Webb's work resonates with this dissertation's argument that Middle Eastern masculinities cannot be understood as a monolith—a concept central to recognizing how theatre might complicate or reinforce diverse identity markers on stage. While the book does not explicitly address the representation of Middle Eastern masculinities in Western contexts, its exploration of the nuanced realities of male identity in the Middle East provides a critical foundation for moving beyond monolithic conceptions. While *Imagined Masculinities* provides a deep and nuanced understanding of male identity within Middle Eastern contexts, its lack of focus on how these masculinities are represented in Western settings, such as Canadian theatre, highlights the need to supplement this work with sources that address these portrayals to contextualize this dissertation's focus. Building on the notion that broader cultural mechanisms shape stereotypes of Middle Eastern masculinities, the next work shifts focus on how visual media, particularly cinema, conceptualizes stereotypes, offering insights that further inform analyses of theatre, performance, and identity.

Jörg Schweinitz and Laura Schleussner's *Film and Stereotype: A Challenge for Cinema and Theory* (2011) explores the construction, perpetuation, and challenge of stereotypes in cinema, offering valuable theoretical insights. Part I of the book provides a conceptual framework that underpins this dissertation's understanding of stereotypical identity constructs as cultural phenomena.⁶⁸ The authors conceptualize stereotypes as dynamic constructs shaped by ideological and cultural forces, offering tools to analyze how such constructs evolve in performance. The book discusses postmodern strategies, such as irony and self-reflexivity, as tools for subverting and transforming stereotypes. These strategies are particularly relevant for theatre, where techniques like irony can challenge audience perceptions and expose the constructed nature of stereotypes. While the book focuses primarily on cinema, its central concepts—especially the adaptability of stereotypes—resonate with this dissertation's interest in how

⁶⁸ Jörg Schweinitz, *Film and Stereotype: A Challenge for Cinema and Theory*, trans. Laura Schleussner (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

theatre engages with and reworks portrayals of Middle Eastern men. By underscoring stereotypes' fluid and performative nature, Schweinitz and Schleussner's framework complements this dissertation's approach to examining how Canadian theatre practitioners deploy or disrupt stereotypical images. Despite its limited focus on cinema and lack of engagement with Middle Eastern masculinities or Canadian contexts, the work provides methodological insights that enrich this dissertation's exploration of stereotypes as performative constructs.

Collectively, these studies reveal that stereotypes in mass media and cultural productions endure through structural forces, necessitating a performative analysis that interrogates their reconfiguration or reinforcement, a task central to this dissertation's examination of Middle Eastern masculinities on stage.

Cinzia Schiavini's essay "Terrorists on Screen, Actors on Stage: Stereotyping Arabs and the Cinema Industry in Contemporary Arab-American Theatre" (2021) refines the discussion of stereotyping by examining the intersection of theatre and film in portraying Arab identities, particularly the pervasive stereotype of the Arab man as a violent terrorist.⁶⁹ Schiavini illustrates how her case studies (i.e., plays) use humour and satire to challenge and subvert mainstream media representations perpetuated by cinema. She critiques these portrayals of Arabs, highlighting how stereotypes are sustained by underlying economic and political motivations, a perspective that aligns with this dissertation's focus on understanding stereotypes within broader structural and cultural frameworks. Schiavini also critiques the limitations of theatrical interventions, questioning their effectiveness in dismantling deeply ingrained stereotypes perpetuated by the robust cinema industry and mass culture. She raises the critical issue of whether a single strategy can disrupt the cycle of stereotype reconstruction influenced by mass culture, hegemony, and structural forces. While this question remains unresolved, her exploration opens avenues for examining more comprehensive strategies, which this dissertation

⁶⁹ Cinzia Schiavini, "Terrorists on Screen, Actors on Stage: Stereotyping Arabs and the Cinema Industry in Contemporary Arab-American Theatre," *Iperstoria*, no. 17 (2021): 155–73.

seeks to address. Although Schiavini exposes the economic and political forces behind these representations, she does not provide a clear framework for what constitutes a compelling counter-narrative. Schiavini's critique of existing interventions highlights the inherent limitations of methods in dismantling entrenched stereotypes, thereby underscoring the need for performative strategies that address structural and cultural complexities, an objective central to this dissertation. By positioning stereotypes as products of a powerful media ecosystem, Schiavini complements this dissertation's approach to viewing theatrical portrayals within a network of cultural forces, further validating the study's structural analysis. A more comprehensive approach might involve integrating structural complexities and exploring what challenges stereotypes beyond a singular focus on case studies. This dissertation aims to address this gap by adopting a more nuanced perspective and avoiding problematic theoretical tools like psychoanalysis or ethics.

Nazila Heidarzadegan's article, "Representation of Problems or Problematic Representation: Three Middle Eastern American Plays"(2020), uses Homi Bhabha's postcolonial concepts to analyze how Middle Eastern American identities are portrayed in plays, often through stereotypical images such as terrorists, misogynists, and anti-Semites.⁷⁰ Heidarzadegan's work highlights how these portrayals are shaped by intersecting cultural and structural forces, offering insights into the mechanisms that sustain stereotypes. Her postcolonial lens underscores the ambivalence inherent in stereotypes: they fix certain identities while simultaneously creating opportunities to contest and subvert them—an idea that supports this dissertation's emphasis on the fluid, negotiated nature of stereotypes as social constructs. Additionally, she reinforces the notion that portrayals of Middle Eastern masculinities can blend stereotypical and non-stereotypical traits along a broader representational spectrum rather than adhering

⁷⁰ Nazila Heidarzadegan, "Representation of Problems or Problematic Representation: Three Middle Eastern American Plays," *Tiyatro Eleştirmenliği ve Dramaturji Bölümü Dergisi (Journal of Theatre Criticism and Dramaturgy)*, no. 30 (2020): 35–52.

to a fixed binary. While Heidarzadegan provides critical insights into how stereotypes function and evolve in the plays she examines, her work does not propose specific methodologies for analyzing how dramaturgical or creative elements might actively challenge stereotypical traits in a representation. Her use of postcolonial theory, however, informs this dissertation's approach to understanding how hegemonic discourse shapes theatrical narratives, emphasizing the dual potential of performance to reinforce or subvert portrayals of Middle Eastern masculinities. By emphasizing the structural factors that sustain stereotypes, her work's theoretical framework reaffirms the importance of integrating interdisciplinary perspectives, such as postcolonial studies, into the analysis of Middle Eastern masculinities. By highlighting the intersection of structural factors and creative agency, Heidarzadegan's postcolonial analysis echoes this dissertation's premise that stereotypes are both reproduced and resisted within the theatrical process.

The literature on Middle Eastern stereotypes in cultural productions discussed above highlights the significance of analyzing representational strategies in shaping perceptions of identity. While the scholarship cited above, such as Said's *Orientalism* and Shohat's methodological proposals, does not directly address dramaturgical choices, it provides foundational insights into the structural and cultural forces that sustain stereotypes. Together, these works conceptualize stereotypes as historically embedded narratives and ideological tools, forming a base from which this dissertation explores theatrical strategies in Canadian contexts. Building on these insights, this dissertation extends the discussion to examine how Canadian theatre engages with representations of Middle Eastern masculinities. The following section reviews scholarship at the intersection of theatre and the representation of Middle Eastern subjects, situating this study within ongoing conversations about identity, performance, and cultural production.

Theatrical Representation of Middle Eastern Masculinities

Middle Eastern masculinities in theatre remain underexplored within identity representation discourse in the performing arts. While scholarship on stereotypes is extensive, there is limited focus on how Middle Eastern masculinities are portrayed within theatrical contexts, particularly in the Canadian landscape. Part of the lack of scholarly focus on how Middle Eastern masculinities are reproduced in the theatre stems from the fact that scholars are often concerned with particular identities, distinguishing them based on racial, ethnic, and linguistic categories.

For instance, Michael Malek Najjar's *Arab American Drama, Film, and Performance: A Critical Study, 1908 to the Present* (2015) explores the representation of Arab Americans' identity construction in art, including theatre.⁷¹ However, the category "Arab American" in this book is defined as "based on the centrality of cultural domination and racial oppression," without much intersection with gendered identity, aside from occasional references to stereotypes of women as oppressed.⁷² Najjar's scholarship examines Arab American artists whose works resist negative stereotypical traits (e.g., terrorists, fanatics), though these negative traits are only briefly defined throughout the book. The work focuses primarily on the negative portrayal of Arab Americans rather than offering a deeper analysis of the persistence and transformation of these stereotypes, an area this dissertation seeks to address. By framing the "Arab American" identity in terms of cultural domination, Najjar's approach illuminates how socio-political dynamics perpetuate stereotypes, an idea this dissertation applies to Canadian contexts of Middle Eastern identity formation. Crucially, Najjar acknowledges that "Arab American" can encompass those of Arab descent in Canada, referencing scholars like Michael Suleiman, who notes that immigrants from Arabic-speaking countries across North America share overlapping concerns.⁷³ Najjar also references critics (such as Steven Salaita and Nouri Gana) who observe parallels between

⁷¹ Michael Malek Najjar, *Arab American Drama, Film, and Performance: A Critical Study, 1908 to the Present* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2015).

⁷² Ibid., 392.

⁷³ Ibid., 66.

Arab American and Arab Canadian experiences, suggesting a shared “culture of resistance.”⁷⁴ Despite this, Najjar does not significantly pursue the implications for Arab Canadians, whose socio-political environment differs from the U.S. Such brevity is understandable, given his book’s stated focus on the U.S. diaspora. However, these references demonstrate that Najjar is aware of diaspora-based identities traversing national boundaries, framing stereotypes within a broader system of cultural domination, a conceptual approach that informs this dissertation’s focus on how Middle Eastern masculinities negotiate power structures in theatre. Furthermore, Najjar’s investigation incorporates film, stand-up comedy, and performance art. While his work contributes valuable insights into how playwrights resist assimilation and post-9/11 discrimination, his study offers limited theatre-specific case studies. As noted, the resistance strategies discussed are rooted in the U.S. socio-political landscape, which may not align with the cultural dynamics in Canadian theatre. The Canadian context, shaped by different immigration policies, multicultural narratives, and attitudes toward minority status, may present Middle Eastern identities in ways that Najjar’s framework does not fully capture. Nevertheless, by foregrounding how diaspora identities can be empowered and constrained by mainstream narratives, Najjar’s framework contributes a valuable starting point for this dissertation, which moves the conversation to the Canadian stages. These distinctions highlight why examining Canadian theatre is essential for understanding how Middle Eastern masculinities operate outside a strictly American lens. This research demonstrates how local socio-political factors alter the negotiation of stereotypes by integrating Najjar’s notion of cultural resistance into an analysis of Israeli, Arab-Canadian, and Iranian-Canadian theatrical productions. In doing so, it expands Najjar’s insights on diaspora identities to a relatively understudied setting.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 99, 102.

The Canadian context remains less explored regarding the representation of Middle Eastern identities, as we further see in another scholarship, “Casting Middle Eastern American Theater: Cultural, Academic, and Professional Challenges” (2019) by Najjar. In this scholarship, Najjar focuses on the dynamics behind an artwork’s production, exploring the systemic barriers contributing to the underrepresentation and stereotyping of Middle Eastern and Middle Eastern American (MENA) actors in American theatre.⁷⁵ While Najjar focuses on “brownface”/“Arab face” and Orientalist casting choices, this dissertation examines the complex interplay of cultural, religious, and socio-political factors that shape representations of Middle Eastern masculinities, particularly within Canadian cultural and political frameworks.⁷⁶ He discusses how cultural norms and professional practices have marginalized MENA performers, often limiting them to stereotypical roles. Najjar’s analysis underscores the structural obstacles to representation, making it a critical resource for understanding the broader challenges Middle Eastern masculinities face in theatre. Najjar’s framing of structural barriers demonstrates that stereotypes extend beyond textual portrayals, highlighting systemic industry practices, a viewpoint this dissertation expands to include Canadian contexts. However, like his other works, this chapter primarily focuses on the American context, and additional research is needed to explore these dynamics within Canadian theatre. While Najjar offers significant insights into professional and academic barriers, this dissertation aims to go beyond the literary analysis of artworks and provide a historical analysis of the structures that perpetuate these stereotypes. The chapter, similar to the previously mentioned book, does not engage with the historical construction of stereotypes or their global political origins in the same way this dissertation does.

⁷⁵ Michael Malek Najjar, “Casting Middle Eastern American Theater: Cultural, Academic, and Professional Challenges,” in *Casting a Movement: The Welcome Table Initiative*, eds. Claire Syler and Daniel Banks (London: Routledge, 2019), 145–60.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 75.

While scholarship on Middle Eastern representation in theatre has expanded, significant gaps remain in exploring the intersection of gendered identity and structural dynamics, particularly concerning Middle Eastern masculinities. Najjar's recent work, *Middle Eastern American Theatre: Communities, Cultures, and Artists* (2021), contributes to this discourse by examining how political tensions between the Middle East and the United States influence the articulation of hyphenated identities among Middle Eastern Americans.⁷⁷ Najjar's scholarship exemplifies how socio-political tensions drive identity formation in theatrical contexts, demonstrating that cultural conflict is often dramatized through portrayals of Middle Eastern men. Najjar critiques the oversimplification of Middle Eastern communities into monolithic categories like Muslim or Arab, emphasizing the need to recognize their diversity, which resonates with this dissertation's approach. Although his analysis offers valuable insight into the broader socio-political forces shaping Middle Eastern American artistry, it devotes limited attention to how masculinity operates as a category of analysis. By addressing how Middle Eastern American artists navigate cultural and professional barriers, including the industry's reliance on non-Middle Eastern actors to portray Middle Eastern characters, and exploring broader themes such as identity crises and belonging, Najjar's discussion lays the groundwork for studying dramaturgical strategies that may address stereotypes of Middle Eastern men. Thus, this study expands on Najjar's work by examining how some strategies in Canadian theatre engage with stereotypes of Middle Eastern masculinities, thereby adding a gendered and context-specific dimension to existing scholarship.

A significant issue in the discourse on theatrical representations of Middle Eastern identities is how efforts to humanize these identities may reinforce stereotypes. Focusing on one case study, "The Representation of Arab America in Betty Shamieh's *Roar*" (2012), Yasser Fouad Selim explores how the

⁷⁷ Michael Malek Najjar, *Middle Eastern American Theatre: Communities, Cultures, and Artists* (London: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2021).

play *Roar* portrays the struggles of Arab Americans in a post-9/11 context.⁷⁸ Selim argues that while the play aims to humanize Arab Americans by depicting their everyday challenges and aspirations, these portrayals inadvertently reinforce a victimized stereotype, presenting Arab Americans as victims of Orientalism and confronting the challenges of assimilation while dealing with the erasure of their cultural identity. However, Selim does not fully explain why these attempts to challenge stereotypes might instead reinforce stereotypical constructs, highlighting a gap in the analysis of narrative strategies that can perpetuate the very stereotypes they seek to dismantle. By centring on a single play and the American context, Selim provides in-depth insight into how post-9/11 cultural tensions shape portrayals of Arab Americans. While his study provides valuable insights into the complexities of Arab American representation, its focus on one case study and the American context reflects a defined scope rather than a limitation. This focused approach underscores the importance of examining theatrical narratives across diverse contexts, including Canadian theatre, to understand how efforts to challenge stereotypes operate within varying cultural and socio-political landscapes. Selim's case-specific model suggests that even well-intentioned humanizing portrayals can inadvertently crystallize stereotypes—a caution this dissertation applies when analyzing Canadian-based plays.

Similar to the literature exemplified by Selim's work, which concentrates on a single case study and a focused portrayal of Middle Eastern identity, leading to partial conclusions about theatrical strategies that either perpetuate or critique stereotypes, some studies rely heavily on theoretical foundations. These studies often combine multiple theories, resulting in conclusions that are intellectually compelling but provide limited guidance for analyzing specific theatrical works. For instance, Erith Jaffe-Berg's chapter—"Deterritorializing Voices: Staging the Middle East in American Theatre" (2009)—employs the theoretical frameworks of deterritorialization, reterritorialization, and

⁷⁸ Yasser Fouad Selim, "The Representation of Arab America in Betty Shamieh's *Roar* and *The Black Eyed*," *Comparative American Studies: An International Journal* 10, no. 4 (2012): 293-303.

hybridity to examine the staging of narratives about the Middle East in American theatre.⁷⁹ Jaffe-Berg draws on multiple theories, including those of Gilles Deleuze, Felix Guattari, and Homi Bhabha, to highlight theatre's potential for challenging monolithic views of the Middle East. In doing so, Jaffe-Berg frames theatre as an arena for discursive experimentation, suggesting that identity boundaries can be fluidly contested on stage—a position resonating with this dissertation's focus on Middle Eastern masculinities as similarly negotiable constructs. However, the chapter does not fully illustrate how these theories might be applied to specific theatrical works, leaving the practical applicability of these theories underexplored. The chapter's implicit focus is on how theatre can serve as a space for deconstructing fixed identities and presenting more fluid and hybrid representations. In comparison, this dissertation calls for a more structural analysis of Middle Eastern masculinities, aiming to move beyond theoretical discussions to a more grounded engagement with the artwork itself. While Deleuze, Guattari, and Bhabha provide valuable frameworks for understanding the complexities of representation, this dissertation prioritizes the artwork as a starting point for analysis, adopting a practice-oriented approach that uses conceptual tools as needed to examine how representation intersects with structural relations, cultural diversity, and gendered and racialized identities. This difference in methodological orientation underscores the importance of selecting analytical tools that theorize and effectively unpack and critique cultural representations. These frameworks emphasize that challenging stereotypes requires both conceptual deconstruction and grounded analysis of performative strategies—a methodology this dissertation adopts in its case studies.

Formation and Deconstruction of Stereotypes in Theatre

Meerzon's scholarship, particularly in "Interpreting Diaspora: From Accented Character to Accented Audience" (2005), examines the role of immigrant theatre artists in redefining their identities

⁷⁹ Erith Jaffe-Berg, "Deterritorializing Voices: Staging the Middle East in American Theatre," in *Performance, Exile and 'America'*, eds. Silvija Jestrovic and Yana Meerzon (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 179–205.

within Western cultural landscapes.⁸⁰ Using a Swedish case study, Meerzon analyzes how diasporic and exilic identities are staged in relation to the cultural, social, and political structures of the host society. This analysis is relevant to the dissertation's stance on how broader societal and political structures influence artistic representations, affirming the importance of external contexts in understanding how identities are depicted, including how stereotypes are constructed and maintained. By linking diasporic theatre practices to broader social forces, Meerzon's approach demonstrates that theatrical representations of the diaspora are heavily shaped by structural conditions, reinforcing this dissertation's argument that portrayals of Middle Eastern masculinities emerge from contextually-specific socio-political pressures. While Meerzon's work does not directly address the deconstruction of stereotypes or the stage depiction at the intersection of gender and other social factors, it provides a foundation for understanding the interplay between societal forces and artistic expression, crucial for developing strategies to challenge stereotypes in theatre and art. Similarly, Meerzon's collaborative work in *Performance, Exile and 'America'* (2009) explores an immigrant artist's redefinition of self-identity within the American cultural landscape.⁸¹ Thus, although her focus in these works is on American and Swedish contexts, her approach underscores the need to examine how host societies represent othered identities such as immigrants, a gap this dissertation aims to address concerning Middle Eastern subjectivities. While Meerzon's analysis foregrounds the role of structural forces in shaping diasporic identities, this dissertation extends that framework to examine how compounded factors such as immigration status, religion, and post-9/11 racialization uniquely affect the construction of Middle Eastern masculinities on Canadian stages.

⁸⁰ Yana Meerzon, "Interpreting Diaspora: From Accented Character to Accented Audience," *New England Theatre Journal* 16 (2005): 71-95.

⁸¹ Jestrovic and Meerzon, eds., *Performance, Exile and 'America'*.

Meerzon turns her focus toward Canada in “Theatre and Immigration: From the Multiculturalism Act to the Sites of Imagined Communities” (2015) and “Multiculturalism, (Im)Migration, Theatre: The National Arts Centre, Ottawa, a Case of Staging Canadian Nationalism” (2018), where Meerzon critiques how Canada’s official multiculturalism policies influence the portrayal of immigrant identities on stage.⁸² Meerzon notes that multiculturalism, as institutionalized in Canada, often results in the creation of “imagined communities” on stage, which emphasize the performance of national cohesion but limit opportunities for immigrants to explore contemporary or forward-looking identities.⁸³ She observes that the National Arts Centre (NAC) often acts as a “pulpit of official ideology,” showcasing diversity as a national value but constructing an image of Canada that aligns with government narratives rather than engaging deeply with the complexities of immigrant experiences.⁸⁴ In particular, she argues that multiculturalism policies position immigrant artists within a “present-to-past temporal continuum,” compelling them to engage with nostalgia rather than enabling expressions of integration or fluid identities.⁸⁵ Together, these essays highlight how multiculturalism policies, while promoting cultural inclusion, often compartmentalize narratives of cultural identity, underscoring the need to examine the economic, cultural, and political forces that shape theatrical representations. By showing how institutional agendas shape immigrant portrayals, Meerzon’s studies reinforce the dissertation’s argument that representations of Middle Eastern men are likewise subject to the impact and influence of systemic policies and expectations. While Meerzon’s analysis does not explicitly focus on stereotypes, it remains relevant to this research by revealing how dominant narratives, such as those promoted by the

⁸² Yana Meerzon, “Theatre and Immigration: From the Multiculturalism Act to the Sites of Imagined Communities,” *Theatre Research in Canada* 36, no. 2 (2015): 181–87; and, Yana Meerzon, “Multiculturalism, (Im)Migration, Theatre: The National Arts Centre, Ottawa, a Case of Staging Canadian Nationalism,” *Journal of Contemporary Drama in English* 6, no. 1 (2018): 113–130.

⁸³ Meerzon, “Theatre and Immigration,” 183.

⁸⁴ Meerzon, “Multiculturalism, (Im)Migration, Theatre,” 114.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 116. Additionally, in the other essay, Meerzon critiques how multiculturalism compels immigrant artists to create “fictional ‘else-where’ and ‘back-home’ environments on stage,” reflecting nostalgia rather than integration. See Meerzon, “Theatre and Immigration,” 184.

National Arts Centre, can reinforce hegemonic discourses about minorities and marginalized cultures. Meerzon argues that the economic and political priorities underpinning multiculturalism policies prioritize the creation of a cohesive national identity over fostering meaningful intercultural exchange. This perspective aligns with the dissertation, suggesting that theatrical portrayals of identity are not solely artistic choices but are profoundly shaped by broader structural forces. Thus, Meerzon's critiques reveal how systemic cultural policies constrain and enable immigrant identity portrayals, an insight this dissertation extends to analyzing Middle Eastern masculinities on the Canadian stage.

In *Performing the Intercultural City* (2017), Knowles examines the intercultural dynamics of theatre within the Canadian context, mainly focusing on Toronto's diverse urban landscape. The chapter "The Modern in Modern Times" provides a detailed exploration of the work of Modern Times Stage Company, co-founded by Parsa and Peter Farbridge.⁸⁶ Knowles delves into how the company interweaves Middle Eastern art forms and drama with Western theatrical traditions on the Canadian stage, framing their work as intercultural. Knowles discusses the aesthetic and methodological strategies used by the company, such as adapting Western forms with Iranian cultural practices. Notably, Knowles's emphasis on cross-cultural aesthetics helps illustrate how intercultural theatre might reshape audience perceptions—a perspective that resonates with this dissertation's interest in how cultural hybridity can reframe portrayals of Middle Eastern identities. However, Knowles's analysis has notable limitations, particularly in its engagement with the historical and cultural specificity of Modern Times' works. A critical shortcoming of Knowles' work is its tendency to remain at the surface level, focusing on theatre's aesthetic and formal aspects without engaging with the historical and cultural meanings and narratives being represented. For instance, Knowles refers to the Iranian Revolution as "Islamic," juxtaposing it with Parsa's theatrical style in opposition to "antimodernism in Iran," a term that is

⁸⁶ Knowles, *Performing the Intercultural City*, chap. 6, "The Modern in Modern Times.

insufficiently contextualized and diminishes the complexity of Iran's political and cultural history.⁸⁷ Similarly, Knowles' reference to *Aurash* as a "simple" myth overlooks that the play's narrative—depicting the protagonist as a wretched shepherd—is not part of the original myth but stems from a Persian adaptation that reimagines the mythical hero.⁸⁸ This conflation reduces the richness of the adaptation's layers and symbolic resonance. Knowles further simplifies an Iranian performing tradition of *ta'ziyeh* by labelling it as a "Persian passion play commemorating the martyrdom of the grandson of the prophet," a description that risks conflating it with Western passion plays and neglects its deeper connections to Persian folklore and mythology.⁸⁹ These instances underscore how reliance on limited sources and insufficient exploration of cultural contexts can hinder a nuanced analysis of works deeply rooted in Iranian history and culture. While this chapter provides useful context for understanding intercultural practices, it requires supplementation with sources that offer more multifaceted analyses of the literary styles and artworks referenced and adapted in the case studies. Such sources are necessary to deepen our understanding of the cultural meanings and complexities embedded in the styles and texts originating from the Middle East. Thus, although Knowles's focus on aesthetics offers a conceptual framework for examining intercultural theatre, it falls short of exploring how these artistic choices specifically intersect with matters of identity formation and representation, particularly in relation to Middle Eastern masculinities.

⁸⁷ Knowles, *Performing the Intercultural City*, 130, 133. Knowles refers to the Iranian Revolution as "Islamic" and contrasts it with "antimodernism in Iran." This framing diminishes the Revolution's broader political and cultural complexities, reducing its nuanced history to a binary framework.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 134. The play *Aurash* draws on Bahram Beyzaie's adaptation of the myth, which transforms the mythical hero into a wretched shepherd, embodying social and political critique. Knowles conflates this adaptation with the original myth, describing it as "a simple one." *Aurash*'s narrative, as presented in the Modern Times adaptation, draws on Persian dramatic reinterpretations that highlight class struggle and the fallibility of leadership, themes tied closely to modern Iranian socio-political contexts. These contextual layers remain unexamined in Knowles' analysis. For further discussion of this adaptation, see Chapter 2 of this research.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 136.

Similarly, Meerzon's collaborative work in *Migration and Stereotypes in Performance and Culture* (2020) extends the discussion on how performance can influence the formation and deconstruction of stereotypes.⁹⁰ This interdisciplinary collection explores the intersections of migration, stereotypes, and performance across various cultural practices, focusing on applied theatre, public history, and cultural rituals. While emphasizing applied theatre and community engagement, the book offers valuable theoretical frameworks and methodologies for understanding how stereotypes, including those related to Middle Eastern identities, are constructed and potentially deconstructed in performance settings. The book's broader focus on migration and stereotypes, such as the representation of Muslim women wearing the niqab and refugee experiences, offers valuable insights into cultural representations and performative identity, which can inform an analysis of Middle Eastern masculinity in theatre.⁹¹ Crucially, this collection conceptualizes migration as a space where stereotypes are both reproduced and negotiated, echoing this dissertation's aim to see theatre as a site where Middle Eastern men's identities can be reshaped or challenged. To further develop this area of inquiry, additional research specifically focused on Middle Eastern masculinity in narrative-driven theatre can build upon the book's foundational methodologies and contextual discussions.

Shontelle Thrash's scholarship, "Breaking the Shackles: Reshaping the Stigma of Stereotypes in Character Development" (2022), explores practical strategies for challenging stereotypes in theatre.⁹² Thrash advocates for fostering a safe environment for actors and encouraging deep, nuanced character exploration as tools for subverting reductive portrayals on stage. These actor-focused strategies align with the dissertation's focus on the practical approaches to subverting stereotypes on stage. By

⁹⁰ Yana Meerzon, David Dean, and Daniel McNeil, eds., *Migration and Stereotypes in Performance and Culture* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020).

⁹¹ Zaheeda P. Alibhai, "Read Her Lips: The Ban on Wearing the Niqab and Burqa at the Canadian Citizenship Ceremony 2011–2015," in Meerzon, Dean, and McNeil, *Migration and Stereotypes*.

⁹² Shontelle Thrash, "Breaking the Shackles: Reshaping the Stigma of Stereotypes in Character Development," *Theatre Symposium* 29 (2022): 110-19.

foregrounding the actor's agency, Thrash's perspective also complements this dissertation's focus on dramaturgical strategies, underscoring that dismantling stereotypes of Middle Eastern masculinity requires acknowledging how practitioners' artistic choices, performers' interpretive decisions, and the broader socio-political framework intersect. While Thrash's strategies primarily center on actor-focused interventions, her work contributes to broader conversations about the interplay between individual interpretation and systemic representation in theatre. Thrash's insights underscore the importance of holistic approaches that integrate textual, performative, and directorial dimensions to challenge stereotypes effectively.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this dissertation positions Middle Eastern masculinities as socially constructed identities shaped by discourse, performance, and socio-political forces. Drawing on Michel Foucault's theory of discourse and Judith Butler's performativity, the study frames these masculinities as identities shaped and reshaped through theatrical portrayals.⁹³ It examines how these identities intersect with hegemonic structures, particularly gender, ethnicity, immigration, and nationality, showing that the construction of Middle Eastern masculinities involves both identity formation and subordination under dominant narratives. To analyze the stereotyping further, the study strategically employs a range of critical tools, including close textual and contextual readings, literary criticism, discourse analysis, intersectionality, hegemonic masculinity, and concepts from postmodernism, such as simulacrum and pastiche, for examining how Middle Eastern masculinity is characterized historically and culturally.⁹⁴ In

⁹³ Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, 2nd ed., trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith (London: Routledge, 2002), 30. Foucault examines how discourse operates as a mechanism of power, asking who controls its use, the benefits derived, and how it is regulated. He writes: "We must grasp the statement in the exact specificity of its occurrence [...] and show what other forms of statement it excludes." His examples include medical discourse (including psychiatry), penal discourse, and sexual discourse. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 1990), 34. Butler similarly argues that gender is performative, shaped by societal norms, explaining: "Gender proves to be performative [...] constituting the identity it is purported to be."

⁹⁴ These analytical tools and concepts are applied as follows: Literary criticism analyzes dramaturgical structure, character development, and symbolic systems in dramatic texts; discourse analysis investigates how language constructs Middle

outlining this theoretical approach, the research transitions to a broader discussion of postmodernity as a cultural condition, incorporating critical insights from Jameson's cultural theory to assess how masculinity is socially constructed and how cultural representations either challenge or reinforce these constructions, with economic forces serving as contextual influences on theatre and broader cultural productions.

Finally, the framework illustrates how dramaturgical choices, particularly those that resist market-driven simplicity, are essential for nuanced portrayals that challenge stereotype-driven portrayals. This backdrop emphasizes the importance of dramaturgical choices in constructing nuanced representations that resist reductive portrayals. These artistic choices enable creators to either align with dominant cultural expectations or to create representations that engage with historical and cultural contexts, offering more layered portrayals of Middle Eastern masculinities. While the broader cultural forces of postmodernity influence the artistic environment, this study centers on how dramaturgical choices respond to such pressures, determining whether portrayals of Middle Eastern masculinity achieve depth and complexity or remain constrained to reductive stereotypes.

Identity as a Discursive Construct

Identity as a discursive construct contrasts with traditional views of identity as a stable essence. Instead, identity is seen as produced and maintained through social practices, cultural norms, and language. Foucault argues that identity is an “effect” of discourse, existing only within these discursive practices.⁹⁵ Butler builds upon this concept with her theory of performativity, proposing that identity is

Eastern identities within plays and productions; intersectionality explores how ethnicity, religion, and immigration status interact with gender; hegemonic masculinity provides a framework for analyzing power relations between dominant and subordinated masculinities; while postmodern concepts of simulacrum (representations detached from historical context) and pastiche (imitation without critical engagement) help assess how depth and historical specificity affect portrayals in both written and performed works. Each tool is elaborated in the respective sections of the Theoretical Framework and Methodology.

⁹⁵ Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977*, ed. Colin Gordon, trans. Colin Gordon, Leo Marshall, John Mepham, and Kate Soper (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 98. Foucault writes, “The individual is not to be conceived as a sort of elementary nucleus, a primitive atom, a multiple and inert material on which

constituted through repeated performances and acts.⁹⁶ Foucault's perspective also denotes the significant role of power relations in shaping identity. Specific discourses do not autonomously dominate but are propagated and sustained by structural forces.⁹⁷ Stuart Hall supports this Foucauldian view, arguing that identity is contingent and constructed through specific discourses that define and limit possibilities. Hall explains that identity is "not determined in the sense that it can always be won or lost, sustained or abandoned," underscoring identity's fluid and constructed nature.⁹⁸

Butler further elaborates on this by introducing the theory of performativity, where identity, particularly gender, is seen as constituted through repeated social acts that align with societal norms. Butler asserts that "gender is instituted through the stylization of the body and must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self."⁹⁹ This notion of performativity reveals that identity is not a fixed attribute, but a dynamic process shaped by ongoing social interactions. Butler's theory suggests that gender is not something one is but something one does—an ongoing performance shaped by social expectations and norms. She elaborates, "Identity is not signified at a given point in time, after which it is simply there as an inert piece of entitative language."¹⁰⁰ This ongoing performance engages individuals in the process of identity construction.

power comes to fasten or against which it happens to strike, and in so doing subdues or crushes individuals. In fact, it is already one of the prime effects of power that certain bodies, certain gestures, certain discourses, certain desires, come to be identified and constituted as individuals. The individual, that is, is not the vis-à-vis of power; it is, I believe, one of its prime effects. The individual is an effect of power, and at the same time, or precisely to the extent to which it is that effect, it is the element of its articulation. The individual which power has constituted is at the same time its vehicle."

⁹⁶ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 125.

⁹⁷ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. I, An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 101. Foucault says, "We must make allowance for the complex and unstable process whereby discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling-block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy."

⁹⁸ Stuart Hall and Paul Du Gay, eds., *Questions of Cultural Identity* (Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 1996), 2.

⁹⁹ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 191.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 197.

Both the performativity theory and the concept of identity as a discursive construct challenge the notion of identity as a fixed essence, presenting it as a fluid and contingent outcome of specific discourses and repeated social acts. Foucault and Hall emphasize that identity is produced and sustained within discourse, where power relations shape the possibilities of who we can become. Butler extends this understanding by arguing that the performative nature of gender identity exposes how power operates to maintain and regulate these performances. Butler writes, “The subject is a consequence of certain rule-governed discourses that govern the intelligible invocation of identity.”¹⁰¹ The convergence of these ideas underscores that identity is not pre-given but continuously formed through the interaction between discourse, power, and social practices, highlighting the fluidity and contingency of identity in a constantly evolving social context.

Hegemony and Identity

The dominance of specific identity constructs raises the question of why certain discourses prevail in shaping these identities. Antonio Gramsci’s concept of hegemony provides a framework for understanding how particular discourses gain dominance and become accepted norms. Gramsci explains how power and ideology are maintained through coercion and the consensual acceptance of certain ideologies and cultural norms by subordinate groups. He describes the dual mechanisms of hegemony (through consent and coercive power):

1. The spontaneous consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group; this consent is historically caused by the prestige (and consequent confidence) which the dominant group enjoys because of its position and function in the world of production.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 198.

2. The apparatus of state coercive power, which “legally” enforces discipline on those groups who do not “consent” either actively or passively. This apparatus is, however, constituted for the whole of society in anticipation of moments of crisis of command and direction when spontaneous consent has failed.¹⁰²

This acceptance is achieved by shaping cultural norms, values, and ideas so that the ruling class’s worldview becomes seen as the norm or “common sense.”¹⁰³

In his analysis of Gramsci’s work, Hall illustrates how dominant discourses become the frameworks within which identities are constructed and understood. Hall emphasizes that Gramsci’s concept of hegemony offers a powerful lens for analyzing how particular cultural norms and values become dominant and embedded in social practices and institutions.¹⁰⁴ This is particularly relevant in understanding how racial and ethnic identities are shaped and maintained by these hegemonic structures. Hall applies Gramsci’s concept of hegemony to race and ethnicity, arguing that the dominance of particular racial and ethnic discourses results from their alignment with broader hegemonic structures that serve the interests of dominant groups in society.¹⁰⁵ Hall highlights that Gramsci’s non-reductive approach allows for an understanding of how racial and ethnic differences are constructed within these broader hegemonic structures, emphasizing that such differences are not merely a reflection of economic exploitation but are deeply intertwined with cultural and social processes.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰² Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. and trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1971), 12.

¹⁰³ Daniel Chandler and Rod Munday, *A Dictionary of Media and Communication* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), s.v. “Common Sense,” accessed December 15, 2024, <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780198841838.001.0001/acref-9780198841838>. For Gramsci, the incoherent, conformist, and unexamined beliefs of the masses are established and naturalized by the acceptance of ruling class attitudes and interests and serve to maintain hegemonic structures. Thus, according to common sense, the status quo—the way things are—is how things should be. Common sense involves incoherences, ambiguities, paradoxes, contradictions, and omissions which intellectuals should expose.

¹⁰⁴ Stuart Hall, *Selected Writings on Race and Difference*, eds. Paul Gilroy and Ruth Wilson Gilmore (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021), 295.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 309.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 322. He argues that there is often little more than a gestural stance that persuades us to the misleading view that because racism is everywhere a deeply antihuman and antisocial practice, it is, therefore, everywhere the same—either in its

Considering the preceding theoretical discussion, identity is conceptually positioned at the intersection of race, ethnicity, structural forces, and hegemony. This framework illustrates how identities are constructed through discourse and performativity and how they are shaped and sustained by hegemonic power structures. This foundation enables a deeper exploration of how masculinities intersect with racialized identities, particularly in terms of hegemonic and marginalized positions.

Critical Studies of Men and Masculinities

The synthesis of “hegemony” with “masculinity” in Critical Studies on Men and Masculinities (CSMM) allows for a critical examination of the once-unquestioned assumption that male dominance in patriarchy is uniform and unproblematic.¹⁰⁷ Feminist critiques highlighted that earlier studies of patriarchy often ignored the diverse hierarchies among men, focusing primarily on their dominance over women and inadvertently leaving men’s own gendered experiences unexplored.¹⁰⁸ Recognizing the absent presence and naturalized status of men led scholars to examine how certain masculinities become normalized and privileged while others are marginalized, thus challenging the idea of masculinity as a fixed, universal norm. Central to CSMM is the understanding that “men and masculinities are explicitly gendered rather than nongendered.”¹⁰⁹ This perspective challenges the assumed normativity of masculinity, making it a subject of critical examination.¹¹⁰ Beyond the nongendered characteristics, the

forms, its relations to other structures and processes, or its effects. Gramsci does, I believe, help us to interrupt decisively this homogenization.

¹⁰⁷ Hearn and Howson, “The Institutionalization of (Critical) Studies on Men and Masculinities,” 19. Regarding the long-remaining unproblematic understanding of men, Hearn and Howson note, “for a long time, ‘gender’ was largely seen as a matter of and for women; men were generally seen as ungendered, natural or naturalized. [...] Thus, men and masculinity become the benchmark against which everything else about human nature is explained, and ‘men’ and ‘masculinities’ as individuals, groups or categories have typically not been problematized.” And on the idea of CSMM as an emerging interdisciplinary field problematizing masculinity, the authors assert that, “while studying men and/or masculinities does not in itself guarantee criticality, CSMM foregrounds the critical impulse [i.e. critically analyze the traditional understandings of masculinity].”

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 20.

¹⁰⁹ Michael Kimmel, Jeff Hearn, and Raewyn Connell, eds., *Handbook of Studies on Men and Masculinities* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2005), 3.

¹¹⁰ Studies of Men and masculinities have been initiated in Eurocentric discourses and scholarship among feminist thinkers in the late 1960s and 1970s in various fields and disciplines, and it was not a centralized field but an emerging paradigm on the study of men later extended intersection into other areas and scholarship in the Global south. That is why when we later

theoretical framework of this dissertation is grounded in the following key concepts, which are fundamental to studying masculinities:

Social Construction and Variability

CSMM approaches “Understanding men and masculinities as socially constructed and variable, changing across different contexts (historical, cultural, etc.).”¹¹¹ This understanding is deepened by recognizing that men and masculinities are “as variable and changing across time (history) and space (culture), within societies, and through life courses and biographies.”¹¹² Consequently, masculinities are shaped by societal norms that evolve across different historical and cultural contexts, rejecting the notion of a fixed or universal definition of masculinity. The social constructionist perspective argues that what it means to be a man or masculine is defined by predominant norms that can change over time and vary across different cultures. This approach rejects the idea that masculinity is fixed, viewing it instead as “socially constructed, produced, and reproduced rather than as somehow just “naturally” one way or another.”¹¹³

Relational Aspect of Gendered Power

CSMM emphasizes the “relational aspect of men’s connections to gendered power.”¹¹⁴ This principle highlights the relational nature of masculinity, where men’s identities and behaviours are shaped through their relationships with others, particularly concerning power dynamics. It emphasizes

speak of the normalized and hegemonic masculinity that has long been seen as normal and natural, the discussion often points out the white heterosexual European males. Concerning this, Hultman and Pule note that “These masculinities are comprehensively unmarked (their privileges, relative to those of women, non-binary/genderqueer people and otherised others, are so conspicuous and mainstreamed as to be invisible or normalised) and represent fraternities of men and masculine identities that are the most characteristic of modern Western malestream personae.” See, Martin Hultman and Paul M. Pulé, “Ecological Masculinities,” in *Routledge International Handbook of Masculinity Studies*, eds. Lucas Gottzén, Ulf Mellström, and Tamara Shefer (London: Routledge, 2019), 479.

¹¹¹ Hearn and Howson, “The Institutionalization of (Critical) Studies on Men and Masculinities,” 22.

¹¹² Kimmel, Hearn, and Connell, *Handbook of Studies on Men and Masculinities*, 3

¹¹³ Ibid., 3.

¹¹⁴ Hearn and Howson, “The Institutionalization of (Critical) Studies on Men and Masculinities,” 22.

that masculinity is often constructed through dominance over others (including other men and women) and that these power relations are integral to understanding how masculinities are enacted and sustained.

Material and Discursive Aspects

This view emphasizes the role of structural forces (i.e., base and superstructure) in forming masculinities, reflecting “A focus that spans both material and discursive aspects of gender.”¹¹⁵ This approach aligns with the dissertation’s study of Middle Eastern masculinities by considering economic, cultural, and power relations in articulating this identity category. Focusing on material and discursive aspects acknowledges that masculinities are shaped not only by material conditions (like economic status, physical spaces, and institutional structures) but also by discursive practices (like language, media representations, and cultural narratives).

Intersectionality

Intersectionality involves the “Examination of men and masculinities through intersections with other social divisions (e.g., class, race, sexuality).”¹¹⁶ This principle highlights the importance of considering how masculinities intersect with other social categories, such as race, class, sexuality, and age, again resonating with the subject matter of this scholarship that is situated on the intersection of diasporic, ethnicity, racialized, sexuality, militarist, and class. This theoretical foundation in CSMM stresses that masculinities are not experienced in isolation but are shaped by and contribute to other forms of social hierarchy and inequality. Intersectionality is pivotal in uncovering how “other social differences play a role in the processes that shape and condition masculinities.”¹¹⁷

By integrating intersectionality with critical theories, such as Jameson’s dialectical criticism, this study examines how Middle Eastern masculinities function as vectors of negotiation and resistance

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 22.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 22.

¹¹⁷ Ann-Dorte Christensen, Sune Qvotrup Jensen, “Intersectionality,” in *Routledge International Handbook of Masculinity Studies*, eds. Lucas Gottzén, Ulf Mellström, and Tamara Shefer (London: Routledge, 2019), 88.

within the global cultural economy. In the artistic realm, where these identities are exposed to economic forces and treated as generic images, intersectionality provides a crucial framework for decoding the layered meanings in their representation. This study critiques the oversimplification of Middle Eastern masculinities, using intersectionality to explore how these identities are constructed, contested, and shaped by cultural narratives in the Global North, paving the way for further analysis of these processes.

Hierarchical Relations Among Multiple Masculinities

A central tenet of CSMM is the recognition of the multiplicity of masculinities and the necessity of examining the relations between them. As sociologist Raewyn Connell articulates, acknowledging multiple masculinities, such as those distinguished by race, class, and sexual orientation, is only the first step.¹¹⁸ The critical analysis must also delve into how these masculinities interact and how hierarchies are established and maintained among them. Connell posits that within any given society, there exists a dominant form of masculinity, hegemonic masculinity, that is culturally exalted and holds a position of power. This hegemonic form is not necessarily the most common but serves as the standard against which other masculinities are measured. Drawing on Gramsci's theory, Connell defines hegemonic masculinity as the following:

The concept of "hegemony," deriving from Antonio Gramsci's analysis of class relations, refers to the cultural dynamic by which a group claims and sustains a leading position in social life. At any given time, one form of masculinity rather than others is culturally exalted. Hegemonic masculinity can be defined as the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁸ Raewyn Connell, *Masculinities* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 76.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 77.

This hegemonic position is sustained by subordinating other masculinities, such as those of non-heterosexual men or those who do not conform to the dominant masculine norms in any society.

The relationships between masculinities are thus structured hierarchically, with hegemonic masculinity positioned at the top. Hegemonic masculinity has long been regarded as the normative standard, rendering deviations from it as lesser or abnormal.¹²⁰ Connell's framework within CSMM highlights that while hegemonic masculinity is prominent, it must be understood in relation to other masculinities, which are categorized as complicit, subordinate, or marginalized.¹²¹

Subordinated masculinities are those positioned lower in the gender hierarchy due to their deviation from the hegemonic ideal, often stigmatized, marginalized, and oppressed within the gender order. Connell's examples are mainly on the intersection of sexuality but extend to other intersections that differentiate the subordinated masculinities from the hegemonic form: "Gay masculinity is the most conspicuous, but it is not the only subordinated masculinity. Some heterosexual men and boys, too, are expelled from the circle of legitimacy."¹²² In this example, subordinated masculinities are associated with traits that are culturally perceived as feminine or that directly challenge dominant gender norms.¹²³ In earlier critical studies of masculinities, subordinated masculinities were often used to define the relationship between male sex roles and women. Connell's foundational argument proposed a pluralistic and hierarchical notion of masculinities, wherein some forms were hegemonic, and others subordinate: "Most obviously, black, gay, and working-class masculinities were seen as subordinate to and, indeed,

¹²⁰ Hearn and Howson, "The Institutionalization of (Critical) Studies on Men and Masculinities," 19. Regarding the long-standing normalization and resulting invisibility of men from the focal point of critique and analysis, they write, "Men have studied men for centuries, though often as an 'absent presence.' Men have historically dominated the written word, in academia, research, science, histories, literature, religion and many further arenas."

¹²¹ Connell. *Masculinities*. 73-76. Connell's three-fold model, addressing power relations, production relations, and cathexis, explains how hegemonic masculinity sustains its dominance. Power relations reinforce male dominance despite resistance, production relations highlight the economic benefits men gain through gendered labour divisions, and cathexis emphasizes the role of gendered desires in maintaining this hierarchy. These dynamics position other masculinities as complicit, subordinate, or marginalized, depending on their alignment with or deviation from hegemonic norms.

¹²² Ibid., 79.

¹²³ Ibid., 78.

oppressed by white, heterosexual, and middle-class masculinities that remained mostly dominant or hegemonic.”¹²⁴

This theoretical framework is particularly relevant when examining Middle Eastern masculinities in the Global North. Despite their broad diversity, these masculinities occupy a subordinated position due to factors such as ethnicity, nationality, language, and cultural associations. Farahani and Thapar-Björkert note, “Diverse dislocatory experiences of social, political and economic marginalization after migration place many displaced men for the first time in the position of the subordinated other.”¹²⁵ These dislocations are linked to the broader economic and political shifts driven by globalization and late capitalism.¹²⁶ In Canada, a significant portion of Middle Eastern masculinities experience dislocation as refugees, expatriates, skilled workers, and asylum seekers, stemming from political, social, and economic crises in their countries of origin. Under the influence of transnational capitalism’s expansion, power structures and cultural norms are increasingly shaped by global markets and media, leading to a growing homogenization of hegemonic masculinity, particularly in the form of a Eurocentric, white, heterosexual male ideal.

In Connell’s later work on theorizing masculinities, the subordinated category became more nuanced, emphasizing that non-hegemonic masculinities do not hold equal positions in their relations with the hegemonic form. This nuance is critical in understanding the positioning of Middle Eastern masculinities within the global gender hierarchy. As the construct of masculinity continuously fluctuates based on context and various intersections, subordinated masculinities occupy positions that are more complicit or marginalized. Todd Reeser emphasizes, “a man oscillates between various relations of

¹²⁴ Tim Edwards, “Queering the Pitch? Gay Masculinities,” in *Handbook of Studies on Men and Masculinities*, eds. Michael Kimmel, Jeff Hearn, and Raewyn Connell (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2005), 59.

¹²⁵ Fataneh Farahani and Suruchi Thapar-Björkert, “Postcolonial Masculinities,” in *Routledge International Handbook of Masculinity Studies*, eds. Lucas Gottzén, Ulf Mellström, and Tamara Shefer (London: Routledge, 2019), 97.

¹²⁶ Late capitalism marks the current phase of capitalism, distinct from earlier stages, characterized by its global reach in financialization, the shift from national to global markets, the dominance of multinational corporations, and the spread of mass consumer culture across the globe. For further reference, see footnote 207 (page 93).

masculinity, how he is never really simply in any one position in any relation, but often somewhere in between.”¹²⁷ As noted earlier, this hegemonic form becomes the standard by which other masculinities are measured, taking on a specific position in the global context. Middle Eastern masculinities’ dislocatory experiences position them in a divergent relation to hegemonic masculinity, perceived as subordinate by dominant cultural and social structures. The very moment Middle Eastern subjects disembark onto Global North soil; they become intrinsically problematized within the entrenched and enduring gender hierarchy of the globalized world. One visible consequence of this problematization is the misconception and misrepresentation of these masculinities, often manifesting as stereotypes. However, Middle Eastern masculinities occupy varied positions within this hierarchy, influenced by the shifting constructs of cultural and gender identity. Hence, their relations oscillate between complicity and marginalization but never reach equivalence with hegemonic masculinity.

Complicit masculinities refer to those forms of masculinity that do not embody the full characteristics of hegemonic masculinity but benefit from the patriarchal dividend, the overall advantages men gain from the subordination of women and other men. Men who embody complicit masculinities may not fully align with the hegemonic ideal (e.g., they might not be the most physically dominant or economically powerful), but they still enjoy social privileges by conforming to many aspects of the dominant gender norms.¹²⁸ Men in this category often fulfill traditional family roles, such as providers, without overtly exercising dominance or violence. They sustain the status quo by neither challenging the hegemonic system nor embodying the extreme traits associated with hegemonic masculinity.

¹²⁷ Todd W. Reeser, *Masculinities in Theory: An Introduction* (West Sussex: John Wiley & Sons, 2010), 14.

¹²⁸ Connell, *Masculinities*. 79.

Marginalized masculinities, shaped by race, class, and sexuality, occupy a complex relationship with hegemonic masculinity, simultaneously reinforcing and challenging the dominant order.¹²⁹ These masculinities exist at the intersection of multiple forms of oppression and are marginalized by both the dominant society and hegemonic masculinity. Within their own communities, they may hold a nuanced position, influenced by factors such as racial discrimination, economic disadvantage, and cultural exclusion. Marginalized masculinities often challenge hegemonic masculinity from the periphery, yet their marginalization is perpetuated by broader social and economic structures that uphold the hegemonic order.¹³⁰ These masculinities face dual pressures: marginalization from the dominant group and competing masculine ideals within their communities.¹³¹

Understanding these hierarchical relations among multiple masculinities, primarily through the lens of intersectionality, offers profound insights into gender dynamics. Incorporating intersectionality here is essential, as it provides a well-established analytical tool for understanding how different social categories, such as race, ethnicity, class, and sexuality, mutually constitute and shape the processes that condition masculinities.¹³² Despite its significant influence on gender studies over the past three decades, intersectionality's application within studies of men and masculinity has been limited. By adopting intersectionality, scholars can fill a critical gap in analyzing the complexities of masculinities, especially in understanding how hierarchies among men are established and maintained. Drawing on

¹²⁹ Ibid., 80.

¹³⁰ Ibid., 80. Connell discusses how marginalized masculinities, particularly in contexts like black masculinity, are shaped by institutional racism and economic disenfranchisement. For example, "In a white-supremacist context, black masculinities play symbolic roles for white gender construction [...] Hegemonic masculinity among whites sustains the institutional oppression and physical terror that have framed the making of masculinities in black communities." This shows how marginalized masculinities are shaped and constrained by the dominant group's practices and ideologies.

¹³¹ Ibid., 197-198. Connell notes that within marginalized communities, there are internal pressures where men are often held to different, and sometimes conflicting, standards of masculinity. For example, in labour forces that have been historically transplanted, "The realities of masculinity [...] have been shaped by the conditions of settlement, which commonly involved poverty and heavy labour as well as the disruption of families and communities." This indicates that marginalized masculinities are also constructed in response to the specific socio-economic conditions of their communities.

¹³² Christensen and Jensen, "Intersectionality," 82. Christensen and Jensen argue that "intersectionality can fill this gap as it offers a well-established analytical tool suited for grasping differences among and between men, and—perhaps most importantly—how other social differences play a role in the processes that shape and condition masculinities."

Connell's typology of relations among men, Diefendorf and Bridges highlight that "It is through the processes of subordination, marginalization, and complicity, Connell argued, that hegemonic masculinity achieves ideological dominance that justifies a patriarchal status quo."¹³³ Intersectionality allows us to analyze how these processes are not only gendered but also racialized and influenced by other social factors, adding further nuances to our understanding of gender dynamics.

In the context of Middle Eastern masculinities, studies within the Global North must consider how Middle Eastern males are positioned within this hierarchy, often in roles of subordination or marginalization. These hierarchical dynamics are further complicated by the intersection of race, ethnicity, and geopolitical factors, which contribute to the unique ways in which Middle Eastern masculinities are perceived and represented in art and media. As this dissertation explores, the portrayal of these masculinities in artistic expressions often reflects their complex and, at times, contradictory positions within the globalized cultural economy. This nuanced understanding of hierarchical masculinities sets the stage for a more in-depth analysis of how Middle Eastern masculinities navigate these structures, which is crucial for uncovering the layers of meaning in their representation.

Synthesis of Constructs

The concepts of identity, hegemony, and masculinity converge to form a cohesive understanding of Middle Eastern masculinity as a socially constructed identity that is both gendered and subordinated under prevailing hegemonic norms. By synthesizing these theories, it becomes clear that Middle Eastern masculinity, like other forms of masculinity, is not a fixed or innate characteristic but is shaped by sociocultural forces that dictate its representation and perception. The intersection of these constructs reveals the complex layers of Middle Eastern masculinity, where identity is continually negotiated and redefined in response to the surrounding hegemonic structures.

¹³³ Sarah Diefendorf and Tristan Bridges, "Masculinity and Homophobia," in *Routledge International Handbook of Masculinity Studies*, eds. Lucas Gottzén, Ulf Mellström, and Tamara Shefer (London: Routledge, 2019), 236.

Stereotype

The portrayal of Middle Eastern masculinities in theatre is significantly shaped by entrenched stereotypes, which are reinforced through cultural narratives and media. This section aims first to define the concept of a stereotype and explore how these stereotypes permeate popular consciousness. It will then examine how these stereotypes are represented in cultural products, particularly theatrical productions, and how they might be challenged within these contexts. This theoretical framework aims to support the dissertation by examining how stereotyping mechanisms simplify Middle Eastern masculinities into a singular, monolithic category within Global North contexts.

A stereotype is a simplified and fixed idea or image of a particular group of people, often based on generalizations that do not account for individual differences. The issue with stereotypes is not merely their oversimplification or fallacy; some characteristics within stereotypes may contain elements of truth, but rather that they remain incomplete. This incompleteness obscures the nuances, depth, and complexities of an identity. For instance, stereotypes reduce the diversity of masculinities from or associated with a vast region, such as the Middle East, often lacking specifically delineated boundaries, into a single category, ignoring the diverse factors and labelling individuals based solely on an implied regional identity. This reductionist gaze begins with the very label used to stereotype the group. Therefore, stereotypes are incomplete conceptions of a social category, extending a few traits that might apply to some individuals across the entire group. The widespread acceptance of these stereotypes transforms these incomplete ideas into perceived realities, embedding them into the common understanding. The Oxford Dictionary of Gender Studies defines stereotype as “Simplistic ideas that people have of others. Gender researchers have shown how gender stereotypes impact on women’s and

men's lives negatively, requiring women to be carers, for example, and men to be assertive and breadwinners."¹³⁴

How does a diverse population become reduced to generalized traits, misinterpreted, and then solidified into stereotypes inscribed into common sense? Teresa Perkins suggests that stereotypes are evaluations typically formed around groups that pose a perceived problem to the social order—such as those undergoing a status change, facing oppression, or engaging in central but difficult relationships within the society.¹³⁵ Dominant groups, whose status is relatively stable and unchallenged, create and perpetuate stereotypes to manage perceived threats from groups whose social status changes.¹³⁶ Once a specific group's social position—including its rights and duties—begins to change, “a stereotype will develop about that group when that group's status becomes problematic.”¹³⁷ Stereotypes, as discursive constructs, arise from discourses that both justify the perceived threat and reshape stereotypical traits into accepted social realities.¹³⁸ As these discourses develop within civil society and cultural representations, they gain broad acceptance, reinforcing stereotypes.¹³⁹ The issue of the stereotyped subject being seen as problematic ties back to the discussion on hierarchical structures, where

¹³⁴ Gabriele A. Griffin, “Stereotypes,” in *A Dictionary of Gender Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), accessed June 6, 2025, <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780191834837.001.0001/acref-9780191834837-e-383>.

¹³⁵ Teresa E. Perkins, “Rethinking Stereotypes,” in *Ideology and Cultural Production*, 2nd ed., ed. M. Barrett et al. (London: Routledge, 2018), 142. (London: Routledge, 2018): 142, 148. In this essay, Perkins defines the relationship between status, role, and stereotype within society: “Status refers to a position in society which entails a certain set of rights and duties. Role refers to the performance of those rights and duties; it is relational. Stereotype refers to both role and status at the same time, and the reference is perhaps always predominantly evaluative.”

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 158.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 148.

¹³⁸ In other words, defining a stereotype as a discursive construct means that it is a product of ongoing dialogue and negotiation within society.

¹³⁹ Richard Dyer, *The Matter of Images: Essays on Representations* 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2002), 14. Dyer writes, “The effectiveness of stereotypes resides in the way they invoke a consensus. Stereotypes proclaim, ‘This is what everyone – you, me and us – thinks members of such-and-such a social group are like’, as if these concepts of these social groups were spontaneously arrived at by all members of society independently and in isolation. The stereotype is taken to express a general agreement about a social group, as if that agreement arose before, and independently of, the stereotype.” While some individuals may add traits to a stereotype that are not widely agreed upon within a particular society, these differences do not alter the overall structure of stereotype of a certain social group. For instance, extreme right-wing groups may emphasize more negative traits, whereas others focus on general characteristics. Despite variations, certain traits are broadly accepted within the stereotype, making it a discursive construct by those perceiving the status of Other as problematic.

hegemonic masculinity is often viewed as unproblematic, while deviations from this norm are problematized, paralleling Teresa Perkins's argument that groups deviating from normalized standards are frequently targeted by stereotypes.¹⁴⁰ Middle Eastern masculinities, intersecting both gendered and racialized identities, experience a double subordination: first within the male hierarchy and then within a broader societal context that privileges hegemonic norms. To sustain othered masculinity's subordination and maintain the dominance of hegemonic masculinity, stereotypes function as a crucial mechanism. The intersection of gendered and racialized identities shows how Middle Eastern masculinities are particularly susceptible to stereotyping, as their deviation from the "norm" is perceived as problematic, reinforcing existing power dynamics.

The rise of stereotypes often follows when a group is perceived as problematic. Middle Eastern masculinities exemplify this pattern, especially given the significant increase in Middle Eastern immigration to North America in recent decades. The influx from the Middle East did more than change the number of foreign-born (first-generation immigrants) in Canada; it fundamentally altered the demographic landscape of host societies, including Canada. As the presence of Middle Eastern men in these societies grew, the frequency of interactions and social encounters naturally increased, often leading to friction stemming from cultural misunderstandings. These tensions have contributed to the persistence and reproduction of stereotypes, further exacerbating the issue. According to Statistics Canada, the census registered approximately 428,000 men from West Central Asia and the Middle East, including significant numbers such as 146,145 Arab men, 108,010 Iranian men, 31,905 Afghan men, 23,000 Turkish men, and 16,830 non-Arab Israeli men.¹⁴¹ Additionally, 216,705 Arab men with origins

¹⁴⁰ See footnote 107 (page 63). Hearn and Howson discuss the relationship between the hegemonic male as the norm and the Othered male as deviating from this hegemonic form, thereby being perceived as problematic.

¹⁴¹ Statistics Canada, "Visible Minority by Place of Birth and Generation Status: Canada, Provinces and Territories, Census Metropolitan Areas and Census Agglomerations with Parts," *Statistics Canada*, October 26, 2022, accessed June 7, 2025. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tbl1/en/tv.action?pid=9810032601&pickMembers%5B0%5D=1.1&pickMembers%5B1%5D=2.2&pickMembers%5B2%5D=3.1&pickMembers%5B3%5D=4.2&pickMembers%5B4%5D=5.1>.

outside the region of the Middle East are recognized as visible minorities within Canada.¹⁴² This means that, in total, we are looking at nearly 350,000 Middle Eastern men, a figure that swells when accounting for almost 300,000 non-Arab visible minorities of Middle Eastern descent.¹⁴³ These numbers highlight the substantial cultural and social presence of Middle Eastern communities in Canada. As Middle Eastern men become more visible in Canadian society, the stereotypes surrounding them persist, often rooted in cultural misunderstandings and geopolitical factors.

These demographic shifts, coupled with ongoing geopolitical tensions in the Middle East, have intensified scrutiny of Middle Easterners within Canadian society, leading to misconceptions, misrepresentations, and the reinforcement of stereotypical views. This perception was particularly pronounced when Middle Eastern men began to occupy higher decision-making roles in the established social hierarchy.¹⁴⁴ Most of these immigrants were highly educated and professionally skilled, gradually assuming social and occupational roles traditionally held by dominant groups in the host societies.¹⁴⁵ Thus, background events in the Middle East and changes in the demographic and labour population makeup have further exacerbated the perception of these immigrants as problematic or threatening. All the shifts in the status and role of these masculinities in Canada have created “important implications for

¹⁴² Ibid., It must be noted that the Arab identity, in particular, carries significant cultural markers, including language and historical migrations, linking them to Middle Eastern roots. While the census does not specify the generation of these individuals, many may be third-generation descendants who still identify strongly with their Middle Eastern heritage. Even without recent direct immigration, their connection to Middle Eastern origins through language and culture highlights their ongoing presence as a visible minority.

¹⁴³ Ibid., In this calculation, this research did not include those who entered Canada and are awaiting residency after 2021 up until this year. This research is being conducted in 2024.

¹⁴⁴ Christoph Schimmele and Feng Hou, “Trends in Education–Occupation Mismatch among Recent Immigrants with a Bachelor’s Degree or Higher, 2001 to 2021,” *Economic and Social Reports*, Statistics Canada, May 22, 2024, accessed June 7, 2025, <https://doi.org/10.25318/36280001202400500002-eng>. In 2021, about 28% of Middle Eastern immigrants were employed in professional, scientific, and technical services, which include high-level occupations such as engineers, IT professionals, and medical practitioners. By 2021, this had increased to 28%, showing a steady upward trend in their presence in high-level occupational sectors.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid. In 2001, the percentage of Middle Eastern immigrants aged 25 to 64 with a bachelor’s degree or higher was approximately 33%. By 2021, this figure had risen to about 45%, which is significantly higher than the national average for Canadian-born individuals in the same age group (i.e., around 32%).

intergroup relations, civic cohesion, the acceptance of immigration and asylum policies, and political responses to radicalisation and terrorism.”¹⁴⁶

Middle Eastern Masculinity Stereotypes

To understand the roots of the misperception and simplification of Middle Eastern masculinity, it is essential to look back centuries to the early encounters between the East and West during the early modern period. Said’s literature on Orientalism provides a critical lens for this analysis. Said explains, “Orientalism is premised upon exteriority, that is, on the fact that the Orientalist, poet or scholar, makes the Orient speak, describes the Orient, renders its mysteries plain for and to the West. He is never concerned with the Orient except as the first cause of what he says.”¹⁴⁷ This construction served to justify colonial dominance and exploitation, “taking the late eighteenth century as a very roughly defined starting point; Orientalism can be discussed and analyzed as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient—dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient.”¹⁴⁸ Thus, historically, the Middle Eastern subject, femininity or masculinity, has traditionally been constructed to portray the East as inferior, thereby justifying Western dominance and colonialism.

From the angle of religious identity, the Middle East has been tied to Islam, in contrast to the pre-Enlightenment realm known as Christendom. In *White: Essays on Race and Culture*, Richard Dyer examines how Christianity, mainly as it developed in Europe, is deeply tied to the construction of whiteness. The iconography of Christ and the Virgin Mary is depicted as white, reinforcing the idea of a

¹⁴⁶ Maykel Verkuyten, “Anti-Muslim Sentiments in Western Societies,” in *The Routledge International Handbook of Discrimination, Prejudice and Stereotyping*, eds. Cristian Tileagă, Martha Augoustinos, and Kevin Durrheim (London: Routledge, 2022), 118.

¹⁴⁷ Said, *Orientalism*. 20-21.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 3.

pure, superior whiteness: “Marking of Otherness by skin colour is also present in the depiction of Christ and the Virgin Mary. Increasingly, they are rendered as paler, whiter than everyone else. This is most evident in the two set-pieces of Christian art, the nativity and the crucifixion.”¹⁴⁹ The attempt to distinguish identity through religion was not merely sparked under colonization but also has roots in the power struggles during the Crusades.¹⁵⁰ The Crusades contributed to the racialization of the idea of Christendom, turning geographic and national others into enemies of Christ. This racialization process heightened awareness of skin colour differences and the moral and spiritual binary of black and white, with Europeans increasingly viewing Muslims as racially and morally distinct from and inferior to Christians. Dyer elaborates:

The immediate explanation of such skin-symbol color consciousness is not only European expansionism, but specifically the Crusades. The beginnings of wide and increasing travel beyond Europe involved an encounter with peoples darker in appearance than Europeans, especially North Europeans [...] The primary terms in which the Crusades were and have subsequently been understood is as a struggle of Christianity against the non-Christian (and specifically against the Islamic powers in possession of the Holy Land).¹⁵¹

Hence, homogenizing the Other under one religious identity, Islam, allowed the European side to establish further contrasts and distinctions to their identity as Christians. Dyer explains that the Middle East was often homogenized as Islamic and therefore positioned in direct opposition to Christianity: “Christianity has also been thought and felt in distinctly white ways for most of its history, seen concerning... the role of the Crusades in racializing the idea of Christendom (making

¹⁴⁹ Richard Dyer, *White: Essays on Race and Culture* (London: Routledge, 1997), 66-67.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 67. Dyer observes: “Christianity brought a tradition of black: white moral dualism to bear on an enemy that could itself be perceived as black. The Crusades were thus part of a heightening awareness of skin colour difference which they further inflected in terms of moral attributes.”

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 67.

national/geographic others into enemies of Christ).”¹⁵² This entanglement of Christianity with skin colour overlooks the diversity within the Middle East, where various religious groups, including ancient Christian communities like the Armenians, reside.¹⁵³ Nonetheless, the association of the Middle East with Islam and the contrasting depiction of Islam against Christianity has significantly contributed to the othering process, extending beyond racial differences to cultural and religious identities, thereby reinforcing stereotypes.

Thus, from its very title—*i.e.*, Middle East—insinuating the centrality of the West, to which the Islamic, darker-skinned peoples are situated in the “Middle” of the Orient/East, the Middle Eastern subject has long been entangled with and identified as both a racialized body (skin colour and other features) and a religious/ideological identity. It is crucial to emphasize in this dissertation that, to the Western subject, the Middle Easterner is interchangeably identified as Islamic or Muslim and through other racial titles such as Arab, Afghan, and Iranian — titles that remain fragmented and inconsistently applied in scholarship studying the Middle Eastern subject. This labelling process inherently carries a function of exclusion and a narrowed, redefined gaze.

Characteristics of Middle Eastern Stereotypes

Visual and Auditory Markers

Like other stereotypes, stereotypes of Middle Eastern men are often initiated by surface-level markers such as names, dress, accent, skin colour, nose shape, eyebrow shape, hair, beard, and even the articulation of specific phrases like “Allahu Akbar.”¹⁵⁴ These visual and auditory markers are the

¹⁵² Ibid., 17.

¹⁵³ Armenians, predominantly living in today’s Iran and Armenia (which was part of Iran less than three centuries ago), highlight the region’s religious diversity.

¹⁵⁴ The Arabic phrase *Allahu Akbar* (meaning “God is the Greatest”) has, particularly in European and North American contexts, become increasingly associated with terrorism, frequently signalling acts of violence. This association is primarily due to its repeated portrayal in news media and cinema, where it is often depicted as being uttered by extremists during violent acts such as stabbings, suicide bombings, or shootings. Consequently, it has come to be perceived as a marker of threat. However, *Allahu Akbar* is a routine phrase in Muslim prayers and sometimes everyday conversations among Middle Easterners, even among those who do not speak Arabic. In these contexts, it might be used without religious intent, much like the expression “Jesus Christ” in English, to convey a range of emotions or social reactions.

gateways to the more profound, more nuanced stereotypes that paint Middle Eastern men as terrorists, violent, and oppressive. These markers not only trigger stereotypes but also shape the perceptions that reinforce them.¹⁵⁵ For instance, in their analysis of a documentary centred on Middle Eastern identity, Morey and Yaqin argue that portrayals of Muslim Middle Easterners often emphasize “Muslimness” through superficial markers like clothing, skin colour, and religious practices.¹⁵⁶ Morey and Yaqin use a case study of a supposedly realist documentary, which, despite its generic claim to authentic representation (i.e. being a documentary), still heavily relies on representational conventions rooted in colonialism and Orientalism.¹⁵⁷ Morey and Yaqin argue that using the obvious characteristics as representational conventions frames Muslim communities as inherently in conflict with modernity and positioned outside the normalized Western context, with an overt emphasis on their Muslim identity that reduces their complexity and reinforces stereotypes.

Despite this critical insight, there remains a significant gap in Canadian research addressing how such markers influence perceptions and biases within Canada. Without Canadian-specific studies, scholars must rely on U.S.-based research, which, although not entirely reflective of Canadian perspectives, offers valuable insights into how visual markers operate and shape stereotypes.¹⁵⁸ Ghavami

¹⁵⁵ Social psychology research supports the idea that appearance, particularly racial phenotypicality, serves as a gateway to stereotypes. Keith Maddox’s work at Tufts University’s Social Cognition (TUSC) Lab examines how skin tone and other phenotypic traits influence stereotype formation and prejudice. See Tufts University, “Social Cognition (TUSC) Lab Research,” Department of Psychology, Tufts University, accessed August 28, 2024, <https://as.tufts.edu/psychology/tusc-lab>. In his research, Maddox demonstrates that individuals with facial features more stereotypical of their racial group face greater discrimination and less favourable outcomes. This underscores the significant role racial phenotypicality plays in social perception and the perpetuation of stereotypes. Keith B. Maddox and Jay M. Perry, “Racial Appearance Bias: Improving Evidence-Based Policies to Address Racial Disparities,” *Policy Insights from the Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 5, no. 1 (2018): 58–59, 62.

¹⁵⁶ Morey and Yaqin, *Framing Muslims*, 119.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 119. Morey and Yaqin posit, “I would argue, the film falls back most often on conventions of representation having their roots in the twin projects of colonialism and Orientalism.”

¹⁵⁸ The influence of U.S. media may shape certain Canadian perceptions, as stereotypes often transcend borders through shared media consumption and global cultural flows. With its history of negatively framing Middle Eastern identities, U.S. media holds significant cultural dominance across North America. As key hubs for American media production, cities like Toronto and Vancouver further heighten Canadian exposure to U.S. cultural narratives. This highlights the need for Canadian research to explore how these stereotypes and markers manifest locally.

and Peplau, for instance, surveyed over 600 participants of “various ethnic backgrounds,” including Middle Eastern Americans, and found that “Dark-Skinned” was one of the top stereotypical attributes associated with Middle Eastern men.¹⁵⁹ Other frequently noted attributes included being Bearded, Terrorists, Sexist, Speaking English with an Accent, Dirty, Rich, Muslim, and Wearing a Turban. Unlike stereotypes of Black or Latino men, the attributes of Bearded, Terrorist, Sexist, Dirty, and Muslim in Ghavami and Peplau’s examination were unique to Middle Eastern men.¹⁶⁰ Another study emphasizes how cues of foreignness, such as names and dress, rather than physical appearance, significantly influence perceptions of Middle Eastern men, particularly those perceived as Muslim.¹⁶¹ Lisa Brown and other scholars in this investigation found that individuals with foreign-sounding names and traditional dress are rated more negatively regarding warmth, competence, and trustworthiness and are perceived as more foreign and less familiar.¹⁶² Thus, despite each study prioritizing different factors, both agree on a crucial point about stereotypes: what is seen and heard forms the initial trigger in the mind for creating and invoking stereotypes.

Although skin colour is a secondary attribute in Ghavami and Peplau’s research, it remains the primary outer appearance marker for racializing individuals.¹⁶³ Silke Schmidt notes that the question of skin colour in identifying Arab American citizens in racial terms remains central to debates over their

¹⁵⁹ Negin Ghavami and Letitia Anne Peplau, “An Intersectional Analysis of Gender and Ethnic Stereotypes: Testing Three Hypotheses,” *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 37, no. 1 (2013):116.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 118-119. See Tables 1, 2, and 3.

¹⁶¹ Lisa M. Brown et al., “Investigating Prejudice toward Men Perceived to Be Muslim: Cues of Foreignness versus Phenotype,” *Journal of Applied Social Psychology* 43, no. 7 (2013): 1362-70.

¹⁶² Ibid., E241. See Table 2; “There was a significant main effect of dress [...] The portrait in Western dress was rated as more familiar [...] than was the portrait in Middle Eastern dress.”

¹⁶³ Ian Haney-López, *White by Law: The Legal Construction of Race*, 10th anniv. ed. (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 135. In his exploration of the use and meaning of race in the judicial context in the U.S., Haney-López finds skin colour a marker frequently used to differentiate individuals based on race, “Context is the social setting in which races are recognized, constructed, and contested; it is here that race gains its life. Within a social context, racial systems of meaning, although inconstant and unstable, are paramount in establishing the social significance of certain features, such as skin colour, and of particular ancestries, for instance, European.”

legal racial classification.¹⁶⁴ Haney-López extends the concept of the marker of colour to encompass other visible markers, underscoring the persistence of racial categorization in the United States: “colour—meaning those somatic details such as skin tone, facial features, hair shade and texture, and so on, upon which racial classifications were erected in the United States—will continue to have tremendous significance, as those minorities with the lightest features will have the greatest access to White identity.”¹⁶⁵ Thus, visible markers such as skin tone, facial features, hairstyle, and texture are where stereotypes find their sensory characteristics and perpetuate beyond discursive constructs of stereotypical traits.

In *Framing Muslims: Stereotyping and Representation After 9/11*, the authors discuss how visual markers, especially beards, are frequently used to signify Muslim identity, reinforcing stereotypes. The book emphasizes how, historically, Muslims have been depicted primarily through visible traits that symbolize their “otherness” to a Western audience; among these traits, the beard stands out as a key visual marker.¹⁶⁶ The portrayal of Muslim men with a “straggly beard” is cited as a common stereotype that has persisted over time, serving as a shorthand for identifying Muslim identity in a way that emphasizes difference.¹⁶⁷

Another potent marker in stereotyping Middle Eastern identities is the use of names, which can signal stereotypical attributes. In his analysis of Arab representation in Hollywood, Communication scholar Jack Shaheen highlights how characters named “Ali” are frequently depicted as stereotypical

¹⁶⁴ Silke Schmidt, *(Re-)Framing the Arab/Muslim: Mediating Orientalism in Contemporary Arab American Life Writing* (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2014), 173, 175. Schmidt writes, “The complex history of racial identity classification in the case of Arab Americans thus reveals the lasting impact skin colour plays for the (self-)image of Arab Americans. Public discourse upholds the image of the Arab as a black other. The media play a substantial role in the maintenance of this issue frame by representing Arabs as blacks.”

¹⁶⁵ Haney-Lopez, *White by Law*, 155.

¹⁶⁶ Morey and Yaqin, *Framing Muslims*, 115. Morey and Yaqin note, “Historically, on the level of form, Muslims are most often conjured up in one of two ways. A long-standing and still much-favored mode of indicating difference is through metonymy; Muslim women wear the hijab, men appear bearded, praying, or both.”

¹⁶⁷ Schmidt, *(Re-)Framing the Arab/Muslim*, 22.

villains. For instance, in the 1944 film *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves*, while the character Ali is portrayed as a heroic figure, this positive depiction is overshadowed by other portrayals in which characters named Ali are represented as thieves or bandits, reinforcing the stereotype of Arabs as dishonest and treacherous.¹⁶⁸ Thus, names like “Ali” carry stereotypical weight in popular culture, demonstrating how even a simple name can be laden with negative connotations and contribute to perpetuating harmful stereotypes.¹⁶⁹

Violent and Active Threat

The stereotype of Middle Eastern men as violent and dangerous escalated significantly after the mid-20th century, mainly due to the Arab-Israeli conflicts. Said’s *Orientalism* highlights how Western media has long depicted the “East” as a region fraught with danger and threat, a perception further intensified by geopolitical events. Said notes that following the establishment of Israel in 1948, repeated portrayals of unrest in the occupied Palestinian territories, alongside conflicts between Israel and its neighbours, reinforced the image of the Arab male as inherently violent and linked to terrorism in the Western imagination. Said writes, “Anyone resident in the West since the 1950s, particularly in the United States, will have lived through an era of extraordinary turbulence in the relations of East and West. No one will have failed to note how “East” has always signified danger and threat during this period, even as it has meant the traditional Orient as well as Russia.”¹⁷⁰ In this context, the stereotype of

¹⁶⁸ Jack G. Shaheen, *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People* (Northampton, MA: Interlink Publishing, 2009), 92-93.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., 101, 131, 430, 514. Other examples of characters named Ali depicted with negative stereotypes include *American Ninja 4: The Annihilation* (1991), where Sheikh Ali Maksoud is portrayed as a nuclear-mad Islamic sheikh, embodying the stereotype of Arabs as dangerous and treacherous; *True Lies* (1994), where a terrorist named Ali is part of a fanatical group plotting to detonate a nuclear bomb, again reinforcing the stereotype of Arabs as terrorists; *Executive Decision* (1996), where a terrorist named Ali hijacks a plane, reinforcing the stereotype of Arabs as dangerous extremists; and *Three Kings* (1999), where the character Ali, a member of Saddam Hussein’s Republican Guard, is depicted as a sadistic torturer, reinforcing negative stereotypes of Arabs as brutal and inhumane.

¹⁷⁰ Said, *Orientalism*, 26.

the violent Middle Eastern man can be understood as a continuation of Orientalist tropes that have long influenced Europeans' perceptions of the East.

It has been stated that the conflict in the Israel-Palestine region has exacerbated the Middle Eastern stereotype, yet the roots of this othering and enemy-making perspective trace back to the era of Orientalism, which persists today. Every tragic historical event, such as war and military conflicts in the Middle East, revitalizes this deeply entrenched stereotype. This narrative, deeply embedded in the cultural subconscious, not only permeates mass media but also finds its way into academic literature, reinforcing the image of the Middle Easterner as a perpetual threat. In *Brown Skins, White Masks*, Hamid Dabashi writes:

The emergence of Islam as the nemesis of the West gave a new lease of life to old-fashioned Orientalism. Among those who have made careers out of glorifying Western civilization and lamenting its vulnerability to the threat of Islam, no one could outdo Bernard Lewis, professor emeritus of Near Eastern studies at Princeton, who began his career in the intelligence corps of the British army and ended it as a consultant to the Pentagon—thus linking British colonialism and American imperialism in the span of a single life. In half a century of writings, Lewis has systematically depicted Islam as a fundamental threat to the uniquely lofty ideals of the West.¹⁷¹

Besides the conflict in the Israel-Palestine region, the intensification of stereotypes surrounding Middle Eastern masculinity is also closely tied to other conflicts in the Middle East, where the West has played a significant role. As noted, “the most vital and spectacular events of the last part of the twentieth century and the first decade of the twenty-first have involved Islam and Muslims.”¹⁷² In these instances, it has been crucial for the West to craft and disseminate a specific image of the Orient to its public, justifying its political interference and presence in the Middle East. This serves to portray the West's

¹⁷¹ Hamid Dabashi, *Brown Skin, White Masks* (London: Pluto, 2011), 11.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, 91

involvement in these devastating events, wars, and crimes as more humane and benevolent.¹⁷³ The period following the first Persian Gulf War, in particular, saw Middle Eastern men increasingly portrayed as enemies and threats to Western security, especially during incidents that shook public opinion and were linked to Muslims.¹⁷⁴ Media representations continually reinforce these portrayals, often associating Middle Eastern identities with extremist violence and security threats in the West. The threatening characteristics juxtaposed with an alluring and patriarchal feature create a complex but ultimately negative image, further entrenching these harmful stereotypes in the Western imagination.

Patriarchal Oppressor and Misogynistic

Another prevalent stereotype of Middle Eastern men is that of the oppressive patriarch, depicted as exercising strict, authoritarian control over women and communities. Said writes, “Orientalism itself [...] was an exclusively male province; like so many professional guilds during the modern period, it viewed itself and its subject matter with sexist blinders.”¹⁷⁵ This portrayal reinforces a rigid form of masculinity that is often associated with violence and coercion. Such stereotypes serve to contrast the Middle Eastern man with the Western Christian white man, who is cast as a saviour and champion of equality.¹⁷⁶ Colonial powers used stereotypes of Middle Eastern men to justify their civilizing missions.

¹⁷³ Ibid., 91-92. Dabashi enumerates these events: “With the continuing saga of the Palestinian dispossession from the middle of the century, the simultaneous partition of India along a Muslim-Hindu divide, and the anti-colonial movements waged against European powers throughout the world, Muslim societies have all but defined global geopolitics. The Islamic Revolution in Iran (1977-79) and the eight bloody years of the Iran-Iraq War (1980-88) commenced the most recent phase of global geopolitics, in which oil has been the defining economic factor in the significance of the region ranging from the Indian Ocean to the Arabian Sea, the Persian Gulf, the Levant, and all the way to North Africa. The Soviet invasion and occupation of Afghanistan (1978-88), the American hostage crisis (1979-80), the Salman Rushdie affair (1989), the first Gulf War (1990-91), the carnage of two successive Intifadas (1987-93 and 2000-03), and the repeated invasions and occupations of Lebanon (1982-2006) culminated in the spectacular events of 9/11/01 and the subsequent US-led invasions of Afghanistan (October 2001) and Iraq (March 2003).”

¹⁷⁴ Singh, *We Are Not the Enemy*, 13-14. A flight crash that was later found due to mechanical failure in 1997 triggered the hate crimes and harassment of Muslims.

¹⁷⁵ Said, *Orientalism*, 208.

¹⁷⁶ Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021), 152. In her analysis of the rhetoric employed by colonial authorities like Lord Cromer, the British Consul General, Ahmed explains how the Victorian colonial establishment appropriated the language of feminism to justify its assault on the religions and cultures of colonized peoples, particularly Islam. Ahmed notes, “The Victorian colonial paternalistic establishment appropriated the language of feminism in the service of its assault on the religions and cultures of Other men, and in particular on Islam, to give an aura of moral justification to that assault, even as it actively opposed feminism within

“Colonial imperialists...selectively appropriated feminism to serve colonialism’s civilizing mission, though this commitment to feminism was not genuine. This colonial feminism [...] justified Western men’s exploitation of Oriental women in the name of saving brown women from brown men.”¹⁷⁷

Furthermore, the sexism attributed to Islam—propagated as an exceptionally sexist religion—has been used to reinforce this stereotype; Deepa Kumar observes “all the world’s major religions are, to a greater or lesser extent, sexist. When only Islam is singled out for its sexist practices in the mainstream media and public discourse, this is not a historical oversight but a systematic attempt to construct “our” values and religion as being enlightened in contrast with “theirs.”¹⁷⁸ Following 9/11, media portrayals have continued to frame Middle Eastern men as “medieval theocrats, violent barbarians, oil despots, and patriarchal oppressors.”¹⁷⁹ This underscores how Western colonial powers co-opted feminist rhetoric, particularly in the 19th and early 20th centuries, to justify domination over Middle Eastern societies by framing Middle Eastern men as inherently oppressive towards women; she writes, “Imperialist men who were the enemies of feminism in their own societies, abroad espoused a rhetoric of feminism attacking the practices of Other men and their degradation of women.”¹⁸⁰

On the other hand, the stereotype of Middle Eastern masculinity as a patriarchal oppressor simultaneously casts Middle Eastern femininity as passive and victimized. This dynamic is evident in the discourse surrounding the Islamic veil: “The Islamic veil has been the subject of much controversy over the last few years. Seen ubiquitously as a symbol of Muslim women’s oppression, the veil has been banned, scorned, or otherwise used to advance a taken-for-granted argument about the need for the West

its own society. The actions of Lord Cromer are particularly illustrative of this dynamic, exemplifying how white supremacist views, androcentric and paternalistic convictions, and feminism harmoniously converged in the service of imperialism.”

¹⁷⁷ Farahani and Thapar-Björkert, “Postcolonial Masculinities,” 94.

¹⁷⁸ Deepa Kumar, “Framing Islam: The Resurgence of Orientalism during the Bush II Era,” *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 34, no. 3 (2010): 263.

¹⁷⁹ Marcia C. Inhorn, *The New Arab Man: Emergent Masculinities, Technologies, and Islam in the Middle East* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 51.

¹⁸⁰ Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate*, 243.

to rescue Muslim women.”¹⁸¹ In *A Quiet Revolution*, Leila Ahmed discusses the role of Western media in perpetuating stereotypes about Middle Eastern men post-9/11, portraying them as medieval, patriarchal oppressors: “Besides becoming a common topic in the media and in the national political conversation, “women’s oppression in Islam” became a theme that was taken up in a raft of books that quickly became best sellers.”¹⁸² Consequently, Middle Eastern men are often portrayed as misogynistic, enforcing strict gender roles and oppressing women. This stereotype, rooted in Orientalist discourses, has long depicted Middle Eastern societies as backward and in need of Western intervention to “save” women from male oppression.¹⁸³

Exotic and Erotic Imagery

The term “exotic” in the context of stereotyping Middle Easterners reduces their cultures to a portrayal that emphasizes “Otherness”—presenting them as fundamentally different, alluringly strange, and often romanticized or sensationalized. The *Oxford Dictionary of Media and Communication* defines exoticism as “a romanticization, fetishization, and/or commodification of ethnic, racial, or cultural Otherness, as in Orientalism, or primitivizing representations of the “noble savage.”¹⁸⁴ Ethnocentric stereotyping (as in Eurocentric views of non-European cultures), in which the Other is marked by difference. In post-colonial theory, this is identified as a form of objectification, marginalization, domination, oppression, and exploitation.”¹⁸⁵ This exotic gaze, frequently invoked through romanticized imagery of deserts, bazaars, and ancient traditions, constructs Middle Eastern cultures as timeless and mysterious, thereby obscuring their complexities and contemporary realities. While the term may carry connotations of allure and mystery, it also conveys negative implications, often suggesting

¹⁸¹ Kumar. “Framing Islam,” 262.

¹⁸² Leila Ahmed, *A Quiet Revolution: The Veil’s Resurgence, from the Middle East to America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 224.

¹⁸³ Ibid., 14, 195, 225. In these pages, Ahmed discusses instances and contexts where Western men portray themselves as liberators of Muslim women, highlighting how this narrative persists in the contemporary era.

¹⁸⁴ Chandler and Munday, *Dictionary of Media and Communication*, s.v. “Exoticism.”

¹⁸⁵ Ibid.

backwardness or barbarism. The *Oxford Dictionary of Word Origins* traces the term *exotic* to the Greek word for foreign origin, which imbues it with a sense of glamour—hence associations like “exotic dancer,” introduced in the USA in the mid-20th century to describe a stripper. The term’s use in English dates back to the late 16th century and coincided with the rise of Orientalist perspectives, further embedding the term in a legacy of stereotyping.¹⁸⁶

While the term carries connotations of mystery and allure, it also encapsulates negative implications, including insinuations of being barbaric or backward. Historically, the term “barbarian” initially did not imply savagery or uncivilized behaviour; however, its connotation evolved to include various negative aspects of Otherness.¹⁸⁷ This evolution parallels the Orientalist mindset and Enlightenment thinking, which categorized Eastern cultures as exotic, much like the ancient Greek practice of identifying foreign communities as “barbarian.” Hence, the Orientalist mindset and Enlightenment thinking emphasize not just Otherness but also attach various negative connotations, such as being erotic, hyper-masculine, backward, and uncivilized. This mysteriousness allows interpreters to impose many characterizations on the Other. The mysteriousness attributed to the “exotic” Other allows interpreters to impose multiple characterizations on these cultures, often rooted in stereotypes and misconceptions.

The eroticization of Middle Eastern men in Western narratives often positions Western men as protectors and saviours of oppressed Middle Eastern women, reinforcing a dynamic where Middle

¹⁸⁶ Julia Cresswell, *The Oxford Dictionary of Word Origins* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), s.v. “Exotic,” accessed December 15, 2024, <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780198868750.001.0001/acref-9780198868750>.

¹⁸⁷ *Oxford English Dictionary*, (Oxford University Press), s.v. “barbarian,” accessed August 15, 2024, <https://www.oed.com>. Originally, this term did not necessarily mean savage or uncivilized, but it evolved to carry those connotations in specific contexts. According to the Oxford Dictionary, “Barbar” initially meant “a person who is not a Greek” (1628 AD, Historical Thesaurus Oxford Dictionary) and “un-Greek” (1535 AD, Historical Thesaurus). As political and temporal contexts shifted, the term came to denote outsiders to the prevailing Western civilization in power in each period. For example, in the Roman Empire, it evolved to mean “a person living outside the pale of the Roman Empire and its civilization, especially the northern nations that overthrew them” (a1616–). In the Christian world, it signified “a person who is outside the pale of Christian civilization” (1616 AD).

Eastern masculinity is seen as both a threat and an object of fascination.¹⁸⁸ Ahmed says: “The Bush Administration... launched an all-out propaganda campaign to win the hearts and minds of the American public in support of its military campaign in Afghanistan... emphasizing the need to mobilize American armed forces to liberate the Muslim women of Afghanistan in particular from their degraded condition.”¹⁸⁹ Orientalist depictions often eroticized Middle Eastern men, a phenomenon that Said discusses in *Orientalism*: “This cultural, temporal, and geographical distance [between the East and the West] was expressed in metaphors of depth, secrecy, and sexual promise: phrases like “the veils of an Eastern bride” or “the inscrutable Orient” passed into the common language.”¹⁹⁰ Dabashi expands on this erotic imagery, highlighting how book covers, paintings and visual representations align with the Orientalist eroticizing gaze: “One of the most common clichés of Oriental desire is the under-aged man and woman, staged in innumerable Orientalist paintings—hence the magnificent cover of Said’s *Orientalism*, exposing this particular penchant of the sexually arrested Orientalist.”¹⁹¹ Dabashi further notes how contemporary media continues this tradition, citing the cover of *Reading Lolita in Tehran* as an update to this long tradition, with roots in Orientalist painting and colonial postcards, such as Frederick Arthur Bridgman’s *Algerian Girl* and *Harem Girl*.¹⁹² These depictions reinforced stereotypes of Middle Eastern subjects as morally decadent, contrasting with Western men’s supposed rationality and restraint. Marcia Inhorn’s *The New Arab Man* discusses the persistence of these stereotypes in modern media and literature, particularly in “Desert Romance” novels that often depict Arab men as hyper-virile “sheikhs” who abduct Western women, reinforcing the trope of the Middle Eastern man as a sexual predator.¹⁹³

¹⁸⁸ See footnote 183.

¹⁸⁹ Ahmed, *A Quiet Revolution*, 223.

¹⁹⁰ Said, *Orientalism*, 222.

¹⁹¹ Dabashi, *Brown Skin, White Masks*, 74-75.

¹⁹² Ibid., 75.

¹⁹³ Inhorn, *The New Arab Man*, 53.

Victimized and Oppressed

One of the forms of representation Meerzon discusses in her scholarship on stereotypes in theatre is the victimization of migrants, which poses a challenge in portraying migrants without perpetuating stereotypical and emotionally evocative images. Meerzon highlights how even representations intended to evoke sympathy can inadvertently reinforce the image of the oppressed subject.¹⁹⁴

In the case of Middle Eastern subjects, the stereotypes of aggression and victimization have historically been divided along gender lines. The roots of victimized Middle Eastern stereotypes can be traced back to Orientalist discourse, which portrayed the Middle East as a region ruled by despots with submissive populations in need of modernization, civilization, and thus control.¹⁹⁵ This duality (victimizer and victim) is seen in the way Orientalists assumed a protective stance towards Middle Eastern women while simultaneously reinforcing the stereotype of Middle Eastern men as tyrannical oppressors.¹⁹⁶ Colonial narratives further portrayed Middle Eastern societies as backward, framing both men and women as victims of their culture and religion, thereby justifying colonial domination and intervention under the guise of “civilizing” these societies.¹⁹⁷ This binary perspective has persisted, evolving from colonialism to imperialism and now into the neoliberal politics of late capitalism. In his

¹⁹⁴ Meerzon, Dean, and McNeil, *Migration and Stereotypes*, 21. Meerzon writes, “The body of a migrant remains evasive and difficult to represent without falling into blatant stereotyping, objectification, or even the further victimization of an already vulnerable subject. This difficulty with representation compels us to question the political, social, or philosophical impacts of performance activism.”

¹⁹⁵ Said, *Orientalism*, 40. Said illustrates how the Oriental, including Middle Eastern men, is portrayed as an object to be controlled, studied, and judged by Western frameworks: “The Oriental is depicted as something one judges (as in a court of law), something one studies and depicts (as in a curriculum), something one disciplines (as in a school or prison), something one illustrates (as in a zoological manual). The point is that in each of these cases, the Oriental is contained and represented by dominating frameworks.”

¹⁹⁶ Morey and Yaqin, *Framing Muslims*, 40. Morey and Yaqin note, “Muslim women have been at the center of headscarf debates across Europe [...] to confirm their supposed position as victims of an oppressive religion.” Also, see footnotes 176 (page 84), 177 (page 85), and 183 (page 86).

¹⁹⁷ David Cannadine, *Ornamentalism: How the British Saw Their Empire* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 30. Cannadine writes about the British perception of their colonies: “Britons saw society in their ‘tropical’ and ‘oriental’ colonies as enervated, hierarchical, corporatist, backward – and thus inferior;” Said, *Orientalism*, 6-7. Said observes, “The relationship between Occident and Orient is a relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of a complex hegemony [...] The Orient was Orientalized not only because it was discovered to be ‘Oriental’ in all those ways considered commonplace by an average nineteenth-century European, but also because it could be—that is, submitted to being—made Oriental.”

exploration of representations of Middle Eastern men in cinema, Shaheen highlights that movie characters like Aladdin, Ali Baba, and Sinbad, as presented in movies, are crafted to emulate the qualities of Western heroes like Robin Hood, portraying them as “brave and moral protagonists.”¹⁹⁸ Shaheen notes that these characters resonate with Western ideals but does not explicitly state that this resonance effectively strips these figures of their Middle Eastern identity. Instead, characters such as Aladdin remain Western constructs dressed in Arab garb, which perpetuates the duality Shaheen identifies: the Arab character is either a villain or a hero shaped to fit Western archetypes, thereby continuing the entrenched stereotypes rather than presenting a genuine portrayal of Middle Eastern identities.¹⁹⁹ Thus, the duality of the oppressed and oppressor has continued to dominate the simplified characterization of the Middle Eastern subject.

As mass media and technology evolved, becoming globally accessible, the violent and oppressive stereotype of Middle Eastern men gained significant prominence, alongside a victimized portrayal associated mainly with Middle Eastern women as oppressed. However, it can be argued that with shifts in the cultural and ethnic makeup of diversified Western societies like Canada and the emergence of more diverse voices, the victimized image of Middle Eastern men has gained wider recognition alongside the other two categorizations: violent, oppressive males and victimized, oppressed women. The victimized and helpless portrayal of Middle Eastern men also emerges from symbolic representations of masculinities, such as during the Palestinian movements against Israeli occupation

¹⁹⁸ Shaheen, *Reel Bad Arabs*, 58. It must be noted that these characters were all inspired by (mis)translations of *1001 Nights* stories, and there has been no evidence in the original manuscripts that characters of Alladin and Ali Baba and stories similar to them existed in those manuscripts.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid., 58. Shaheen observes, “I discovered more than 50 motion pictures sans Arab villains, five percent of the total number reviewed here. Refreshingly, these movies debunk stale images, humanizing Arabs. As for those Arabian Nights fantasies of yesteryear, only a few viziers, magicians, or other scalawags lie in ambush. Mostly fabulous Arabs appear in *The Desert Song* (1929), *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves* (1944), *Son of Sinbad* (1955), and *Aladdin and His Magic Lamp* (1969). The movies present viewers with brave and moral protagonists: Aladdin, Ali Baba, and Sinbad. Emulating the deeds of Robin Hood and his men of Sherwood Forest, Arabs liberate the poor from the rich and free the oppressed from corrupt rulers.”

during the Intifada uprisings. Repeated news coverage of young Palestinians using stones and slingshots against the Israeli army, for instance, symbolizes their victimization and highlights the power imbalance, turning acts of resistance into broader narratives of oppression.²⁰⁰ This shift in recognition of the victimized image of Middle Eastern men has been driven by wider social changes where marginalized groups have gained visibility, leading to expanded discussions on social rights and justice.²⁰¹ Considering various processes for the construction of the victim-based identity, as outlined by Jacoby, the image of Middle Eastern men as victims has added a third dimension to the previously dualistic stereotype of Middle Eastern identities, complicating the narrative within Western mass culture.

The characteristics of victimized Middle Eastern men in stereotypes are those that diverge from the violent and oppressive image, but do not necessarily present them as heroic saviours, which often happens when their representation resonates with European archetypes of heroes. Instead, these characteristics align more closely with the image of being helpless, in need of protection, and emasculated, traits typically associated with the already stereotypical portrayal of Middle Eastern women. This portrayal suggests a vulnerability and lack of agency, further reinforcing the idea that Middle Eastern subjects require external intervention or salvation, often depicted as being provided by

²⁰⁰ David A. McDonald, *My Voice Is My Weapon: Music, Nationalism, and the Poetics of Palestinian Resistance* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 120-121. McDonald notes, "As the technologies of modern warfare (RPGs, Kalashnikov rifles, uniforms, and so on) had proven ineffective at stopping Israeli attacks in the refugee camps of Lebanon, Palestinians interpreted the adoption of nonlethal resistance, epitomized in the stone, slingshot, and Molotov cocktail, as a return to their Palestinian roots [...] This resignification successfully indexed the enormous power imbalance between Palestinian demonstrators and the Israeli army before an international ---audience of observers."

²⁰¹ Tami Amanda Jacoby, "A Theory of Victimhood: Politics, Conflict and the Construction of Victim-Based Identity," *Millennium* 43, no. 2 (2015): 511-30. Jacoby explains that victimhood is constructed in different processes, including legal and institutional frameworks that recognize and validate victimization, such as human rights laws, social justice movements, and media platforms. The emphasis on individual rights and justice heightens awareness of victimization, making claims of victimhood more likely to be heard and validated. Political consciousness around victimhood is further amplified by social movements, media coverage, and public discourse, with media often broadening public awareness and shaping collective victim identities. For instance, the portrayal of refugees as victims in European media can significantly influence public perceptions and political responses. Jacoby also notes that victimhood narratives often align with dominant ideological frameworks like liberalism, humanitarianism, and social justice, solidifying these identities within Western legal and political structures. Additionally, those identified as victims actively seek recognition and redress through legal avenues, further establishing their victim status within society.

Global North states towards refugees and asylum seekers. The victimized portrayal also includes those subject to discrimination, marginalization, and what is perceived as systemic injustice in diversified Western societies.²⁰² Additionally, as the increasing presence of Middle Easterners contradicts the stereotyping traits of men as uniformly violent, other narratives strengthen to justify the contradictions the public encounters, that is, portraying them as victims of their own oppressive cultures and the traditional norms of their host society that subjects Middle Easterners to discrimination.²⁰³

Postmodernity and Cultural Production

Cultural narratives, deeply embedded within dominant ideological and structural forces, continually reinforce and reshape stereotypes. The role of power and ideology is crucial in shaping and perpetuating stereotypes. Dyer argues that stereotypes are less concerned with accuracy and more with “who controls and defines them, and what interests they serve.”²⁰⁴ Stereotypes are not only created through discourse but are also reinforced by dominant power structures and ideologies, serving to maintain control and manage perceived threats posed by certain groups, thus preserving the existing social order. Rooted in societal power structures, stereotypes sustain their existence by adjusting to counter-discourses and when forced to change. As cultural contexts evolve, the discourses sustaining stereotypes must adapt, though such shifts require persistent reinforcement to establish new dominant narratives. To effectively analyze the dynamics of forces and relations shaping stereotypes, where cultural narratives intersect with broader social, economic, and political structures, this research asserts

²⁰² Karla McKanders, “Gender, Islamophobia, and Refugee Exceptionalism,” in *Arabs at Home and in the World: Human Rights, Gender Politics, and Identity*, ed. Karla M. McKanders (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2019), 126-143. McKander discusses how young, single men from Muslim-majority countries are often stereotyped as violent threats and, therefore, excluded from refugee protection. This exclusion is based on narratives that portray them as potential terrorists, reinforcing their marginalization and victimization under international refugee frameworks.

²⁰³ Morey and Yaqin, *Framing Muslims*, 62. Authors posit that the creation of a victim image sustains the oppressive stereotypes by depicting Middle Eastern men as inherently problematic, regardless of their actual behaviour and identity; “The persistent parading of particular images [...] came to lose their neutrality and instead became a decontextualized, interchangeable sequence of markers denoting an alien culture in perpetual crisis.”

²⁰⁴ Dyer, *The Matter of Images*, 12.

that understanding contemporary cultural dominance as postmodernity is essential. Jameson and Hall, who incorporated broader structural dynamics into cultural studies, offer paradigms valuable to this research and integral to its methodology.²⁰⁵ While the use of postmodernity as an analytical framework may be debated, it is crucial in this section to clarify its relevance and outline the theoretical tools it provides for this dissertation. Additionally, considering this dissertation's focus on assessing the effectiveness of critique/support of the stereotype of masculinity image, it is crucial to define contemporary cultural dominance as rooted in postmodernity. Without recognizing the specific characteristics of our current cultural condition, this analysis risks replicating the depthless and fragmented qualities of the very cultural components it seeks to analyze. As Jameson argues, without a clear conception of dominant cultural logic, we risk interpreting history as mere heterogeneity, which undermines the effectiveness of cultural politics.²⁰⁶ Therefore, postmodernity serves as the force field in which both residual and emergent cultural forms operate, and understanding this dominance is essential for evaluating the impact of any radical cultural critique today.

Postmodernity profoundly shapes the production and reception of cultural products within the contemporary global economy, shaped by "late capitalism."²⁰⁷ Jameson emphasizes that in this

²⁰⁵ Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1981). In *The Political Unconscious* (1981), Jameson argues that literary texts reflect socio-economic structures, showing how cultural artifacts, including stereotypes, are shaped by political and economic contexts. In *Postmodernism*, Jameson explores the commodification of culture under late capitalism, illustrating how hegemonic ideologies are maintained. In "Encoding/Decoding" (1980), Hall introduces the concept that media messages are encoded by producers and decoded by audiences within their social contexts, highlighting the role of hegemonic culture in shaping and maintaining stereotypes. Stuart Hall, "Encoding/Decoding," in *Culture, Media, Language: Working Papers in Cultural Studies, 1972-79*, ed. Stuart Hall et al. (London: Hutchinson, 1980). In *Representation* (1997), Hall further examines how cultural representations, including stereotypes, are constructed and contested through power relations, showing how hegemony incorporates critiques. See Stuart Hall, "The Spectacle of the Other," in *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, 1st ed., ed. Stuart Hall, Jessica Evans, and Sean Nixon (London: Sage/Open University, 1997). The following section will elaborate on this, outlining the methodological and theoretical framework and emphasizing the importance of incorporating structural dynamics alongside social factors.

²⁰⁶ Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 6. Jameson writes, "If we do not achieve some general sense of a cultural dominant, then we fall back into a view of present history as sheer heterogeneity, random difference, a coexistence of a host of distinct forces whose effectivity is undecidable."

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, xix. Late Capitalism is characterized by globalization, involving extensive cross-border trade, investment, migration, technological innovation, and financial sector dominance, leading to economic inequality within and between nations, consumer culture, environmental degradation and neoliberal policies, promoting deregulation, privatization, free markets, and

omnipresent social and economic structure, even art that seeks to be oppositional struggles to define what opposition means in a system where even the negative is co-opted. He observes:

It seems to me that capitalism — or late capitalism, if you like, or perhaps finance capital is a better way of naming it, or globalization — at any rate, it seems to me that everyone has had to come to terms with the omnipresence of this far more wholly subsumed kind of social and economic structure. And that, I think, leaves its traces on or in art, much of which wants to be oppositional, but do we know any longer what oppositional means in this total system, or what might “subvert” it, or even function as its critique? [...] So there is today a feeling that even the negative has been co-opted by the system — indeed, that the system needs negative critiques to keep itself going.²⁰⁸

This dominance is rooted in the economic shifts of “Late Capitalism,” when globalization, technological advancements, and the expansion of multinational corporations blurred the boundaries between culture and the marketplace.²⁰⁹ Cultural production, under this framework, is shaped by a condition marked by plurality, fragmentation, and a focus on surface rather than substance—what Jameson describes as “depthlessness” and “the waning of historicity.”²¹⁰ Jameson argues that postmodernity operates as a force field that dominates all aspects of our daily lives; “it now becomes coterminous with the social field as a whole, and everything becomes in that sense “cultural”—politics, economics, law, ideology, religion, daily life, sexuality, the body, space, et cetera, et cetera.”²¹¹ Mass media and consumer culture play a pivotal role in shaping and disseminating cultural images; these images are simplified and

reductions in government spending on social services. For more reading on the characteristics of late capitalism, see Cecilia Rikap, “Capitalism as Usual: Implications of Digital Intellectual Monopolies,” *New Left Review*, no. 139 (January–February 2023): 1.

²⁰⁸ Nico Baumbach, Damon R. Young, and Genevieve Yue, “Revisiting Postmodernism: An Interview with Fredric Jameson,” *Social Text* 34, no. 2 (2016): 144-145.

²⁰⁹ See footnote 207 (page 93) on what Late Capitalism is featured.

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 6.

²¹¹ Jameson, *Jameson on Jameson*, 19.

transformed into easily recognizable forms, often stripped of historical context and repackaged as commodities.²¹² This process of cultural production reduces complex identities to superficial images.²¹³ Consequently, this research links the features of postmodernity—marked by the omnipresence of fragmented and depthless narratives and images in all realms of daily life, to the prevalence of stereotypical portrayals.²¹⁴ These portrayals reflect a broader postmodern tendency to obscure complexities and prioritize surface-level depictions.

The approach taken in this research views postmodernity as a historical condition characterized by the intersection of various cultural, ideological, and structural forces. Postmodernity represents a state where various definitions of postmodernism, whether as an artistic style, philosophical perspective, or linguistic practice, arise from and reflect the diverse layers of a broader socio-historical context. These layers, encompassing cultural, ideological, economic, and structural forces, shape human perception and expression. This pervasive influence extends beyond language into culture and even the unconscious, where, for the first time in history, economic forces are penetrating the frameworks of human creativity and imagination, overshadowing all aspects of creation through the broader structural dynamics of the contemporary condition.²¹⁵ This transformation marks a phase where economic and cultural forces have become inseparable, profoundly shaping human consciousness and cultural production.²¹⁶ Therefore, as

²¹² Ibid., 4-5.

²¹³ Ibid., 12.

²¹⁴ In the 2016 interview, Jameson states, “I think that everybody nowadays recognizes that capitalism is an omnipresent form of our existence, and I would say it’s a continuation of the process that was called, in the famous missing chapter of *Capital*, a ‘subsumption.’ That is, everything has been subsumed under capital to a much greater degree than ever before.” See Baumbach, Young, and Yue, “Revisiting Postmodernism,” 144.

²¹⁵ Jameson, *Jameson on Jameson*, 80. In the interview, Jameson says: “Today, I think one of the characteristics of the postmodern is very precisely this penetration and colonization of the unconscious. Art is commodified, and the unconscious is itself commodified by the forces of the media and advertising.”

²¹⁶ David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), 63. Harvey notes that postmodernism should not be read “as some autonomous artistic current. Its rootedness in daily life is one of its most patently transparent features,” driven by “forces that emanate from mass-consumer culture: the mobilization of fashion, pop art, television and other forms of media image, and the variety of urban life styles that have become part and parcel of daily life under capitalism.”

will be discussed, articulating different scholarly interpretations of postmodernism is essential to clarifying the framework this research adopts.

1. Philosophical Postmodernism: In philosophy, postmodernism is often associated with skepticism towards grand narratives and meta-narratives, as articulated by thinkers like Jean-François Lyotard in *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Postmodernism denies universals and questions the legitimacy of myths or meta-narratives, focusing on the relativity of knowledge and the plurality of perspectives. According to Lyotard, the “result of [...] incredulity towards meta-narratives is that the inhabitants of advanced capitalist societies now live in a world in which the following is the case: there are no guarantees as to either the worth of their activities or the truthfulness of their statements; there are only language games; and there are no economic constraints on the cultural realm.”²¹⁷ This view challenges the idea of universal truths and objective reality, emphasizing instead the plurality of perspectives and the relativity of knowledge.
2. Postmodernism as a Historical Period: Some scholars view postmodernism as a distinct historical period following modernism, marked by technological changes, media, and globalization.²¹⁸ This perspective considers postmodernism as a cultural phase that reflects broader societal shifts. David Harvey’s *The Condition of Postmodernity* is a critical text that explores these aspects.²¹⁹ Chris Baldick describes postmodernism as a cultural condition prevailing in advanced capitalist societies since the 1960s, characterized by a superabundance of disconnected images and styles,

²¹⁷ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), xxiv.

²¹⁸ Ian Buchanan, *A Dictionary of Critical Theory*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), s.v. “Postmodernism,” accessed June 1, 2025, <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780198794790.001.0001/acref-9780198794790>.

²¹⁹ Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, 328. Harvey writes, “The historical sketch I have here proposed suggests, however, that shifts of this sort are by no means new, and that the most recent version of it is certainly within the grasp of historical materialist enquiry [...] Postmodernism can be regarded, in short, as a historical-geographical condition of a certain sort.”

eclectic nostalgia, and the rejection of modernism's depth and coherence. Baldick notes that postmodernism is a disputed term that has occupied much of the late 20th-century debate about culture since the early 1980s.²²⁰

3. Linguistic and Deconstructive Postmodernism: Associated with Jacques Derrida and his concept of deconstruction, this perspective focuses on the instability of language and meaning. As a reaction against structuralism, postmodernism posits that texts can never have a definitive interpretation and encourages continuous questioning and unravelling of meaning.²²¹ Derrida's *Of Grammatology* is foundational to understanding this view. In a postmodern approach, everything from a novel to notes on a napkin is a text that can be analyzed without hierarchy.²²² This approach is further characterized by a focus on relationships of power or the unconscious in language, derived from Saussure's view that words gain meaning through their relations rather than their connection to an extra-linguistic reality. It rejects the structuralist view that the unconscious or societal forms obey structural laws, celebrating instead the subjective and spontaneous and refusing concepts of objectivity, reality, and truth.²²³ Additionally, postmodernism in literature often employs self-reflexivity, where language becomes the object of

²²⁰ Chris Baldick, "Postmodernism," in *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*, 4th ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), accessed November 13, 2024, <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780198715443.001.0001/acref-9780198715443-e-905>.

²²¹ Simon Blackburn, *A Dictionary of Philosophy*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), s.v. "Poststructuralism," accessed June 16, 2024, <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780198735304.001.0001/acref-9780198735304>.

²²² Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 172. Derrida asserts, "There is nothing outside of the text [there is no outside-text; *il n'y a pas de hors-texte*]" to highlight the inherent instability and openness of language and meaning, which challenges the structuralist belief in fixed interpretations." See "Postmodernism," in *The Oxford Companion to Architecture*, ed. Patrick Goode (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), accessed June 6, 2025, <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780198605683.001.0001/acref-9780198605683-e-1028>.

²²³ Blackburn. *Dictionary of Philosophy*, s.v. "Postmodernism."

its own scrutiny, creating a dizzying rhetorical regress and encouraging a ludic development of the “linguistic turn” in philosophical thinking.²²⁴

4. Cultural and Sociological Postmodernism: Thinkers like Zygmunt Bauman view postmodernism in terms of societal changes, emphasizing the fluidity and transience of social structures, identities, and relationships in the contemporary world. This view highlights the erosion of traditional social norms and the rise of individualism and consumer culture. Bauman’s *Liquid Modernity* comprehensively examines these changes. Postmodernism, as a sociological concept, describes a break with modernity marked by the decline of the industrial economy and the rise of the information economy, consumer capitalism, and economic globalization.²²⁵ These shifts reflect broader societal changes, including the disintegration of established social structures and the increasing fluidity of identities and relationships. This condition emphasizes the breakdown of historically conditioned styles and the transformation of cultural and social practices, aligning with Bauman’s analysis of a society characterized by constant change and instability.²²⁶
5. Postmodernism in Architecture: Postmodern architecture is characterized by a return to ornamentation and historical reference, contrasting with the functionalism of modernist architecture.²²⁷ This approach is often eclectic, blending various styles and elements. Marshall Berman describes postmodernism as a movement that emerged prominently in architecture in the

²²⁴ Christopher Norris, “Post-modernism,” in *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, 2nd ed., ed. Ted Honderich (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), accessed June 7, 2025, <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780199264797.001.0001/acref-9780199264797-e-2001>.

²²⁵ <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780199264797.001.0001/acref-9780199264797-e-2001>.

²²⁵ Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), 126. Bauman writes, “The passage from heavy to light capitalism, from solid to fluid modernity, may yet prove to be a departure more radical and seminal than the advent of capitalism and modernity themselves... The novel instantaneity of time radically changes the modality of human cohabitation - and most conspicuously, the way in which humans attend to (or do not attend to, as the case may be) their collective affairs, or rather the way in which they make (or do not make, as the case may be) certain affairs into collective ones.”

²²⁶ Craig Calhoun, ed. “Postmodernism,” in *The Oxford Dictionary of the Social Sciences*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), accessed June 1, 2025, <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780195123715.001.0001/acref-9780195123715-e-1306>.

²²⁷ “Postmodernism,” *The Oxford Companion to Architecture*.

late 1960s, highlighted by architects like Robert Venturi, who rediscovered and recombined historical forms and styles in fresh and original ways. This movement is marked by complexity, irony, contradiction, and multivalence, reflecting a sensitivity to the forms of the past while creatively reinterpreting them for the present.²²⁸ Charles Jencks' *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture* is a key text in this field.²²⁹ Harvey also writes about postmodern architecture and urban design, clarifying that "postmodernism is manifest in contemporary urban design because a closer focus helps reveal the fine-grained textures rather than the broad brush strokes of which the postmodernist condition is constructed in daily life."²³⁰ Like Jameson Harvey's marks, postmodernity is the condition that symptomizes or manifests in different realms of human social and intellectual life, including architecture.

6. Postmodernism as an Artistic Style: Postmodernism is an artistic style marked by rejecting modernism's formalism and purity. Jameson admits that the term "postmodernism" is often known (in academic discourses and public knowledge) to "describe first of all the style of certain forms of contemporary architecture and after that, certain kinds of image-production and other kinds of cultural products;" still, he sees these descriptions as "symptoms and clues to the underlying" condition he refers to as postmodernity.²³¹ In the same vein, Harvey denotes, "Whatever else we do with the concept, we should not read postmodernism as some autonomous

²²⁸ Berman, "Postmodernism."

²²⁹ Charles Jencks, *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture* (New York: Rizzoli, 1977), 7. Jencks discusses the pluralistic and eclectic nature of postmodern architecture, which contrasts with the singular style and functionalism of modernist architecture. Jencks writes, "The phrase 'post-modern' is not the happiest expression one can use concerning recent architecture. It is evasive, fashionable and worst of all, negative [...]. And yet it is precisely this vagueness and implied pluralism which the title of this book [that is, *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture*] is meant to convey. The present situation tolerates opposite approaches, and I hope that architecture doesn't prematurely crystallize around a single style and doctrinaire approach, as it has so many times in this century. If there is a single direction I prefer, the reader will discover that it is pluralistic: the idea that an architect must master several styles and codes of communication and vary these to suit the particular culture for which he is designing."

²³⁰ Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, 65.

²³¹ Jameson, *Jameson on Jameson*, 77.

artistic current. Its rootedness in daily life is one of its most patently transparent features.”²³²

The postmodern style embraces pastiche, irony, and mixing different artistic styles and mediums.²³³ In this sense, postmodernism in art is connected to contemporary advancements in technology, popular culture, corporate practices, and government. Postmodern artists reject the modernist focus on the essence of individual media, instead blending traditional techniques like painting, sculpture, and photography or exploring new media such as installation, video, and performance art.²³⁴

The diverse interpretations of postmodernism—from its artistic expressions to its sociocultural, philosophical, and linguistic implications—converge within the broader historical condition of postmodernity. This condition, recognized today as postmodernity, reflects the profound transformations driven by economic, cultural, and technological forces that have redefined human thought, creativity, and social structures. Each interpretation—whether focused on culture, language, or philosophy—reveals how the shifts associated with late capitalism manifest across various aspects of contemporary life. While this research primarily focuses on postmodernity’s impact on cultural and artistic production, other perspectives address its philosophical, linguistic, architectural, and social aspects.

Stereotypes and Postmodern Tendencies of Cultural Productions

In the context of postmodernity, cultural production often simplifies complex identities into stereotypes that align with market demands for recognizable and widely distributable content. As examined in section “Characteristics of Middle Eastern Stereotypes,” representations in the Global North frequently depict Middle Eastern men in violent or oppressive terms. These stereotypes endure

²³² Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, 63.

²³³ Pastiche is the imitation of style without critique, which distinguishes it from parody. It is the generic attempt to recreate a style of art from the past. The concepts will be further elaborated on in the following lines.

²³⁴ Ann Lee Morgan, “Postmodernism,” in *The Oxford Dictionary of American Art and Artists*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), accessed November 16, 2024, <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780191807671.001.0001/acref-9780191807671-e-1075>.

due to persistent cultural and economic conditions, which have evolved to reinforce these reductive images despite shifts in social and political landscapes.²³⁵ Although the vocabulary describing the Middle Eastern man has evolved, the foundational Orientalist image remains intact: the despotic, uncivilized oppressor, now portrayed as violent, terrorist, and misogynistic. Historically, the image of the Middle Eastern man as an uncivilized oppressor was confined to those audiences with access to published works and literacy before the 20th century. Today, however, it is widely disseminated across all groups and classes, facilitated by the pervasive reach of digital media.

What, then, has remained unchanged at the core of this stereotype, allowing it to persist and even intensify? The answer lies in economic structures, particularly within the framework of globalization, which began with colonialism and evolved through classical and industrial capitalism into today's late capitalism. Alongside the persistence of the stereotype of the Middle Eastern man, the nature of capital itself has intensified, accelerating wealth accumulation and deepening class divides, and extending the pervasive reach of globalization into localities and nations worldwide—characteristics aligned with today's postmodern condition. Thus, it is no coincidence that stereotypes, shaped by the context of each historical period, have become more defined and widespread, embedding themselves in language and common perceptions and appearing in cultural representations. Therefore, in evaluating how Middle Eastern masculinity is critiqued or reinforced in cultural productions such as theatre, it is essential to keep in mind the broader structural forces, including economic conditions, as they provide a critical backdrop for understanding the dynamics that perpetuate stereotypes.

The relationship between stereotyping and postmodern tendencies is omnipresent in cultural production, where market-driven dynamics infiltrate representation.²³⁶ In postmodern conditions, culture

²³⁵ The endurance of these stereotypes is more accurately attributed to a combination of economic forces and global media dissemination. Focusing solely on social bias oversimplifies the issue, missing the broader systems that perpetuate these stereotypes for economic and ideological purposes.

²³⁶ Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 1-3.

merges with the circuits of capital, causing cultural forms to lose their autonomous material identity as they are absorbed into processes of simplification to become easily recognizable and consumable. This process creates an illusion of diversity and equality by presenting differences on a seemingly equal footing, yet it sacrifices their depth and nuance, stripping them of historical and social contexts and reducing them to superficial and consumable displays. When representations exhibit postmodern tendencies like simulacrum—detaching identity from its historical roots—or pastiche—imitating styles without critique—they signal an alignment with postmodern conventions of cultural production, which flattens identity and reduces the representation’s critical potential. Applying this theoretical framework is crucial because even a representation that appears to critique stereotypes may, instead, risk reinforcing them by reconstructing the stereotypical frame while addressing only surface-level critiques or modifying certain traits. As a result, such representations often fail to offer substantive challenges to stereotypes.

This transformation is evident in creating cultural “Spectacles,” where images dominate as consumable objects, masking the loss of deeper meaning and critical engagement due to structural forces.²³⁷ Images become the dominant form of cultural expression, not as representations of reality but as objects to be consumed.²³⁸ Jameson describes this condition as the “supersession of everything outside of commercial culture,” where all forms of art, high and low, are absorbed into the circuits of

²³⁷ Buchanan, *A Dictionary of Critical Theory*, s.v. “Society of the Spectacle.” The spectacle is a term proposed by Guy Debord, arguing that in late capitalism, the final form of the commodity would be the image. The spectacle is “how things appear, or more precisely, how they make us appear to ourselves, that matters. The spectacle is the illusion that our fragmented, alienated life is in fact whole, true, and authentic; the spectacle is what we believe when all our beliefs have been devalued by the market; the spectacle is the idea that the market is sufficient unto itself, no longer a means to an end but an end in its own right.”

²³⁸ Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 206-207. He discusses the pervasive and inescapable nature of the “culture of consumption” and how it dominates contemporary society, including its associated imagery. Jameson highlights the idea that we are immersed in a culture of consumption where desires are endlessly propagated and replicated with no outside fulfillment. This mirrors the commodification of images, where images are produced and consumed not for their representation of reality but as objects of desire within the market system.

commodification.²³⁹ The link between this process and stereotypical representations is best understood when analyzing how stereotypes – simplified and flattened depictions of social identity – are particularly amenable to postmodern features such as lack of historicity and depthlessness. For instance, Disney’s *Aladdin* (1992) portrays Arab characters in ways that have been criticized for depicting them as violent, rendering these identities recognizable in mass culture.²⁴⁰ Hall notes, “Stereotypes function by reducing, essentializing, and naturalizing difference, and are a means of exercising power over those who are stereotyped.”²⁴¹ Like the depthless images abundant under postmodernity, stereotypes are stripped of their complex social and historical roots and repackaged as narratives reinforcing hegemonic discourses.

The question arises: Why are identity representations and cultural distinctions so readily flattened, leading to the widespread reproduction of stereotypical images? Jameson observes that the boundaries between difference and identity become increasingly blurred: “For the very concept of difference itself is booby-trapped; it is at least pseudo-dialectical, and its imperceptible alternation with its sometimes indistinguishable opposite number, Identity, is among the oldest language and thought games recorded in (several) philosophical traditions.”²⁴² As the lines between identity and difference blur, the notion of neo-ethnicity emerges: “Ethnicity in the postmodern, in other words— neo-ethnicity— is something of a yuppie phenomenon, and thereby without too many mediations a matter of fashion and the market.”²⁴³ Neo-ethnicity describes how ethnic identities, stripped of their original cultural significance, are reimagined as desirable traits within the marketplace. This commodified version of ethnicity arises when representations of identity lack genuine cultural distinction, detach ethnic identities from their historical

²³⁹ Fredric Jameson, *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern, 1983–1998* (London: Verso, 1998), 135.

²⁴⁰ Ron Clements and John Musker, directors, *Aladdin* (Burbank: Walt Disney Pictures, 1992).

²⁴¹ Hall, “*The Spectacle of the ‘Other’*,” 258.

²⁴² In this context, difference distinguishes one group or individual from another; it is a genuine cultural or social distinction (i.e. unique characteristics or practices that define a particular group or community, such as language, traditions, religious practices, and social customs. These distinctions are “genuine” because they are deeply rooted in the history, geography, and lived experiences of the people who practice them. Identity is the essence of a group or individual, a stable notion of self or group belonging and societal values. See Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 341.

²⁴³ *Ibid.*, 341.

and social contexts and reimagine them as fashionable in the marketplace.²⁴⁴ This results in identity representations being reduced to superficial markers and detached from their contexts. The shift in cultural politics, where ethnic identities are lifted from contexts of oppression and repackaged for mass culture, leads to the intersection of neo-ethnicity and stereotypes, resulting in reductive and consumable representations of gender and ethnic groups.²⁴⁵

Within the framework of neo-ethnicity, dramaturgical choices become pivotal in either resisting or reinforcing the flattening of Middle Eastern masculinities.²⁴⁶ This dissertation explores how specific dramaturgical approaches can reclaim the complexity of identity portrayal. Stereotypes, quickly consumed and reproduced, cater to a capitalist preference for simplicity over depth, raising concerns about the integrity of cultural representations. Jameson observes that, in postmodern culture, the line between original realities and mediated images blurs, with such mediated representations often posing as genuine realities.²⁴⁷ This blurring complicates the audience's ability to discern whether a cultural product genuinely challenges stereotypes or subtly reinforces them. Consequently, these representations persist as perceived realities (as opposed to genuine realities), perpetuating stereotypes and aligning with existing power structures.²⁴⁸ By situating this analysis within the cultural dynamics shaped by market forces, this study underscores dramaturgical choices' critical role in maintaining depth and resisting reductionism in representations.

²⁴⁴ Genuine distinction in the sense that these distinctions are deeply rooted in the history, geography, and lived experiences of the people who practice them. What makes these distinctions 'genuine' is their organic development within a community and their integral role in that community's social fabric and identity.

²⁴⁵ John Rajchman, *The Identity in Question* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 282. Jameson explains that the transformation of identity to neoethnicity involves a kind of Hegelian dialectic, where the original ethnic identity is both preserved and cancelled, resulting in a new form that is recognized and consumed within the media landscape.

²⁴⁶ Neo-ethnicity is a type of difference that is an unreal recognition of origin reality. See footnote 242.

²⁴⁷ Jameson, *The Cultural Turn*, 72.

²⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 76. In this analysis, genuine reality refers to the multifaceted experiences of Middle Eastern masculinities, encompassing the social, cultural, and historical contexts that shape them. Originality involves presenting these identities in ways that challenge conventional stereotypes, offering perspectives that reflect their true complexity.

To evaluate the effectiveness of a representation in critiquing stereotypes, one must examine how postmodern features are embedded in a work. Neo-ethnicity strips ethnic identities of their original cultural significance and reduces them to simulacrum qualities of theatrical representation—copies without originals.²⁴⁹ This process can be observed in how artworks adopt postmodern characteristics like pastiche (the imitation or borrowing of styles without regard for original meaning), historical depthlessness (a detachment from historical context), and thematic flattening (superficial and fragmented thematic presentation). By examining these characteristics in theatre, we can determine whether the staging of identity conforms to broader cultural demands, presenting identity as neo-ethnicity and reinforcing stereotypes, or critiques the flattened and simplified traits by re-engaging with the complexities of the identity's original context. Theatre, as Michael Mangan notes, “both reflects and shapes societal norms around gender, often perpetuating dominant masculinities while marginalizing others.”²⁵⁰ This dual role of theatre highlights its potential to reinforce or challenge the reductive representations that emerge under postmodern conditions. This approach helps distinguish between superficial critiques, which may alter the outward appearance of a stereotype to suit contemporary tastes, and substantive critiques, which challenge the underlying reductive structure of the stereotype.²⁵¹ In postmodern culture, even representations that critique stereotypes are often recontextualized within frameworks that align with hegemonic norms.²⁵² Hall illustrates how hegemony's fluidity ensures that

²⁴⁹ Or expression without a subject. See Fredric Jameson, *Mimesis, Expression, Construction: Fredric Jameson's Seminar on Aesthetic Theory*, ed. Octavian Esanu (New York: Watkins Media, 2024), 560.

²⁵⁰ Michael Mangan, *Staging Masculinities: History, Gender, Performance* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 35.

²⁵¹ Stuart Hall, “Domination and Hegemony,” in *Cultural Studies 1983: A Theoretical History*, eds. Jennifer Daryl Slack and Lawrence Grossberg (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 169. Hall's analysis of hegemony reveals how cultural power absorbs critiques, neutralizing their subversive potential. Hall highlights that domination through hegemony involves the “capacity to actively contain, educate, and reshape oppositional forces, to maintain them in their subordinate places.” This is the central mechanism of neutralization.

²⁵² *Ibid.*, 170. Hall explains that subordinate groups are allowed to exist and have their own culture, but always within a larger, dominant framework. They can “maintain their own space as long as they are constantly contained within the horizon of political practices and ideological systems of representation which place them always in the subordinate position.”

underlying power structures remain intact, even when surface content appears to change.²⁵³ A dramaturgy contributing to substantive critique would deconstruct the stereotype by reconnecting the identity with its original cultural, historical, and social significance, challenging the flattened and reductive images propagated by neo-ethnicity. Thus, this scholarship argues that assessing how a theatre performance embraces or resists postmodern characteristics provides a foundation for determining whether it reinforces or critiques identity depiction. This framework underscores the imperative for dramaturgical choices that resist superficial portrayals and re-engage identities with their complex socio-historical contexts, grounding the analysis in theatre's potential for critical representation.

Methodology

This research employs a multifaceted methodology to examine how representations of Middle Eastern masculinity in Canadian theatre can become simplified, easily consumed images that risk reinforcing stereotypes. This study is grounded in Jameson's methodology of dialectical criticism, which serves as the overarching analytical framework. Furthermore, the methodology benefits from Hall's views on cultural studies and his work's approach to ideology and power to explore how these representations naturalize and perpetuate societal prejudices. By contextualizing Middle Eastern masculinity within these frameworks, the research examines how socio-cultural forces, and postmodern tendencies shape theatrical portrayals, positioning these influences as a broader backdrop rather than the primary analytical lens.

Dialectical Criticism: A Jamesonian Framework

This study adopts Jameson's "dialectical criticism" to situate cultural texts within their socio-economic, political, and ideological contexts, enabling an exploration of the latent contradictions

²⁵³ Stuart Hall, "The Question of Cultural Identity," in *Modernity: An Introduction to Modern Societies*, eds. Stuart Hall et al. (Malden: Blackwell, 1996), 597.

embedded in representations of Middle Eastern masculinities in Canadian theatre. Grounded in the imperative to “always historicize,” this methodology critically examines how cultural texts mediate the material and ideological contradictions of their time.²⁵⁴ “Dialectical criticism” employs a triadic interpretive model that situates texts within interconnected horizons of meaning: political, social, and historical.²⁵⁵ By connecting cultural production to broader systems, this framework complements the study’s stance on viewing the artwork with its structural relations. Within this overarching framework, the research employs specific methods at each horizon:

Political Horizon

At the political horizon, the analysis begins with the individual text, considered a symbolic act that attempts to address real socio-political contradictions through its narrative and formal structures.²⁵⁶ According to Jameson, every cultural text responds to specific historical and social conditions, symbolically negotiating the conflicts and contradictions inherent in its context. As he explains: “The object of study is still more or less construed as coinciding with the individual literary work or utterance.”²⁵⁷ Within this horizon, we seek to uncover the latent meaning of the text; thus, the phase involves a close reading of the text’s internal dynamics, such as character development, plot structure, dialogue, and thematic motifs, to uncover how it symbolically addresses societal tensions. Notably, the method avoids reducing the artwork to extrinsic content; instead, it explores how purely formal patterns symbolically perform the social within the aesthetic. This phase involves:

²⁵⁴ Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, 9.

²⁵⁵ Ibid., 75. Jameson conceptualizes this method in three concentric stages, meaning they are interconnected yet allow for distinct analytical focuses. Importantly, the intersection of these realms and their relevance remains intact when analyzing an artwork. He describes these three levels as “three concentric frameworks, which mark a widening out of the sense of the social ground of a text through the notions, first, of political history, in the narrow sense of punctual event and a chronicle-like sequence of happenings in time; then of society, in the now already less diachronic and time-bound sense of a constitutive tension and struggle between social classes; and, ultimately, of history now conceived in its vastest sense of the sequence of modes of production.”

²⁵⁶ Ibid., 79. Jameson describes the symbolic act as the process through which “real social contradictions, insurmountable in their own terms, find a purely formal resolution in the aesthetic realm.”

²⁵⁷ Ibid., 76.

Discourse Analysis: Drawing on principles of critical discourse analysis, this study examines how language within selected plays constructs and conveys identities, focusing particularly on the ideological functions that underpin these portrayals. By analyzing the verbal dimensions of dialogue, monologues, and character interactions, this research explores how language choices in each production shape, reinforce or challenge stereotypes of Middle Eastern masculinity.

Specifically, the discourse analysis investigates how power dynamics are represented through language, the use of stereotypical phrases or descriptors, and the ways in which verbal exchanges support or disrupt dominant narratives surrounding Middle Eastern masculinities. This approach enables a deeper understanding of how dramaturgical language works within each play to either uphold or critique existing stereotypes, linking verbal expression to broader themes of identity and representation in Canadian theatre.

By engaging the artwork on its own terms, this approach ensures that formal analysis begins with the internal structure and patterns of the text while remaining connected to the broader socio-political dynamics it reflects.²⁵⁸ In this phase, the plays are examined for how they represent Middle Eastern masculinities and symbolically negotiate issues like identity, immigration, and cultural integration. For instance, a character's internal conflict may reflect broader societal tensions between multiculturalism and assimilation policies in Canada.

²⁵⁸ Ibid., 77. The first stage of analysis in Jameson's method is concerned with how the artwork represents a political conflict and provides an alternative resolution to a conflict that remains unresolved in the real world. The text offers an imagined consequence or resolution, which Jameson calls the "symbolic act." Jameson notes, "The starting point will be an immanent description of the formal and structural peculiarities of this body art; yet it must be a description already pre-prepared and oriented toward transcending the purely formalistic, a movement which is achieved not by abandoning the formal level for something extrinsic to it such as some inertly social "content"-but rather immanently, by construing purely formal patterns as a symbolic enactment of the social within the formal and the aesthetic." This approach highlights that the social and political meaning of the artwork is not something added from the outside but is instead built into its form and structure. The way the artwork is organized, its symbols, patterns, and narrative, already reflects and represents deeper societal issues. To understand these meanings, we must analyze how the artwork itself creates and embodies them, rather than looking for external explanations or imposing outside ideas onto it.

Social Horizon

The social horizon expands the analysis to situate the text within the collective discourses and social structures that shape its form and content. Jameson describes this shift between phases of analysis as moving from viewing individual texts as isolated works to understanding them as "little more than an individual parole or utterance" within the "great collective and class discourses."²⁵⁹ This phase involves:

Identifying Ideologemes: The object of study transforms from the singular text to the ideologeme, which Jameson defines as "the smallest intelligible unit of the essentially antagonistic collective discourses of social classes."²⁶⁰ The ideologeme represents a core thematic or narrative element that encapsulates class ideologies and social contradictions. By identifying ideologemes within the plays—such as themes of displacement, assimilation, resistance, or identity crisis—the analysis reveals how representations of Middle Eastern masculinities embody and negotiate conflicting social ideologies. Specifically, this involves examining how masculinities are portrayed in relation to social categories like class, ethnicity, immigration status, and cultural identity. For example, characters may represent different social strata: a working-class immigrant grappling with economic hardship, a middle-class professional facing cultural alienation, or a second-generation individual torn between traditional values and Western norms. These portrayals reflect broader class dynamics and social tensions within society. By focusing on these ideologemes, the analysis uncovers how the plays engage with issues such as:

- **Class Struggles:** Depicting the economic challenges and class barriers faced by Middle Eastern men, highlighting the intersection of masculinity and socioeconomic status.
- **Cultural Identity:** Exploring the conflicts between maintaining cultural heritage and assimilating into mainstream society, which can create internal and external tensions for characters.

²⁵⁹ Ibid., 76.

²⁶⁰ Ibid., 76.

- **Stereotyping and Racialization:** Addressing how societal stereotypes and racial profiling impact the experiences and self-perception of Middle Eastern masculinities.
- **Gender Roles:** Examining traditional versus contemporary expectations of masculinity and how these are negotiated within different social contexts.

The text is thus read as a site where competing social interests and ideologies intersect, revealing the underlying social dynamics that influence its creation. For instance, a character's resistance to cultural assimilation may symbolize larger ideological conflicts between multiculturalism and nationalist sentiments in society. In this social phase, the methodology bridges the gap between the text's content and the socio-economic context, demonstrating how the artwork participates in and responds to the social realities of its time. The analysis moves beyond the individual text to consider its role within the larger tapestry of social discourse, uncovering how cultural productions both shape and are shaped by societal forces.

Historical Horizon

At the historical horizon, the analysis situates the text and its ideologemes within the broader context of human history and modes of production. Jameson explains: "Both the individual text and its ideologemes... must be read in terms of what I will call the ideology of form, that is, the symbolic messages transmitted to us by the coexistence of various sign systems which are themselves traces or anticipations of modes of production."²⁶¹ This phase involves:

Formal Analysis: Interpreting formal elements—such as narrative structure, genre conventions, and stylistic features—as symbolic expressions of underlying historical modes of production.

Drawing on the notion of the ideology of form, the methodology examines how different formal elements within the plays correspond to specific historical contexts and modes of production. The

²⁶¹ Ibid., 76.

“Ideology of Form” is a crucial concept in Jameson’s methodology of literary analysis, wherein the organization and structure of cultural texts are understood as reflections of the prevailing mode of production.²⁶² This idea posits that the formal aspects of a cultural text—such as its narrative structure, stylistic choices, and genre conventions—are not neutral. Instead, they reflect the economic and social conditions under which the texts were produced.²⁶³ For example, in postmodern texts, pastiche—imitating styles without regard for original meaning—reflects the detachment of historical styles from their original context, where they are repurposed for aesthetic presentation without critical engagement.

Bertolt Brecht’s formal innovations provide a compelling example of how form itself can serve as a site of ideological struggle, underscoring the significance of Jameson’s concept. Brecht’s development of the *Verfremdungseffekt* demonstrates how formal choices disrupt the audience’s passive consumption of cultural texts, fostering critical engagement with their sociopolitical implications.²⁶⁴ This artistic choice counters the dominant ideology embedded within cultural institutions, which Althusser termed the Ideological State Apparatus. Unlike traditional theatrical forms that immerse audiences emotionally, Brecht’s techniques—such as breaking the fourth wall and non-linear narratives—actively challenge the dominant ideologies perpetuated through cultural institutions. His ensemble style, actor rehearsals, and development of formal body movement elements (e.g., *habitus*, *haltung*, and *gestus*) aim to direct the audience to the context outside the theatre space.²⁶⁵

For example, Brecht’s play *Mother Courage and Her Children* goes beyond portraying war’s human cost; it critically examines the relationship between war and capitalist interests, showing how

²⁶² Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, 76.

²⁶³ Ibid., 98. Jameson defines the Ideology of form as “the determinate contradiction of the specific messages emitted by the varied sign systems which coexist in a given artistic process as well as in its general social formation.”

²⁶⁴ Bertolt Brecht, *Brecht on Performance: Messingkauf and Modelbooks*, eds. Tom Kuhn, Marc Silberman, and Steve Giles, trans. Charlotte Ryland (London: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2015), 46.

²⁶⁵ Buchanan, *A Dictionary of Critical Theory*, s.v. “habitus,” “haltung,” “gestus.”

even the lower classes, who suffer the most, are complicit in perpetuating war. Rather than delivering a simplistic emotion-evoking message that “war is bad,” Brecht’s stylistic approach forces the audience to understand the underlying dynamics that sustain conflict; these forms resonate with the idea of the mobilization of the masses for awareness and change, a central theme in Karl Marx’s writings.²⁶⁶ This is particularly poignant given that Brecht wrote *Mother Courage* in 1939 and staged it in 1941 when the world was engulfed in the Second World War. He continued staging it post-war, amidst ongoing conflicts like those in Palestine and Korea, as capitalism, under U.S. economic hegemony, was advancing toward a globalized world. Thus, Brecht’s “ideology of form” through the *Verfremdungseffekt* exemplifies how context and artistic expression can critically interact, in contrast to works that conform to dominant ideologies through pastiche. As the example manifests, cultural works operate as a “field of force” where different sign systems corresponding to various modes of production coexist and interact.²⁶⁷ These interactions reflect the contradictions and tensions within these modes, making the form a site of ideological struggle. By examining how a theatre work is structured—how it presents its narrative, the genres it employs, and its stylistic elements—we can uncover the deeper ideological meanings inscribed into the work and its depictions.

The notion of the ideology of form can be instrumental in analyzing cultural depictions of identity, as it allows us to see how forms—whether in dramatic literature, theatre, or performing arts—reinforce or challenge the prevailing ideologies of their time. By examining these formal qualities, one can discern whether a representation is complicit in perpetuating stereotypes or if it critically engages with the

²⁶⁶ See Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party* (Marxists.org, 1848), accessed August 2024, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1848/communist-manifesto/ch02.htm>. The idea of “mobilization of the masses for awareness and change” is particularly prominent in *The Communist Manifesto*. Marx and Engels argue that the proletariat, or working class, must become conscious of their exploitation under capitalism and unite to overthrow the bourgeoisie, the capitalist class that owns the means of production. Marx emphasizes the importance of developing class consciousness and collective organization to achieve revolutionary change. Brecht adopts this Marxist perspective in his art, transforming theatre into a tool to raise awareness and mobilize the masses.

²⁶⁷ Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, 98.

socio-economic conditions that produce those stereotypes. In theatre production, formal elements such as mise-en-scène, actors' arrangement, gestures, plot narrative, character development, dialogues, and stage directions can provide deeper insight into the depicted identity. Analyzing the ideology of form in contemporary theatre involves examining an artwork's generic forms and narratives to determine the ideological connections between these genres and the depicted image. As Jameson notes, a "critic's royal road to explicating the ideology of form is genre."²⁶⁸

To further explore how the ideology of form manifests in representations of Middle Eastern masculinity, this study draws on specific analytical concepts derived from postmodern theory. These concepts—pastiche, simulacrum, and depthlessness—are not imposed externally but identified through each play's particular formal elements, such as recurring motifs, narrative structures, genre conventions, and thematic progressions. This practice reflects Jameson's first interpretive stage, where form is read as symbolically enacting unresolved socio-political contradictions. Drawing on Jameson's idea that texts use their form and structure to address unresolved social and political conflicts, this approach demonstrates how a close reading of each play's stylistic and structural elements reveals how dramaturgical strategies and creative choices reflect or challenge broader societal tensions.²⁶⁹ By applying these concepts, the analysis highlights how dramaturgical strategies and creative choices uphold or critique prevailing ideologies, engaging directly with the text's internal logic and its cultural-historical context rather than relying on an external interpretive framework.

Analytical Concepts: In the following, some postmodern characteristics will be defined and explored as key analytical tools for this research, particularly in their application to representing Middle Eastern

²⁶⁸ Ibid., 72.

²⁶⁹ Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, 77-79. Jameson argues that texts should be approached through their own formal and structural elements, which symbolically resolve real-world social and political tensions. This method respects each artwork on its own terms by uncovering socio-political meanings already embedded in its narrative and patterns, rather than imposing external interpretations. Jameson writes, a text "is to be grasped as the imaginary resolution of a real contradiction" through its "formal and aesthetic" structure.

masculinity in theatre. These concepts will help reveal how stereotypical identities are either reinforced or challenged through the dramaturgical strategies and creative choices employed by each artist and director in the performance.

- “Pastiche” involves imitating styles or blending genres without more profound commentary or critique. Pastiche is a neutral mimicry of other styles, unlike parody, which mocks or critiques. This concept is crucial for understanding how Middle Eastern identities may be superficially blended with various cultural elements in theatre, often leading to representations that lack genuine cultural depth.

Pastiche is ideally suited to what Jameson describes as a historically original consumer’s appetite for a world transformed into sheer images of itself [...] or what is more generally known as the culture of the simulacra. The effect of this change has been to turn the past itself into an image, or rather a vast pile of images like the discarded photo album of some God-like creature. Another aspect is visual aesthetics, where set designs and costumes mimic specific historical periods or genres without commentary. Pastiche also features mixing cultural references, where diverse elements like Kabuki theatre, Greek tragedy, and modern dance are combined primarily for their visual impact.²⁷⁰

- “Simulacrum” describes representations detached from historical or cultural roots, existing instead as perpetual reproductions. This concept aligns with Baudrillard’s “hyperreality,” where reality and representation blur.²⁷¹ The logic of simulacra erases the distinction between the real and the representation, creating a world where everything is a copy of a copy, devoid of any original reference.²⁷² An example is Tom Stoppard’s *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, where

²⁷⁰ Ian Buchanan, *Fredric Jameson: Live Theory* (London: Continuum, 2006), 95.

²⁷¹ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010), 2-5.

²⁷² Baumbach, Young, and Yue, “Revisiting Postmodernism,” 155. Jameson says, “Representation of the simulacrum means you have a complete realism, none of which is real.”

characters from *Hamlet* are placed in a new, detached reality, blurring the distinction between the original text and the recreated narrative.²⁷³ In Stoppard's play, characters' actions and identities are detached from the Shakespearean narrative, situated in a state of limbo; their actions and characteristics are floating in a new, self-contained reality. This concept is especially pertinent when examining how Middle Eastern masculinity might be presented as a simulacrum, detached from cultural roots and thus contributing to stereotypical portrayals.

The concept of "Simulacrum" is pivotal in understanding how cultural representations, particularly in theatre, can create a new reality based on images and spectacle rather than lived experience. This process often reduces meaning to surface-level representations, detaching identities from their historical and cultural origins. In the context of this research, analyzing how portrayals of Middle Eastern masculinity are detached from their contexts reveals whether these representations contribute to a superficial and reductive image. Such portrayals risk reinforcing stereotypes by presenting these identities as mere spectacles devoid of their original significance and complexity. This analytical framework is essential for uncovering how theatrical productions might inadvertently sustain hegemonic narratives by prioritizing aesthetic form over substantive engagement.

- "Historical Depthlessness" in postmodern culture emerges as a broad symptom, manifesting in images and historical narratives. It reflects a superficial engagement with content, where symbolic depth and historical context are stripped away, leaving only surface-level representations.²⁷⁴ History is reduced to fragmented aesthetic elements, and cultural forms are treated as mere surfaces without deeper meaning or continuity. This trend is essential to consider in the context of Middle Eastern

²⁷³ Tom Stoppard, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* (London: Faber, 1967). This play premiered at the National Theatre in 1967, after its first performance at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe in 1966. The play is a tragicomedy that reimagines the lives of two minor characters from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, addressing existential themes of fate and free will.

²⁷⁴ On historical depthlessness in literary works, Jameson writes, "The past as 'referent' finds itself gradually bracketed, and then effaced altogether, leaving us with nothing but texts." About the image, Jameson says, "The superficiality of the image and its commodified, commercial nature remove the potential for any deeper connection or engagement." See Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 6-7, 18.

masculinity in theatre, where such representations might be reduced to shallow stereotypes, lacking historical and cultural depth. Unlike pastiche or simulacrum, which focus on imitating styles and representations, depthlessness indicates a broader cultural trend of engaging with history and imagery without any critical or meaningful connection to their origins. This trend signifies a loss of deeper, meaningful connections to the subject matter's origins, context, or symbolic depth.²⁷⁵

Case Studies and Contextual Reading

The case studies focus on three distinct dramaturgical approaches by Canadian theatre practitioners and companies: the collaborative works of Guillermo Verdecchia and Youssef, the Modern Times Stage Company under Parsa's direction, and the productions of Erdal. These artists have been instrumental in shaping the discourse on Middle Eastern identities within Canadian theatre. Each chapter of this dissertation examines one dramaturgical approach, analyzing how these works either challenge or reinforce stereotypical depictions of Middle Eastern masculinities. The analysis situates these case studies within the broader context of Canada's multiculturalism, globalization, and the cultural influences of postmodernity.

Contextual reading involves analyzing and situating the plays and productions of these three theatrical approaches within their broader socio-political and historical contexts. Additionally, the context shaped in the dramatic world will be examined in relation to the context of production. This approach identifies ideologies and social forces, particularly in how they intersect with representations of Middle Eastern masculinity. These readings can help to determine the social groups and ideologies the Middle Eastern images are linked to or advocating in the play and production to create a better picture of what these images look like and what they think about, and possibly to what social stratum,

²⁷⁵ Buchanan, *Fredric Jameson*, 90. Buchanan observes, "The new 'depthlessness' of the image is Jameson's shorthand for the way contemporary culture engages with content, where the meaning of art can no longer be found in symbolic depth but is instead located on the surface."

time, and space to which these masculinities belong. By linking the case studies and their depictions of male subjects to their historical and cultural settings, this research reveals how these plays and productions engage with and respond to the stereotypes perpetuated by Western media and cultural narratives.

Library Research

The library research component gathers and synthesizes scholarship on Middle Eastern masculinities, studies of men and masculinities, postmodern cultural production, and the historical context of stereotypes. This phase establishes a theoretical foundation by engaging with key texts, such as Jameson's theories on postmodernism and form and Hall's writings on cultural studies, representation, and power. These sources provide the critical framework for examining how contemporary theatrical works represent Middle Eastern masculinity in the context of cultural dominance, stereotypes, and postmodernity.

This research is guided by the need to contextualize the depiction of Middle Eastern masculinity within broader scholarly discussions about stereotypes, cultural production, and the cultural dominance of postmodernity. This study establishes a theoretical foundation that informs the analysis of contemporary theatrical representations by critically engaging with existing literature. The gathered scholarship provides historical and theoretical context, identifying gaps in current research and enabling this study to contribute original insights into how Middle Eastern masculinity is constructed and represented in theatre.

Data Collection and Interviews

This research collects various materials, including recorded production videos, published interviews, critical reviews, and textual and formal analyses. Interviews with the artists and their collaborators provide additional insights into the creative processes behind these works. This data

collection phase includes interviews with Youssef (conducted in July 2022) and acquiring production videos and scripts from Verdecchia, Erdal, Parsa, and the Modern Times, and Companies that participated in the productions of case studies in this research.

Chapter Overview

This dissertation is organized into four chapters, each building on the theoretical and methodological foundations established in the introduction. The chapters are structured to align with the specific features of each case study, systematically investigating the representation of Middle Eastern masculinity in Canadian theatre and examining how these portrayals reinforce or challenge dominant stereotypes.

Chapter 1: The Contested Identities in *A Line in the Sand* and *Ali and Ali and the Axes of Evil*

This chapter examines two plays, *A Line in the Sand* and *Ali and Ali and the Axes of Evil*, collaboratively created by Youssef and Verdecchia. Both plays engage with themes associated with Middle Eastern identity, including war, displacement, and the complexities of visible minority status in a Western context. Through these works, *A Line in the Sand* and *Ali and Ali and the Axes of Evil*, Youssef and Verdecchia explore the concept of “contested identity” to critique and reflect on the experience of Middle Eastern individuals navigating stereotypes and cultural perceptions.²⁷⁶

Through analysis of the dramaturgical strategies within these plays, this chapter examines how each work addresses and subverts dominant stereotypes of Middle Eastern masculinity. *Ali and Ali and the Axes of Evil* employs metatheatricality and satire to expose and critique common misrepresentations. The other play by the same creators, *A Line in the Sand*, adopts melodrama as a critical approach, utilizing elements such as narrative style and character development to seemingly reframe the stereotype of Middle Eastern masculinity from violent to victimized, though without fully dismantling it. The

²⁷⁶ Marcus Youssef, interview by Arash Isapour, Vancouver, July 25, 2022.

analysis of dramaturgical choices in these works reveals how different theatrical forms engage with stereotypes and identifies the characteristics that enable a form to deconstruct stereotypes rather than reconstruct them.

Chapter 2: De-Historicized Masculinity in Modern Times' Presentations: *Aurash* and *The Death of the King*

This chapter examines *Aurash* and *The Death of the King*, two productions by Modern Times Stage Company. Directed by Parsa, these plays reflect Modern Times' collaborative approach to translation, text dramaturgy, and performance, with significant contributions from co-founder Farbridge as a key performer. Both productions aim to present a universalist vision, emphasizing shared human experiences that transcend cultural specificity. However, the chapter argues that this universalist approach, while well-intentioned, often detaches the plays from their historical and cultural roots, leaving the representations vulnerable to oversimplification and stereotyping.

Through analyzing dramaturgical elements in *Aurash* and *The Death of the King*, this chapter explores how a lack of cultural and historical depth impacts the portrayals of Middle Eastern masculinities. Without a grounding in specific cultural contexts, these representations risk reinforcing generic and reductive images rather than providing a nuanced understanding. The chapter thus situates Modern Times' productions within the broader context of Canadian multiculturalism and the influences of postmodernity, which further complicate the portrayal of Middle Eastern identities.

Chapter 3: Staging Masculinities and Memory in the Israel-Palestine Conflict: *Soldiers of Tomorrow* and *This is Not a Conversation*

Erdal's work critically examines the Israeli State's approach toward Palestinians, offering a non-conformist portrayal of Israeli masculinity that challenges the dominant patriotic image, particularly through opposition to Israel's military actions in the Palestine-Israel region. By staging his own

memories and physical presence, Erdal's narrative creates a distinct representation of Israeli masculinity that contrasts with more conventional, conformist depictions. However, in presenting this contrast, Erdal's work also reinforces the simplified image of conformist Israeli masculinity while positioning non-Israeli Middle Eastern characters primarily as passive victims of this construct. Thus, in crafting a nuanced and intellectual image of non-conformist Israeli masculinity, Erdal's dramaturgy contributes to the persistence of other stereotypes.

CHAPTER ONE

The Contested Identities in *A Line in the Sand* and *Ali and Ali and the Axes of Evil*

Bodies are never naked; they are always clothed with meaning. But the meanings may be reconstructed by imperialism and globalization.

R.W. Connell

Introduction

This chapter investigates how dramaturgical form determines the possibilities and limitations for representing Middle Eastern masculinity, revealing a spectrum from what I term the softening trap of melodramatic humanism to satirical disruption through metatheatre. Through a close analysis of contrasting theatrical strategies, I demonstrate how melodrama's structural demands for moral clarity through emotional binaries, requiring characters to be either an innocent victim or a potential threat, trap representations within stereotypical frameworks, regardless of their progressive content. Melodrama works through emotional excess that replaces complexity with sentiment, demanding audiences feel rather than analyze. In contrast, metatheatrical devices, including breaking the fourth wall and play-within-play structures, can expose stereotypes as constructs while simultaneously revealing the machinery that produces them. This analysis, grounded in Butler's performativity theory, concept of ideology of form, and examination of how masculinity must be repeatedly performed within available theatrical frameworks, establishes how formal choices shape whether Middle Eastern masculinity emerges as a tragic victim fulfilling melodrama's demands or as a self-referencing construct exposing its production.

The plays examined in this chapter, co-created by Youssef and Verdecchia, explore themes of Middle Eastern masculinity through collaborative dramaturgical approaches. This analysis focuses on

how the plays *A Line in the Sand* and *Ali and Ali and the Axes of Evil* employ dramaturgical strategies to critique fixed conceptions of Middle Eastern masculinity. The collaboration between Youssef and Verdecchia allows for a dynamic exploration of themes, with “contested identity,” as described by one of the co-creators, woven into the narrative structure and dramaturgical techniques of both plays.¹ This chapter, therefore, considers how these plays engage with mainstream perceptions of Middle Eastern masculinity and the ways they may provide a more nuanced understanding of it.

The case studies of this chapter delve deeply into themes of cultural identity and the complexities of Middle Eastern masculinity. These works reflect the challenges of navigating cultural heritage, visibility, and stereotypes, particularly for those who are often seen as visible minorities—individuals whose identities do not align with dominant Western norms. In the second act of *A Line in the Sand*, Youssef portrays a character introduced by his full name (Marcus Patrick Youssef), a role initially performed by both Youssef and Verdecchia during the play’s early days in the 1995 Vancouver production.² The character, associated with a Middle Eastern identity, reflects Youssef’s complex relationship with his heritage as the son of an Egyptian immigrant. This dynamic is captured in the character’s monologue:

Half. That’s what I am. Half Arab. Half Egyptian. In this war, Egypt’s on our side. Hell, I’m North American. My Dad, the real Arab, hates the place. I don’t speak a word of Arabic. I haven’t lived with my father since I was 15; didn’t even know the name of his place of birth until about eight

¹ Marcus Youssef, interview by Isapour, July 25, 2022.

² Youssef, interview by Isapour, July 25, 2022. Youssef explained that he initially performed the role in early productions but briefly stepped away after the first preview due to personal circumstances. Youssef stated, “So part of what happened was during the night of our first preview, my wife went into labour with our first child. The night of the first preview, I called Guillermo from the hospital to say that my wife was in labour and that I could not attend the performance. I was 25, and so Guillermo went on as me for the first two nights. It was then that he (Guillermo) came basically a few days after my son was born, and I went back in my part, a day Guillermo had already decided.” The shifts in Act Two, reflecting slight differences in the creators’ dramaturgical stances, will be discussed in the following pages.

months ago; had always assumed he was from Cairo. I mean, where else is there in Egypt? But by blood, by heritage, by faith, I feel like an Iraqi. Like an Arab.³

Through their Middle Eastern characters, these plays critique the reductive stereotypes often found in mainstream culture, using satire and narrative to dismantle these simplified portrayals. The play *Ali and Ali and the Axes of Evil*, for example, critiques how popular representations, like those found in Disney's *Aladdin*, reduce Middle Eastern men to exotic, romanticized figures or cunning, morally ambiguous characters. By playing on these stereotypes, the plays highlight how such depictions perpetuate the idea of Middle Eastern men as either inherently threatening or submissive, reinforcing a limited, binary view of their identities. Ultimately, these works present a critical standpoint on Middle Eastern masculine subjectivity, using theatre as a space to challenge and deconstruct the narratives that sustain these stereotypes, revealing the complexity and nuance often overshadowed by mainstream portrayals.

As Youssef and Verdecchia's collaborative works evolved, their treatment of the idea about Middle Eastern masculinity began to exhibit greater historical depth and cultural awareness. Initially, in *A Line in the Sand*, the portrayal of Middle Eastern masculinity leans towards stereotypical depictions, shifting from a negative stereotype, such as the violent terrorist figure, to a relatively more sympathetic one: the victimized Muslim.⁴ This early approach suggests an attempt to critique and dissect stereotypes by incorporating themes like war, Middle Eastern politics, historical references to the first Persian Gulf War in 1991, and tragic portrayals of inhumane attitudes toward Middle Eastern men; however, *A Line in the Sand* still struggles to fully escape the limitations of simplified portrayals.

In *Ali and Ali and the Axes of Evil*, the creators take a more detailed approach to Middle Eastern masculinity, with shifts in narrative, staging, characterization, casting, and dialogue. Rather than

³ Marcus Youssef and Guillermo Verdecchia, *A Line in the Sand* (Burnaby: Talonbooks, 1997), 101-102.

⁴ Further analysis of specific scenes and dialogue from *A Line in the Sand* will appear in sections Polarization of Characters (page 157) and Melodramatic Narrative Style (page 166), illustrating this shift in detail.

reconstructing a single character by foregrounding stereotypical aspects, as in *A Line in the Sand*, *Ali* and *Ali and the Axes of Evil* bring stereotypes directly from mass culture to the forefront, making the stereotypes themselves the subject. By using characters reminiscent of Disney's *Aladdin* or Western archetypes from musicals like Rogers and Hammerstein's *Oklahoma!* reimagined as asylum seekers in America, the play contrasts simplified images with the complex social realities they obscure about Middle Eastern masculinities. This dramaturgical approach critiques stereotypes not as neutral representations, but as constructs shaped by popular media and societal biases, presenting characters through satirical styles that exaggerate and expose their contradictions. Influenced by post-9/11 events and the second Persian Gulf War, *Ali* and *Ali and the Axes of Evil* employs satire along with staging techniques like breaking the fourth wall and play-within-a-play structures to interrogate the stereotypical traits often attributed to Middle Eastern characters.⁵ Through artistic choices in narrative, staging, characterization, and the integration of satirical elements, *Ali* and *Ali and the Axes of Evil* demonstrates how mainstream portrayals can flatten the complexities of Middle Eastern masculinity, reducing them to one-dimensional figures and inviting audiences to confront the contradictions in these stereotypes.

Observing the differing approaches in these two plays suggests that the dramaturgical choices in narrative, staging, characterization, and other stylistic elements merit close examination, as they signal more than individual artistic style or preference, reflecting purposeful selections that expose the mechanisms through which interpretations of Middle Eastern masculinity are shaped and embodied on stage. This observation invites the use of analytical tools that reinforce the argument that artistic choices go beyond personal preference but are essential subjects for critical examination. As Jameson articulates

⁵ The title of *Ali* and *Ali and the Axes of Evil* references President George W. Bush's 2002 "Axis of Evil" rhetoric, which helped justify the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq after 9/11. The play employs satirical plays within the play to critique American interventionist policies and highlights the human toll of the Iraq War, referencing death counts and the devastation in Iraq. See Marcus Youssef, Camyar Chai, and Guillermo Verdecchia, *The Adventures of Ali & Ali and the Axes of Evil: A Divertimento for Warlords* (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 2005), 68–72; and Office of the Press Secretary, "President Delivers State of the Union Address," The White House Archives, January 29, 2002, accessed August 21, 2024, <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2002/01/20020129-11.html>.

in *The Political Unconscious*, the form itself is an ideology that mediates cultural identity and power dynamics; his concept of “ideology of form” posits that an artwork’s formal elements—such as plot, character, theme, and language—function beyond mere structure, actively engaging with societal norms, values, and power dynamics.⁶ In this context, selecting specific theatrical elements and embedding socio-historical details within a play’s content are closely linked to the representation of identity on stage.

This chapter argues that when dramaturgical strategies employ techniques like metatheatre and dramatic genres like satire, the artwork’s self-referentiality exposes the constructed nature of Middle Eastern masculinity and layers the portrayal with cultural and historical insights. These strategies critically interrogate stereotypes and offer a multi-dimensional view of Middle Eastern masculinity. Additionally, the chapter argues that by embedding cultural and historical referents into elements like dialogue, costume, and casting and contextualizing the theme, dramaturgy adds depth and complexity to portraying Middle Eastern masculinities, inviting scrutiny of prevailing assumptions about them. Conversely, when dramaturgy adopts styles like melodrama without engaging with their ideological implications, the resulting portrayals often prioritize emotional appeal over critical reflection. Such choices fail to dismantle the stereotypes they initially summon on stage, offering no layered understanding or critical examination. Instead, using such styles shapes a dramaturgy that aligns with

⁶ Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1981), 76–77. The notion of “ideology of form” posits that the structure and style of an artwork are not neutral; they actively shape how audiences perceive its narratives. In this view, theatrical elements like plot, character, and theme influence our understanding of social identities, which are defined as discursive constructs shaped by collective narratives. Jameson’s concept of “ideology of form” suggests that the ways we structure and combine different artistic elements—such as symbols, narrative styles, or genres—carry messages shaped by the social and economic systems underlying the artwork. By mentioning the settings underlying the artwork, we are referring to broader structural forces—like class structures, dominant ideologies, historical conditions, and economic interests—that influence how artistic forms develop and what they convey. When an artist chooses a form from the past, they bring along the symbolic meanings that were associated with that form in its original context. This choice can either reinforce or critique those historical associations in a contemporary setting. Also, see Fredric Jameson, “Reflections in Conclusion” in *Aesthetics and Politics*, eds. Theodor W. Adorno et al. (London: Verso, 1977), 196–197.

postmodern tendencies of pastiche, in which portrayals emerge as shallow simulacra.⁷ Even if thematic elements within the play suggest an intent to critique stereotypical views of masculinity, the absence of historical and cultural depth risks shifting a negative stereotype into a softened, yet still reductive, form that ultimately fails to challenge or alter its fixed nature.

This chapter will further demonstrate that when representations adopt postmodernist qualities, such as pastiche, portrayals of Middle Eastern masculinities risk shifting from critical interrogation to fixed, simplified images. Specifically, pastiche-like forms may soften negative stereotypes but often fail to dismantle them, allowing stereotypical traits to persist. The analysis will explore how, as dramaturgy increasingly incorporates postmodernist styles, representations of masculinity can become static and less critical, reinforcing rather than challenging stereotypical views.

This argument unfolds in two main sections within the analysis of the case studies. The first section examines how one of the early collaborative works, *A Line in the Sand*, falls short of effectively challenging the structural dynamics that sustain stereotypes of Middle Eastern masculinity, despite its critical approach to mainstream representations. The second section shifts the analytical focus to *Ali and Ali and the Axes of Evil*, which critiques and deconstructs Middle Eastern stereotypes by drawing inspiration from American mass culture, specifically characters like Ali Ababwa from Disney's *Aladdin* (1992) and Ali Hakim from the musical *Oklahoma!*—a Persian peddler character.⁸ Both of these figures, depicted as Middle Eastern, convey distinct stereotypes in their original contexts: Ali Ababwa embodies a romanticized, exotic figure in animated cinema, while Ali Hakim portrays a sly, comedic character in

⁷ Pastiche is a form of imitation or mimicry that lacks the satirical edge of parody. It's a neutral practice of copying styles from the past. Refer to pages 114-115 of this dissertation for a further definition of pastiche and simulacrum.

⁸ Youssef, interview by Isapour, July 25, 2022. Youssef says, "They are created as much out of the idea of what the representation of the Middle Eastern is as they are anything real, they are clowns, they are not real; Ali Hakim is a Persian peddler from Oklahoma, Ali Ababwa is the character from the Aladin early scenes of a carpet seller. They are not real; they are projections." For Ali Hakim's character in Oklahoma, the characters are defined as "A Persian peddler who has wandered into town; Ali Hakim is an opportunist, a shrewd businessman, and a bit of a player. Cornered into marrying Ado Annie, he must think and act quickly to reverse his fortune." See Rodgers and Hammerstein Organization, "Oklahoma! Characters," *Rodgers and Hammerstein*, accessed August 22, 2024, <https://rodgersandhammerstein.com/oklahoma-characters/>.

American musical theatre. The adaptation of these characters in *Ali and Ali and the Axes of Evil* aims to expose and critique the oversimplified stereotypes perpetuated by mainstream cultural depictions, with the dramatists creatively using specific genres and forms to interrogate and subvert these stereotypes.

Each section begins by identifying the specific stereotypes portrayed, including a detailed examination of the physical characteristics, visual markers, and semiotics in staging elements that depict these characters as stereotypes. The analysis then explores how these stereotypes are employed in the narrative, focusing on both form and content to see how the staged constructs function as a critique and dismantle stereotypical perspectives. This phase of analysis in each section concerns the effectiveness of these critiques. This involves critically assessing how well the dramaturgical strategies succeed in subverting the stereotype or whether they reinforce it.⁹ As established in the first chapter of this thesis, defining what constitutes an effective critique is essential. Thus, analytical tools discussed in the first chapter's theoretical framework, from studies of men and masculinities to Jameson's analytical tools in assessing artworks of the postmodern era, are utilized to focus on the reconstruction and critique of stereotypical masculinity, such as evaluating how the representation aligns with or challenges hegemonic masculinity.¹⁰

This chapter makes a key contribution to the academic discourse on the intersection of dramaturgy, identity, and ideological frameworks in theatre, particularly in the context of Middle Eastern

⁹ While New Historicist approaches such as Stephen J. Greenblatt's subversion/containment model valuably illuminate how cultural productions navigate power dynamics, they often insufficiently account for the material conditions that sustain these representations. The systematic recurrence of these stereotypes suggests that ideological analysis alone cannot fully explain their persistence; instead, their tenacity emerges from economic structures that transcend specific cultural moments. This study, therefore, employs analytical tools capable of addressing both ideological tensions and the underlying economic imperatives that shape cultural production.

¹⁰ Raewyn Connell, *Masculinities*, 2nd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 73–76; Jeff Hearn and Richard Howson, "The Institutionalization of (Critical) Studies on Men and Masculinities: Geopolitical Perspectives," in *Routledge International Handbook of Masculinity Studies*, eds. Lucas Gottzén, Ulf Mellström, and Tamara Shefer (London: Routledge, 2019), 19. Connell, drawing on Gramsci's theory of hegemony, defines "hegemonic masculinity" as the culturally dominant model that legitimizes male authority and upholds the subordination of women, as well as of racialized and ethnic "other" masculinities. This ideal is not necessarily the most prevalent but serves as a normative standard, positioning nonconforming masculinities, including non-heterosexual, racialized, and ethnically diverse forms, as subordinate. This hierarchy reinforces patriarchy by aligning masculinity with power and rendering deviations as lesser.

masculinities. By analyzing *A Line in the Sand* and *Ali and Ali and the Axes of Evil*—two works created by the same artists with overlapping themes—the chapter illustrates how different dramaturgical strategies, though addressing similar subject matter, lead to contrasting portrayals of identity. *A Line in the Sand*, set during the First Persian Gulf War, partially employs melodrama in its narrative and characterization, shifting stereotypes from overtly negative to less negative, though still simplified, forms. In contrast, *Ali and Ali and the Axes of Evil*, set after 9/11 and the Second Persian Gulf War, uses metatheatre and satire to interrogate the constructed nature of Middle Eastern masculinities and the traits attributed to them, exposing the ideological systems framing these identities. Additionally, this chapter puts the notion of the ideology of form into analytical practice within theatre studies, moving beyond theoretical abstraction by applying the notion of the ideology of form to the discussion of these two plays. By highlighting that dramaturgical choices, such as the use of satire, are not merely aesthetic decisions but infuse meanings and symbolic messages into their representations, the chapter provides concrete evidence of how form carries ideological significance shaped by the context in which the form emerged. Ultimately, this chapter contributes to broader discourses on how theatre can resist or conform to the pressures of ideological state apparatuses, demonstrating how integrating historical and cultural referents within both form and content directly impacts how marginalized identities are theatrically narrated.¹¹

The analysis provided in this chapter offers valuable insights for practitioners seeking to challenge dominant narratives and create more multi-dimensional portrayals of marginalized identities, demonstrating the practical relevance of these dramaturgical strategies. Moreover, the strategies

¹¹ John Scott, *A Dictionary of Sociology*, 4th ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), s.v. “Ideological State Apparatus,” accessed June 7, 2025, <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780199683581.001.0001/acref-9780199683581-e-1064>. Ideological State Apparatuses (ISA) is a term from Marxist theory, particularly associated with Louis Althusser. It refers to institutions like education, religion, media, and culture that propagate ideology and maintain the dominance of the ruling class.

examined here not only challenge stereotypes in theatre but also offer applicable insights for other narrative-driven forms, such as film and digital media.

Introduction to Case Studies

In both plays under examination in this chapter, three key artists stand out in their roles as writers, directors, and performers. A brief introduction to these artists provides context for their contributions to the plays and how their roles intersect with the thematic focus of Middle Eastern masculinity.

Camyar Chai, an Iranian-Canadian theatre director and performer, played Sadiq, a young Middle Eastern man, in *A Line in the Sand* during its earliest productions in Vancouver and Toronto. Chai also co-authored *Ali and Ali and the Axes of Evil* and performed as one of the central characters, Ali Hakim. His dual role as creator and performer, coupled with his founding of Newworld Theatre, the company that produced *Ali and Ali*, highlights his significant influence on the thematic exploration of Middle Eastern masculinity across both plays.

Marcus Youssef is a playwright, actor, and director whose dramaturgical work interrogates identity and power, with a particular emphasis on Middle Eastern masculinity. Youssef's experience, including growing up with a father who was silent about his Middle Eastern heritage, informs his exploration of "contested identity"—a recurring theme in his works.¹² Youssef's themes are often concerned with significant global events, such as the First and Second Persian Gulf Wars and the post-9/11 political landscape. In *Ali and Ali and the Axes of Evil*, Youssef co-wrote and performed as Ali Ababwa, using humour, satire, and political critique to challenge Western stereotypes of Middle Eastern men. The play

¹² Youssef, interview by Isapour, July 25, 2022. On the theme of dual identity and personal struggles, Youssef expresses his curiosity about understanding his family's past and how this lived experience influenced his portrayal of characters with a conflicted identity: "The adoption of Middle Eastern-associated characters and narratives reflects my own interest in a kind of contested identity—like Arab, not Arab. It's a contested identity, like my experience growing up as someone who knew nothing about my family or my own. My father was utterly silent about that part of his life, and there are many facets to that silence. Both in my relationship to culture and in my relationship to very specific things in my family that were also secret and held unknown, which became clear later. These were things that I was wrestling with questions about."

examines how Western narratives shape these stereotypes while also showing how Middle Eastern identities can manipulate them for survival.¹³ Youssef's artistic contributions reflect a dedication to interrogating the cultural and political forces that shape perceptions of Middle Eastern identity, using theatre as a platform to challenge stereotypes and offer a more complex and critical perspective on representation.

Verdecchia has been involved in theatre, writing, and acting in Canada since the early 1990s. Verdecchia's work is marked by a critique of North American political and economic dominance, particularly through its influence on media, markets, and public opinion. His early work, *The Noam Chomsky Lectures*, created with Daniel Brooks, explores how hegemonic powers shape North American perceptions of international politics, critiquing U.S. interventions in Central America, the Middle East, and beyond. Another play that significantly raised Verdecchia's profile was *Fronteras Americanas: American Borders*, which delves into the identity and experience of a character of Latino descent, closely mirroring Verdecchia's own life as an immigrant from Argentina.¹⁴ The stereotype of the Hispanic man plays a significant role in this play, highlighting the direct link between his lived experience and his representation. In *Fronteras*, Verdecchia explores displacement, identity, and cultural hybridity, blending Spanish and English to convey a sense of liminality and estrangement. Themes of border crossing, migration, and the negotiation of identity in a world dominated by U.S. cultural hegemony are central to his work, illustrating his concern with how power shapes both personal and collective identities.

¹³ Youssef, interview by Isapour, July 25, 2022. Youssef's insight into the Ali brothers as figures that navigate Western stereotypes, both embodying and exploiting them, adds a layer of complexity to his work on identity and representation: "They (Ali characters) are from Agraba because Agraba is where Disney's Aladin takes place. They are an inversion of the West's fantasy about the Middle East, one that they are conscious of and make.... One that they exploit to get that they want."

¹⁴ Urjo Kareda, "Foreword," in *Fronteras Americanas: American Borders*, by Guillermo Verdecchia (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 2012), 9–12.

Verdecchia and Youssef first collaborated on *A Line in the Sand*, a project that began as a small radio play.¹⁵ This marked the beginning of their creative partnership, which continued with later works such as *Ali and Ali and the Axes of Evil*. While both artists brought their own unique perspectives to their collaborations, their joint efforts reflect shared concerns around issues of identity and discrimination. There are thematic differences between Youssef and Verdecchia: while Verdecchia's dramaturgical focus often critiques broader power dynamics and hegemony, Youssef's work is more specifically centred on Middle Eastern masculinity and the immigrant experience in North America. In their collaboration, these two perspectives intersect to create a dramaturgy that simultaneously critiques Western hegemonic narratives and highlights the complexities of Middle Eastern identity. The slight divergence in their thematic concerns is observed in their collaboration on *A Line in the Sand*, which exists in two versions. In the second act of the first version, Youssef plays himself, sharing his personal experiences as a visible minority. However, in the later version, this act was significantly altered, with the second act replaced by more generalized themes of Western dominance and racial discrimination.

Together, Youssef and Verdecchia's collaborative works reflect a merging of Youssef's focus on Middle Eastern identity and Verdecchia's critique of North American hegemony. While Youssef tends to focus on the specific challenges faced by Middle Eastern men navigating Western society, Verdecchia often addresses the broader implications of migration, displacement, and cultural domination. Both artists employ humour, satire, and critical commentary to interrogate themes of power, identity, and simplified representation, drawing partially from their lived experiences of navigating Otherness in Western society. Through these dramaturgical choices, they explore the tension between personal identity and societal expectations, engaging with dominant narratives while reflecting their positionalities as marginalized subjects.

¹⁵ Youssef, interview by Isapour, July 25, 2022.

***A Line in the Sand* (1995-1996)**

Inspired by the Gulf War of 1991 and the murder of a Somali teenager by Canadian peacekeepers, Youssef wrote and performed a short radio play, which, in collaboration with Verdecchia, evolved into the play *A Line in the Sand*.¹⁶ Verdecchia directed the play in Vancouver in 1995 and Toronto in 1996. Youssef performed in Act Two of the Vancouver production, which Verdecchia fully revised in later productions.¹⁷

Synopsis

There are three main characters in *A Line in the Sand*, all of whom are male. Two characters are Canadian soldiers - Mercer (a private) and Colonel (a colonel). The third character is Sadiq (a Palestinian teenager), the only Middle Eastern subject in this play. The location is in a desert near Doha in Qatar, and the story is set close to the Persian Gulf War - Operation Desert Shield. The play is in three acts, chronologically ordered according to the operation's timeline. Act One is four days before the start of the operation. Act Two is the start of the operation (in the revised version) - in the original version, Act Two is apart from the plot story; it is an interview with Youssef, and Act Three is amid the operation. All locations of the story are in Doha, Qatar.

Mercer, a 20-year-old soldier, Caucasian and skinny, is on a watch post when he encounters Sadiq, a teenager who does not speak English fluently. Sadiq tries to connect with Mercer by showing his acquaintance and devotion to the American culture. Sadiq also intends to sell pornographic photos and

¹⁶ Ibid., Youssef confirms in the interview that the young Somalian man killed under the watch of Canadian peacekeepers was one of his sources of inspiration for the short play. Also quoted in Geoff Chapman, "*A Line in the Sand*: A Canadian Soldier, a Palestinian Boy, Operation Desert Shield, a Three-Act Tragedy Amplified by the Real-Life Horrors of Somalia," *Toronto Star*, April 6, 1996, accessed December 15, 2024, <https://search.proquest.com/docview/437459008>.; And Guillermo Verdecchia, "Blahblahblahblah Mememememe Theatreschmeatre," in *Theatre and Autobiography: Writing and Performing Lives in Theory and Practice*, eds. Sherrill Grace and Jerry Wasserman (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 2006), 335.

¹⁷ Youssef and Verdecchia, *A Line in the Sand*, 9.

magazines to save money and go to Kansas City. Mercer becomes Sadiq's regular customer, and in every scene of the first act, Mercer enters to sell more magazines. They exchange their life stories and dreams through regular encounters and argue about various topics such as wars and politics. For instance, both characters share their experience of an angry father[s] from whom they are running away. Mercer's father wanted him to continue his education, but Mercer joined the Army. Sadiq's father asks him the same thing: to go to university, but in pursuit of his dream and joining his uncle in the U.S., Sadiq goes to Qatar to make money for his journey. Sadiq consistently presumes Mercer's background and cultural values are attached to American society, and Mercer keeps reminding Sadiq of his nationality and the city he lives in (i.e., Vancouver). In no scenes in Act One is there any expression of attraction from Sadiq toward the pornographic products he sells to Mercer. On the other hand, Mercer expresses excitement each time he sees the photos. Sadiq initiates moments of slight physical connection between the two characters. Sadiq suggests rubbing Mercer's feet for comfort and touching Mercer's stomach to demonstrate that he understands the feeling of emptiness when they share traumas. The subtext signals a sexual bond between the two but never becomes apparent in the first act.

In the first version of Act Two, which premiered in 1995, the characters portrayed by Youssef and Norman Armour do not appear in Acts One and Three. The first version of Act Two foregrounds Youssef's subjectivity as a minority based on his autobiographical accounts and experiences. He self-identifies as an Arab and distinguishes himself by describing aspects of his physical appearance. Youssef explains various situations he experienced that were linked to the ethnic dimension associated with his identity. Norman acts as an interviewer whose questioning of Youssef, at times with an interrogative tone, draws out Youssef's autobiography while subtly reframing it through a dominant cultural perspective. As the conversation unfolds, Youssef responds to Norman's assumptions about his identity, explaining how his upbringing in North America shaped his sense of belonging. At one point, Norman

remarks: “[...] you sound to me like a totally assimilated, enculturated, young North American.”¹⁸ The interview becomes increasingly interrogative, forcing Youssef to articulate his experiences as an othered subject within North American society. Norman becomes blunter and more aggressive in questioning Youssef, asking him to return to Egypt. Youssef’s reaction is to explain rationally that he is an ordinary citizen but feels alienated from himself: “You want to know why I am North American? Because when I look in the mirror, I don’t recognize my own face. It doesn’t look like me.”¹⁹ The play ends with a song from the 1992 Walt Disney cartoon *Aladdin*.

In the revised version of Act Two, the only act altered in later productions, both versions are included in the published text. In the revised Act Two, two characters, Actor 1 and Actor 2, respectively, were performed by actors Colonel and Sadiq. The second version is presented in the main body of the play, while the first version is referenced in a dedicated section at the end of the book.²⁰ The revised Act Two contains historical facts and events associated with the Gulf War 1991. It juxtaposes facts and numbers about war and casualties, creating a darkly comic commentary.

In Act Three, a 45-year-old male Colonel seems to interrogate Mercer in his office on a military base in Doha. There are sounds of Hornet fighters in the stage direction, implying that the war is in progress.²¹ The interrogation concerns the death of Sadiq when he was captured at that base. Details of the incident are gradually revealed through the dialogue between the two. The Colonel makes discriminatory comments, distances himself from extremist supremacist groups, and asks if Mercer killed Sadiq based on hate. Mercer turns out to be the son of the Deputy Minister of Defence.

¹⁸ Youssef and Verdecchia, *A Line in the Sand*, 119.

¹⁹ Ibid., 123.

²⁰ Youssef, interview by Isapour, July 25, 2022. Youssef stated that the first version was performed for only a few nights before being replaced by the revised version, which was subsequently staged in productions across other cities following its premiere in Vancouver. Additionally, as Youssef notes, the director, Verdecchia, made the decision to stage the revised version. As a result, the first version remained largely unstaged beyond its initial performances, and the play has since become more closely associated with the revised version. The shifts in Act Two, reflecting slight differences in the creators’ dramaturgical stances, further contributed to establishing the revised version as the definitive one (see footnote 2).

²¹ Youssef and Verdecchia, *A Line in the Sand*, 64.

Increasingly receiving pressure from the Colonel, Mercer confesses his sexual relationship with Sadiq at the end of Scene One of the third act. The last scene is short; Mercer is now in Vancouver, talking over the phone with his girlfriend. The play ends with Mercer seeing Sadiq blaming him for shooting Sadiq when the soldiers were torturing him.

Two Versions, Two Dramaturgical Stances

The significant difference between the two versions of *A Line in the Sand* lies in the complete revision of Act Two. In the first version, Youssef exposes his experience as a visible minority citizen through an interrogative dialogue, drawing on his own life and identity struggles. The second version, however, adopts a documentary form, delivering an account of the Gulf War on stage. A reviewer of the first production noted about the second act: “It’s a mock documentary in which Youssef is interviewed and challenged about his own beliefs and perceptions as an Arab-Canadian.”²² This observation, combined with the intensity of the dialogue in Act Two, reveals that Youssef’s concerns encompass not only the theme of war and its impact on vulnerable communities but also the crisis of identity inflamed by these events.

Youssef’s focus on the identity crises of an othered citizen is encapsulated in the line: “Marcus Patrick Youssef: [...] Half. That’s what I am. Half Arab. Half Egyptian [...] I’m North American.”²³ Youssef’s experience of a contested identity aims to deliver this complexity within the first version of Act Two. Youssef reflected on his own upbringing, stating that growing up as someone who knew nothing about his family or heritage and dealing with the silence surrounding his father’s life significantly influenced his work:

²² Barbara Crook, “Exploring and Exploding Borders: *A Line in the Sand* Investigates Cultural and Theatrical Boundaries,” *The Vancouver Sun*, March 30, 1995, C3, accessed via ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

²³ Youssef and Verdecchia, *A Line in the Sand*, 102.

My experience growing up as someone who knew nothing about my family or my own. My father was utterly kind of silent about that part of his life and there are many facets to that silence. Both in my relationship to culture and my relationship to very specific things in my family that were also secret and were held unknown became clear later. There were things that I was wrestling with questions.²⁴

Therefore, the theme of contested identity forms the primary thematic bond between the first version of Act Two and the play's overall plot. In contrast, the second version of Act Two provides background information that focuses more on the context of war rather than personal identity struggles. This shift was driven by Verdecchia's belief that the original version was not aligning with the intended focus on war: "Guillermo [said] it (i.e., Act Two) does not work, I think it should just be more focused, I do not think it was accomplishing what we want."²⁵ Consequently, the revision somewhat diminishes the complexity of the represented male identity, weakening the thematic emphasis on contested identity.



Figure 1. Guillermo Verdecchia (left) and Marcus Youssef (right) in rehearsal for *A Line in the Sand*, 1995. Source: *Vancouver Sun*.

In the revised version of Act Two, the characters are identified as Actor 1 and Actor 2, shifting the audience's focus to a reportorial account of the events related to the play's context, specifically the

²⁴ Youssef, interview by Isapour, July 25, 2022. It must be emphasized that this study integrates close readings of dramatic texts with practitioners' reflections gathered through interviews, allowing for analysis of the textual strategies and the creative intentions that shaped these representations of Middle Eastern masculinity. This dual methodological approach enables examination of both the works themselves and the sociocultural contexts of their creation.

²⁵ Ibid.

Persian Gulf War in 1991. In an interview, Verdecchia illuminates his decision, revealing the ideological concerns shared by both artists regarding the theme of marginalized identity and its related struggles:

There is a version of *A Line in the Sand* in which the second act is a long interview with Marcus Youssef, the playwright of *A Line in the Sand*. That, to me, was not entirely successful, and I have cut it from both the Vancouver production and the Toronto production. It didn't satisfy me entirely as being effective. I felt it actually undermined the story we were trying to tell, and that either the story had integrity as a story that people could enter into the way that we enter into stories, or it didn't. But that break and this interview suddenly focused it all back on the cultural production and Marcus the playwright, and it got very clever and kind of ironic. And I felt it undermined the story. Now, I think Marcus doesn't quite agree with me, so when the play is published, it will contain this alternate second act.²⁶

Verdecchia views Youssef's exposition in Act Two as undermining the plot's integrity, suggesting that Verdecchia prioritized the theme of war crises and global power injustice. On the other hand, Youssef's emphasis on dramatizing his subjectivity and the characterization of the main character, Sadiq, who shares some concerns with Youssef, suggests that his primary focus is the crisis of identity concerning political events. This seemingly slight thematic difference results in a significant shift in the depiction of the Middle Eastern man. The replacement of Youssef's personal narrative with a documentary account of a historical event signifies how a minority's specific expressions and concerns are overshadowed by a more generalized anti-war theme.²⁷

²⁶ Guillermo Verdecchia, as quoted in Jennifer Harvie, "The Nth Degree: An Interview with Guillermo Verdecchia," *Canadian Theatre Review*, no. 92 (Fall 1997): 46.

²⁷ Anti-war themes in mass culture are typically presented through melodramatic narratives that prioritize universal humanistic messages over specific identities and experiences affected by war. Verdecchia's approach in *A Line in the Sand* often aligns with hegemonic cultural trends that can diminish critical engagement with antiwar themes, particularly in the portrayal of Middle Eastern masculinity. For example, war films often employ emotional and affective strategies in mass cultural cinema to create narratives that evoke pity, sorrow, and nostalgia. These strategies, though framed as anti-war, often reinforce hegemonic narratives by portraying war as necessary or inevitable. Films like *Saving Private Ryan* and *Schindler's*

The second version initially portrays a complex image that sometimes counters stereotypical narratives, though these narratives are not particularly associated with or directly pointing to identity perception. The second act functions more as a reportative account from two points of view: Actor 1 narrates the events of the war and its background, aligning his narrative with the Western power's justification of the conflict, while Actor 2 presents facts and events that counter Actor 1's stance. Despite the implicit references to the general stereotyping of the region in mass culture, the focus on identity perception remains indirect. For example:

Actor 2: [...] Number of good Arabs in movie *True Lies*: 1.

Number of bad Arabs: 763,000.

Lyrics to opening number from Walt Disney's *Aladdin*: 'Oh, I come from a land, from a faraway place where the caravan camels roam; where they cut off your ear if you don't like your face. It's barbaric, but hey, it's home.'²⁸

Providing report-like accounts and simultaneous critiques of the war by two characters, the second act ultimately sets the background for the dramatic world we witness in the narrative story of Sadiq and Mercer in the first and third acts. The focus in the revised version shifts away from what Youssef considers his artistic concern—namely, the crisis of identity experienced by an individual.²⁹

Furthermore, in the third act of the second version, Sadiq's death at the hands of military personnel—later framed to resonate with oppressive hegemonic masculinity—renders him a pitied and victimized male. While the first act of the second version gradually builds a complex portrayal of contradictions that provide the viewer with a dialectical insight into the perception of Middle Eastern

List exemplify how emotional strategies in mass culture, while ostensibly antiwar, can reinforce hegemonic narratives of war's necessity or inevitability. Cilli Pogodda and Danny Gronmaier, "The War Tapes and the Poetics of Affect of the Hollywood War Film Genre," *Frames Cinema Journal* 1, no. 15 (2024), accessed June 6, 2025, <https://framescinemajournal.com/article/the-war-tapes-and-the-poetics-of-affect-of-the-hollywood-war-film-genre/>.

²⁸ Youssef and Verdecchia, *A Line in the Sand*, 60.

²⁹ Youssef, interview by Isapour, July 25, 2022.

males, the second act abandons this process of characterization. Instead, Act Two of the revised version evokes a news roundtable reminiscent of typical mass media portrayals.

Act Two

A slash (/) indicates that Actor 2 begins speaking at that point. The use of different types is intended to suggest text that is under (lower in volume than) Actor 2's text.

Actor 1: At 10:10 p.m. on January 16 of 1991, Prime Minister Brian Mulroney made the following speech to the House of Commons:

Mr. Speaker, honourable members will know that military action began in the Persian Gulf today, / as announced at 7 p.m. Eastern Standard Time.

Actor 2: Population of Iraq: 18 million.

Cost of one Tomahawk missile: \$1.4 million U.S.

President Bush called me beforehand to apprise me that he had authorized such action. We understand at the moment that the participants of this first wave included forces from the United States, The United Kingdom, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait.

Estimated number of Tomahawk missiles fired at Iraq during first 2 weeks of war: 240.³⁰

As a result of shifts in narrative, the third act reverts to a binary dynamic of good versus evil, embodied in Sadiq's death at the hands of military men. This binary also manifests as voiceless versus voluble, with Sadiq's image depicted solely through the actions inflicted upon him, lacking his self-narrating presence in the final act. Consequently, the incoherent representation of the Middle Eastern male in the second version reflects the creators' conflicting standpoints on his portrayal: is he merely a victim of power dominance and war or a contested identity engaged with geopolitical conflicts? This confusion

³⁰ Youssef and Verdecchia, *A Line in the Sand*, 59. Fonts are changed as they appear in the original text to indicate which lines must be uttered louder, distinguishing the stress in the recitations of the actors.

within the character's representation arises from the differing emphasis each co-creator places on the themes of anti-war sentiment and identity crisis.

Reconstructing Stereotypes in *A Line in the Sand*

This section explores how *A Line in the Sand* reconstructs and critiques stereotypes of the Middle Eastern man, beginning with a focus on external appearance and the character's position within gender and power hierarchies. By emphasizing certain external markers, such as costume and physical appearance, and situating the characters within social structures, the play engages with staging stereotypes from various angles. However, the play's use of these elements often stops short of fully dismantling the stereotypes, instead shifting them from overtly negative to less negative portrayals. Following this, the analysis will focus on how these stereotypes are represented in the text, as no recorded performance is available for a detailed dramaturgical analysis of the staging. By investigating the textual elements of the dramaturgical strategy, this examination seeks to determine whether and how the stereotypes are critiqued. Finally, this section will provide further analysis of both the play and the available staging evidence to assess how dramaturgical elements, such as the use of melodrama in narrative and characterization, shape the representation of masculinity. It will also analyze whether these choices align with or diverge from postmodern tendencies like pastiche and whether the representation achieves historical and cultural depth or reduces masculinity to a simulacrum through various aspects of characterization.

Before delving into the analysis of the representations in *A Line in the Sand*, it is important to first introduce the style of melodrama, as its symbolic messages and ideological implications have been frequently referenced. In this study, the term melodrama is applied based on its characteristic elements, including polarized characterization, heightened emotion, clear moral binaries, and morally charged resolutions, which will be examined through an analysis of various dramatic elements in the play. A brief

discussion of melodrama's features, its embedded meanings, and its tendency to reinforce dominant social values and moral codes will clarify how this genre contributes to the portrayal of Middle Eastern masculinity in the play. This introduction will also highlight the historical context from which melodrama emerged, providing insight into the ideology and meanings it carried during its peak. By examining this background, we can assess whether melodrama can offer a nuanced and multilayered portrayal of Middle Eastern men or if it merely reinforces simplified and reductive representations.

Melodrama became a popular genre in the 19th century during industrialization, urbanization, and the rise of the bourgeoisie.³¹ Its focus on domestic and social issues mirrors middle-class concerns, using clear moral binaries that uphold bourgeois values.³² As theatre historian James Leslie Smith explains, melodrama follows a formulaic narrative of moral triumph, offering audiences a vicarious experience of victory:

Take an innocent man and a defenceless woman, both of them wholly admirable and free from fault. Present them sympathetically, so that an audience will identify with them and share their hopes. And then set against them every obstacle you can devise. Persecute them with villains, dog them with ill-luck, thrust them into a hostile world which threatens at every moment their instant annihilation. Dramatize these excitements as effectively as the resources of the stage will allow, heighten the suspense with music, relieve it with laughter and tears [...] This is the pattern of the melodrama of triumph. It can be found in every age, but is in none so well defined as the

³¹ Dennis Kennedy, ed., *The Companion to Theatre and Performance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), s.v. "Melodrama," accessed June 7, 2025, <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780199574193.001.0001/acref-9780199574193>.

³² "Melodrama," in *The Concise Oxford Companion to the Theatre*, 2nd ed., eds., Phyllis Hartnoll and Peter Found (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), accessed June 7, 2025, <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780192825742.001.0001/acref-9780192825742-e-2024>.

nineteenth century, when history brought together an audience eager for such plays and a theatre whose economic and technical resources were uniquely qualified to provide them.³³

Melodrama simplifies conflicts by employing stock characters and offering emotional resolutions to complex social issues.³⁴ This generic framework, rooted in patriarchal structures, casts aristocrats and the working class as negative figures. At the same time, melodrama critiques social injustices faced by the bourgeoisie under aristocratic rule, but it was never intended to challenge the broader injustices experienced by marginalized, racialized, or gendered minorities.³⁵

Moreover, melodrama consistently perpetuates patriarchal norms, assigning gender-specific roles that reinforce the dominant order. Male characters are often central, embodying either virtuous or villainous traits, while female characters are marginalized as passive, innocent, or sexualized figures. These dynamics upheld patriarchal values, ensuring that even apparent critiques of society left the gender hierarchy intact. As media and cultural theorist Tom Luz notes, melodrama often addresses tensions within the male-dominated order without challenging the overarching hierarchy, ultimately reaffirming patriarchy despite its internal conflicts.

Robert Lang's *American Film Melodrama* is one of the strongest arguments for reading melodrama as "a struggle against, or within, the patriarchy," in which "a repressed identity" seeks release. Lang assumes that in patriarchal culture, femininity is a failure of masculinity and that, following Lacan, femininity is structured as a lack, particularly a lack of economic or social

³³ James Leslie Smith, *Melodrama* (London: Routledge, 2018), 23. Smith further elaborates on the historical context of the rise of the melodrama genre in Europe in the nineteenth century: "The Industrial Revolution swept up into the cities of Europe a vast workforce of uneducated country people who sweated over noisy machines for starvation wages, slept six or eight to a room in slum dwelling-houses, and were back on the factory floor by five the next morning. Pulp literature offered no escape, for they could not read. [...] To the theatre then they came, an invading army of factory slaves, navvies, guttersnipes, emaciated counter-clerks and careworn women suckling babes in arms. And the theatre took them in."

³⁴ Chris Baldick, "Melodrama," in *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*, 4th ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), accessed November 13, 2024, <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780198715443.001.0001/acref-9780198715443-e-703>.

³⁵ Kennedy, *Companion to Theatre and Performance*, s.v. "Melodrama."

power. Jackie Byars argues that melodramas “mystify existing domination, inequality, and injustice,” but sometimes “allow residual and emergent—potentially progressive—elements into the ideological process.” [...] In each of these cases, attention is given to the multiplicity of ideological forces at work, but in each case, it is some form of patriarchy that is reinforced or critiqued.³⁶

Melodrama’s narrative structure, driven by plot twists and turns and suspense, features rapid developments, eventual moral resolutions, and a sense of inevitability that narrates the triumph of virtue over vice. Peter Brook describes the genre’s tendency to “stage a drama of articulation, a drama that has as its true stakes the recognition and triumph of the sign of virtue.”³⁷ For such articulation of the conflict between vice and virtue, the plot progresses through a series of self-contained scenes designed to heighten dramatic tension, which keeps the audience emotionally engaged in the story as each scene unfolds with heightened anticipation.³⁸ The resolution of a melodramatic plot narrative often restores moral order, rewarding virtue and punishing vice at the end of these dramatic tensions. Thus, the audience is made to feel the weight of the characters’ actions as the plot’s moral resolution is presented as an inevitable outcome.³⁹

Reconstructing via Outer Markers

³⁶ Milette Shamir and Jennifer Travis, eds., *Boys Don’t Cry? Rethinking Narratives of Masculinity and Emotion in the U.S.* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 191.

³⁷ Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 45.

³⁸ Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams, eds., *Melodrama Unbound: Across History, Media, and National Cultures* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 241. Gledhill and Williams explain that melodrama’s core structure is based on movement from emotion to emotion, swinging among opposing or contrasting emotional effects. This sharp oscillation structures melodrama’s dramatic form, carrying us through conflicting scenes of fracture and reconciliation, flight and refuge, horror and comedic relief, and exilic loss and restorative justice.

³⁹ On the moral resolution in melodrama, Gledhill explains, “melodramatic aesthetics and dramatic narrative structure use emotional means to arrive at moral legibility.” See Gledhill and Williams, *Melodrama Unbound*, 240. Additionally, Brooks explains that the melodramatic plot frequently culminates in a public recognition of virtue and the eradication of evil. He writes, “The play ends with public recognition of where virtue and evil reside, and the eradication of one as the reward of the other [...] there is rather confirmation and restoration.” See Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination*, 32.

Melodrama conveys polarized roles, heightened emotions, and rigid moral positions through various staging and dramatic signifiers, including visual and bodily markers, such as exaggerated gestures, distinct costumes, and stylized movements. These elements serve as an immediate shorthand, enabling the audience to grasp the moral and emotional dynamics at play instantly. The following section examines how *A Line in the Sand* employs similar strategies, using physical appearance, costume, and movement to construct Middle Eastern masculinity. It will discuss how outward elements intersect with melodramatic impulses, ultimately shaping (or reshaping) the stereotypical portrayal of Middle Eastern men.

As elaborated in Chapter One, outer appearance functions as an influential marker in the processes of racialization and social classification. This section investigates the staging and embodiment of the Middle Eastern character Sadiq in *A Line in the Sand*, with a particular focus on how appearance markers contribute to the stereotypical dimensions of Sadiq's portrayal. It will explore how these markers align with broader stereotypical constructs. This analysis follows the chapter's argument that the creators of *A Line in the Sand* summon familiar stereotypes on stage, focusing in this section on the invocation of stereotypical visual markers, to engage in a critical discourse that both reveals and critiques the very stereotypes their characters' traits ostensibly reinforce.

Camyar Chai, a first-generation Iranian immigrant, portrayed Sadiq in the early productions.⁴⁰ Chai's physical appearance aligns with common stereotypes associated with Middle Eastern and Mediterranean men; with features like dark hair, bushy eyebrows, dark eyes, and bright brown skin, Chai's appearance mirrors the stereotypical Middle Eastern male portrayed in mass media, making his depiction immediately recognizable to audiences. Hence, Chai's body aligns with how Western common sense is conditioned to associate markers with Middle Eastern masculinity; therefore, most audiences

⁴⁰ Youssef and Verdecchia, *A Line in the Sand*, 43.

find the signs consistent with what they perceive in their other cultural consumptions. This logic on physical markers applies to the casting of Vincent Gale and Tom Butler, who played the Canadian military characters Mercer and Colonel and are categorized as Caucasian.

Sadiq: [*to Mercer*] You are not so white today. Gold, like the sun. Look. I am so brown. Your nose straight. And your hair. Harrison Ford. One time I go to the hair cutter in my neighborhood, in Doha. Stupid ass. Say I want him to make my hair straight. Like movie star I tell him. I have money. I will pay you to do it. I know it is possible. I read about it in magazines. But he laugh at me, says, Sadiq, you always want to be somebody else. You should know, he says, all the other boys, they laugh at you, so worried about how you look, talking about America and movie stars. I do that to your hair, your father, he would kill me. He will say I am traitor to the Arabs, to Palestine, make people not go to my store.⁴¹

While archival images provide some insight into Sadiq's appearance, there is limited evidence of how Chai embodied Sadiq's gestures, posture, accent, or interactions with Mercer. Consequently, this analysis relies on stage directions, production images, and journal accounts, which suggest that the performers conformed to the physical semiotics of the Middle Eastern male as dictated by mass culture.⁴² Additionally, the visual contrast of casting between Sadiq and Mercer's actors reinforces binary oppositions between the "Middle Eastern Other" and the "Western Self." This dichotomy to

⁴¹ Ibid., 30.

⁴² Visual and auditory markers refer to the immediate, surface-level cues used to identify and stereotype individuals. These markers include visual traits like dress, skin colour, and facial features (e.g., beards, nose shape), as well as auditory signals such as accent or specific phrases (e.g., *Allahu Akbar*). These markers often serve as triggers for deeper, more entrenched stereotypes, framing individuals within negative contexts like terrorism, violence, or oppression. Peter Morey and Amina Yaqin, *Framing Muslims: Stereotyping and Representation After 9/11* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 119. Morey and Yaqin argue that portrayals of Muslim Middle Easterners frequently emphasize superficial traits like clothing and skin colour, reinforcing reductive stereotypes. Such a focus on these markers perpetuates harmful and oversimplified representations, particularly of Middle Eastern masculinities. Also, see section Visual and Auditory Markers in Chapter One for more reference.

contrast racialized bodies has been frequently employed in mass media, including the film industry, where physical appearance is used to signify these categories quickly.⁴³

Sadiq: [to Mercer] Your skin is like snow Canada. Maybe you going to melt.⁴⁴

Thus, Sadiq's casting in the early production of *A Line in the Sand* aimed to distinguish the Middle Eastern character from others through visible markers.



Figure 2. Camyar Chai (left) and Vincent Gale (right) in *A Line in the Sand*, 1996, Toronto. Source: Tarragon Theatre.

Sadiq's appearance markers resonate with those images of mass media—images of young Palestinian boys throwing stones at Israeli soldiers, faces of those wanted by Western powers, and terrorist characters in movies—although Sadiq's dramatic expressions do not deliver a sense of aggression. Concerning media projection of these markers, Marcia C. Inhorn exemplifies the appearances of Middle Eastern political figures whose vilification intensified in post-9/11 representations; thus, stereotypical attributes are strengthened and associated with these faces.⁴⁵ There

⁴³ Jack G. Shaheen, *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People* (Northampton, MA: Interlink Publishing, 2009), 54. Shaheen addresses how binary opposition between Middle Eastern and Western characters in films simplifies these characters into good versus evil, often using Arabs as the convenient bad guys. Shaheen's use of the term convenient is synonymous with the obvious stereotypical attributes or visual markers here: "Convenient stereotypes make everyone's job easier. Rather than having to pen a good joke, the writer inserts a stumbling, bumbling sheikh. Looking for a villain? Toss in an Arab terrorist—We all know what they look like from watching movies and TV. No thought required [...] For some producers, Arabs are convenient scapegoats."

⁴⁴ Youssef and Verdecchia, *A Line in the Sand*, 14.

⁴⁵ Inhorn, *The New Arab Man*, 51. Inhorn notes, "In the West at least, we have allowed our perceptions of Middle Eastern men's lives to be overwhelmed by recent media portrayals of Taliban, al-Qaeda, Hamas, and Hizbullah religious zealots, suicide bombers, ruthless dictators, and petro-rich Gulf moguls. Such contemporary representations of Middle Eastern men as

are media images of Iranian President Ahmadinejad, Egypt's President Hosni Mubarak, and King Fahad of Saudi Arabia, rallies of men supporting Al Qaeda and Hezbollah.⁴⁶ Additionally, Inhorn lists T.V. shows, movies, and book covers where the Middle Eastern male image is a Bedouin man in Harlequin "Desert Romance" and *Sex and the City 2* series.⁴⁷ The physics accompanies a sense of violence in all these images through the postures of protesting and angry men and politicians' serious and non-smiling faces.

Youssef's acting in Act Two of the first version is an icon of a body that signifies the same social category as Chai, as described above. Through an interviewing form of dialogue, Youssef shares his subjective experience as a racial minority and reacts to the stereotypes the interviewer associates with Marcus's ethnic identity category.

Norman: Because you're an Arab.

Marcus: I don't know. I guess you could say that.

Norman: Well, aren't you? What about your mother?

Marcus: What about her?

Norman: Is she 'Arabian'?⁴⁸

The dialogue in Act Two of the first version emphasizes Youssef's physicality and his identity as an Arab. Youssef's self-identification aligns with the images delivered through mass media of Middle Eastern men who hold a specific nose shape, for instance. Hence, Act Two demands an actor with either those physical features or the makeup that creates the physicality.

medieval theocrats, violent barbarians, oil despots, and patriarchal oppressors are part of a much longer history of Orientalism, through which the West has viewed the East with simultaneous prurience, repugnance, and outright fear."

⁴⁶ Ibid., 51-53, 56-57

⁴⁷ Ibid., 54.

⁴⁸ Youssef and Verdecchia, *A Line in the Sand*, 107-108.

Youssef: [*to audience*] Look at my skin. Ladies and Gentlemen. This is an Arab's skin [...] My nose. Look at my nose.

Picture of Marcus' nose [on the background screen]

Here, we have what is commonly referred to as a "Roman Nose" [...] this particular olfactory organ belongs to me [...]. I used to complain about how ugly I thought my nose was...

*Picture of a "button" nose.*⁴⁹

The casting choices in other productions are consistent in maintaining Sadiq's body representation of what the Western gaze signifies as a Middle Eastern male, as we see in Chai's appearance and in the 2016 production, where Danny Ghanoush plays Sadiq.



Figure 3. Danny Ghanoush (right) in the Factory Theatre production of A Line in the Sand, 2016. Credit: Guillermo Verdecchia

Thus, in depicting masculinities through their physicality and appearance, the actors' choices resonate with the common perception in North American mass culture about a Middle Eastern man: someone with a hooked nose, specific skin tone, hair, and eye colour. The director consistently adhered to this principle in various productions. Therefore, it can be said that the stereotype, at least on a superficial level, was invoked without any alteration.

Reconstructing via Power and Gendered Order Positionality

⁴⁹ Ibid., 14,111,112.

Another method in the portrayal of the Middle Eastern male stereotype in *A Line in the Sand* is constructed through his positioning within hierarchies of power and gender, particularly in contrast to hegemonic masculinity.⁵⁰ Throughout the play, the power dynamics between characters—expressed through dramatic signs such as in dialogue, stage directions and actor arrangements—consistently depict Sadiq as subordinate to Mercer, whose visible markers (as discussed earlier) signal the image of white North American masculinity. The depicted hierarchy extends beyond the relationship between Sadiq and Mercer, as the interactions among other characters, such as Mercer, the Colonel, and the soldiers, further illustrate the broader gender and power structures the play reflects. Consequently, this section explains that Sadiq is stereotypically portrayed not only by his appearance but also by his position as an inferior within these gender and power hierarchies.



Figure 4. Gale as Mercer (left) and Tom Butler as the Colonel (right) in *A Line in the Sand*, 1995, Vancouver. Source: Vancouver Sun

⁵⁰ Todd W. Reeser, *Masculinities in Theory: An Introduction* (West Sussex: John Wiley & Sons, 2010), 149. Reeser discusses how hegemonic masculinity often defines itself in opposition to other forms of masculinity, particularly those racialized as non-white. He notes the complexity involved in creating stereotypical images for both hegemonic and racialized masculinities but emphasizes that “hegemonic white masculinity may commonly be opposed to masculinities of colour.” What is crucial for the current discussion is that this “often,” as Reeser suggests, oppositional dynamic constructs a hierarchy where non-white masculinities, such as those of Middle Eastern men, are often depicted as lacking power compared to dominant white masculinity, reinforcing their portrayal as subordinate within power hierarchies: “Within the realm of masculinity, the associations with hegemonic forms of masculinity are often with power or the ability to control, dominate, or rule over the other.”

The play begins in a dramatic setting that intertwines a hierarchy of power, rooted in the military and war environment, with a hierarchy of masculinity. As Duncanson states, “Masculinity shapes war, and war shapes masculinity.”⁵¹ The stage directions emphasize the military context, such as in Act One’s description: “The play is set in the desert just outside of Doha, Qatar, during Operation Desert Shield in the Persian Gulf in the late fall of 1990,” and Act Three, where the sound of jet fighters is described: “A squadron of planes takes off. The noise is deafening and lasts at least a minute. Colonel and Mercer both react to the noise.”⁵² This setting reinforces the idea that the characters operate in a dramatic world where hierarchies of power and masculinity are ever-present, with masculinity asserting dominance through military might. Within this dramatic world setting in *A Line in the Sand*, a male-dominated and hierarchical military institution, Sadiq is portrayed as subordinate and oppressed. In Act One, the stark contrast between Mercer’s armed, militarized presence and Sadiq’s unarmed, non-militarized body highlights Sadiq’s vulnerability. Act Three further reinforces this dynamic, as Mercer’s description of Sadiq’s killing among other soldiers underscores Sadiq’s powerlessness not only before Mercer but also in relation to other militarized masculinities, with Colonel at the top of this hierarchy.

The first indication of Sadiq’s power and gender position is his first encounter with Mercer, highlighting their military-civilian dynamics. Set in a military field during wartime, Mercer, a soldier on watch, possesses a weapon, symbolizing his militarized masculinity and power. During their initial encounter, Sadiq and Mercer assert their identities and power status in military terms, with Mercer declaring, “I am a Soldier,” and Sadiq responding, “I am not.”⁵³ Although neither character is initially armed, Mercer picks up his gun upon seeing Sadiq, reinforcing his dominant position by contrasting his militarized body against Sadiq’s non-militarized stance. Mercer’s manifestation of superiority over

⁵¹ Claire Duncanson, “Masculinities, War and Militarism,” in *Routledge International Handbook of Masculinity Studies*, eds. Lucas Gottzén, Ulf Mellström, and Tamara Shefer (London: Routledge, 2019), 468.

⁵² Youssef and Verdecchia, *A Line in the Sand*, 10, 64.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 2.

Sadiq is not merely due to his possession of a weapon but also stems from his identity characterized as a soldier, shaped by military training and service in a national army. As political science and gender studies scholar Sandra Whitworth observes, “Basic military training helps to nurture the exaggerated ideals of manhood and masculinity demanded by national militaries,” highlighting how Mercer’s militarized masculinity places him in a position of power within both gender and societal hierarchies.⁵⁴ Thus, Mercer’s dominance over Sadiq is established through Mercer’s embodiment of militarized masculinity, while Sadiq is depicted as a non-military 17-year-old male youth.

As the dialogue between Sadiq and Mercer in Act One unfolds, revealing more about their characteristics and personalities, the power imbalance between them increasingly manifests through dialogue. Sadiq consistently asserts a stance of non-violence rather than responding aggressively to Mercer, thus emphasizing his subordination and complicity in the established power dynamic: “I have no gun [...] I come in peace.”⁵⁵ While Sadiq attempts to establish a connection from a non-threatening position, Mercer’s aggressive demeanour and authoritative speech toward Sadiq persist. For instance, their seemingly amicable exchange in Scene Two culminates in the following dialogue:

Sadiq: And Mother? She afraid you go to war – be shoot and killed?

Mercer: Fuck off.

Sadiq: Why you anger Vancouver? The heat not good to you. You should go slow. Rest. Stay in base.

Mercer: You should fuck off.

Sadiq: I go. You want more pictures. I come back three days.

Mercer: I won’t be here so don’t fucking bother.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Sandra Whitworth, *Men, Militarism, and UN Peacekeeping: A Gendered Analysis* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2007), 161.

⁵⁵ Youssef and Verdecchia, *A Line in the Sand*, 2, 11.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 27.

In Scene Five, Mercer further asserts his dominance by exploiting Sadiq's attempts to forge a friendly bond, reducing him to a servant-like role:

Mercer: Stop fucking touching me, you're always touching me.

Sadiq: I apologize. I do not anger to you [...].

Mercer: Massage my feet [...]

Sadiq: I apologize? Is good rub? [...]

Mercer: Kiss my foot.⁵⁷

Although there are fleeting moments in their dialogue where Sadiq attempts to empathize with Mercer, these instances do not foster a sense of friendship or equality. Mercer's distancing behaviour in Act One, often marked by aggression and condescension, consistently prevents the development of a closer relationship between them. Thus, as the dialogue in Act One unfolds, Sadiq is portrayed as an inferior subject whose minimal resistance to Mercer's dominance further characterizes him as a subject of pity and victimization.



Figure 5. Vincent Gale (left) and Camyar Chai (right) in rehearsal, 1995, Vancouver. Source: Vancouver Sun

⁵⁷ Ibid., 42-43.

The power and gender hierarchy in *A Line in the Sand* is reflected not only in Sadiq's interactions with Mercer but also in the dynamics between Mercer and the Colonel. In Act Three, Mercer's account of Sadiq's death at the hands of himself and other soldiers solidifies Sadiq's marginalized and subjugated depiction, reinforcing the inferiority associated with the Middle Eastern stereotype. The Colonel's dialogue and behaviour establish his superior position within the military's gendered order, embodying hegemonic masculinity through his heterosexual and discriminatory remarks. For instance, when the Colonel interrogates Mercer about his prejudices:

Colonel: [...] What do you think of niggers, Mercer?

Mercer: Sir?

Colonel: Niggers. What do you think of niggers? You have anything against them?

Mercer: No sir.

Colonel: Pakis? Jews? Indians? You got anything against them?⁵⁸

This interaction underscores the Colonel's dominance and the normalization of discrimination within the military hierarchy. Additionally, Mercer's description of the incident in killing Sadiq provides a broader picture of the gendered order within the play's world, illustrating where Sadiq stands. The Colonel's interrogation of Mercer focuses not on the brutality of Sadiq's death but on preserving the Army's reputation and peacekeeping image:

Colonel: [...] Son, I want you to know something. This [referring to Sadiq's death and torture] is not a personal thing. It's just the way things are done. You understand. Professional. I don't say I approve. I say it's unfortunate. It's stupid. It's all timing. Look, this guy died at the wrong time, is all.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ Ibid., 66.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 89.

Moreover, the Colonel's dominance is further reinforced in Act Three, where he stands authoritatively while Mercer remains seated, signifying Mercer's inferiority. This is evidenced by the stage directions and images from early productions (Figure 5 and 6), showing Mercer occupying a chair while the Colonel dominates the space by standing, overseeing, and interrogating Mercer: "[*A tent. Mercer is sitting in a chair. The Colonel enters. Mercer jumps unsteadily to attention.*]"⁶⁰ The previous dialogue, along with the Colonel's dominance in the space, firmly positions Sadiq at the bottom of the gender and power hierarchy. Mercer's power status within the military hierarchy, especially in relation to the Colonel, is further emphasized by the offstage sounds of military movements, such as fighter jets, which symbolize the pervasive influence of militarized masculinity in the dramatic world. In this hierarchical structure, Sadiq is situated at the lowest level, with Mercer above him, though Mercer himself is subordinated within the broader hierarchy. Mercer's internal conflict and subordination are brought to the forefront in the following exchange:

Mercer: I broke his teeth. I cracked his ribs. I kissed his lips [...].

*Jets fly by again. Landing perhaps. The Colonel slowly packs his briefcase, speaks briefly to Mercer, though again we cannot hear what he is saying. He exits, leaving Mercer alone in the tent.*⁶¹



Figure 6. Tom Butler as the Colonel (left) and Vincent Gale as Mercer (right) in *A Line in the Sand*, 1996, Toronto. Source: *Globe and Mail*

⁶⁰ Ibid., 64.

⁶¹ Youssef and Verdecchia, *A Line in the Sand*, 96.

Mercer's ambiguously intimate relationship with Sadiq—whether coercive or emotional—alongside his dynamic with the Colonel highlights his deviation from hegemonic masculinity, which is often seen as the normative ideal of manhood across various societies.⁶² Mercer's alignment with hegemonic masculinity oscillates between complicity, as seen in his participation in Sadiq's torture, and subordination, portrayed in his inferior relationship with the Colonel and his concealed intimate bond with Sadiq. Furthermore, this veiled intimacy situates both Sadiq and Mercer within a shared space of vulnerability, indicating that each, albeit to varying degrees, is shaped by the constraining force of hegemonic masculinity. This dynamic aligns with Connell's hierarchical model, where masculinities range from the hegemonic at the top to the complicit who aspire to the privileges of the hegemonic to the marginalized who remain excluded and disprivileged.⁶³ The starkness of this hierarchy emerges when Mercer aligns with the soldiers and facilitates Sadiq's death, consolidating his complicit masculinity by both suppressing his sexual difference and acting as an accomplice in Sadiq's exclusion. Hence, while Mercer's dominance over Sadiq appears in Act One, where he maintains superiority despite Sadiq's moments of resistance, Mercer's overall position in the gendered hierarchy is compromised by his interactions with the Colonel. In this framework, Sadiq's portrayal as the inferior, racialized other, positioned below even the subordinated Mercer, situates him at the margins of both the identity and gender hierarchies.

The power dynamics and gender hierarchy in the play are also conveyed through the characters' costume designs (military uniform) and props (gun, helmet, and bag of magazines). The stark contrast between the unarmed Middle Eastern male carrying a plastic bag – “*Sadiq sets his large nylon bag*

⁶² The concept of hegemonic masculinity is basically a culturally idealized form and includes characteristics and social practices that create gender inequality and stand on top of the gender hierarchy. This idealized pattern is that a male dominates over various genders, including men, in terms of power. It features sexual potency, physical strength, heterosexuality, emotional detachment, possession of power and command over valuable resources, including human resources.

⁶³ Connell, *Masculinities*, 77-79.

down, and Mercer grabs his gun” - and the armed Canadian soldier guarding a space that Mercer asserts is “a militarized zone under the jurisdiction of the United Nations,” subtly mirrors colonial narratives in Canadian society.⁶⁴ This dynamic reflects the historical tensions where colonizers viewed Indigenous peoples or others as threats to their control of territories claimed under legal or institutional authority.⁶⁵ These nuances in the dramatic setup reinforce the persistent power imbalance, which remains unchanging even as Mercer’s tone toward Sadiq occasionally softens, underscoring the constant, unaltered power distance between the characters.

The Dramaturgy of an Ineffective Critique

This section demonstrates how the play’s adoption of melodramatic form, a genre known for its emotional exaggeration and moral binaries, while challenging certain aspects of the stereotype inadvertently reinforces others, thereby sustaining the overarching stereotypical framework. While the play does not strictly follow melodrama as a genre, key melodramatic elements are present in its characterization and performance. Earlier, it was noted that Sadiq occupies a subordinate and marginalized position within the hierarchies of power and identity, with traces of pity and victimhood embedded in his characterization. The victimized and oppressed characteristics emerge through the play’s attempts to challenge the stereotypes’ inhuman and unjust traits by invoking moralistic themes and triggering heightened emotions. The play incorporates melodramatic elements in its plot narrative, character development, and emotional exaggeration, using *mise-en-scène* and dialogue to amplify the narrative’s emotional intensity. This section explores whether the adoption of melodramatic elements in *A Line in the Sand* effectively challenges the stereotype of Middle Eastern masculinity as violent and oppressive or if it merely reconstructs the stereotype with less overtly negative traits. By first identifying

⁶⁴ Youssef and Verdecchia, *A Line in the Sand*, 11-12.

⁶⁵ Sadiq is not from Doha, but Doha’s setting has several cultural proximities, including language and religion, with Sadiq’s home, Palestine. Hence, I use the wording “familiar land.”

the melodramatic elements, this analysis will explore where and how these formal elements are employed to critique the stereotypical narratives of violent and oppressive Middle Eastern masculinity. Ultimately, this section concludes that while the play's critical approach in adopting melodrama offers a less negative portrayal, it ultimately results in the reconstruction of the stereotype, albeit with different traits and narratives, such as victimized masculinity. Therefore, the stereotypical framework persists, though with fewer overtly negative connotations.

Melodrama operates on a foundation of moral dichotomy, wherein characters are distinctly polarized to represent opposing moral values, creating a clear contrast between notions of good and evil.⁶⁶ Protagonists in this genre are typically characterized by their unwavering virtue, while villains are depicted with heightened malevolence, reflecting the extremes of human behaviour. The binary framework of melodrama (i.e., good vs evil) not only generates dramatic tension but also reinforces the moral clarity central to melodrama's narrative appeal. As a result, the genre frequently relies on the use of stock characters—archetypal figures such as the virtuous hero and the nefarious villain—who are placed in familiar and emotionally resonant scenarios, facilitating a visceral connection between the audience and the narrative.

Polarization of Characters

Characters embodying stereotypes often function like stock characters in melodrama, mainly through their superficial articulation and rigid portrayal. As James Smith observes, characters in melodrama are usually constructed as “two-dimensional figures, all sharply defined and all different,” whose actions, thoughts, and speech align predictably with their roles within the moral binary.⁶⁷ By incorporating melodrama elements, this genre's characterization polarizes characters into binaries of

⁶⁶ Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination*, 36.

⁶⁷ Smith, *Melodrama*, 26. Smith further notes that stock characters in melodrama are “the whole men who can be guaranteed to think, speak and act exactly as you would expect.”

good and evil, victim and perpetrator.⁶⁸ Stereotypical characters, like those in melodrama, simplify complex identities by presenting only the most recognizable traits, ensuring that the audience quickly grasps their roles within the story's moral framework. This reduction of complexity serves to reinforce the clear-cut distinctions between good and evil, a hallmark of both stereotypes and melodramatic storytelling.

The critical question in this section is how the dualistic and simplified model of melodramatic characterization functions as a dramaturgical strategy to critique stereotypical understandings of Middle Eastern masculinity. The play presents a stereotypical Middle Eastern man embodied in Sadiq, who is immediately recognizable to the audience through his visible markers, physicality, and his later subordinated position of power. In contrast, the characterization of the Colonel and Mercer creates a stark opposition; their power dynamics with Sadiq and among each other, along with their external markers and the content and semiotics of their dialogue, increasingly depict them as discriminatory, unjust, and ultimately aligned with the villainous pole of extremity. For example, in Act One, Mercer projects his stereotyped perception of a threatening Palestinian onto Sadiq, who tries to clarify the misunderstandings but is consistently met with condescension, further victimizing Sadiq through discriminatory remarks:

Mercer: You Palestinians are the guys we're supposed to watch out for. Might try to car bomb our air base.

Sadiq: Not me, Military Man. I don't care about that.

Mercer: You part of the uprising, that – uh – in-ti-faggot thing?

Sadiq: Intifada.

⁶⁸ It is important to note that the point is not that *A Line in the Sand* strictly adheres to the melodrama genre, thus creating a weak critical representation. Instead, the emphasis is on how melodramatic elements are evident in the performance and dramatic elements, such as characterizations showing a significant presence of a generic layer of melodrama in the play. Thus, it is more accurate to say that the director has made a layer of the work melodramatic rather than the entire piece.

Mercer: Whatever the hell it's called.⁶⁹

Mercer's initial stance towards Sadiq, from holding a weapon to engaging in unfriendly dynamics, along with subtle discriminatory remarks, such as the moment Mercer argues over the currency exchange where Sadiq prefers the U.S. dollar, further pushes his characterization towards that of a villain. For instance:

Sadiq: [...] When I start, I sell cigar to skinny black soldier for Bangladeshi dollar, Salim just laugh. Make me pay.

Mercer: Well, Canada's not fucking Bangladesh, pal.⁷⁰

These nuances in characterization in Act One reinforce the polarized dynamic often seen in melodrama, with Sadiq and Mercer positioned in opposing roles.

Sadiq's efforts to foster compassion and mutual understanding with Mercer lend Sadiq's character an innocence throughout Act One that increasingly contrasts with Mercer's fluctuating behaviour towards Sadiq. There are moments when it seems that an empathetic and peaceful connection is forming between them, only for the tone of their dialogue to quickly shift toward distance and tension in Mercer's attitude toward Sadiq.

Sadiq: Look at my shoes, Vancouver. Two years, same shoes. My father, he always moving [...] dream of his homeland [...] All I remember, poor, hungry, the same the same.

Mercer: OK, OK, whatever [...].

Mercer: Stop fucking touching me. You're always touching me.

Sadiq: I apologize. I do not want anger to you. (*A pause.*) My father this morning, he find hashish I have for to sell. He learn I not go to school. He shout and shout at me. I say nothing. He is a fool. I am angry to him not to you.

⁶⁹ Youssef and Verdecchia, *A Line in the Sand*, 13.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 17.

Mercer: That's a total sob story. My heart bleeds.

Sadiq: You forgive?

Mercer: Massage my feet.

Sadiq: Rub feet? Yes? I know how to good. I do for my sister. Her, how you say, blood...too close?

Mercer: Don't talk.⁷¹

In contrast to Mercer's often unfriendly and distancing behaviour, Sadiq's attempts to build a friendship with Mercer are grounded in their shared experiences of family and paternal expectations. These shared experiences provide a potential common ground for connection, as both characters reflect on the strict demands of their fathers, which influenced their decisions to leave home.

Sadiq: Here I learn real life. But my father, he know I not go to school, he would break my throat.

Mercer: Fuck. When I quit school and joined up, my father freaked.

Sadiq: Freak?

Mercer: He got really angry.

Sadiq: For why?

Mercer: He's a government big-shot. Makes him look bad, his son's a stupid soldier.

Sadiq: Yes. You like me.

Mercer: What?

Sadiq: You...like...me.⁷²

Sadiq's line, "You...like...me," suggests a brief moment of connection as they acknowledge similarities in their experiences. However, Mercer's immediate denial—"No, I don't"—and his insistence on the differences between their lives undermine this potential bond. Through his denial and resistance to

⁷¹ Ibid., 41.

⁷² Ibid., 25-26.

empathizing with Sadiq's experience, Mercer effectively dismantles any possibility of shared understanding. This rejection reinforces the vertical distance between them, where Mercer, from a position of power, refuses to acknowledge any equality between their experiences.

Mercer: No, I don't.

Sadiq: No, I say, "You like me."

Mercer: I don't even know you.

Sadiq: No, no. Like me. For angry father you join army—come to Qatar. Me also. Work for Salim and go to Kansas.

Mercer: No. I didn't join because of him.

Sadiq: Then why you join?

Mercer: I told you. I wanted discipline.⁷³

Sadiq's attempts to build camaraderie and emotional connection extend beyond shared memories of their fathers, as he also shares the hardships his family faces in the occupied West Bank.

Sadiq: [...] We are six in my family. Father, mother, two sisters, brother and me. I am youngest. My sisters both married. Fatma, she is teacher. Leila, she have four children. I am uncle. Mother is dead. My brother, Hanni, he is killed in prison. Choke on tear gas, die. Three years ago. So, we are only four. But sisters are in West Bank, so we are only Father and me.

Mercer: Holy shit.

Sadiq: I very missing Leila, Fatma. Already four year. You have brother sister?

Mercer: No, just the three of us.⁷⁴

Despite these efforts, Mercer remains largely unresponsive, offering little empathy and revealing minimal details about his own family. Even when Sadiq expresses sympathy over Mercer's mother's

⁷³ Ibid., 42.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 49.

death, Mercer suppresses his grief, maintaining emotional distance and highlighting the lack of mutual connection between them.

Furthermore, Sadiq's characterization through his dialogue counters Mercer's stereotype of Palestinians as hostile by presenting a more complex and humanized image; the way his personal stories are conveyed employs melodramatic elements that emphasize pity and victimhood. By sharing personal stories about his family, including his brother, who was imprisoned and killed, Sadiq challenges Mercer's preconceived notions and portrays the Palestinian experience with depth and empathy. Sadiq's recounting of his personal experiences, heavily centred on emotional suffering and injustice, adds nuance to his characterization as someone who has endured profound hardship, implicitly reflecting the broader suffering of Palestinian civilians in the Israel-Palestine conflict. However, Sadiq's portrayal lacks a specific socio-historical context, which causes his identity to rely primarily on evoking pity. This emphasis, driven by melodramatic elements, deepens Sadiq's characterization as a victimized figure and ultimately sustains the overarching stereotypical framework, focusing more on his victimization than on other potential dimensions of his identity.

Sadiq: My brother is over there (*he points*). In West Bank. I not see since I am twelve. You have brother?

Mercer: How old are you?⁷⁵

Mercer evades answering Sadiq's question to the end of Scene Two, Act One. Despite Sadiq's efforts, Mercer offers little empathy and reveals minimal details about his own family. Even when Sadiq expresses sympathy over Mercer's mother's death, Mercer suppresses his grief, maintaining emotional distance and highlighting the lack of mutual connection between them.

Mercer: (*A pause*) Two of us, actually. Now. My mother just died. Just before I met you.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 23.

Sadiq: Mercer... I am sorry.

Mercer: You didn't do anything.

Sadiq: For mother.

Mercer: She was in the hospital for a long time. A mental hospital. Twelve years. I only ever saw her at Christmas. She was a mess. She's better off dead.

The service was packed. Some church. Dad and all his big shot buddies from the ministry pretending they gave a shit. Telling me they were sorry. She was fucked. I wouldn't have recognized her if she'd climbed out of the coffin and told my father and me to go fuck ourselves. Jennifer was there, couldn't look at her. I always told her my mother was dead. Dad didn't say a word. Trying to act all serious and sad, but inside he was dancing.⁷⁶

Therefore, in Act One, Sadiq's innocence and victimization are emphasized, creating a clear moral dichotomy between him and Mercer. The power imbalance is stark as Mercer consistently resists empathy, reinforcing their hierarchical divide.⁷⁷ Their interactions solidify Sadiq as an innocent figure unjustly subjected to dehumanization and denied the capacity for empathy. Sadiq increasingly embodies the traits of a victim marginalized not only by discrimination but also by being disregarded in his attempts to foster mutual understanding. Consequently, the melodramatic characterization of Sadiq transforms the negative stereotype associated with him into one that evokes empathy and pity, emphasizing his innocence and unjust victimization by Mercer's dehumanization and lack of empathy.

In Act Three, Scene One, the characterization of Mercer and the Colonel, through their complicity and lack of compassion toward Sadiq's murder, further positions them as oppressors and antagonistic figures. This increasing clarity on the alignment of characters within the victim-victimizer dynamic, in

⁷⁶ Ibid., 50.

⁷⁷ As discussed on pages 148-155, the play underscores a persistent vertical distance in power dynamics, with Mercer's superiority remaining unchallenged and Sadiq's attempts at connection systematically undermined.

turn, heightens the portrayal of Sadiq as victimized and oppressed. For instance, the Colonel appears to be angrily condemning Mercer for the severe beating of Sadiq, initially suggesting concern for the inhumane act. However, as the conversation unfolds, revealing the Colonel's authoritative and bitter tone contrasted with Mercer's more subdued responses, it becomes evident that the Colonel's concern lies not with the brutality itself, but with the potential repercussions for their professional standing, seeking to obscure the incident.⁷⁸

Colonel: A 16 year old kid Mercer. He was beaten black and blue. He was bound and beaten with a riot baton. Nine teeth broken. Two ribs cracked. Index and middle fingers of his left hand broken. Left foot crushed. Human excrement dumped on his head. Cigarette burns to forearms and pectorals, and you assumed this was all right? It was understood that this was all right? Where the hell would you get that idea? You learn that in basic? You learn that in Cub Scouts? Your father teach you that? *Silence*. Answer the qu-qu-question Mercer.

Mercer: No, sir.

Colonel: You maybe aren't seeing things too clearly [...] Stop trying to shit me. I'm your friend, you moron. I can help you out of this mess, but don't you dare lie to me. So, let's start again. What happened in that tent? [...] You were frightened. *A silence*. I know it's a crazy fucking situation. World's gone fucking nuts Mercer. Things aren't what they used to be. [...] You call in the Army 'cause it's armed insurrection, right? But do you let them do anything? No. You tie their hands. And the men stand there and take the shit and get garbage thrown at them, and Indians point guns at them, and they can't do anything but take it.⁷⁹

Moreover, Mercer appears to be Sadiq's principal murderer, possibly driven by a desire to conceal his intimate relationship with Sadiq from his fellow soldiers.

⁷⁸ See page 153 for another instance of the Colonel's lack of interest in the inhumane nature of the incident.

⁷⁹ Youssef and Verdecchia, *A Line in the Sand*, 81-82.

Colonel: He tried to call you, but he couldn't. He was too badly beaten. Right. And you were scared. You didn't know what was going on. You were shocked to see him there. *A Silence.*

Mercer? It was a terrible shock to see him there.⁸⁰

As a result, Sadiq's life is deemed expendable for excessively disproportionate reasons.⁸¹ This devaluation of Sadiq's life exemplifies the process of othering and the discriminatory gaze also exhibited by the Colonel and the other soldiers, albeit in different ways. What unites these oppressive figures, however, is their shared lack of compassion and remorse for Sadiq's death and their concern for the potential damage to their military and personal identities if the incident were to be exposed.

Colonel: Son, I want you to know something. This is not a personal thing. It's just the way things are done. You understand. Professional. I don't say I approve. I say it's unfortunate. It's stupid. its all timing. Look, this guy died at the wrong time, is all.⁸²

Moreover, the stereotype of the Middle Eastern man as a patriarchal oppressor of women is subverted in Sadiq's characterization. Despite selling pornographic magazines, Sadiq shows no interest in the content of these magazines and refrains from expressing an instrumental or sexualized view toward their subjects, even when Mercer provocatively suggests that Sadiq must enjoy the magazines his boss holds.

Mercer: Must be your personal stash.

Sadiq: I do not understand.

Mercer: Ah, C'mon, don't tell me you don't sneak a quick pull over there in the back of your boss' tent.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 84.

⁸¹ The only crime that can be addressed to Sadiq is his unauthorized presence, Sadiq's trespassing, as Mercer tells Sadiq in the first Scene.

⁸² Youssef and Verdecchia, *A Line in the Sand*, 89.

Sadiq: I not look at picture. They are not for me.⁸³

This subversion of the stereotypical portrayal of Sadiq contrasts sharply with Mercer's characterization; Mercer, a regular customer of these magazines, openly reveals his fascination with the commodified female body. This contrast not only highlights the differences between Sadiq and Mercer but also adds a humane dimension to Sadiq's character, fostering a sense of empathy and connection with the audience.

By using emotionally provocative measures through melodramatic character development and contrasting Sadiq's stereotype with negative characters, the play challenges the stereotypical perception of the Middle Eastern man as violent and oppressive. The polarization of characters aims to highlight the injustice of such stereotypes by evoking empathy and emotions, ultimately replacing the already associated negative traits with a portrayal of Sadiq as a victimized and peace-seeking figure whose innocence deserves recognition. However, the characterizations rely on emotional provocation rather than historical or analytical contexts to deconstruct the stereotype; the artwork ultimately fails to provide a multi-dimensional understanding of Middle Eastern identity and thus risks oversimplifying it. Consequently, the audience may merely substitute one fixed stereotype for another, replacing the negative image with a pitiful one, rather than gaining a nuanced and realistic understanding of Middle Eastern identity.

Melodramatic Narrative Style

Although it was earlier discussed that dualistic characterization reconstructs stereotypes, it is crucial to recognize that *A Line in the Sand*'s resonance of melodramatic form encompasses more than just character development. The emphasis is on the predominance of emotional and surface-level engagement with the audience, not that *A Line in the Sand* is entirely melodramatic. This section observes that the narrative structure in *A Line in the Sand* parallels the structure of melodrama, with

⁸³ Ibid., 28-29.

tensions building through subplots and several scenes, leading to increasingly polarized characters and the audience's emotional engagement. By focusing on the narrative style in *A Line in the Sand*, the discussion highlights that when emotions dominate the narrative and audience interaction, there is less opportunity for critical and analytical forms of engagement for audiences, thus resulting in a superficial take on the representations.

In Act One, the dynamic between Sadiq and Mercer is characterized by underlying tension, though this tension is not always immediately overt. Their interactions oscillate between moments of confrontation and instances where a more subdued tone prevails. However, the fundamental tension and distinction between the two characters are established from the beginning and are increasingly polarized through characterization. The following examples from Act One illustrate how the dynamic between Sadiq and Mercer fluctuates, contributing to a sense of unease and division, even when the two characters appear to reach a semblance of mutual understanding:

Mercer: [...] Why you in such a hurry all of a sudden?

Sadiq: I have work to do.

Mercer: Fuck that. Come on, this is my time off.

Sadiq: So?

Mercer: So tell me something [...] tell me about your family.

Sadiq: Why?

Mercer: 'Cause I want to know.⁸⁴

Mercer attempts to lower his defences and engage in a friendly dialogue. However, Sadiq, who has grown increasingly wary, adopts a more guarded stance, expressing his doubts, to which Mercer responds with a sharp tone.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 48-49.

Sadiq: No, you just want pictures.

Mercer: Ok fuck off then.

Sadiq: No, you fuck off. This is my beach, too. *Silence*.⁸⁵

At the beginning of the final scene of Act One, Understanding Sadiq's dream of moving to America for a better life, Mercer adopts a gentler approach and speaks to Sadiq compassionately, offering advice:

Mercer: Sadiq, you should go to Canada. Not to the States, go to Canada... My dad, he's a big bureaucrat, he could do something, I bet, he could get you in [...]. We could work something out. I don't know. You could visit at least [...] I'll bring you. Sadiq, I live on the ocean.⁸⁶

Sadiq's growing doubt and distrust towards Mercer become increasingly evident by the end of Act One. With each expression of skepticism, however brief or seemingly out of step with Mercer's tone throughout Act One, Mercer responds with sharpness and a discriminatory attitude towards Sadiq.

Sadiq: You are a child.

Mercer: Don't call me that. I know you're an Arab, but you gotta face the truth. It's like their – whadhya call it – gee had or whatever. It's a fucking holy war. If they get killed fighting us, they go straight to heaven.

Sadiq: You think we just wanna die? Because we are Muslim. We don't have wives? Families? Children?

Mercer: That doesn't matter.⁸⁷

Act One's narrative structure incorporates melodramatic elements, such as sudden twists and turns in Sadiq and Mercer's relationship, creating suspense and uncertainty about whether their interactions will

⁸⁵ Ibid., 48-49.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 53.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 56.

lead to friendship or enmity. Although Act One doesn't end with an impression of the triumph of virtue over vice, the growing contrast between Sadiq's victimization and Mercer's increasing alignment with vice subtly shifts the emotional balance, with virtue beginning to take precedence on the surface.

Act Three, which continues the narrative from Act One, further highlights the increasing weight of Mercer's vice. Mercer initially appears as a naive soldier, but his character gradually reveals negative traits in his interactions with Sadiq and his alignment with the Colonel. As the narrative progresses in Act Three, Scene One, Mercer transitions from a mere naive military figure to a more sinister character implicated in Sadiq's death and torture (in complicity with other soldiers). This shift – Mercer's naivety to viciousness – deepens the overall portrayal of vice established in Act One and extends to include the Colonel, whose dismissive attitude, alongside a subtle discriminative stance, further solidifies a sense of complicity in a collective viciousness. The narrative in Act Three thus contrasts the growing vice represented by Mercer and other soldiers with Sadiq's increasingly innocent and victimized portrayal, offering his side a further sense of virtuosity.

Colonel: OK, so you meet this guy. He sells you some pictures. You talk. Visiting. Cultural exchange like. I'm glad you told me and nobody else needs to know about that. You're doing real good. Just a few more questions.

Mercer: What does it matter? Big deal? Who cares? He's n-n-nobody. He's only a fucking Arab. That's what we're here for. To kill a bunch of Arabs. He doesn't count. He's here illegal anyway. Who needs to know?

Colonel: Mercer. We all have to agree. We need to be sure about what happened that night. You understand? A lot of people back home have questions about this. They need some answers. Good answers. This isn't just about your ass Mercer. Lot of asses on the line now.⁸⁸

⁸⁸ Ibid., 88.

In Act Three, Colonel delivers a sense of a lack of remorse for Sadiq's death, coupled with his cold pragmatism, exposes a brutality that extends beyond the act of murder itself. The Colonel's focus on controlling the narrative (i.e. Sadiq's death) to avoid repercussions illustrates how specific racialized and gendered identities are devalued—reduced to mere obstacles to be managed rather than human lives to be respected. Mercer's distress and confusion under interrogation differ from the Colonel's calculated indifference and hypocrisy, highlighting a broader collective masculinity marked by violence, discrimination, and apathy toward specific identities' suffering. Consequently, the tension between vice and virtue expands into a collective masculine identity among the victimizers, with the extent of vice becoming more severe and contrasted, extending beyond Mercer's character. The narrative in Act Three continues to widen the gap between vice and virtue, further amplifying the virtuous image and, consequently, intensifying the emotional impact and reinforcing the pitiable stereotype associated with Sadiq's portrayed identity.

There are various elements in the Colonel and Mercer's dialogue and characterizations that foster a sense of condemnation toward the discrimination, devaluation, and unequal treatment of other groups depicted through these characters. For instance, the Colonel not only recounts but also justifies his alleged crime, urging Mercer to follow a similar path. The Colonel narrates a memory where he committed a war crime by killing an innocent young man, further solidifying his portrayal as a vicious figure, and adding to the evidence of his internalized brutality.

Colonel: There's a noise. Like coughing. So in I go. Very slow. Very quiet. There's somebody in the corner. A boy, he's maybe ten years old. I'm so tired, I think I'm dreaming, hallucinating. He gets up. He starts to get up. I put a couple of shots in his legs. He falls. Screaming gook. I just stood there looking at him, Mercer. Telling myself it's not the same kid. Then I put another one in his gut. And one more in his chest. Took him a long time to die. Turned out he was blind. From the

chemicals. Or whatever. There was no reason to shoot him. I had no reason. He was unarmed, blind, a boy. [...] It's not that simple. We are a part of something, Mercer. Something that asks us to do certain things expects us to do certain things. You hear what I'm saying? We follow orders, right? You've got your orders. I've got mine.⁸⁹

The narrative structure that begins in Act One and continues into Act Three in *A Line in the Sand* primarily elicits emotional engagement, lacking elements that encourage viewers to explore the underlying causes of the victim-victimizer dynamic. The play's narrative overlaps with melodramatic conventions, which often simplify complex struggles into an archetypal battle between vice and virtue. Consequently, the narrative does not invite viewers to delve into the deeper roots of this dynamic or connect it to their own experiences. When the play adopts a melodramatic structure, it misses opportunities to explore the structural factors or historical context behind the collective behaviour and crimes committed against Sadiq, the character representing virtue. Thus, *A Line in the Sand* delivers its depictions through a narrative structure marked by historical superficiality, increasing the likelihood that its characters will be perceived stereotypically.

While Act Two in the second version of the play introduces a historical element, creating a link between the emotional narrative and historical events, it offers little for the inquisitive viewer to understand the roots of discrimination and the perpetuation of stereotypes of Middle Eastern masculinity. Although Act Two presents a documentary-like portrayal of war and crime, rather than providing a detailed and multilayered perspective, it constructs a binary narrative of aggressor versus victim.

Actor 1: Diplomacy has been given every chance to end this conflict peacefully, but regrettably, has failed in the face of Saddam Hussein's intransigence.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 95.

That same intransigence and his indifference to the suffering of his own people, especially the children, / made it clear that sanctions alone were not going to force him to leave Kuwait [...].

Actor 2: Estimated number of Iraqi children under the age of 5 dead as a result of the war in the year following cessation of bombing: 150,000.

Number of babies in Kuwait City incubators killed by Iraqis: 0.

We have joined with other UN members in expelling Saddam Hussein from Kuwait by force. At this moment, our CF-18s are flying combat air patrol in the Northern Persian Gulf, / protecting Canadian and allied ships and personnel in the Gulf and the Arabian Peninsula....

Number of CF-18s based in the Persian Gulf: 24.

Cost to taxpayer to purchase one CF-18: \$35 million.

Percentage of Canadian defence budget spent on peacekeeping: less than 1%.

[...] Estimated number of Iraqi soldiers killed during the Gulf War: 100,000.

Actor 1: Number of American Soldiers killed: 144. Number of these American soldiers killed by friendly fire: 60.⁹⁰

Despite its documentary and historical appearance, Act Two lacks the narrative depth and details needed to invite the audience to explore the historical, cultural, and social connections that might explain the depicted discrimination. Instead, Act Two focuses on a world where, once again, victim and victimizer appear locked in an eternal battle.

By adopting a narrative structure that overlaps with melodramatic conventions, *A Line in the Sand* diminishes the representational coherence necessary for sustained critical engagement. Instead of encouraging the audience to ask probing questions about the underlying causes of the victim-victimizer dynamic, the play confines the narrative to an archetypal battle between good and evil. This approach

⁹⁰ Ibid., 61-63.

limits the connection between the represented subject (Middle Eastern masculinity as embodied by Sadiq) and a broader socio-historical understanding, reducing the Middle Eastern character's portrayal to a superficial, pity-based view. Consequently, this narrative strategy reinforces a victimized stereotype of Middle Eastern masculinity rather than challenging or deconstructing it.

Ideological Positioning and the Reconstruction of Stereotypes

Building upon the earlier examination of melodramatic characterization and narrative structure, this section synthesizes how the artists' ideological positioning and historical awareness critically influence their dramaturgical choices in *A Line in the Sand*. Adopting melodramatic elements is not merely a stylistic preference but is deeply embedded with ideological significance that impacts the play's effectiveness in challenging stereotypes. As the notion of ideology of form suggests, every dramatic and staging element drawn from specific genres and styles emerges from a particular context and is linked to specific themes and meanings; thus, these elements contribute their embedded meanings to the representation. The ideology embedded in the melodramatic form plays a key role in reconstructing stereotypes of Middle Eastern masculinity. Additional conceptual tools like pastiche will be used to show that imitating melodramatic forms without considering their historical and ideological contexts risks producing superficial representations that ultimately contribute to the reproduction of stereotypes.

One might question how we can differentiate whether a dramaturgical choice stems from a personal preference or if the artist has considered the ideology embedded in their form. Fortunately, *A Line in the Sand* offers a compelling example of this dilemma through its two versions, each written according to the vision of the two collaborating theatre-makers. Each version of Act Two is thematically and formally distinct from one another. As noted earlier, the two artists had contrasting perspectives on the play's narrative. By comparing the two distinct versions of Act Two, this analysis illustrates how

differing ideological stances of the collaborating theatre-makers lead to either the reinforcement or slight mitigation of stereotypes of Middle Eastern masculinity.

In the first version of Act Two, Youssef, as the character/performer, addresses the connection between marginalization with historical references and contexts, helping the audience see not only the politics and unjust wars but also a deeper examination of how discrimination and prejudice intersect with these broader contexts.

Norman: [...] The Border Project is very pleased to welcome as our guest, actor and playwright, the author of *A Line in the Sand*, Mr. Marcus Youssef.

Marcus: January 16, 1991. The day I'd been waiting for: the expiration of the US's ultimatum to Saddam to get the hell out of Kuwait, or else. I'm glued to my radio [...] Their voices are excited, energized. This is news: important, up to the minute, in your face even though it's halfway across the world—kind of news.

Half. That's what I am. Half Arab. Half Egyptian. In this war, Egypt's on our side. Hell, I'm North American. My Dad, the real Arab, hates the place. I don't speak a word of Arabic. I haven't lived with my father since I was 15; didn't even know the name of his place of birth until about eight months ago; had always assumed he was from Cairo. I mean, where else is there in Egypt? But by blood, by heritage, by faith, I feel like an Iraqi. Like an Arab. Early reports from the Pentagon, my radio friend tells me, are of overwhelming success. Targets have been hit, no coalition planes lost, minimal collateral damage.

We are killing people who look like me.⁹¹

The first version of Act Two in *A Line in the Sand* adopts a documentary-style approach, referencing the First Persian Gulf War while addressing racial discrimination and the crises faced by

⁹¹ Youssef and Verdecchia, *A Line in the Sand*, 101-102.

minoritized subjects. Through an interview-like dialogue, Youssef positions himself as a North American minority listening to the war's accounts on the radio. By bridging the Persian Gulf war history to his lived experience in Canada, the play adds thematic depth, exposing contradictions in the simplistic narrative of war as a battle between good and evil. For example, when Youssef remarks, "We are killing people who look like me," he challenges the binary framing of the conflict that shadows over the plot as the struggle between vice and virtue.⁹² While the first version of Act Two doesn't fully dismantle the stereotype of Middle Eastern masculinity, it adds critical layers to the narrative, moving slightly away from a purely stereotypical portrayal.

In contrast, the second version of Act Two reduces the play's thematic layers of identity crisis to an anti-war theme. The news-style approach, featuring nameless characters delivering factual accounts like radio announcers while providing historical context, remains too generalized to capture the specific cultural complexities at play, thus lacking the personal and racial nuances present in the first version. Like other Acts, the second version of Act Two presents a simplified narrative, focused primarily on the brutality of war rather than a critical engagement with racial prejudice. The shift to a more polarized version of the narrative between good and evil strips away the opportunities for the audience to question and reflect on identity, offering an entirely one-dimensional portrayal.

Actor 1: At 10:10 p.m. on January 16, 1991, Prime Minister Brian Mulroney made the following speech to the House of Commons: "Mr. Speaker, honourable members will know that military action began in the Persian Gulf today, / as announced at 7 p.m. Eastern Standard Time."

Actor 2: Population of Iraq: 18 million. Cost of one Tomahawk missile: \$1.4 million U.S.

President Bush called me beforehand to apprise me that he had authorized such action. We understand at the moment that the participants of this first wave included forces from the United

⁹² Ibid., 102.

States, the United Kingdom, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. Estimated number of Tomahawk missiles fired at Iraq during first 2 weeks of war: 240.⁹³

The stark difference between the two versions of Act Two exemplifies how dramaturgical choices affect the play's ability to challenge or support stereotypical representations. The play's overarching critique of war in the Middle East, with explicit references to conflicts such as the Persian Gulf War and the Israel-Palestine situation, emerges clearly in both versions. However, Verdecchia's version leans more towards a straightforward critique of war, overlooking the in-depth examination of personal and racial prejudice that Youssef's version presents. Thus, dramaturgical choices play a critical role in determining the level of engagement the audience has with the themes of identity and stereotype, making Youssef's version more effective in this regard, albeit still far from fully deconstructing the stereotype.

Conclusion: Adopting Melodrama, a Dramaturgy of Pastiche Recreates Simplified Images

By examining key staging elements like character construction, narrative structure, and performative devices, it becomes clear that these components mirror those found in melodrama. The play evokes emotions and emphasizes the vice-virtue dichotomy, positioning the stereotypical Middle Eastern character as a simplified stock figure, reduced to a victim. While this melodramatic framework attempts to critique negative stereotypes by eliciting sympathy, it ultimately replaces one set of reductive traits with another, shifting from overtly negative depictions to those of victimhood. However, adopting melodrama as a strategy to add a critical edge to the stereotypical characteristics of Middle Eastern masculinity fails to deconstruct these stereotypes; instead, it reverses the negative image to a positive side within the same stereotypical frame. By employing this style, *A Line in the Sand* overlooks

⁹³ Ibid., 59.

the cultural and historical complexities of Middle Eastern identity, reducing the stereotype to an emotional engagement without addressing its origins.

Moreover, the tension within melodramatic narratives, particularly in how male characters navigate their roles, reinforces patriarchal values. This dynamic is evident in *A Line in the Sand*, as the genre positions marginalized figures like Middle Eastern characters in subordinate roles. While the portrayal of Middle Eastern men may shift from villainous to victimized or innocent, the broader patriarchal order remains intact due to the melodramatic framework. This reliance on melodramatic elements prevents the play from addressing or critiquing the hierarchical structures that sustain these stereotypes, leaving the underlying gender and power dynamics largely unchallenged.

In the contemporary context, where capitalism and cultural dominance have evolved, applying melodrama without acknowledging its inherent ideological content results in ineffective critiques of stereotypes. The melodramatic framework tends to create a duality that redeems some Middle Eastern masculinities by casting them as virtuous victims deserving of pity (alongside perceptions of Middle Eastern women as oppressed) while maintaining the negative image of Middle Eastern men as oppressive figures. This approach leads to pastiche—a superficial imitation of past styles—rather than offering a form capable of critical interrogation. By replicating the emotional excesses and moral binaries of 19th- and 20th-century melodrama, *A Line in the Sand* critiques injustices but ultimately reinforces the same stereotypical perceptions it seeks to challenge. Instead of dismantling the stereotype, the play transforms it from an overtly negative portrayal to a less negative one, yet still confines the portrayal within the boundaries of victimization and moral polarity.

Consequently, a dramaturgy relying on pastiche creates representations without original reality, resulting in simulacra—realities without foundations. Through melodramatic elements, *A Line in the Sand* presents an oversimplified version of Middle Eastern masculinities as if it is the current reality,

lacking diversity and depth. While perhaps more sympathetic than direct vilification, the portrayal remains within a limited framework, failing to explore why certain traits are consistently assigned to Middle Eastern men. Instead, the narrative becomes a simulacrum—emotionally resonant but detached from meaningful identity analysis. Moreover, the binary dynamic of victim and victimizer mirrors a simplified cultural view of “us vs. them” and “good vs. evil,” overlooking socio-cultural complexities. As a result, these simplified representations appear real but lack origins, further solidifying stereotypes.⁹⁴

Therefore, the dramaturgical choices in *A Line in the Sand* illustrate how the uncritical adoption of past forms leads to superficial critique, failing to engage deeply enough to dismantle ingrained stereotypes. By not critically engaging with the ideological implications of melodrama, the play prioritizes emotional appeal over critical reflection. Such choices fail to dismantle the stereotypes they initially summon on stage, offering no layered understanding or in-depth analytical critique. Instead, the use of such styles shapes a dramaturgy that aligns with postmodern tendencies of pastiche, in which portrayals emerge as shallow simulacra.

The Adventures of Ali and Ali and the Axes of Evil (2004)

A Line in the Sand engages with the global political context of the mid-1990s, marked by both peace negotiations and continued violence between Israel and Palestine, while the U.S. coalition sought to establish power dominance in the Middle East. In contrast, *Ali and Ali and the Axes of Evil* responds to the post-9/11 era, addressing the wars that followed and the subsequent influx of Middle Eastern refugees to the Western world. Youssef and Verdecchia draw on former U.S. President George W. Bush’s characterization of nations like Iraq and Iran as the “Axis of Evil.”⁹⁵ U.S. President G.W. Bush

⁹⁴ This aligns with Jameson’s critique of postmodernity, which produces depthless cultural representations, offering a critique that feels real but lacks substantial engagement with the complexities of identity. See Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), 6-7.

⁹⁵ Office of the Press Secretary, “State of the Union Address.”

introduced this term during his State of the Union address on January 29, 2002. In this speech, Bush identified Iraq, Iran, and North Korea as nations that, along with their terrorist allies, posed a significant threat to global peace due to their pursuit of weapons of mass destruction. The Axis of Evil concept was central to the Bush administration's framing of these countries as part of the broader "Global War on Terror" following the events of September 11, 2001.

The early productions of *Ali & Ali and the Axes of Evil* played a crucial role in establishing its reputation for incisive political satire and compelling performances. Co-written by Youssef, Verdecchia, and Chai, the play premiered in February 2004 at the Vancouver East Cultural Centre (now The Cultch) in Vancouver, British Columbia.⁹⁶ This initial production was a collaboration between Newworld Theatre and Cahoots Theatre Projects. After its Vancouver debut, the play was staged at Theatre Passe Muraille in Toronto, Ontario, and subsequently at the Montreal Arts Interculturels (MAI) Studio in Montreal, Quebec, within the same year.⁹⁷ Directed by co-author Verdecchia, the original cast featured Chai as Ali Hakim, Youssef as Ali Ababwa, and additional roles performed by Butler and Bill Dow, among others. In 2007, the play made its U.S. debut at On the Boards in Seattle, Washington, with the original cast and creative team.⁹⁸

The play opens with two Middle Eastern characters, both named Ali, who introduce themselves to the audience, clarifying that they are not terrorists but asylum seekers.⁹⁹ The Alis are there to entertain the audience by performing comedy and making them laugh to earn money. The Alis frequently refer to the audience as the "Sophisticated Western Audience." They perform using a style that parodies an

⁹⁶ Newworld Theatre, "History," accessed November 2024, <https://newworldtheatre.com/history/>.

⁹⁷ Teesri Duniya Theatre, "The Adventures of Ali & Ali and the Axes of Evil," accessed November 2, 2024, <https://teesriduniyatheatre.com/project/2004-the-adventures-of-ali-ali-and-the-axes-of-evil/>.

⁹⁸ "The Adventures of Ali and Ali and the Axes of Evil," *Montreal & Quebecois Literature*, accessed November 2, 2024, <https://mqclit.ca/plays/the-adventures-of-ali-and-ali-and-the-axes-of-evil/>.

⁹⁹ Throughout this research, the two characters named Ali, who are central to the narrative and frequently referenced, will be collectively referred to as "The Alis."

international businessman—charming, opportunistic, and persuasive.¹⁰⁰ The Alis continuously perform like a familiar figure to the North American Audience, acting charming, joking, and entertaining, so the customer gets convinced to buy. In the start, the Alis engage in a series of comedic sketches, parody news reports, political speeches, and Hollywood movies. For instance, they mock U.S. military slogans “Ali Ababwa & Ali Hakim: Huah! *Projection: Huah! A phrase used by elite Special Ranger Forces in the U.S. Army. See Black Hawk Down.*”¹⁰¹ The Alis begin to introduce themselves as “stateless refugees.”¹⁰² Ali Ababwa is a Christian minority (i.e., Copt), and Ali Hakim is a progressive Muslim who tries to distance himself from the negative stereotypes so the audience can accept him: “You see, we wish nothing more than to be real like you. Prosperous like you. Legal like you.”¹⁰³ In their conversations, they subtly make comic notes on the idea of making the bonds between various cultures under terms such as transculture, while they introduce a fictitious translation machine, “Phraseolator,” to highlight cultural misunderstandings humorously.¹⁰⁴

As the play progresses, the Alis propose various movie and performance ideas, describing details of a movie showing the cruelty of the Middle Eastern extremist groups and the protagonist is constantly victimized. The Middle Eastern protagonist’s dream is infatuated with Western dreams and values. The events in the scenario about war and conflict describe the philanthropist Western nation’s attempt to liberate their homeland, Agraba, and help the Agrabanian people. The Alis assert that their scenarios are worthy of winning prestigious awards like the Academy Awards.¹⁰⁵ The Alis propose a performance idea that they believe can be sold due to its commentary on embracing diversity in Canada. This idea of

¹⁰⁰ Youssef, Chai, and Verdecchia, *The Adventures of Ali & Ali*, 19.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 20.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 21.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 23.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 25.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 47; As one of the plays within the play concludes, one of the main characters addresses the Academy Awards, highlighting the dominance of cultural hegemony by referencing one of the most well-known Ideological State Apparatuses in the U.S. and global cultural market: “Ali Ababwa: I think I smell an Oscar.”

diversity in art is supported and enforced by the subtle speech of the theatre manager, Duncan, referring to the theme as “ethnic family drama.”¹⁰⁶

The Alis, affirming the manager’s words, mistakenly called their approach “many cultural people’s ancestral drama,” an error that shows their language and cultural barrier and their difficulty adjusting to the prevailing cultural and political narratives.¹⁰⁷ They start providing another ethnic family drama in which a family becomes a victim of xenophobia. Their performances grow increasingly intense, especially when Ali Hakim begins to critique Western intervention in the Middle East, prompting Duncan, the theatre manager, to tranquillize him and apologize to the audience.¹⁰⁸ Ali Hakim, tranquillized, comes back and acts calm and cooperative to Duncan’s demands. The Alis speak of their background in terms of religious diversity and ethnic diversity in their home, and the ongoing politics. They suddenly get a message that the evil Axes are coming (through projection), asking the head of security, Mohandas, to take care of this threat.

Then they start a puppet show, with “*photocopied faces of Georg W. Bush, Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld, and Colin Powell, on sticks, against a background photo of the Oval Office.*”¹⁰⁹ Through the show, the Alis express their support for the Western narrative of the war on terror, fighting against some Middle Eastern entities labelled as enemies of the State, a concept promoted by the Bush administration as the “Axes of Evil.”¹¹⁰ In the puppet show, their story justifies the 2003 invasion of Iraq and the atrocities at Abu Ghraib prison— the Alis mistakenly call it “Gayrab.”¹¹¹ However, when they attempt to critique Israeli politics, Duncan intervenes, emphasizing the limits of acceptable discourse.¹¹² Duncan

¹⁰⁶ Youssef, Chai, and Verdecchia, *The Adventures of Ali & Ali*, 49.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 49.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 55.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 66.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 19.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 68.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 75-76. “Duncan: [...] Look! Leave Israel out of it.”

repeatedly apologizes to the audience for these comments, explaining that such mistakes occur when intercultural policies are practiced.

The Alis attempt to present other performances that align more closely with the manager's interests; they first offer an image of a Russian family suffering in Russia and dreaming of living in Canada. Duncan is happy about Alis's performance. The Alis decide to perform another "ethnic people manycultural play."¹¹³ However, their stories do not align with what the manager wants, and the manager interferes again, asking Alis to leave and promising to refund the audience. The Alis attempt to flatter Duncan by expressing admiration for Scottish history, which allows them to continue their performance. Duncan becomes emotional when he speaks of his heritage background, allowing the Alis to remain on stage. Then, they start getting among the audience and convincing them with their stories so they can get some money to justify that they are looking for a potential threat. They begin by offering a history of politics and democracy in their home country and how, through a coup backed by the CIA, the democratic Agraba turned into a dictatorship.¹¹⁴ The Alis' story culminates in a musical performance that reveals their disillusionment with Western democracy.¹¹⁵

The actor who also plays Duncan enters and introduces his professional life and how economic pressure gave him no choice but to work there with Alis and make some money for his family to survive. Alis interrupt Duncan and introduces their sponsor to the audience. They bring Bin Laden on stage as their sponsor, entering the stage holding a suitcase and a gun. The Alis try to convince the audience that Bin Laden has friends in the American political network, justifying their source of sponsorship. They ask Osama to stop being a terrorist because all that is important is his image, implying that his negative image creates a contrast to the Western politics justifying their acts of war on terror: "Ali Ababwa: it's

¹¹³ Ibid., 81.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 106. This narrative closely resonates with events of 1954 Coup in Iran backed by CIA. As they describe further it resonates with clerics taking over the power in Iran after 1979.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 109-110.

OK if you don't want to stop jihad because, from what we can tell, in the postmodern, post-industrial West, it is not your action that counts so much as your image."¹¹⁶ Osama leaves, and the Alis open the suitcase, which explodes, causing the stage to go dark. In their final appearance on stage, the Alis are seen relaxing and talking about their dreams of a peaceful Agrabah, where they are with their families. They dream and stare at the audience as the stage gradually goes dark.

Deconstruction of Stereotypes in *Ali and Ali and the Axes of Evil*

This section applies the chapter's argument to *Ali and Ali and the Axes of Evil* by first examining how the play recreates and presents on stage the stereotype of Middle Eastern masculinity, as widely portrayed in North American mass culture, theatre, and digital media. By analyzing casting choices, characterizations, and the characters' positions within power and gender dynamics, we observe how the play rebuilds familiar stereotypes of Middle Eastern men. The analysis then explores how these reconstructed stereotypes are critiqued through innovative dramaturgical methods. Utilizing the concept of the ideology of form, we highlight how the use of theatrical techniques, particularly metatheatrical elements and exaggerated performances, dissects and deconstructs these stereotypes. This analysis will discuss that by incorporating these techniques, the artists draw attention to the artificial nature of racialized and gendered constructs. Furthermore, it will be discussed how the dramaturgy delves deeper by addressing the socio-political conditions that sustain stereotypical representations. The impact of this dramaturgical method is further examined in relation to postmodern features of artistic creation, demonstrating how the play offers a nuanced portrayal by distancing itself from pastiche and simulacra.

Rebuilding Stereotypes via Casting Choices

Like the casting choices in *A Line in the Sand*, the casting choices for the Alis characters in the early productions suggest that the physical appearance of Alis is iconic of Middle Eastern males:

¹¹⁶ Youssef, Chai, and Verdecchia, *The Adventures of Ali & Ali*, 116.

Youssef and Chai. It must be re-emphasized that appearance markers, also referred to as outer markers in this chapter, are the primary signifiers that trigger stereotypical perceptions.¹¹⁷ These markers consist of visual and auditory cues that stereotypes associate with identity categories, often generalized by factors such as geographical region, in this case, Middle Eastern masculinities. However, another Middle Eastern character (i.e., Bin Laden) is performed by actors whose visual markers are distant from what is commonly perceived as iconic of Middle Eastern men but instead resemble the so-called Caucasian category.¹¹⁸ It must be noted that the Bin Laden character's physical appearance primarily relies on solid makeup. Both Butler and John Murphy, who took the role of Osama (in the first two productions), have exaggerated, darkened faces and fake long beards (Figure 7). The use of exaggerated makeup underscores the importance of appearance markers not merely in recreating Bin Laden's image as an icon of terrorism. Aside from the costume, darkened skin, and long beard, there is little resemblance between the depicted character and the real person. By having so-called Caucasian actors play the role, the exaggerated makeup subtly emphasizes the contrast between the two masculinity categories: one side is represented through makeup, the other through natural features. This emphasis on outer markers in the Caucasian actors, juxtaposed with the natural appearance of the Alis characters, highlights the falsifying function of these markers in front of the audience's eyes, as the visual contradiction stirs the stereotyping gaze. It is through this exhibition of contradiction that the artwork addresses the falsifying

¹¹⁷ Visual and appearance markers, such as names, dress, accent, skin tone, facial features, and specific phrases, often serve as immediate triggers for stereotypes about Middle Eastern men. These markers frame individuals as "other," reinforcing stereotypes of violence and oppression and positioning them outside a normalized Western context. Commonly associated attributes, including dark skin, beards, and accents, are often linked to perceptions of foreignness and mistrust, overshadowing nuanced representations and reinforcing reductive portrayals/.

¹¹⁸ I use the adverbial modifier "so-called" to emphasize the common sensory dimension of the subject under discussion.

nature of outer markers and their inherent lack of depth, revealing them as unreliable indicators of identity.

The two so-called Caucasian actors in the early productions also play Duncan, an authoritative male figure. Their voices and physical appearances allow the audience to detect that Bin Laden's appearance at the end of the play is the result of exaggerated makeup applied to the same actors who performed Duncan. This intentional rebuilding of the stereotype on stage, coupled with the contradictions in outer markers, serves as a strategy to critique the perception of Middle Eastern masculinity that relies on superficiality and appearance; the production creatively emphasizes the visual aspects of stereotyping through this technique. The outer appearance of the Middle Eastern characters consists of markers that signify an ethnicized and racialized body, and the juxtaposition of these exaggerated markers with characters like Bin Laden reveals that outer markers can falsify identity perception. The actors' portrayal of Middle Eastern masculinity through exaggerated markers highlights



Figure 7. Tom Butler as Bin Laden in Ali and Ali and the Axes of Evil, 2004, Vancouver East Cultural Centre (Cultch Theatre). Source: Newworld Theatre.

how these markers are performative acts rather than fixed representations of identity. In Butler's sense of performativity, the embodied Middle Eastern males, from the Alis to Osama, are constructed through a series of repeated acts or markers that don't truly reflect an individual's identity but are merely

articulations, filled with contradictions.¹¹⁹ By juxtaposing characters like the Alis with the exaggerated portrayal of Bin Laden, the production exposes the flaws of relying solely on surface-level traits to define identity. Rather than presenting a new image, the production reconstructs an identity perception that, through staging its contradictions, disrupts the coherence of the stereotype.

Rebuilding Stereotypes' Racialized Markers

Apart from what the visual and outer markers signal, the stereotyping aspect of the characters on stage, as these characters introduce themselves and the plot moves forward, the North American audiences are more likely to associate the Alis with the stereotypical perception gained through mass culture and popular art. The characters Ali Ababwa and Ali Hakim, both derived from popular media and performing arts, serve as prime examples of how Middle Eastern masculinity has been stereotypically constructed and perpetuated in Western entertainment. These characters symbolize the broader stereotyping of the Middle Eastern region as a whole.

Ali Ababwa, known as Prince Ali in Disney's *Aladdin* (1992), is Aladdin's alter ego. He disguises himself as a wealthy prince to win the heart of a princess. This character is set in the fictional city of Agrabah, which the narrator introduces as "near the Jordan River."¹²⁰ The cartoon is abundant with visual and auditory stereotypes, not just of its characters but of the entire Middle Eastern world. Agrabah is depicted as a beautiful, exotic city with mosque-like structures and iconic Islamic architecture, surrounded by an endless desert. Outside the city, the landscape is nothing but sand, reinforcing the stereotypical image of the Middle East as a barren desert region. The city's inhabitants are portrayed

¹¹⁹ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), xv. Butler uses this term to redefine gender as an action that humans are compelled to perform by society rather than a state of being or bodily condition. Butler writes, "Performativity is not a singular act, but a repetition and a ritual, which achieves its effects through its naturalization in the context of a body, understood, in part, as a culturally sustained temporal duration." Gender can be imitated because it is always already a performance.

¹²⁰ Ron Clements and John Musker, directors, *Aladdin* (Burbank: Walt Disney Pictures, 1992).

with uniform skin tones, and the men are depicted with exaggerated hooked noses, bearded, wearing turbans, and riding camels and elephants. The storyteller at the film's opening (i.e. a peddler) is a bearded man with thick eyebrows and a distinct accent, welcoming viewers to witness a tale from the "mysterious" city of Agrabah.¹²¹ This introduction, alongside suspenseful music, heightens the exoticism and mystique associated with the Middle East. Furthermore, the film perpetuates a stereotype of violence and backwardness through scenes such as the punishment for theft, where thieves' hands are to be cut off for stealing a piece of bread or an apple. Hence, Ali Ababwa is a figure set within a world comprised of simplified visual, cultural, and conceptual interpretations of the Middle East. Aladdin's transformation into Prince Ali, complete with a turban and a flying carpet, further symbolizes mysteriousness besides the stereotypical image of a turbaned man.

Similarly, Ali Hakim, a character from *Rodgers and Hammerstein's Oklahoma!*, embodies another stereotype of Middle Eastern masculinity within North American performing arts. Described as a "Persian peddler," Ali Hakim is portrayed as an opportunist, a shrewd businessman, and a somewhat sleazy figure.¹²² His characterization as a foreigner sets him apart from the other characters, and his inferiority is highlighted in the script, such as when another character (i.e. Will Parker) says: "I don't know what to call you. You ain't purty enough fer a skunk. You ain't skinny enough fer a snake. You're too little to be a man, and too big to be a mouse. I reckon you're a rat."¹²³ Throughout *Rodgers and Hammerstein's Oklahoma!*, Ali Hakim is an object of ridicule, embodying stereotypes of Middle Eastern men as polygamous, manipulative, and sexually deviant. In one scene in *Oklahoma!*, Ali Hakim jokes about his brother in Persia having six wives, playing into the Western trope of polygamy in the Middle East:

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Rodgers and Hammerstein Organization, "Oklahoma! Characters."

¹²³ Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II, *Oklahoma!*, Acting Edition (New York: Concord Theatricals, 1943), 64.

Ali Hakim: It's a wonderful thing to be married. (*He starts off*)

Ado Annie: Ali!

Ali Hakim: I got a brother in Persia, got six wives.

Ado Annie: Six wives? All at once?

Will: Shore. 'At's a way they do in them countries.

Ali Hakim: Not always. I got another brother in Persia, only got one wife. He's a bachelor.

(*Exit.*)¹²⁴

These lines serve to further reinforce the notion of Middle Eastern men as both culturally backward and morally dubious. *Aladdin* is not merely an entertainment product for children; it actively passes on traditional stereotypes of the Middle East to new generations. Sally Totman writes: "Ideas such as having a hand cut off for stealing, women having to obey men, and having their marriages arranged are all included. Although this film is for the entertainment of children [...] the traditional stereotypes of the region are actively being passed on to a new generation."¹²⁵ This reflects the persistence of these representations across media and theatre. However, in plays like *Ali* and *Ali and the Axes of Evil*, these images are regenerated but with a critical stance, marking the point where the continuity is disrupted or distorted. Youssef and Verdecchia summon characters deeply embedded in mass culture, shaped by exaggerated markers of Middle Eastern identity. While these visual and cultural cues perpetuate stereotypes, the playwrights tend to adopt a dramaturgical approach that critically questions entrenched notions of the Middle Eastern man, using these characters as vehicles for critique within their play.

¹²⁴ Youssef, Chai, and Verdecchia, *The Adventures of Ali & Ali*, 25-26.

¹²⁵ Sally-Ann Totman, *How Hollywood Projects Foreign Policy* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 17.

Similar to the dramatic world depicted in Disney's *Aladdin* (1992) and the background perception of Ali Hakim in *Oklahoma!*, the *mise-en-scène* in *Ali and Ali and the Axes of Evil* extends beyond the Alis' appearances, contributing to their characterization as Middle Eastern masculinities. While the stage is bare, the worn-out carpet and eclectic music, referred to as "Arabic-Persian-Indo-World-fusion-cuisine music," firmly anchors the setting in a Middle Eastern and Central Asian context.¹²⁶



Figure 8. *Ali and Ali and the Axes of Evil*, 2004, Vancouver. Source: Newworld Theatre.

[Opening Stage Direction]: *The stage is more or less bare. The rear wall is a vaguely tent-like structure, onto which video is projected throughout. There is a worn carpet centre stage and some laundry (socks, some underwear) drying on the set. Music expressing the happiness of brown people in liberated zones plays as the audience enter and pass through the Ali and Ali security apparatus. Totally funky, vaguely Arabic-Persian-Indo-world-fusion-cuisine music kicks in.*¹²⁷

The worn-out carpet is implicitly reminiscent of the fantastical flying carpet from centuries-old European fantasy tales, which were inspired by Middle Eastern manuscripts since the rise of Orientalism.¹²⁸ Although the flying carpet does not originate from authentic Middle Eastern traditions, it

¹²⁶ Youssef, Chai, and Verdecchia, *The Adventures of Ali & Ali*, 5.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 11.

¹²⁸ While carpets originated in the Middle East, the myth of the "flying carpet" was a creation of Europeans, inspired by trade, colonial expansion, and stories about the East. This mythologized version was rooted in exoticism rather than reality, meaning that the flying carpet, as a fantasy object, was more a product of European cultural interpretation than an authentic Middle Eastern symbol. As Barnett writes, "The oriental carpet came to be mythologised as a flying carpet, perhaps signifying the distance it had travelled [...] but for the European client [...] that journey was likely to remain an imaginary

reinforces an Orientalist gaze on stage. The aged and worn-out carpet subtly layers the stage with symbols rooted in Orientalist modes of meaning, evoking the exoticism associated with Middle Eastern culture through fantasy.¹²⁹ As the Alis stand on the carpet in the opening scene, they appear as if they have travelled from a far-off, exotic land (Figure 8). The carpet's symbolism, combined with the Alis' outer appearances, reinforces their role as outsiders, a stereotypical view further emphasized by their opening dialogue.

The Alis begin with rapid, entertaining dialogue, shifting topics, and telling stories that evoke a sense of travelling performers. Their identity as "stateless refugees," combined with their singing and dancing across the plot, mirrors Orientalist depictions of Middle Eastern masculinity as seen in *Aladdin*'s image of Ali Ababwa from Agrabah and *Oklahoma*'s picturization of Ali Hakim.¹³⁰ These characters evoke familiar stereotypes of the Middle Eastern male, portrayed as both exotic and subject to ridicule, reinforcing Western fantasies.

Ali Hakim & Ali Ababwa: Here are our papers.

Ali Ababwa: We are stateless refugees.

Ali Hakim: From Agrabah.

Ali Ababwa: You know, Agrabah?

Ali Hakim: Land of clamstones, the Sammis, Kreskin's assistant?¹³¹

The use of terms like "clamstone" and "Sammis" signals a stereotypical Middle Eastern origin to the audience; while "clamstone" lacks direct historical ties to the Western audience's perception of the

one, fuelled by sales talk, travellers' tales, and culturally received ideas about the Orient." Pennina Barnett, "Rugs Я Us (and Them): The Oriental Carpet as Sign and Text," *Third Text* 9, no. 30 (1995): 16.

¹²⁹ Barnett. "Rugs Я Us (and them)," 16. It must be noted that even the carpet, whether worn or new, is part of the Orientalist gaze, regarded as merchandise from the Orient, "as alien and exotic artefacts, since neither carpets nor other kinds of floor covering were indigenous to Europe."

¹³⁰ Youssef, Chai, and Verdecchia, *The Adventures of Ali & Ali*, 21-22.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 21-22.

Middle East, it evokes an air of mystery and exoticism, reminiscent of Sinbad's legendary voyages, with its associations to the sea and hidden treasures.¹³² "Sammis" is closely related to "Semites" or "Semitic" peoples, which encompasses ethnic groups like Arabs and Jews.¹³³ The transformation of the Arabic *Sami* (i.e. سامي /'sa:.mi/) into the English "Semite" makes this interpretation. Initially a linguistic classification, the term "Semitic" evolved in the 19th century to encompass languages like Arabic, Hebrew, and Aramaic under the Semitic family.¹³⁴ The term was initially used as a linguistic attribute, often reducing Middle Eastern peoples to stereotypes; over time, the term took on broader ethnic connotations, employed by European scholars to describe peoples of the Middle East.¹³⁵ In *Ali and Ali and the Axes of Evil*, the use of "Sammis" and "Sammites" parallels this framework, invoking stereotypical ethnic markers to reinforce the Orientalist portrayal of Middle Eastern characters through a linguistic and later ethnic attribute under this term. Throughout the play, the Alis frequently refer to each

¹³² Daniel O'Brien, *Muslim Heroes on Screen* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 67-116. Adaptations of the Sinbad stories have circulated widely in Europe since the earliest translations of *One Thousand and One Nights*, extending into the 20th and 21st centuries. Sinbad's tales of mysterious voyages and hidden treasures, especially his association with the sea, have reinforced Western imagery of the exotic and unknown. O'Brien's analysis traces Sinbad's evolution in Western cinema, where films like *The 7th Voyage of Sinbad* (1958) amplify his appeal, connecting him to themes of exploration and concealed riches. Much like the term "clamstone," this symbolism draws on the allure of mystery and exoticism.

¹³³ "Semite," in *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology*, ed. T. F. Hoad (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), accessed June 7, 2025, <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780192830982.001.0001/acref-9780192830982-e-13604>. Hoad defines "Semite" as "Hebrew, Arab, Assyrian, or Aramaean, regarded as a descendant of Shem." *Shem* is the son of Noah, and Semites are "Any of the peoples supposed to be descended from Shem, son of Noah, including especially the Jews, Arabs, Assyrians, and Phoenicians." See "Semite," in *A Dictionary of World History*, 3rd ed., eds. Anne Kerr and Edmund Wright (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), accessed June 7, 2025, <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780199685691.001.0001/acref-9780199685691-e-3303>.

¹³⁴ Timothy Darvill, "Semitic," in *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Archaeology*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), accessed June 2, 2025, <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780191842788.001.0001/acref-9780191842788-e-3775>. Darvill states, "A general term that applies to a group of related languages rather than a set of recognizable communities [...] Arabic and Hebrew are the two most significant surviving Semitic languages."

¹³⁵ Julia Cresswell, *Oxford Dictionary of Word Origins* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), s.v. "Semitic," accessed December 15, 2024, <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780198868750.001.0001/acref-9780198868750>. Cresswell writes, "Despite the fact that Semite and Semitic are most often found as synonyms for 'Jew, Jewish,' frequently in a derogatory sense, Shem's descendants are said to have repopulated much of the land to the east of the Mediterranean, and traditionally included the Hebrews, Aramaeans, Assyrians, and Arabs. The words were initially introduced as linguistic terms to describe a family of languages of which Hebrew, Aramaic, Arabic, Ethiopic, and ancient Assyrian are members."

other's religious backgrounds, with Ali Hakim described as a "Sammite" and Ali Ababwa as a "Copt," a Christian minority from Egypt.¹³⁶

Ali Hakim: [...] They know nothing of the Sammites and Copts.

Ali Ababwa: I don't know.

Ali Hakim: For Sure. It's important that they understand. Context is everything. (he addresses the audience) Agraba is a predominantly Muslim society.

Ali Ababwa: Not Shia.

Ali Hakim: Not Sunni.

Ali Ababwa: But Sammi. [...]

Ali Hakim: The Sammis, on the other case, believe that there is a 13th Imam who has already appeared.¹³⁷

They continue introducing further groups in Agraba, such as Sammis, that are extremists, creating a resonance with extremist groups known as terrorists to North American officials to justify that there are good and bad religious groups from their imaginary world.

Ali Ababwa: But in Agraba, there is a group of fanatical Sammis.

Ali Hakim: A *small* group. Fundamentalists. Known as Sammites.¹³⁸

Thus, *Ali and Ali* rebuilds its characters' exotic, stereotypical backdrop using minimal visual resources (i.e., props and costumes) and verbal references; this approach contrasts with larger productions like *Aladdin* or *Oklahoma!*, yet still effectively summons and reinforces Orientalist stereotypes on stage.

¹³⁶ Roger S. Bagnall, "Copts," in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Ancient Egypt*, ed. Donald B. Redford. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), accessed October 12, 2024, <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780195102345.001.0001/acref-9780195102345-e-0152>. Bagnall writes about Copt as a "term commonly used for the Egyptian people in Late Antiquity and for the Christian population of Egypt from the Arab conquest of 640–641 CE to the present."

¹³⁷ Youssef, Chai, and Verdecchia, *The Adventures of Ali & Ali*, 57-58.

¹³⁸ Ibid., 60.

Beyond the visual creativity of the *mise-en-scène*, the dialogue reinforces not only the stereotypical referencing of Middle Eastern identity, using terms such as Sammite, but also presents them as clowning figures reminiscent of those in Disney's *Aladdin*. In *Aladdin's* Agrabah, men are pictured as subjects of entertainment and mockery, such as the Peddler and the Sultan's guards, while also being depicted as gullible (e.g., the Sultan) or oppressive and violent (e.g., Jafar, the Sultan's scheming vizier, Figure 9). The Alis themselves acknowledge their roles as entertainers for the audience:

Ali Hakim: Perhaps you are looking to make lateral move in world of entertainment, from handsome brown anchor to handsome brown actor?

Ali Ababwa: We propose a modest proposal of interest to you and all entertainment industry peoples here tonight. We at Ali and Ali have idea for movie vehicle.¹³⁹



Figure 9. Screenshots from Disney's *Aladdin* (1992): 1. The Peddler character; opening the film with exaggerated gestures and a comedic tone, establishes a fantastical and exotic atmosphere. 2. The palace guards, depicted as bumbling and easily fooled, serve as comedic relief, reinforcing stereotypes of incompetence. 3. A scene in the bustling Agrabah marketplace, predominantly populated by men and veiled women, reflecting Orientalist imagery. 4. Aladdin, disguised as Prince Ali Ababwa, is captured by the palace guards, showcasing themes of disguise and deception. 5. Aladdin discovers hidden treasures and the flying carpet, symbolizing the mystery and adventure associated with the exotic East.

Throughout the play, the Alis perform various stories and scenarios, including sharing their background life stories, which entertain the audience at the cost of humiliating their own cultural identities. The Alis even reinforce the simplifying narrative about the people in the Middle East, simply categorizing bad, oppressive people as fundamentalists or those oppressed and victims like themselves

¹³⁹ Ibid., 29.

seeking asylum and even begging for food.¹⁴⁰ The scene where they are asking for money to eat reinforces the peddler image, further downgrading the victim to a peddler and beggar. At one point, Ali Hakim goes into the audience and directly implores them for money, evoking the image of a peddler similar to Ali Hakim's characterization in *Oklahoma!*¹⁴¹

Ali Hakim: [...] enters the audience and addresses one person in particular.

Give me twenty dollars, and we get pizza. Come on. Give me twenty dollars. I thought you said you like pizza. (he improvises depending on audience's response) How 'bout you put it on gold card. You get points; I get pizza. What, you ate before the show? Must be nice.

He returns to the stage.

Ali Hakim: They think nobody else needs to eat.¹⁴²

Regarding this clown-like portrayal and its alignment with stereotypes, Youssef confirms that the Alis characters reflect North American audiences' projections of Middle Eastern subjects.

Agraba, because it doesn't exist, that these two characters are a riff on projections of the audience. They are created as much out of the idea of what the representation of the Middle Eastern is as they are anything real; they are clowns, and they are not real, Ali Hakim is a Persian peddler from *Oklahoma*, Ali Ababwa is the character from the *Aladdin* early scenes of a carpet seller (the character is also referred to as Peddler). They are not real, they are projections. That's not to say there are some moments of realness in them, but they are as much a mirror to the audience as they are actual characters. So, they are from Agraba because Agraba is where Disney's *Aladdin* takes place. They are an inversion of the West's fantasy about the Middle East.¹⁴³

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 54-55. See the dialogue in these pages where the Alis are referring to fundamentalists.

¹⁴¹ Rodgers and Hammerstein Organization, "Oklahoma! Characters."

¹⁴² Youssef, Chai, and Verdecchia, *The Adventures of Ali & Ali*, 27.

¹⁴³ Youssef, interview by Isapour, July 25, 2022.

Ali and Ali and the Axes of Evil reconstructs these familiar narratives and rearticulates them in ways that align with how Middle Eastern men are imagined in mass culture and everyday understanding. Youssef stresses that the Alis are not representations of real Middle Eastern identities, but exaggerated projections based on Western fantasies and stereotypes of Middle Eastern masculinity.

So far, we have examined several layers of visual, linguistic, and cultural representations of the Alis that evoke recognizable stereotypes deeply ingrained in popular culture. The directors employ the Alis' physical features, such as their iconic bodies, costumes, accents, and props like the carpet, to reinforce these representations. These representations are solidified using fictional names and inspired by mainstream cultural productions, such as Disney and Broadway musicals. Verbal cues, like references to "Sami" and familiar imagery of peddlers and beggars, serve to deepen the stereotypical depictions of Middle Eastern men, aligning these characters with long-standing cultural narratives.

Rebuilding Stereotypes via Positionality within Hierarchical Order

The representations of the Alis in this performance extend beyond merely cultural or ethnic markers to include aspects of gender and social power dynamics. The Alis are marginalized not only in terms of ethnicity and culture but also in how they are depicted as victims or victimized figures, reinforcing their subordination within both gender and social structures.

From the outset, with only the Alis on stage, they assert dominance by moving through the space, directly engaging the audience, and establishing control over the narrative. However, this manifestation of dominance collapses as another character enters; later in the play, the Alis become subordinated to Duncan, a hegemonic figure manifested through his outfit and Caucasian physicality, besides his authoritative stance towards the Alis. Duncan dictates their performance, ensuring the Alis adhere to his prescribed agenda. He intervenes as the Alis critique American politics or perform stories that are not in Duncan's favour. Duncan's interventions shift the dynamics, raising the question of whether the Alis'

humour functions as a form of resistance or as a spectacle that ultimately reinforces their subordination. For instance, the Alis are describing a film scenario they think is worth winning an award, ending their description with a pity-evoking scene of a child's death:

Ali Hakim: [...] the hot desert wind blows, whipping the tattered remains of a child's soccer jersey up from the dusty street, up above the prefabricated tents, up past Old Glory herself, but in the distance, we hear the thin wail of muezzin.

From off we hear muezzin call in gibberish

Calling the faithful to prayer.

We hear the muezzin sing "kill all the white guys."

The End.¹⁴⁴

Duncan enters while the Alis think they presented an entertaining story:

Ali Ababwa and Ali Hakim: Theatre manager!

Duncan: My name is Duncan McVingoe and I'm the Artistic and Managing Producer here at the Vancouver East Cultural Centre [...] Ladies and gentlemen, again I apologize for the unorthodox interruption. However, as part of our pro-active education and outreach mandate, I feel it is necessary to facilitate ongoing dialogue for personal and intercultural exploration. [...] After all, that's what ye came to see – an ethnic family drama that offers you a window onto our nation's cultural diversity [...] so tha's what they're [meaning the Alis] going to be doing now [...] (*With a significant glance at Ali and Ali*) Right?¹⁴⁵

Duncan's authoritative intervention as stage manager shifts the power dynamic, as he reprimands the Alis for their uncomfortable stories, picturing misery, and dark images because of war on one side, which is the Western powers. Duncan repeatedly intervenes as the Alis' performance repeatedly

¹⁴⁴ Youssef, Chai, and Verdecchia, *The Adventures of Ali & Ali*, 46-47.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 47-49

disaligns with Duncan's agenda, which demands avoiding any mention or critique of Israel, and no mockery of American politics.¹⁴⁶

Duncan: Ladies and gentlemen, again I apologize for the unorthodox interruption [...] I feel it is necessary to facilitate ongoing dialogue for personal and intercultural exploration [...] we had agreed that they would present a new ethnic family drama.¹⁴⁷

[...]

Duncan: What was that'? Look, Leave Israel out of it.¹⁴⁸

After several Intervention, Duncan threatens to shut down the performance:

Duncan: Tha's it. You people. We give ye this opportunity and ye just push our tolerance till it snaps. So, out ye get. Oot of my theatre. And you'll be hearing from my lawyer! Ladies and gentlemen, my sincerest apologies. These two will refund yer money. I'm very sorry they've wasted yer valuable time.

Ali Ababwa & Ali Hakim: No no no—

*Duncan traps Ali Hakim and begins to push him out of the theatre.*¹⁴⁹



Figure 10. Tom Butler (left), Youssef (middle), and Chai (right). *Ali and Ali and the Axes of Evil*, 2004, Vancouver. Source: Newworld Theatre

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 75. Alis perform a comedic story with characters from the George W. Bush Administration, at the end of which The U.S. dominance of power is repeatedly questioned.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 48-49.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 76.

¹⁴⁹ Youssef, Chai, and Verdecchia, *The Adventures of Ali & Ali*, 87.

Dressed in a kilt and a tam, symbolizing his Western European heritage, Duncan's dominant stance at the front of the stage contrasts with the Alis, who stand together at the back, visually emphasizing his authority over them (Figure 10).¹⁵⁰ The Alis quickly display their inferiority when Duncan threatens to shut down their performance, jeopardizing their asylum plea.

To gain Duncan's approval, the Alis conform to mainstream narratives, telling stories that align with Western stereotypes. Their performances reinforce Western depictions of the Middle East, reproducing dominant narratives to legitimize their presence and appeal for asylum. For example, they describe a film where a Western community avenges a terrorist attack by waging war on a Middle Eastern region, rescuing the oppressed people. This narrative frames non-terrorist Middle Eastern communities as victims seeking freedom from despotic rulers, pleading for help from a superior Western power. These stories resonate with the U.S.-led coalition's war with Iraq (in both Persian Gulf Wars) and the broader notion of establishing democracy in the Middle East.

The Alis recount a dramatized war-torn narrative involving a character named Ali, a young boy who is an innocent victim of the war, whose only dream is to play soccer with an English soccer player. Western soldiers are depicted as valiant heroes who sacrifice themselves for the helpless locals, especially Ali. The Western soldiers (represented by the British) take on the role of the "saviors" in the story, undertaking dangerous missions and displaying acts of heroism, like retrieving a soccer jersey for Ali.¹⁵¹ Meanwhile, the Middle Eastern characters (like Ali and the other local townspeople in the Alis' script within the play) are portrayed as either victims or primitive, brainwashed fanatics. The script ends with the boy dying before the soldiers can deliver the soccer shirt to him, which is his dying wish. The

¹⁵⁰ Although some audience members might draw an intertextual link between Duncan's kilt and name and King Duncan of *Macbeth*, the play makes no explicit Shakespearean references. Nonetheless, for those attuned to such resonances, Duncan's appearance may evoke a form of authority reminiscent of King Duncan, a symbolic embodiment of the authority of an Ideological State Apparatus that enforces hegemonic norms within the Canadian theatre space.

¹⁵¹ Youssef, Chai, and Verdecchia, *The Adventures of Ali & Ali*, 31.

ending is “We hear the muezzin sing Kill all the white guys.” an exaggerated, grotesque stereotype of how the West often imagines Muslim calls to prayer as threats of violence or hatred.¹⁵²

Through this narrative, the Alis mirror how the West, particularly in film and other forms of mass culture, constructs the Middle East through a binary of victim and victimizer. Within the play’s meta-theatrical framing, the Alis’ internal performance reconstructs stereotypical ideas of helplessness, barbarism, and religious extremism associated with the Middle East, juxtaposed against the civilized, heroic nature of Western intervention. Furthermore, the broader dramaturgical frame, the play’s self-referential focus on reproducing stereotypical narratives, underscores the constructed nature of these stereotypes, revealing the Alis’ own narrative as one shaped by compliance with hegemonic discourse. Yet, this very conformity, imposed under Duncan’s authority, exposes the coercion underlying the Alis’ compliance, showing how they are compelled to enact the victim role under the theatre manager’s oversight rather than passively endorsing the stereotype. Thus, in its broader framework, the play represents another form of reconstructing Middle Eastern masculinities as victims of cultural dominance and hegemonic narratives: the Middle Eastern masculinities embodied by the Alis, along with the Ali character from their internal narrative, are not merely passive victims of Orientalist stereotypes but rather subjects forced into conformity under cultural hegemony. In doing so, the Alis position themselves as victimized Middle Easterners who seek U.S. protection from violent powers in their region. However, the play’s meta-theatricality emphasizes that the Alis’ asylum within Western society depends on actively navigating and embodying these imposed stereotypes rather than rejecting them outright. This act of remaking and embodying the Middle Easterner as a victim serves both as the Alis’ self-representation and as a means of distancing themselves from the “terrorist” label, a move that legitimizes their identity as figures deserving of protection under a hegemonic gaze. This Orientalist-

¹⁵² Ibid., 30-47.

rooted gaze dichotomizes Middle Eastern masculinity, allowing only two possibilities: powerless victim or violent oppressor. By engaging in this strategic self-positioning, the Alis confirm their victimization under hegemonic dominance, where conformity becomes unavoidable, while the play simultaneously reveals how deeply entrenched the victim–victimizer binary is in portrayals of Middle Eastern masculinity, and how inevitable it becomes to navigate that paradigm. *Ali and Ali* exposes not only the constructedness of these stereotypes but also the conditions under which they are reconstructed, providing a further layer of critical examination into why, in mass culture, Middle Eastern subjects are often portrayed within one of two stereotypical roles: either an oppressor or a powerless victim in need of protection.

The Alis’ emphasis on their marginalized identity as refugees and asylum seekers positions them within an inferior and vulnerable space in the hierarchy of identity. Immigration status, particularly when tied to the gendered and racialized body, adds another layer of vulnerability to an already minoritized subject. When the subject is framed as a refugee of war and asylum seeker, as in the case of the Alis, it reinforces the stereotypical image often portrayed by the mass media: Middle Eastern war refugees depicted as passive victims in their host countries, devoid of political and social agency as they are unable to defy their oppressors. They are shown as reliant on the West for support and salvation, a narrative frequently illustrated by images of refugees in news reports, refugee camps, or scenes of them being rescued at sea, such as by coast guards in the English Channel. These representations of Middle Eastern asylum seekers perpetuate a stereotype of a subordinated, marginalized masculinity within various hierarchies, including male gender order, social status, and positions of power.

The blend of costume elements in the Alis' attire visually reinforces their conformity to Western norms. Chai's turban is the sole direct marker of Middle Eastern identity among the costumes, while other elements—such as the bow tie, ruffled shirt, and suit pants—are drawn from various European fashion traditions. This mixture of garments suggests that the Alis, though visually linked to their Middle Eastern heritage, are portrayed primarily as conformists to the ideal of Western masculinity in a male-gendered order. The historical references in these garments—from the Enlightenment-era ruffled shirt to the modern bow tie—underscore how the Alis, through their costumes, outwardly assimilate into European-origin aesthetics (Figure 11). The combination of these markers reflects the Alis' adaptation effort to the cultural framework of their host society (i.e., Canada), positioning them as figures who navigate their Otherness while striving for legitimacy within an Occidental context. In other words, the Alis' costume blend emphasizes the tension between maintaining their identity and conforming to the hegemonic gender and power orders, suggesting that assimilation may offer them a better position in this identity hierarchy.

Figure 12. (Right) Camyar Chai (Right) and Tom Butler (Left), Ali and Ali and the Axes of Evil (2004), Vancouver East Cultural Centre (Cultch Theatre). Source: Newworld Theatre



Figure 11. (Left) Camyar Chai (Right) and Marcus Youssef (Left) in Ali and Ali and the Axes of Evil (2004), Vancouver East Cultural Centre (Cultch Theatre). Source: Newworld Theatre



Thus, the Alis are depicted as conforming to Western hegemonic masculinity and hierarchy of power, assimilating to the norms and wants of the host society. They reinforce their inferiority by acknowledging and performing the host's stereotypical views of Middle Eastern subjects. Even their costumes—an amalgamation of European garments from various

periods—reflect their attempt to emulate Western masculine aesthetics to gain recognition and social legitimacy.¹⁵³ The Alis' interactions with Duncan, who embodies Western hegemonic masculinity, reveal another layer of subordination and complicity, highlighting their inferior social position. Overall, the Alis, through their actions, narratives, and visual cues, embody the victimized Middle Eastern stereotype. By conforming to the hegemonic narrative, they distance themselves from the violent Middle Eastern stereotype in an attempt to gain minimal recognition, albeit within the margins of Western society's identity hierarchy.

Having established how *Ali and Ali and the Axes of Evil* reconstructs and stages stereotypical images of Middle Eastern masculinity, reflecting and reinforcing popular perceptions that marginalize non-Caucasian men, we now turn to how the play strategically deconstructs these stereotypes. By employing metatheatre and satire, Youssef and Verdecchia challenge these reductive representations, exposing a stereotypes' constructed nature and inviting critical reflection. The following analysis examines how these stereotypes, once reconstructed, are strategically deconstructed through a method that interrogates these representations, advancing the chapter's thesis. The following sections will discuss how the play disrupts the stereotypes on stage by revealing their contradictions through specific staging and dramatic techniques.

The Dramaturgy of an Effective Critique: Metatheatre and Satire

The Alis' portrayal as marginalized, gendered, and racialized figures reconstruct stereotypes through various elements and layers. The question remains whether these representations are critiqued or merely reinforced. If a critique exists, it suggests that the directors have devised a creative, layered dramaturgical strategy using costume, dialogue, props, and stage design to build and deconstruct the stereotype. The following discussion will explore how Youssef and Verdecchia use metatheatricity and

¹⁵³ This visual conformity underscores the broader dynamic where racialized men, including Middle Eastern subjects, seek to align their appearance with Western ideals to secure a place within the gender hierarchy.

satirical elements to deconstruct the stereotype and reveal its nature as a discursive construct rather than a fixed reality.

Ali and Ali and the Axes of Evil subverts hegemonic representations of Middle Eastern men while revealing the structural forces that limit deeper critiques, offering a meta-critique of how these constraints contribute to the perpetuation of stereotypes. In *Ali and Ali and the Axes of Evil*, metatheatricality and satire are not just artistic choices but critical tools that challenge reductive stereotypes. Metatheatricality, by highlighting its own theatricality, destabilizes conventional logics of realism and coherence, thereby exposing the constructedness of Middle Eastern masculinity stereotypes.¹⁵⁴ This self-referential approach allows the play to layer cultural and historical insights, foregrounding the mechanisms through which prevailing assumptions are rendered unstable. Similarly, satire, through humour, irony, and exaggeration, exposes human follies and institutional flaws, often critiquing political figures and policies.¹⁵⁵ In the context of the play, satire serves to mock and undermine the simplistic binaries and

¹⁵⁴ Anton Bierl, "New Thoughts on Metatheatricality in Attic Drama: Self-Referentiality, Ritual and Performativity as Total Theatre," in *Theatre and Metatheatricality: Definitions, Problems, Limits*, eds. Éléonore Paillard and Stéphane Milanezi (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2021), 108, 117-119, 128. Metatheatricality refers to the moments when theatre explicitly foregrounds its mechanisms, drawing attention to the nature of performance and representation. Rather than existing as a distinct genre, it functions as a structural and performative device, allowing plays to "self-referentially point out [their] own structure" and "make theatre its subject." Bierl emphasizes that "metatheatricality does not denote another level from the outside, but performance playing with elements of performance." This self-referentiality operates through multiple dramaturgical techniques, including self-commentary within performances, layered dramatic structures, and moments when plays highlight their own theatricality rather than merely telling a story. Metatheatricality "neither destroys illusion nor the entire play by deconstructing its texture and form" but instead functions to "reinforce performance and enhance generic coloring." The interplay of "ritual and performative activity in the here and now," as well as dramatic layering, demonstrates how theatrical works critique and expose their constructedness. Bierl highlights that metatheatricality engages with self-referential modes of performance, drawing attention to its mechanisms without breaking its structural cohesion.

¹⁵⁵ Satire has long been recognized as a powerful means of critiquing authority, exposing institutional flaws, and dismantling dominant ideologies. Brandon Manning explains that satire, particularly in its Juvenalian form, "attacks governments, social norms, religion, and so on to dismantle their appropriative power," emphasizing how satire can forcefully critique hegemonic structures. Manning asserts that "Black satire peels and scratches at the corners of blackness to question our most basic assumptions about race, gender, and class," highlighting its subversive nature in challenging social structures. See Brandon J. Manning, *Played Out: The Race Man in Twenty-First-Century Satire* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2022), 8-9. Campbell and Abdullah emphasize how satire functions as a "form of political communication that uses humor, irony, and/or parody to provide substantive criticism of political actors, political institutions, media, and the various absurdities of our sociopolitical systems," quoting from A. Martinez and Y. Atouba's study on satire's impact on Latinx political engagement. See A. Martinez and Y. Atouba, "Political Satire TV Shows in the Trump's Era: Examining Their Impact on Latinx Viewers' Political Knowledge, Political Engagement," quoted in Christopher Campbell and Tawfiq Abdullah, *Race, Representation, and Satire* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2023), 37. These perspectives affirm that satire in various forms is not merely a comedic tool but a strategic means of questioning dominant political narratives.

reductive portrayals of Middle Eastern men, offering a more multi-dimensional view. By diverging from postmodern conventions like pastiche and simulacra, the play exposes the inconsistencies of these stereotypes, suggesting that the media-driven image of Middle Eastern masculinity is ultimately a constructed representation. Through these dramaturgical strategies, the play adds depth and complexity to portraying Middle Eastern masculinities, directly supporting the chapter's argument that such techniques invite scrutiny and critical reflection.

In *Ali and Ali and the Axes of Evil*, we observe the use of multiple metatheatrical devices, such as narrative within narrative structures. The characters perform mini-plays within the main play and narrate stories, such as movie scripts, as if they are engaging in a recitation.¹⁵⁶ Additionally, the Alis engage directly with the audience, acknowledging their presence and commenting on their performance. The dialogue is often self-referential, making note of the production itself and the specific theatre where it is being performed.

Ali Hakim & Ali Ababwa: Hello, People in Real Life Canada!

Ali Hakim: Do Not be Afraid!

Ali Ababwa: And thank you for coming to Vancouver East Church Basement.

*[In the footnote, the authors highlight that depending on the location of production, this line alters to be a "site-specific reference"]*¹⁵⁷

These elements direct our attention to the concept of metatheatre. In the following, we examine how the adoption of metatheatrical devices in the dramaturgy of *Ali and Ali and the Axes of Evil*, offers a critique that marks the very constructive nature of the stereotypes embodied in the Alis characters.

¹⁵⁶ Youssef, Chai, and Verdecchia, *The Adventures of Ali & Ali*, 30-47. In these pages of the play, the Alis are narrating a movie script about a boy named Ali, who was killed by extremists in the Middle East, and the Western soldiers could not be on time to save this boy.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 21.

While metatheatre has been used across various historical periods and in different theatrical forms, it is not a specific genre with fixed structural principles like tragedy or comedy.¹⁵⁸ Instead, metatheatre is a device, a technique employed across genres and contexts to achieve a specific effect: to critique both the act of storytelling and the cultural or ideological assumptions underpinning it.¹⁵⁹ The key function of metatheatre is self-referencing—the acknowledgment of its own theatricality. It reflects on the mechanics of representation, inviting audiences to question what is presented as reality on stage and, by extension, in the world. Metatheatre acts as a critical lens, exposing the constructed nature of identities, social roles, and cultural narratives. By highlighting characters as actors and events as staged, metatheatre parallels the ways in which social categories, like identity and power, are similarly constructed rather than naturally occurring. It asks audiences to reflect on how ideologies shape perceptions, making reality a product of these constructs. For instance, the device of a play within a play not only critiques the narrative it presents but also reveals how cultural forms, like theatre itself, are complicit in perpetuating dominant social orders. This distinction between reality and illusion, often made apparent through formal devices such as self-referential gestures and direct audience engagement, reveals the obscuring nature of ideology.

In *Ali and Ali and the Axes of Evil*, metatheatre is effectively used to subvert and critique the reconstruction of Middle Eastern stereotypes, particularly the binary portrayal of the Middle Eastern

¹⁵⁸ Examples of using metatheatre are as follows: 1- Euripides used it to critique traditional Greek values and the very nature of mythological thinking. In plays like *The Bacchae*, for instance, Euripides uses self-aware characters to highlight the conflict between reason and passion, as well as the social roles and expectations placed on gods and humans alike. 2- Shakespeare uses this device to examine power, performance, and identity. In *Hamlet*, for example, the play within a play is used to reflect on the nature of truth and performance in both theatre and life, indirectly critiquing the court's politics and the ways in which people perform certain roles in society. 3- Brecht uses it to critique the social impact of capitalism and the shortcomings of a society under this mode of production. His method *Verfremdungseffekt* involved breaking the fourth wall, where actors directly address the audience, thus preventing emotional immersion and prompting intellectual reflection.

¹⁵⁹ Form refers to the broader, structural principles governing a work of art or literature. It includes the overall genre (tragedy, comedy, epic, etc.) and the way the narrative or thematic elements are shaped. Form is often historically situated and can represent a larger cultural or ideological framework. It's more encompassing than a single technique or strategy. Device, however, refers to a specific technique or tool used within various forms.

man as either a victim or an aggressor. One method the play critiques this binary is by referencing the melodramatic genre for its oversimplification and emotionally manipulative narratives. For instance, in the scenario presented by the Alis as part of their imagined screenplay, the audience is given a humanistic story where Western soldiers pity a child but are ultimately sacrificed by extremist Middle Easterners. The metatheatrical device here doesn't merely highlight the melodramatic dichotomy of good (victim) versus evil (victimizer); it critiques this constructed dichotomy by showing how cultural representations exploit the victimization of vulnerable figures, like children, to elicit pity and reinforce simplistic binaries. By adding an innocent dimension to the Middle Eastern character, the play reveals how such portrayals contribute to constructing a dramatic world divided into good and evil.

Ali Ababwa: "This damned war."

Ali Hakim: But Ali is not angry. He is peaceful. For he has seen how your boys have already transformed his country; how his friends, the urchins of the streets, are happier, even though their schools are destroyed and they have no running water and their parents are being sexually tortured in the prisons of the former dictator.

Ali Hakim: As Ali lies in his hospital cot he speaks of soccer and his hero, the great English metrosexual soccer player, David Bendham, and how he dreamed of one day playing against Bendham and, of course, losing but that would be okay because after the game he would trade shirts with Bendham, having won his respect having played so valiantly.¹⁶⁰

[...]

Ali Ababwa: "This damned war."

Ali Hakim: Back in our jeep there is silence.

¹⁶⁰ Youssef, Chai, and Verdecchia, *The Adventures of Ali & Ali*, 38.

Ali Ababwa: The sort of silence you get when it's dark and men drive a jeep through hostile territory to deliver a soccer shirt to a boy with no arms. Suddenly

Ali Hakim: an ambush.

Ali Ababwa: Incoming RPG!

Ali Hakim: The jeep explodes in a fireball of fire.¹⁶¹

This method of surface-level representation, depicting a simplistic good-versus-evil dichotomy, is also seen in *A Line in the Sand*. Through their play-within-a-play narrative, *Ali and Ali* create a dramatic world reminiscent of *A Line in the Sand*. However, the function of metatheatre here is to add a critical layer, revealing that what appears on the surface is not reality but a constructed representation—one shaped by particular perspectives and biases within cultural production. The Alis' portrayal of the Middle Eastern boy named "Ali" in their scenario echoes Sadiq's character, where Middle Eastern masculinity is embodied by a vulnerable youth dreaming of a peaceful life in North America, reinforcing the trope of the West as an asylum for the oppressed. The self-referentiality in *Ali and Ali* goes beyond simply acknowledging the play within the play; the narrative unfolds as a movie script that mirrors melodramatic conventions, exposing how such stories differentiate between victimized and violent Middle Easterners while both remain trapped in stereotypical portrayals. By highlighting this generic structure, *Ali and Ali* uses metatheatre to expose the artificiality of melodramatic narratives, showing how they shape and reinforce the audience's perceptions of Middle Eastern identities in a way that conforms to stereotypical expectations.

Another way the metatheatrical device in *Ali and Ali and the Axes of Evil* provides a profound critique of the construction of identity is by highlighting the structural forces and power relations that encourage the rise of specific genres and reinforce fixed images of Middle Eastern men. The play

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 40.

underscores how cultural and political hegemony actively shapes the portrayal of these identities, particularly through picturing the expectations placed on the Alis' performances. For instance, when the Alis heighten the emotional tension in their movie script narrative, they depict Middle Eastern fundamentalists praying and shouting, "Killing all the white people."¹⁶² This scene stages a violent, demonizing stereotype of Middle Eastern men as religious fanatics. While the Alis' exaggeration reinforces the violent stereotype, it simultaneously equates Islamic identity with fundamentalism, an extreme oversimplification in the portrayal. At this point, Duncan, who earlier in the play encouraged the characters to align their stories with "trans-cultural negotiations" and acts as a representative of the Ideological State Apparatus, intervenes to moderate the narrative's extremism, ensuring that the cultural product conforms to the identity politics associated with discourses of multiculturalism.¹⁶³

Ali Hakim: [...] From off, we hear the muezzin call in gibberish

Calling for faithful to prayer.

We hear the muezzin sing, "Kill all the white guys."

The End.

Ali Ababwa: I think I smell an Oscar.

Ali Hakim: Do you?

Enter Duncan.

Duncan: Excuse me. Can I have some light here? (He addresses the audience.)

I apologize for the interruption, ladies and gentlemen.

Ali Ababwa & Ali Hakim: Theatre's manager!¹⁶⁴

¹⁶² Youssef, Chai, and Verdecchia, *The Adventures of Ali & Ali*, 47.

¹⁶³ Ibid., 25.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 47.

At this extreme point of representation, the play reveals how melodrama is subject to the surveillance of hegemonic forces. When the narrative ventures into controversial territory, such as depicting Middle Eastern extremists in prayer calling for violence, it no longer aligns with the cultural and political expectations shaped by multiculturalism policies, which claim to provide equal standing to diverse cultural backgrounds. Day argues that multiculturalism in Canada is intended to manage diversity; however, this principle is violated in the *Alis*' script, necessitating suppression and control.¹⁶⁵ The *Alis*' recited movie script, presented in a melodramatic form, marks the moment when the narrative departs from the boundaries enforced by ideological state apparatuses, such as the theatre space. Once the narrative crosses these boundaries, as in the case of this exaggerated portrayal, it disrupts the normative expectations of melodrama and highlights the ideological constraints governing cultural productions.

Duncan: My name is Duncan McVingoe and I'm the Artistic and Managing Producer here at the Vancouver East Cultural Centre. And first, I'd like to thank everyone for coming. Thank you. It's an honour to have you. Welcome. I'd also like to make it clear that our mandate to represent, accommodate, dignify, and empower cultural communities through theatrical productions of high artistic quality doesn't mean that—well [...]¹⁶⁶

Through direct engagement with the audience and the use of a play-within-a-play, the metatheatricity in *Ali and Ali* not only highlights the constructed nature of narratives about the Middle East and its characters but also underscores the cultural politics and structural conditions that mediate such portrayals of Middle Eastern masculinity. The theatre manager's intervention exemplifies how the ideological apparatus controls which narratives are deemed acceptable, emphasizing cultural

¹⁶⁵ Richard J. F. Day, *Multiculturalism and the History of Canadian Diversity* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000), 4. Day notes, "Multiculturalism will remain a slave to the history of Canadian diversity. To escape the limitations of the modern-colonial nation-state, those who would be Canadians must traverse the fantasy of unity, which underlies both the problem of diversity and its solution via state recognition of a system of official identity categories. Only then can the potential of multiculturalism as radical imaginary, which tends towards spontaneous emergence, be separated from multiculturalism as state policy, which tends towards management, discipline, and uniformity."

¹⁶⁶ Youssef, Chai, and Verdecchia, *The Adventures of Ali & Ali*, 48.

management policies and trends through his direct address to the audience, particularly with phrases like ‘intercultural exploration.’

Duncan: Well, it means we have a responsibility to you, our audience, a responsibility we tek seriously, which is why I’ve taken the extraordinary step of interruptin’ and [...] Excuse us, please. Excuse me. [...] As part of our pro-active education and outreach mandate, I feel it is necessary to facilitate ongoing dialogue for personal and intercultural exploration.¹⁶⁷

The Alis’ compliance in all these interventions and their frequent mistakes in not following the manager’s prescribed themes show their strategic move aimed at gaining legitimacy and ensuring their performance continues, rather than a genuine commitment to the principles of interculturalism. The Alis’ use of the term “manycultural” instead of “multicultural” further highlights their misunderstanding of the hegemonic narrative, signalling their effort to comply and revealing their lack of deep engagement with it.¹⁶⁸ This slip underscores their precarious position, where they are compelled to conform without truly subscribing to the ideology imposed on them. This calculated conformity reflects a survival strategy within the cultural framework, where following the rules helps maintain their position, even though they do not fully align with or embrace the ideological narrative.

Ali Ababwa: (*to audience*) Apologies. The esteemed manager is, of course, correct. We agreed to present to you a manycultural peoples’ ancestral drama, which we will do in due course.¹⁶⁹

Thus, the metatheatre device not only marks the hegemonic rule over artworks that reconstruct stereotypes of Middle Eastern men as victims or victimizers but also serves as a critical tool to expose these stereotypes as cultural fabrications shaped by power relations. By drawing attention to the mechanisms behind these constructions, the play subtly undermines their perceived reality as

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., 48. The nonstandard spellings in Duncan’s dialogue reflect the original text’s intentional representation of vernacular speech patterns.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., 49.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., 49.

representations of Middle Eastern masculinities. Through metatheatre, the play repeatedly references the constructed nature of identity and the conditions that sustain these constructs, gradually undermining the authority of stereotypical portrayals. Consequently, the familiar stereotypes initially presented on stage are critically questioned, losing their legitimacy and revealing themselves as cultural fabrications rather than inherent truths. This process supports the chapter's argument that by carefully considering the embedded content within dramatic and staging forms, what Jameson theorizes as the "ideology of form," the creators purposefully employ dramaturgical strategies such as metatheatre, satire, and play-within-a-play structures to underscore the constructed nature of Middle Eastern masculinity.¹⁷⁰

Another instance illustrating the influence of external forces on cultural representations is the intertextual reference to Bob Woodward's *Bush at War*, followed by the Alis' puppet show, which extends and builds upon this text. At one point, the character as the head of security, Mohandes, is projected on stage while reading Bob Woodward's *Bush at War*.¹⁷¹

Ali Ababwa & Ali Hakim: Shazaaaaam!

They press the button.

¹⁷⁰ A dramaturgical approach that adopts self-referential techniques without acknowledging their historical and ideological embeddedness risks reproducing stereotypes rather than subverting them. Without a critical awareness of the forms and their ideological functions, such a practice may devolve into pastiche, which, as Jameson argues, is a superficial imitation and employment of forms, lacking the deeper socio-historical engagement that distinguishes genuine parody or critical artistic intervention. See Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 16–19, 83–87.

¹⁷¹ Woodward is a journalist who cooperatively worked on the Watergate scandal, the exposition of which earned him credit as an investigative journalist of American politics. Reviewers of his book *Bush at War*, such as Bruce Berkowitz, believe Woodward's book "uses a different approach." The book does not seem to critique Bush's administration on the War on Terror; Berkowitz writes, "He emerges as a decisive leader who kept his cool under pressure. The book refutes Bush critics who claimed pre-9/11 that he was a lightweight." Berkowitz, Bruce. "Enduring Freedom, From Under the Covers." *Orbis* 47, no. 3 (2003): 563, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0030-4387\(03\)00043-7](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0030-4387(03)00043-7). Another peer reviewer sees Woodward's book as a result of Bush's administration cooperation to be presented well in this well-known journalist account, Lawrence Freedman critiquing that Woodward is "relying too much on cooperation with the key players and by paying too little attention to the actual course of events on the ground." Lawrence D. Freedman, review of *Bush at War*, by Bob Woodward, *Foreign Affairs* 82, no. 2 (March–April 2003): 152.

Ali Hakim kicks Tim [A character played by Duncan's actor] off the stage. The screen flickers to life. Mohandes is eating a donut and reading Bob Woodward's Bush at War. Behind him, an image of a bikini babe is on his computer screen.

Mohandes: This is Mohandes Panir Ali Zia ... One moment please. He swallows the remains of the donut. Gandhinehruhomeinijinnah. Have you caught a terrorist?¹⁷²

This intertextual reference, pointing to a book that claims to document the Bush administration's decision-making process during the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, is followed by the Alis' satire of the same administration through their puppet show. Here, the play examines the dynamic between state-driven political agendas and the narratives projected to the public through ideological state apparatuses, such as the theatre space in which the Alis perform. *Bush at War* is not a critique of U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East but rather a documented account emphasizing the administration's struggles and complexities, subtly framing Bush's decision-making process within a dualistic good-versus-evil context. This aligns with a broader narrative that characterizes Western interventions as moral necessities, ultimately reinforcing hegemonic representations of Middle Eastern figures as either villains or victims in need of Western intervention.¹⁷³ The Alis puppet show contrasts the book's narrative by offering a critical lens through satire; it reveals the mechanisms by which dominant political agendas shape cultural representations and its satirical portrayal of the same figures.

The puppet show features caricatures of figures like Donald Rumsfeld, Dick Cheney, Colin Powell, and George W. Bush, continuing the storyline alluded to in *Bush at War* but reinterpreted as a

¹⁷² Youssef, Chai, and Verdecchia, *The Adventures of Ali & Ali*, 64. The long word is a juxtaposition of several names of political figures: Gandhi, Nehru, Khomeini, and Jinnah.

¹⁷³ See footnote 171.

dark satire of the Bush administration's policies in Iraq and their justification of war crimes such as those at Abu Ghraib.¹⁷⁴

Semi-Colin: Mr. President, the media are having a field day with the prison abuse—

Rummy: Fuck 'em. Keeps their mind off the really nasty shit we're doing. Hehehe.

Dubya: I saw those Abu Ghayrab pictures. Didn't I?

Cheney: You did, sir.

Dubya: Can I see them again?

Rummy: No, sir. [...]

Cheney: I mean, what do they expect?

Rummy: Yeah!

Cheney: Hell, I look at way better stuff than that on the internet all the time.

Rummy: Amen, Fatty!

Cheney: Like Rush Limbaugh said, "These soldiers were just blowing off a little steam."¹⁷⁵

The satirical dialogue critiques the administration's casual attitude towards abuses of power, exemplified by the line, "Like Rush Limbaugh said, These soldiers were just blowing off a little steam," which reflects how the U.S. political apparatus framed instances like Abu Ghraib to downplay their significance.¹⁷⁶ Through satire, the *Alis* critique the government's dismissive approach to violence in the Middle East, subtly undermining the dualistic portrayal of Middle Eastern masculinity in Western

¹⁷⁴ Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, *Committee Study of the Central Intelligence Agency's Detention and Interrogation Program*, 113th Cong., 2nd sess., December 9, 2014, S. Rep. 113-288, vii, accessed June 7, 2025, <https://www.congress.gov/congressional-report/113th-congress/senate-report/288>. According to the 2014 United States Senate Select Committee on CIA's detainees in Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq, there have been several illegal criminal acts of torture and interrogation of detainees by American intelligence Officials. Chairman Dianne Feinstein writes, "While the Office of Legal Counsel found otherwise between 2002 and 2007, it is my personal conclusion that, under any common meaning of the term, CIA detainees were tortured. I also believe that the conditions of confinement and the use of authorized and unauthorized interrogation and conditioning techniques were cruel, inhuman, and degrading. I believe the evidence of this is overwhelming and incontrovertible."

¹⁷⁵ Youssef, Chai, and Verdecchia, *The Adventures of Ali & Ali*, 68-69.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 69.

discourse. The Alis proceed with their critique in the puppet show without violating the broader hegemonic narratives that are often maintained even within democratic systems, in which it is expected to see critiques aligned with left-right political dynamics, such as those within the U.S. or Canada, where opposition and government narratives coexist.¹⁷⁷ Criticism within this framework, primarily through media and cultural productions, is tolerated and even expected if it remains within the boundaries of hegemonic forces. However, as soon as the Alis stray into more sensitive or controversial territory, such as critiquing Israel, Duncan, the theatre manager, intervenes:

[This is the stage direction for the Alis' puppet show.]

Projection: Which country alone in the Middle East has nuclear weapons?

Which country in the Middle East refuses to sign the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and bars international inspectors?

Which country in the Middle East is in defiance of 69 United Nations Security Council resolutions and has been protected from 29 more by U.S. vetoes?

Hint: It's not Agrabah.

Duncan: Hang on, hang on.

¹⁷⁷ The political dynamics between Democrats and Republicans in the U.S., or Liberals and Conservatives in Canada, often revolve around critiques of governance. However, specific issues remain off-limits for critique, such as unwavering state support for Israel. For example, groups like Hezbollah or Hamas are officially designated as terrorist organizations in Canada and the United States, and any narrative supporting these organizations could be considered a criminal act. Critiques of Israeli policies can also be labelled as hate speech, with accusations of anti-Semitism potentially leading to legal consequences. A recent example involves Francesca Albanese, the UN Special Rapporteur for Palestinian territories, who was accused of justifying Hamas's October 7, 2023, attack. As a result, Israel barred her entry, with the foreign ministry stating her comments justified violence. Lazar Berman, "UN Special Rapporteur for Palestinians Banned from Israel after Appearing to Justify Oct. 7 Massacre," *Times of Israel*, February 12, 2024, accessed January 16, 2025, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/un-special-rapporteur-for-palestinians-banned-from-israel-after-appearing-to-justify-oct-7-massacre/>. Additionally, the silence or positions of academic institutions in the wake of rising civilian casualties in the Israel-Palestine conflict illustrate the complex nature of public discourse. Some critique Israel's extreme measures, while others emphasize Israel's right to self-defence. Many choose silence to avoid social, financial, or professional backlash during this highly charged and unprecedented conflict. This demonstrates that while critical narratives can prevail and are not always confined within the ideological state apparatus, they may become restricted when they address sensitive issues that are legally protected, hegemonically supported, or widely accepted.

Ali Ababwa: Oh, theatre's manager has returned.¹⁷⁸

Duncan's intervention exemplifies the constraints imposed on cultural narratives, reinforcing the idea that even satirical critiques must adhere to acceptable boundaries. *Ali and Ali* highlights the regulation of ideological apparatuses that determines which critiques are permissible and which must be suppressed, exposing external forces shaping cultural representations, particularly narratives portraying Middle Eastern masculinities and their contexts. By allowing certain critiques while restricting others, the play exposes the political parameters within which Middle Eastern masculinities are represented, particularly when these representations stray into areas deemed too critical or subversive. Through metatheatre, *Ali and Ali* use intertextual references, and the puppet show to reveal how even satirical portrayals, though intended to challenge hegemonic discourses, are monitored to align with state and media narratives. This dramatization demonstrates how, as the chapter argues, dramaturgical techniques such as metatheatre expose the construction of Middle Eastern identities as deeply intertwined with external political interests and controlled to fit within hegemonic discourse. Thus, the play not only critiques the stereotypes themselves but also foregrounds how specific socio-historical contexts and cultural conditions shape, sustain, and regulate such representations. By consistently referencing these structural dynamics, the play exposes how certain socio-historical elements become perceived as universal truths about Middle Eastern masculinity, rather than elements that require deeper exploration of their contextual complexities and nuances. Through this critical framing, *Ali and Ali* destabilizes stereotypical understandings that rely on simplified cultural and historical markers.

In the play, the puppet show sequence underscores how even critical approaches in cultural production, such as theatre, remain subject to external hegemonic forces, revealing how stereotypes persist, and critiques are ultimately de-weaponized. By employing a historically significant form of

¹⁷⁸ Youssef, Chai, and Verdecchia, *The Adventures of Ali & Ali*, 75.

political commentary—the puppet show—the Alis attempt a practical critique through satire and parody. Historically, puppet shows have been used as a form of political commentary, as seen in 19th-century Europe, where “anti-government satire often depicted puppets” and “satirical cabarets [...] introduced puppet versions of well-known figures.”¹⁷⁹ The Alis adopt this form to parody the George W. Bush administration’s handling of the “War on Terror,” contrasting with narratives like Woodward’s *Bush at War* that rationalize the Bush administration’s decisions. In the puppet show, for example, the satirical representation of political figures:

Semi-colin: Sir.

Dubya: I want a report on that whole apocalypse in the Middle East, Second Coming, Jesus returning to the Holy Land thing. I want it on my desk by noon tomorrow and I want it now!

Semi-colin: Sheeeit, what up, dog? Sho, stick it to de negro. I ain’t no mothafuckin’ office boy. I’m de mothafuckin’ secretary of the mothafuckin’ state. I’n take dat report and shove it up yo skinny white ass, mothafucka. And Rumsfeld, you mothafuckin’ cracker, any more lip from you and I’n fuck you up, mothafucka. (*beat*) I mean, I’ll get my people on it, sir. Right away.

(*As semi-colin exits, we hear ...*)

Semi-colin: Yo! Condoleezza, get your ass over here, girl!

Dubya: Let me make it very clear. The War on Terror is not a figure of speech. It’s more like a bumper sticker.

Rummy: Mr. President, let us pray.

(*Music: “Ride of the Valkyries” bursts on.*)¹⁸⁰

This scene satirizes political narratives that glorify and mythologize government discussions and decision-making processes, often highlighting the absurd justifications used by those in power. While

¹⁷⁹ Kennedy, *Companion to Theatre and Performance*, s.v. “Puppet Theatre.”

¹⁸⁰ Youssef, Chai, and Verdecchia, *The Adventures of Ali & Ali*, 74.

the Alis appear to adopt a historically effective form of political critique, the play demonstrates the limitations placed on such critiques. When the Alis' show begins to address sensitive political and ideological issues, such as references to Israel, the theatre manager, Duncan, intervenes, illustrating how cultural production is tightly monitored and subject to censorship.

Through metatheatrical devices and intertextuality, the play exposes how even critiques aimed at deconstructing stereotypes, like those surrounding Middle Eastern masculinity, are constrained or deprived of their full critical potential. By employing metatheatrical narrative forms, the play moves beyond simply highlighting negative, simplistic traits often associated with Middle Eastern men in stereotypes to offering a deeper critique, revealing how these stereotypes are constructed and sustained. In doing so, metatheatre and satire subtly undermine the foundation of these familiar images, weakening the stereotypical representations that render Middle Eastern identities as the unfamiliar other. Therefore, in *Ali and Ali*, the metatheatrical elements not only serve as storytelling devices but also underscore the constructedness of the stereotypes being depicted. The puppet theatre within the play thus serves as a metatheatrical device that highlights the performative construction of Middle Eastern stereotypes and the limitations of genuine political critique under hegemonic control. The Alis, as Middle Eastern men, navigate a space where they must pretend to conform to the rules imposed upon them while simultaneously attempting to offer critique. Their performative struggle mirrors the real-world tension between marginalized groups trying to critique power while being constrained by the same structures they seek to challenge.

Distancing from Postmodern Features

In contrast to *A Line in the Sand*, which employs the postmodern convention of pastiche to construct a stereotypical image lacking original reality through melodramatic elements, *Ali and Ali and the Axes of Evil* distances itself from postmodern features by choosing styles that add depth and reveal

nuances and contradictions in portrayals of Middle Eastern masculinities. The play's use of metatheatrical elements and satire, forms historically associated with contexts that used them to deliver critique through self-referentiality and exaggeration, contrasts with dramaturgies that adopt past styles solely for aesthetic effect, overlooking the ideological intent embedded within these genres. Thus, *Ali and Ali* moves away from pastiche and representations as simulacra, which contribute to the stereotyping of portrayals. The formal strategies in *Ali and Ali* not only expose the constructed nature of Middle Eastern identities but also prevent the audience from passively consuming these representations, avoiding their reduction to consumable images for mass appeal.

At the core of *Ali and Ali*'s resistance to postmodern conventions is its use of metatheatre, which breaks the fourth wall and invites audiences to reflect on the performance's constructed nature. The direct engagement of the Alis with the audience exposes the artifice behind their roles, making it clear that these representations are fabrications shaped by external forces rather than genuine realities about Middle Eastern masculinities. This self-referentiality prompts the audience to question the staged stereotypes drawn from mass culture, challenging passive consumption and revealing the political agendas behind the depictions of Middle Eastern masculinities. It is as if Youssef and Verdecchia extract the character of Prince Ali (i.e. Ali Ababwa) from Disney's *Aladdin* and Ali Hakim from Broadway's long stage history, positioning them in direct engagement with the audiences. *Ali and Ali* disrupts the passive acceptance of Middle Eastern stereotypes by repeatedly addressing the constructed nature of these identities and their dramatic world.

In the context of deconstructing stereotypes through metatheatrical devices, *Ali and Ali* moves beyond simply highlighting problematic representations of Middle Eastern men as fixed and simplified and interrogates the broader structural forces shaping these depictions. Through Alis' puppet show, the play exposes the hegemonic forces in play within the ideological state apparatus in a theatre space while

exposing the limitations of critiques under the forces of cultural hegemony. This resonates with Jameson's concept of "meta-critique," which emphasizes how even "progressive" representations in theatre are subjected to postmodern dominance and its cultural hegemony.¹⁸¹ The play becomes a reflection not only of its content but also of its production mechanism, revealing how stereotypes of Middle Eastern masculinity persist, even in critical works. The metatheatrical performance foregrounds how theatrical narratives about Middle Eastern identities are often oversimplified and perpetuated, even within ostensibly critical contexts. Through its meta-critique, the play exposes the contradictions in how socio-historical elements are selectively used to construct and validate stereotypes, inviting viewers to question both the stereotypes themselves and the political structures that preserve these contradictory representations of Middle Eastern masculinity.

Satire, unlike pastiche, retains its critical capacity by exposing the absurdities of power structures. In *Ali and Ali*, the exaggerated portrayals of figures like George W. Bush and Dick Cheney dismantle the ideological narrative of the "War on Terror" by amplifying its absurdities. Through farce, the play undermines the gravity of narratives that justify war and violence in the Middle East and the exportation of democracy.

The combination of these techniques and devices allows *Ali and Ali and the Axes of Evil* to distance itself from postmodern cultural conventions, where the representation of identity, including Middle Eastern masculinity, tends toward becoming stereotypical. The play resists presenting a simplistic victim-hero binary that easily fits familiar tropes about the Middle East and its masculinities.

¹⁸¹ Christopher Wilkes, "Jameson, Fredric Ruff," in *The Dictionary of Modern American Philosophers*, ed. John R. Shook (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), , accessed June 7, 2025, <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780199754663.001.0001/acref-9780199754663-e-490>. Meta-critique seeks to understand how the structural relations condition the very act of critique. Interestingly, as I was trying to synthesize the staging of meta-critique with a critique of stereotype, I came across Jameson's use of meta-narrative as a tenet in his methodology of literary analysis. According to Jameson, all cultural products, including critique, are historically and materially situated; they cannot be entirely detached from the systems they seek to challenge. Meta-critique goes beyond merely highlighting problematic representations; it interrogates the very structural forces that shape and constrain representation itself.

Instead, the artwork employs self-referential forms to bring to the stage—and emphasize through satirical exaggeration, the very process by which Middle Eastern characters are polarized within a good-versus-evil conflict. *Ali and Ali and the Axes of Evil* highlights the very structures that simplify cultural representations, creating conditions that make portrayals of Middle Eastern masculinity appear as oversimplified realities without original reference—a simulacrum. Thus, the conscious dramaturgical choices in the play—its metatheatre, satire, and farce—allow it to resist postmodernity’s cultural dominance and present a more complex, politically aware portrayal of Middle Eastern masculinity.

Chapter One Conclusion

This chapter has examined the contrasting dramaturgical approaches in *A Line in the Sand* and *Ali and Ali and the Axes of Evil*, focusing on how each play navigates and critiques the stereotype of Middle Eastern masculinity. The findings suggest that the forms and structures adopted in these works directly affect their capacity to deconstruct or reconstruct stereotypes within contemporary cultural production.

In *A Line in the Sand*, the reliance on melodrama as the primary narrative form limits the play’s potential for critical engagement. As discussed, melodrama reinforces binary structures and patriarchal frameworks, offering simplified moral conflicts that fail to challenge deeper social hierarchies. Although the play humanizes aspects of the Middle Eastern male characters, it ultimately reduces them to passive victims. This binary framework of good versus evil, where Middle Eastern men are cast either as perpetrators or victims, mirrors the inherent limitations of melodrama – an approach that lacks the ideological nuance necessary to question the power structures that sustain such representations. Consequently, the play falls short of fully dismantling the stereotypes it portrays, instead offering a portrayal that is less overtly negative but still constrained by conventional stereotypes that align with postmodern features of cultural forms.

In contrast, *Ali and Ali and the Axes of Evil* actively resists the postmodern cultural dominance through the innovative use of metatheatre, satire, and farce. These dramaturgical choices allow the play to distance itself from postmodern aesthetics like pastiche and simulacrum. By breaking the fourth wall and using self-referential devices, the play exposes how Middle Eastern masculinity as an identity group is constructed through hegemony and identity politics, while revealing how specific socio-historical traits are selectively attached to this construct and presented as fixed truths. Through this metatheatrical approach combined with farce and satire, the play highlights contradictions within these constructed characteristics, challenging what common sense often perceives as natural traits of Middle Eastern masculinities. The use of metatheatrical devices disrupts the audience's passive consumption of the narrative, while farce and satire destabilize the narratives that portray Middle Eastern masculinity as either a violent oppressor or a helpless victim. *Ali and Ali and the Axes of Evil* thus goes beyond a surface-level critique of stereotypical perception to address the systemic forces that construct and sustain the stereotypes. Through this layered dramaturgical approach, *Ali and Ali* engages in a critique of both stereotypes and the structures that perpetuate them.

The chapter concludes that *A Line in the Sand* remains limited in its critique due to its use of melodrama, a genre inherently associated with reinforcing hierarchical masculinity and gendered order. This approach functions as a pastiche, rendering the representation shallow and devoid of original reality. The melodramatic structure in *A Line in the Sand* shifts the stereotype from one of aggressive and oppressive masculinity to one of helplessness and victimhood; this shift reinforces a binary representation of Middle Eastern men as either violent or oppressed rather than dismantling these stereotypes. In contrast, *Ali and Ali and the Axes of Evil* employs dramaturgical choices, combining metatheatricity and satire styles historically associated with questioning social and power hierarchies, to distance itself from postmodern conventions that often lead to stereotypical and shallow

representations. Rather than presenting a depthless simulacrum, *Ali and Ali and the Axes of Evil* invites viewers to critically reflect on the structures that perpetuate these stereotypes, making them appear as realities about Middle Eastern men. *Ali and Ali and the Axes of Evil*'s resistance to postmodernity's cultural dominance positions the play's dramaturgy as an effective tool for dismantling stereotypes of Middle Eastern masculinities.

CHAPTER TWO

De-Historicized Masculinity in Modern Times Presentations

Only something which has no History is Definable.

Nietzsche - Genealogy of Moral

Introduction

This chapter examines how the attempt to transcend stereotypes through what I identify as universalist abstraction, the removal of cultural specificity in favour of shared human values, paradoxically creates conditions that facilitate the reproduction of stereotypes. Through analysis of *Aurash* and *The Death of the King*, I demonstrate how adaptations of Iranian epic heritage, originally rooted in Persian mythology with masculine characters embodying gendered concepts of nation and patriotism, become distorted through universalizing dramaturgical strategies. This process produces what Jameson describes as the schizophrenic contemporary subject—identity unmoored from its signifying chains—as cultural markers are mixed, erased, or shifted across cultures, creating a chaos of signs and visual ambiguity that leaves images vulnerable to stereotypical projection. Even apparently deconstructive gestures, such as the cross-gender casting employed since 1998, including the 2017 all-female cast performing traditionally male warrior roles in *Aurash*, fail to disrupt underlying structures; applying Butler’s performativity theory reveals that while bodies change, the gendered dramatic world and its hierarchies remain intact, with characters still positioned as victims or oppressors. The analysis reveals how universalism, rather than transcending cultural boundaries as intended, evacuates the historical and cultural specificity necessary to resist dominant interpretive frameworks.

The “human experience,” in which commonalities of values and experiences are examined, is the pivotal theme in Soheil Parsa and his collaborators’ dramaturgical approach in Modern Times Theatre

Company. This humanist and universalist view is also announced in their company's mandate, which Parsa and Peter Farbridge, an actor and theatre creator, co-founded.¹

Parsa's leadership in shaping most of Modern Times Theatre's productions is particularly significant, especially when it comes to works rooted in Iranian culture and Persian literature. While both Parsa and Farbridge are credited with translations and edits for the case studies in this chapter, Parsa's role as the sole Persian-speaking member of the group places him at the forefront of interpreting and adapting these works for Canadian audiences.² For instance, Parsa often performs epic Persian passages aloud to convey their tone and rhythm to facilitate adaptation and translation.³ As noted in the plays' introduction, Parsa draws on reputable Persian literary works, such as the poetry of Rumi and Khayyam, which are often romanticized in Western mass culture for their spiritual and exotic appeal.⁴

¹ Modern Times Stage Company, "About," accessed June 7, 2025, <https://moderntimesstage.com/about/#work>, quoted in Ric Knowles, *Performing the Intercultural City* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2017), 131. "Peter Farbridge," Concordia University, accessed June 14, 2025, <https://www.concordia.ca/faculty/peter-farbridge.html>. Peter Farbridge is a theatre actor and creator working in Montreal. As a founding member and co-artistic director of the Modern Times Stage Company from 1989 to 2022, Peter appeared in numerous productions, including the title roles of *Macbeth* and *Hamlet*. He has earned several Toronto Dora awards for his work with the company. Among that work, Peter has co-translated and adapted the plays of several Iranian artists with Parsa and served as co-writer or co-deviser on several new theatrical productions, including *Hallaj* (2009) and *Forgiveness* (2014).

² Soheil Parsa, Peter Farbridge, and Brian Quirt, trans. *Stories from the Rains of Love and Death: Four Plays from Iran* (Toronto: Playwrights Canada Press, 2008), vii. The translators note that "many times the text was read out loud in Farsi so as to hear the rhythmic and percussive nuances in the source text that needed to be emulated in the translated version," indicating Parsa's central role as the Persian-speaking member in guiding the translation process. The case studies of this chapter focus on two plays originally written in Persian. Farbridge's inclusion as a translator/editor likely reflects collaborative efforts rather than a direct translation from Persian, as he lacks familiarity with the language and cultural depth required for such works. These case studies' source plays demand profound knowledge of Persian, as they are not written in modern Persian but rather in a language rich with literary and epic elements from earlier periods, akin to the poetic depth of *Shahnameh*.

³ Parsa, Farbridge, and Quirt, *Stories from the Rains of Love and Death*, vii. The published translation further notes: "The plays were translated in a collaborative fashion. Sometimes, the translation was done face to face with the literal translation in English being read out loud, whereupon the text would be transcribed into fluid English. [...] Readings of other texts as well, including translated works of Rumi and Khayyam, helped to understand the imagistic world of the playwrights."

⁴ Ibid., vii. However, Rumi and Khayyam's works do not carry a Persian model and tone of epic literature, further evidencing the grounds for this chapter's argument about the superficiality of representations and resulting stereotyping. Franklin Lewis, *Rumi: Past and Present, East and West: The Life, Teaching and Poetry of Jalāl al-Dīn Rumi* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2000), 526-527. Lewis examines the romanticization of Rumi's works in Western receptions. Lewis highlights the "Rumi-craze" in the United States, where Rumi has been celebrated as a best-selling poet, with translations like Coleman Barks' *The Essential Rumi* achieving sales of over 110,000 copies within three years of publication. Rumi is framed as a "universal, non-denominational mystic," appealing to New Age sensibilities and Western notions of spirituality (p. 540). Mehdi Aminrazavi, *The Wine of Wisdom: The Life, Poetry and Philosophy of Omar Khayyam* (New York: Oneworld Publications, 2013), 102, 109-111; Similarly, Aminrazavi traces Khayyam's enduring Western appeal to Edward FitzGerald's 19th-century translations of the *Ruba'iyyat*, which framed Khayyam as a hedonistic skeptic and a symbol of secular humanism. Aminrazavi observes

This framing (i.e. resorting to Khayyam and Rumi to create a cultural bond) allows other translators and possibly the Canadian audiences unfamiliar with the sources of adaptations to grasp some elements, albeit superficially, of the epic, poetic, and Sufi aspects Parsa intended to convey.⁵ Another reason for emphasizing Parsa's role in this scholarship is his position as the principal director of the case studies and the artistic director of Modern Times Theatre during their productions.⁶

Parsa, as the co-founder and first artistic director of Modern Times Theatre, describes his works as intercultural, with the concept of shared humanity occupying a central role.⁷ Parsa's emphasis on universal humanism, combined with the idea of transcending cultural borders and advocating for cross- or intercultural theatre, implicitly aligns with the intercultural theatre developed in Europe, which places human universalism at its thematic center.⁸ Eurocentric intercultural theatre, as practiced by Peter Brook, Jerzy Grotowski, and Eugenio Barba in the mid-20th century, is a model that incorporates performing

that this legacy persists in mass culture today, where Khayyam is celebrated more as a poetic figure embodying romantic and mystical ideals, often at odds with his broader scholarly significance in Persian culture.

⁵ Indeed, any translation is inherently an adaptation, and every adaptation develops its thematic and interpretive independence. However, the components of these adaptations—such as characters, plot, and dramatic motivations—derive their significance and meaning from the source texts and their historical context. While Modern Times' productions convey themes and meanings independent of their sources, they share components anchored to culture and history, which is the semiotic bond between the plays and their adaptation sources. Further discussion of these sources and their deep roots in the geocultural history will be provided in later pages.

⁶ Modern Times Stage Company. "Past Productions," accessed June 7, 2025, <https://www.moderntimesstage.com/past-productions>. Farbridge plays the role of assistant director in some performances, such as in Sarajevo's production of *Aurash*. In other instances, Farbridge had no involvement beyond his name appearing as a translator. For example, in the 2010 *Aurash* performance in Toronto, only Parsa and Brian Quirt are credited as translators. Farbridge had an acting role in earlier productions, but Parsa consistently directed. The same pattern is evident in the play *The Death of a King*, where Farbridge is credited as a translator and also served as assistant director in the 2016 production.

⁷ When Parsa speaks of different productions of *Aurash*, he says, "In all these works I saw transcultural and transnational dimensions. Or autonomously, it happens in my head, and with a little adaptation, I make changes to the work because being human per se is imperative for me. I do not want to perform and work only for particular audiences. Because I am intellectually engaged with a belief more extensive than or beyond the borders of Iran." TVT Canada, "Arash Directed by Soheil Parsa," YouTube video, 24:48, originally aired in Persian, translated into English by Arash Isapour, posted August 21, 2017, accessed June 7, 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=23qUkXKfIGs>. Theatre scholar Daphne Lei calls this model Hegemonic Intercultural Theatre (HIT): "a specific artistic genre and state of mind that combine First World capital and brainpower with Third World raw material and labour, and Western classical texts with Eastern performance." See Daphne P. Lei, "Interruption, Intervention, Interculturalism: Robert Wilson's HIT Productions in Taiwan," *Theatre Journal* 63, no. 4 (2011): 571, accessed June 7, 2025, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41411240>.

⁸ Patrice Pavis, ed., *The Intercultural Performance Reader*, (London: Routledge, 1996), 42, 71, 121. In this collection of essays theorizing Eurocentric intercultural theatre, authors ascribe "universal principles of humanism" and "universalist" approaches to practitioners such as Schechner, Barba, and Grotowski. He refers to Brook's standpoint as "radical utopianism and deep-seated humanism" and attributes Antoine Vitez's theatre to "the pure tradition of European humanism."

and dramatic elements from non-European cultures into theatre-making, often decontextualized from their original cultural and historical contexts. Contrary to Ric Knowles' assertion that Modern Times offers a distinct form of intercultural theatre, the close reading and analysis in later pages will demonstrate how Modern Times' productions align with Eurocentric intercultural theatre practices.⁹ Knowles acknowledges that Modern Times' mandate, with its focus on "uniqueness" and "differences" within the human experience, diverges from the practices of European directors.¹⁰ Although Knowles claims Modern Times' appropriation differs from those of these Western directors, there is no specific analysis of how Modern Times' intercultural model differs from other multi/inter/cross-cultural works. Parsa repeatedly stresses his standpoint in multiple interviews, which aligns with the mandate set for Modern Times: "My perspective is beyond borders and cultures."¹¹ Moreover, Parsa repeatedly stresses the universalist aspect of their representation, though none of his interviews can be found explaining what this universalist vision is apart from its generalized and superficial addressing.¹² When asked to

⁹ Knowles, *Performing the Intercultural City*, 134. Knowles highlights the distinctiveness of Modern Times' intercultural model, attributing it to Parsa's unique positioning at the intersection of various influences: "the work of western modernist playwrights and directors that Parsa was exposed to in Iran in the late 1970s, contemporary Persian/Iranian plays and theatrical practices that blend ancient Persian fables and forms with their modernist refashionings, and Sufism." Knowles dedicates his chapter on Modern Times primarily to exploring how these intersections might differentiate Modern Times' interculturalism from Eurocentric models. However, this argument appears more as a hypothesis than a substantiated claim, as it does not adequately address the decontextualization of the sources of adaptation from their historical and cultural origins. Furthermore, Knowles's reliance on the artist's autobiographical accounts, without thorough cross-referencing with historical details, results in several inaccuracies about Parsa's Iranian background, which weakens the overall argument for Modern Times' distinctiveness.

¹⁰ Knowles, *Performing the Intercultural City*, 131-132. Addressing the Modern Times's mandate, Knowles writes: "As a mission statement, this [the mandate] differs little from the predatory intercultural projects of modernist theater artists such as Peter Brook, Jerzy Grotowski, and Eugenio Barba, except, crucially, for its focus on "uniqueness" and "differences" within the human experience, which Modern Times' European models are most often happy to erase in search of a common, undifferentiated humanity. But there is no critique in this mandate of the appropriative practices of universalist humanism or Western modernism. Indeed, Soheil Parsa would be delighted to be positioned within the tradition of the great European modernists whose work he admires and from whom he has learned a great deal."

¹¹ TVT Canada, "Arash Directed by Soheil Parsa."

¹² There are several instances of Parsa's attributing universal approach and vision in his works; for instance, in an interview with CBC radio on the production of the play *The House of Bernarda*, Alba, Parsa says: "The theme and the universal forecast always fascinated me. His [i.e. Federico García Lorca] vast artistic imagination, his unique style of theatre that confronts naturalism and realism." Soheil Parsa, "Soheil Parsa Reflects on His Career and Contributions to Canadian Theatre," interview by Tom Power, *Q with Tom Power*, CBC Radio, April 19, 2022, accessed June 3, 2024, <https://www.cbc.ca/listen/live-radio/1-50-q/clip/15907325-soheil-parsa-reflects-career-contributions-canadian-theatre>. In another interview on the production of *Aurash*, Parsa notes, "In our adaptation, we extended the universal dimensions of the story we extended the universal dimensions of the story for instance, we removed the title of Iran so that the story can be

define what universal means to him, Parsa responds: “Shared human values. It is interesting to see how much we have in common as human beings.”¹³

A focus of this chapter’s argument is not on how closely Parsa and his collaborators’ work at Modern Times aligns with modernist art and aesthetics but instead on the realization that Parsa frequently attributes his dramaturgy and artistic style to concepts such as universalism and shared human experience.¹⁴ These themes manifest in the forms, narrative techniques, and performance elements as a deliberate move away from specific cultures and nationalism, aiming to transcend them. The critical question that arises is how a dramaturgy that serves the theme of shared humanity and distances itself from cultural and national specificity by a director and dramatist with cultural roots in the Middle East portrays Middle Eastern masculinities in works such as *Aurash* and *The Death of the King*, originally grounded in Middle Eastern culture.

Considering the artistic and dramaturgical elements of Modern Times artists’ approach, the question arises as to what aspects of Middle Eastern male identity are presented to Canadian audiences through the historical, social, and cultural characteristics depicted on stage. Does transcending historical and cultural boundaries while adhering to the idea of what is assumed as shared universal humanity provide a representation of Middle Eastern men that goes beyond stereotypical portrayals? In a theatre company with over thirty years of performances, founded by Parsa, an artist from Iran, and Farbridge, an artist from Canada, where a significant number of productions are translations and adaptations of modern plays written in Iran, can we see a portrayal of Iranian and Middle Eastern male identity that offers a nuanced understanding beyond superficial perspectives? Or does the omission of history and

adopted in any nation and local culture and could be understandable for anyone;” TVT Canada, “Arash Directed by Soheil Parsa.”

¹³ Soheil Parsa, “Theater Talk Soheil Parsa Part 2,” interview by Hamid Mozafari, trans. Arash Isapour, Hidden Treasure Productions, YouTube video, 16:50, posted September 21, 2020, accessed June 7, 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aDtloTVrXD4&t=4s>.

¹⁴ See footnote 12.

assimilation into Western modernist ideals transform the perception of Iranian and Middle Eastern masculinities' identities? To investigate these inquiries, two plays and productions are chosen to see how, from such a dramaturgical perspective, the representation of Middle Eastern men is brought to the stage and what dimensions of this identity are being supported and/or critiqued in the Modern Times' approach. Given the concern of this exploration over identity and its relationship with historical and geocultural specificity, two case studies are selected that are deeply connected to history and culture from a non-European geocultural context. These works feature masculinities with strong mythological and historical ties to a specific geocultural region in the Middle East. The aim is to examine how the Modern Times founders' approach represents Middle Eastern men and to assess how their dramaturgy navigates a spectrum between fixed, stereotypical portrayals and more nuanced, critical representations of this identity category. Therefore, this chapter explores two plays and productions adapted from two Iranian plays, which are adaptations of history and mythology. Hence, the case studies are deeply rooted in Iranian culture, mythology, folklore, and history.

Since these case studies are each an adaptation of an adaptation (from history and mythology), providing the historical context in which the sources of the two case studies were created and in which Parsa adopted his modernist ideals is crucial for a deeper understanding of the complexity of these adaptations. Additionally, given that Modern Times artists have a specific interaction with history and cultural characteristics in their works, and their universalizing approach influences their perspective, understanding the historical roots and weight connected to portraying Middle Eastern men in these works is essential. This is because part of defining a specific identity on stage is through its historical, ideological, and social elements. This chapter examines what characteristics Modern Times artists bring to the stage in their portrayal of Middle Eastern men. The works Parsa and his colleagues adapted are not merely intertwined with history but are history itself; they are representations of the fragmented,

trauma-stricken contemporary Iran, a country that has experienced coups, colonial encounters, and despotism, with literature and poetry being part of a limited number of options for refuge.

In introducing Parsa's biography, a brief overview of the historical and intellectual currents that influenced his choice of theatre as a profession and shaped his views is essential because Parsa lived in two different contexts that significantly influenced his portrayal of masculinity. As a diasporic artist, Parsa, the adapter, translator, and co-producer, reflects the instability of a hyphenated identity, navigating his Iranian roots in Canada.¹⁵ Parsa's journey from "Rest" to "West" involves more than merely exporting and adapting dramaturgical style; it reflects the interplay of pre-diasporic legacies, post-diasporic identity politics, and social and cultural dynamics.¹⁶ Encountering the fragmenting effects of multiculturalism in Canada, the Modern Times artistic director and co-founder articulated his concern about identity crisis both as an artist in interviews and through his portrayals of masculinity on stage, striving to transcend multicultural categorizations. By adopting a universalizing stance, his efforts and Farbridge's strategies are scrutinized to determine whether their portrayals deliver a critique or depict a nationless and ambiguous identity as they transform historical depth into universal dimensions.

This chapter argues that while the founders of Modern Times Theatre occasionally challenge stereotypes of Middle Eastern masculinity, their dramaturgy predominantly perpetuates these portrayals by creating ambiguous and superficial depictions that are easily susceptible to stereotypical interpretation. It will be argued that *Aurash* and *The Death of the King*'s portrayals of Middle Eastern

¹⁵ Even his negating specificity for universalism reaffirms ethnonational identity, which is an expression of his identity that is defined in contrast with Iran's contemporary Islamic Republic state that propagates a narrow national definition in the mass culture of the Western world. Homi Bhabha's ideas of hybridity and third space explore how diasporic identities are perpetually in flux and unstable, characterized by translation between different cultural elements. See Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 2004).

¹⁶ This binary term was drawn from Stuart Hall's "The West and the Rest: Discourse and Power" (1992). The dual concept of The West and the Rest is part of broader discussions on postcolonialism and cultural studies, where Hall's insights have been particularly influential in examining colonialism's impacts and the persistence of cultural hierarchies. This duality is rooted in the Enlightenment Philosophy. Stuart Hall, "The West and the Rest: Discourse and Power," in *Essential Essays, Vol. 2, Identity and Diaspora*, ed. David Morley (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), 141–70.

masculinity lack depth, making it difficult to penetrate the subtleties where there is no clear semantic system among the signs and semantic components, thus hindering the understanding of the identity for its audiences. It will be argued that by removing and altering specific cultural and historical markers in their staging, Parsa and collaborators in their adaptations of *Aurash* and *The Death of the King*, create images that function as simulacra, rendering them susceptible to ambiguity and simplification due to their lack of semiotic coherence and reduction of specific signifiers. This dramaturgical approach reveals postmodern features like pastiche in the works, where representations detach from their origins, creating simulations of identities that urge audiences to use familiar stereotypes for identification. By analyzing the degree of succumbing to commodification forces through examining postmodern characteristics in content and form, it can be determined where the presentation falls on the spectrum between critical and stereotype-reinforcing tendencies.¹⁷

Parsa and Modern Times: Inspirations and Adaptations

As Parsa's co-adaptations are based on original works from and linked to the pre-revolution decades in Iran, it is essential to map the ideological and political contexts that shaped his dramaturgical choices and theatre style. Parsa's familiarity with theatre started during a time when colonial modernity under the Shah's nationalism permeated the collective consciousness. Furthermore, this chapter's argument is based on the idea that the dramaturgy of the productions of the case studies is a manipulation of the collective subjectivities and specifics of that era, reflected in the material sources of adaptation.¹⁸ Therefore, part of this chapter describes the period in which the sources of the case studies under examination were created, which holds dual significance. Firstly, during this time, Parsa's

¹⁷ In this context, commodification refers to the process by which cultural representations and identities are transformed into marketable commodities. This transformation often leads to the simplification and stereotyping of complex identities to make them easily consumable by audiences. For a more detailed discussion of commodification and its impact on identity representation, see Chapter 1.

¹⁸ This contextual account is necessary when the case studies are briefly introduced in the next sections; hence, to avoid repetition, I considered all relevant information to both Parsa's views and the plays' inherent meanings in this part.

theatrical ideas and worldview began to take shape, and he became acquainted with the works he would later adapt. Consequently, his artistic approach and formal decisions are rooted in that period. The Iranian plays (i.e., Parsa's sources of co-adaptations) were written and performed when Parsa was deeply immersed in theatre, studying at Tehran University, and engaging with Iran's intellectual environment. Secondly, this period represents the historical context of the sources he adapted, and understanding this context is crucial for distinguishing the semantic and narrative innovations in Parsa's adaptations and highlighting these differences. Similarly, explaining the theatrical context, themes, and interpretations of the original plays helps distinguish Parsa and his collaborators' original creations in these adaptations and understand the changes Parsa made in representing masculinity, differentiating his adaptations from the original works and their historical sources.

Iran's engagement with European colonial powers in the 19th and early 20th centuries significantly shaped its cultural and political landscape.¹⁹ These colonial intrusions introduced Iranians to European modernity, ushering the nation into modernity without choice but under duress. Iranian intellectuals, poets, and dramatists responded to this imposition of foreign influence with a literary and artistic movement that engaged both with colonial modernity and anti-colonial resistance. Theatre became one of the key mediums through which the nation's thinkers grappled with ideas of modernity, revolution, and national identity.²⁰ In the 1960s and 1970s, theatre became a crucial platform for both expressing and challenging colonial modernity; the Shiraz Arts Festival (1967–1977) and underground

¹⁹ Early encounters with Russia and Britain led to territorial concessions and economic exploitation, exemplified by the Treaties of Gulistan (1813) and Turkmenchay (1828) with Russia, the Tobacco Concession of 1890, and the D'Arcy Oil Concession of 1901 with Britain. For details on these concessions and treaties, see Ervand Abrahamian, *A History of Modern Iran* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 34–37.

²⁰ Babak Rahimi, "Introduction," in *Performing Iran: Culture, Performance, Theatre* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2021), 12. Rahimi writes about the presence of theatre as a form of expression of critique of the monarchy and the social state under its rule and the demand for further civil rights in the late 19th century during the Constitutional Revolution period: "The Constitutional-era theatre combined a critical spirit for change and a didactic sensibility for public education, where the growing print culture played an integral role in its promotion. Especially in the later stages of the revolution, theatre groups and constitutionalist playwrights staged plays in closed yet especially open spaces such as Amin al-Dowleh Park, where they advanced revolutionary conceptions of patriotism in addition to minority and women's rights."

theatre movements demonstrate how theatre became a battleground for both promoting and resisting the forces of colonial modernity imposed by the Pahlavi regime.²¹ In the 1960s and 1970s, Iranian theatre and performing arts featured performances that critiqued the state's vision of modernity and functioned as spaces for anti-colonial expression. Playwrights like Bahram Beyzaie wrote works such as *Arash* (written in 1959–1960) and *Death of Yazdgerd* (1979), which drew on Iranian history and mythology to address contemporary issues of identity and resistance. These plays are significant as they were later adapted by Parsa, whose work is the central focus of this chapter. To understand colonial modernity, Enlightenment, and literature's role in modern Iran, Dabashi, Professor of Iranian Studies and Comparative Literature at Columbia University, provides illuminating insights in *Iran: A People Interrupted*, which are relevant to further discussions in this chapter about the context of the sources adapted in Modern Times productions:

We, like the rest of the world, were ushered into European modernity via European colonialism [...] we have not learned how to decolonize our minds without abandoning what Jurgen Habermas still insists on calling “the unfinished” project of modernity [...]. Iranians received the universal promise of Enlightenment modernity through the gun barrel of European colonialism [...]. The formative period of modern Iranian political culture is thus rooted in the exposure of Iranians to colonial modernity and the development of the modern nation-state and civil society,

²¹ Ibid., 16-17. The Pahlavi state's sponsorship of avant-garde performances in the 1960s and 1970s showcased its desire to align Iran with a European notion of modernity. Rahimi discusses festivals and venues sponsored and established by the Pahlavi regime in their effort to define national pride and cultural identity, presenting their version of modernity to the world and asserting hegemony over Iran's cultural landscape at the time: “the institutionalization of the Shiraz Arts Festival (1967–77) launched a period of stage production in national culture. The state-sponsored festivals involved various venues and a range of performances: avant-garde or jazz music from the United States to the performance of a number of Iranian avant-garde plays [...]. Yet given its high visibility as a cultural event, the most salient development was marked by the staging of arts and performances deemed as “traditional” into reified cultural commodities in display for both Iranian and international audiences.” On the other hand, we have a dissident stream of theatre in Iran opposed to the Pahlavi model of modernization. Rahimi writes, “In various instances, and in appeal to the new middle class with a taste for alternatives, theatre emerged as a critical, subversive space associated with oppositional activities [...]. Informed by contemporary revolutionary social movements in other parts of the world, dissident theatre was an embrace of an aesthetic-expressive universality that perceived performance as a means of creating self-consciousness and a space to educate and bring about change for alternative politics.”

while a robust and critical literary and artistic imagination highlighted the promises and warned against the pitfalls of the modern age [...] Iran (or Persia, as the Europeans called it) as a modern nation-state was actively imagined and creatively conceived in absentia and from angles peripheral to its geographical location- by imperial envoys, colonial officers, missionary Orientalists, superpower interventionist, expatriate intellectuals, and exilic communities.²²

Within the plurality of Iranian collectivity, three political streams notably opposed the Shah's colonial modernity disguised in a glorious past: "Opposing this monarchic ideological buildup (all orchestrated by an army of European and American Orientalists in collaboration with their Iranian counterparts) were an alternative mode of anticolonial nationalism, pro-Soviet or independent socialism, and of course endemic Shi'i millenarian Islamism."²³ While Iran was not colonized, it had traumatic encounters with colonialism in the last two centuries, resulting in the continuation of a divide between the state and the nation; the most significant of these traumas is the coup of 1953.²⁴ During the postcolonial condition, anticolonial narratives find their way into literature. These literary works played an active role in redefining national identity and engaging with the collective intellect.²⁵ Theatre and literature in Iran were the site of this defiance of colonial dominance, mainly for the nationalist and leftist groups.²⁶ Leftist writers and directors presented works that they found had the emancipatory potential to be applied to their tumultuous society. Writers with nationalist ideologues presented dramatic works that

²² Hamid Dabashi, *Iran: A People Interrupted* (New York: The New Press, 2007), 45-46.

²³ Ibid., 147.

²⁴ Hamid Dabashi, *Iran: The Rebirth of a Nation* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 7-8. Dabashi explains that nations are born out of national traumas and "people made into a nation by virtue of their colonial encounters and postcolonial struggles. Anticolonial nationalism is the birth channel of nations and nation-states. In Iran, like much of the rest of the colonial world, a succession of colonial encounters has been its birth certificate as a nation-state."

²⁵ An example relevant to this chapter is a poem by Siavash Kasrayi, a poet affiliated with Iran's Tudeh Party, adapting the myth of *Arash*. Written after the traumatic experience of the 1953 coup, Kasrayi's *Arash e Kamangir* is one of the most prominent adaptations of the fable, reflecting national suffering and the hope for liberation. Further details will be provided in the section about Parsa's Adaptation of *Arash*.

²⁶ Saeed Talajooy, "History and Iranian Drama: The Case of Bahram Beyzaie," in *Perceptions of Iran: History, Myths and Nationalism from Medieval Persia to the Islamic Republic*, ed. Ali M. Ansari (London: I.B. Tauris, 2014), 186.

had the same emancipatory defiance as those leftist artists, such as Beyzaie, who presented a modern theatre infused with elements of *naqqali* (a recitative form of storytelling) and *ta'zieh* (Iranian passion play), both these forms are incorporated in the case studies in this chapter.²⁷ Parsa moved to Tehran amid such an environment, engaging with theatres that represented diverse ideological stances. Additionally, the masculinities portrayed in the original plays carry emancipatory narratives in their characterizations, especially in the figure of Arash dramatized by Beyzaie, within the context of 1970s Iran.²⁸ It is within this framework that we need to explore what and how Parsa and his collaborators adapted these narratives to portray masculinities in the Canadian context.

1970s: Embarking on a Theatrical Journey

Parsa's interest in performing arts started when he moved to the cosmopolitan city from a small town in the West of Iran in the mid-1970s, the decade that ended with Iran's revolution.²⁹ As his several interviews manifest, Parsa's passion and theatrical perspectives are rooted in his youthful years of exposure to cinema, drama, and performing arts in Iran: "We [i.e. Parsa and Farbridge] started a professional company then called Modern Times, a name that came from my love of Charlie Chaplin. My first exposure to artistic expression was Charlie Chaplin movies."³⁰ Of the works he was impressed

²⁷ In later sections, these forms will be explained. See Talajooy, "History and Iranian Drama," 185. "Beyzaie brings his mastery of numerous historical and class registers of the Persian language and his mastery of theatrical techniques together to project a deconstructive outlook that undermines the authorial voices of Iranian history and myths and create alternative accounts that invite the audience to include the voices of subaltern on contemporary discourses on modernity and justice." The other anticolonial current was the religious Islamist movement, which was not very present in literature but circulating in religious clerical institutions.

²⁸ In this context, postcolonial reason is caught in a tumultuous interplay between anti-colonial modernity, tradition, and colonial modernity. This culminated with the 1979 revolution, which led to the rise of another autocratic regime by the time Parsa emigrated from Iran. He left behind a State that had chosen a path of isolation and offered a limited, exclusive articulation of Iranian identity in universal terms. For clarity in this chapter, the transcription used for "Arash" (i.e. آرَش, pronounced /ɑ:'ræʃ/) must be delineated to avoid confusion due to its intertextual significance. "Arash the Archer" refers to the mythological narrative and fable, and its main character. "Arash" is used specifically for Beyzaie's play and character, while "Aurash" denotes Parsa's co-adaptation and the main character. Arash e Kamangir refers to Kasrayi's poetic adaptation.

²⁹ Barbara Simonsen, *The Art of Rehearsal: Conversations with Contemporary Theatre Makers* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2017), 171.

³⁰ Judith D. Rudakoff, *Questionable Activities: Canadian Theatre Artists in Conversation with Canadian Theatre Students* (Toronto: Playwrights Canada Press, 2000), 77.

with was Charles Chaplin's *Modern Times*, "[...] I knew this was my path in life and that I had to become an artist. But I was really fascinated by that movie, and I saw it twice that same week. And I think it was the beginning of my journey in theatre. The following year, I applied for the theatre school in Tehran."³¹ Parsa's drive to be an artist took a more serious form as he strived to enter the theatre program at the University of Tehran. Determining Performing Arts as his only career path, young Parsa hoped to become a movie actor similar to those he saw in the imported movies from the Western world: "I was a blond, handsome guy, with green eyes and long hair; I was thinking that I would be a superstar and act in the big movies, Iranian movies."³² Although his current goal is no longer to become a superstar, his aesthetic taste in the physicality of an idealized male body seemingly remains as it was inspired in those early years of experiencing imported dramatic art. Parsa's expression of his youth physicality ideal for stardom manifests the permeation of colonial modernity's aesthetic that has continued to the contemporary interviewed Parsa in 2017. Thus, it can be inferred that the fetishized and idealized figure of European racialized masculinity has influenced Parsa's aesthetic alongside the emancipatory themes he observed in Chaplin's films.

His entering Tehran University required him to gain knowledge through reading plays written in Iran, as well as translations of European and American plays, and watching various productions. His autobiography affirms the inundation of these texts increasingly absorbed by the urbanized and modernized population: "I started to read plays, Iranian, Western pieces, Bertolt Brecht, Chekhov, Stanislavsky. And the third time, I got in. I was very happy. That was two years before the revolution."³³ Young Parsa had these theatrical encounters as he strived to enter the theatre school, which was a competition. At the same time, the colonial modernity advocated by the monarchic regime embraced

³¹ Simonsen, *The Art of Rehearsal*, 171.

³² Ibid., 171-172.

³³ Ibid., 172.

external theatre artists such as Brook to adapt Iranian classic literature and perform it, sponsored by the state festivals such as the Shiraz Festival; Parsa had the experience of seeing those works as well:

I came from a very interesting time in Iran, before the Iranian Revolution, because Iranian theatre in those days was very, very active and alive. We had different kinds of theatre. We had the Art Festival of Shiraz—fantastic directors like Peter Brook, Grotowski, and Richard Schechner came to Iran and performed there. It was a very vibrant theatre community, and we had some fantastic avant-garde Iranian directors. So, I was familiar with avant-garde, Grotowski, [and] all that.³⁴

Parsa describes his experience with European experimental artists in Iran, referring to them as influential figures. During the pre-revolution decades, there was scarcely any theatre or play by anticolonial defiant ideologues that was welcomed by the monarchic hegemony.³⁵ University of St. Andrews scholar in Persian cultural studies, Saeed Talajooy, connects the 2nd Pahlavi Monarch's approach to art and his orchestration of festivals with insightful analysis, showing that Shah's aim in every aspect of these performances was to present the ideological construct of modern Iran to the world: "Mohammad Reza Shah's theatricality urged him to proclaim "Cyrus, sleep calm since we are awake" in his inauguration speech for the theatrical festivals of Two Thousand and Five Hundred Years of Monarchy [...] to project an image of his reign as recreating the ancient glories of Iran."³⁶ Thus, the Shah's nationalist ideology sought to interpellate Iranian identity by redefining Iranian masculinity within the global cultural sphere.³⁷ Through state-sponsored festivals showcasing modern, powerful Iranian identity alongside

³⁴ Simonsen, *The Art of Rehearsal*, 173.

³⁵ The difference between Brook's adopting *ta'zieh* and Beyzaie's adoption of this Iranian passion play is in their function; the former is merely an experimental attempt, while the latter adopts the narrative of defiance to his plot, a defiance that cannot be irrelevant to socio-politically tumultuous Iran of the revolutionary years.

³⁶ Talajooy, "History and Iranian drama," 186.

³⁷ Connell argues that "hegemonic masculinity can be defined as the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women." She notes that "at any given time, one form of masculinity rather than others is culturally exalted," and that hegemonic masculinity maintains its dominance through alignment with

Western works, the Shah aimed to project an image of Iran as both modern and distinctively Iranian, encouraging Iranians to identify with this vision.³⁸ This perspective permeated through Iranian collectivity; even Parsa's interviews manifest this, emphasizing Iran of the pre-1979.

Formative Years: Shaping Parsa's Worldview and Artistic Style

As Parsa entered theatre school in Tehran, his purpose to be involved with theatre evolved from being a superstar to being an idealist that could again be rooted in the 1970s Iranian desire for liberation, the superstar dream replaced by "saving humanity":

I think one of the reasons I was attracted to theatre was that I thought it could be an interesting "social tool" to communicate something, say something, save humanity, even. You know, naïve thinking of a teenage boy. It was not just that I wanted to be famous and become an actor; the intellectual aspect of the theatre fascinated me as well.³⁹

Young Parsa's "naïve" idealism has not been abandoned but has evolved and translated into the universalist humanism of Enlightenment philosophy. Parsa's humanist themes have roots in the Enlightenment project, in which, as Dabashi suggests in works like Hegel's, the dichotomy of the West and the Rest emerges.⁴⁰ Thus, it is insufficient to present Parsa's hyphenated identity in a way that addresses one side (Iranian) of the hyphen and focuses only on the other (Canadian) aspect when both

"institutional power," including state and military structures. In this sense, nationalist performances—such as the Shah's invocation of imperial grandeur—function as cultural expressions of hegemonic masculinity. See R. W. Connell, *Masculinities*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 77–78.

³⁸ Joshua Charney, "The Shiraz Arts Festival and the Slide Towards Revolution," in *Performing Iran: Culture, Performance, Theatre*, ed. Babak Rahimi (London: I.B. Tauris, 2021), 77–78. Queen Farah Pahlavi explained during the Shiraz Festival's inaugural address in 1967 that the goal was to expose Iranians to international artists while allowing Iranian artists to gain recognition both locally and globally. The Shah's intention was to present Iran as a "great civilization," proving that it had achieved a "high" cultural standard through its engagement with both the West and its own heritage. The festival aimed to forge "a bridge connecting not only Iran's past and future but also the East and the West," serving as a "cultural synthesis" between Iran's history and contemporary artistic expression alongside that of the Western world.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 172.

⁴⁰ Hamid Dabashi, *Europe and Its Shadows: Coloniality after Empire* (London: Pluto Press, 2019), 22, 64.

sources of adaptation and the adapter migrated between the bifurcated contexts of the colonial invention (i.e., the West and the Rest).

In Canada – A New Stage

Upon Parsa's arrival in Canada in 1984, the global economy was implementing a new project of capitalism, whose cultural logic, as theorized by Jameson, was Postmodernism.⁴¹ This structural transition significantly shaped identity discourses in countries like Canada, where the institutionalization of multiculturalism in the 1970s introduced a framework that promoted inclusion while often depoliticizing difference.⁴² By the time Parsa arrived in Canada, the Multiculturalism Act and related politics had been implemented in the cultural landscape for less than a decade. This emerging policy landscape was one of the reasons Parsa decided to co-establish a theatre company and adopt a more defined approach for his theatrical perspective.⁴³

Parsa's early years in Canada were marked by substantial barriers, linguistic, institutional, and cultural, that reshaped his understanding of artistic practice. Reflecting on that period, he described himself as "invisible," lacking language fluency, connections, or cultural footholds.⁴⁴ In an interview, Parsa described his entry into the Canadian theatre scene by stating, "I started from scratch. The main reason was to learn the language and just be in the right environment—the theatre environment."⁴⁵

⁴¹ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), 9.

⁴² Hamid Dabashi, *Persophilia: Persian Culture on the Global Scene* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), 212. Dabashi critiques global multiculturalist discourses as tools for managing, rather than transforming, postcolonial difference, writing that even "counterintelligence is the handiwork of global capitalism," which renders migration and cultural performance complicit with transnational capital rather than oppositional to it.

⁴³ Modern Times's mandate reflects a key standpoint of Parsa, who, as the co-founder and artistic director, shaped it to confront identity politics: "We have challenged the illusion of a unique[ly] singular and choiceless identity. We are not against identity. We are aware that it can be a source of pride, joy, strength, and confidence, yet we recognize that identity can cause destruction and death. We continue to see violence associated with identity conflicts repeating itself around the world." See UVicFineArts, "Orion Lecture Series with Theatrical Artistic Director Soheil Parsa," YouTube video, 59:23, Zoom lecture, University of Victoria, March 18, 2021, posted April 13, 2021, accessed June 7, 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VikJ5pcH9-s>.

⁴⁴ Hannah Antaki, "In Conversation: Soheil Parsa," *Intermission*, March 10, 2017, accessed August 7, 2024, <https://www.intermissionmagazine.ca/in-conversation/soheil-parsa/>.

⁴⁵ Simonsen, 173. Parsa describes his departure from Iran and his move to Canada, stating, "I escaped from Iran through the mountains and went to Pakistan. It took me about two years to get to Canada, and it was in 1984. In 1985, I started in the

These conditions catalyzed a shift in his artistic development, prompting a reorientation of his practice toward a more cross-cultural and universalist aesthetic.

This process of reinvention began at York University, where Parsa enrolled in Theatre Studies rather than acting or directing. He recalls that he “barely spoke English” at the time and had to recalibrate his artistic training, which had been grounded in the Iranian avant-garde and Stanislavsky-based practices.⁴⁶ At York University, Parsa encountered significant gaps in institutional knowledge of Iranian theatrical traditions; he recalls being the first to introduce forms such as *ta'zzieh* and *Parde-Khani*, underscoring the marginalization of non-Western performance practices: “They had heard about *Ta'zieh*, for example, or *Parde-Khani*, but they had no idea, so I introduced them to it.”⁴⁷

This formative period of adaptation and cultural negotiation laid the groundwork for Parsa’s dramaturgical vision. His experience as both an outsider and a cultural translator informed the strategies he later employed in adapting culturally rooted source texts for Canadian stages, particularly works centred on Middle Eastern masculinity.

To analyze how Parsa’s unique position as both insider and outsider to Middle Eastern theatrical traditions shapes his representation of masculinity, this chapter employs a methodological approach that can examine multiple layers of meaning simultaneously. Building on the Jamesonian framework outlined in the introduction chapter, the analysis proceeds through three interconnected stages that trace how masculinity is constructed, transformed, and positioned within these adaptations.⁴⁸

university theatre programme. I started from scratch. The main reason was to learn the language and just be in the right environment, the theatre environment.”

⁴⁶ Ibid., 174. Parsa notes, “I barely spoke English [...] I didn’t take any acting or directing courses at university here. I went to theatre studies, so it was mainly theory.”

⁴⁷ Ibid., 174. The word *ta'ziyeh* appears in varied transliterations—*ta'ziyeh*, *ta'zīya*, *ta'zzieh*, among others—due to differing conventions for rendering Arabic-script words into English. In this interview, it is spelled “*Ta'zieh*,” reflecting either editorial variation or transliteration preference.

⁴⁸ Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1981), 75, 78-79. Jameson’s model structures literary analysis through three concentric horizons. First, the political horizon: the text is analyzed as a symbolic act that stages visible ideological contradictions: “methodical analysis of textual structures as symbolic acts.” Here, narrative conflicts and tensions (such as divided masculinity) represent immediate political

Analytical Trajectory

The analysis begins by examining the symbolic representation of political and ideological contradictions within the plays' dramatic worlds. At this stage, plot synopses, character actions and motivations, and dramatic world-building elements provide primary evidence for understanding how the plays stage conflicts around Middle Eastern masculinity. Analyzing the dramatic unfolding of the story reveals how masculinity is symbolically shaped by tensions within the narrative.

The second stage interprets how these symbolic structures mediate real historical contradictions experienced by collective groups outside the fictional world. In this phase, characters are treated not only as individuals but as symbolic representatives of larger social groups such as nations, displaced communities, or social classes (e.g., post-revolutionary Iranian diaspora, displaced Middle Eastern populations, and marginalized immigrant artists). Character typologies, narrative arcs, and group dynamics serve as evidence for how these plays process broader social and ideological pressures through their organization of dramatic action.

The third stage focuses on formal and historical analysis, examining how specific dramaturgical strategies reshape the presentation of Middle Eastern masculinity. By analyzing formal elements such as textual signs, adaptation strategies, costume design, and narrative progression, this phase reveals how dramaturgical choices position masculinity along a spectrum between stereotypical figures and multi-

struggles. Second, the social horizon: the symbolic act is read as the imaginary resolution of real collective contradictions, where character types and narrative structures mediate broader ideological struggles ("the symbolic act [...] must also be grasped as an imaginary resolution of a real contradiction"). The text symbolically processes anxieties over class, national identity, and social displacement. Third, the historical horizon: the analysis of form reveals how aesthetic structures (such as fragmentation, abstraction, or universalism) are shaped by the historical conditions of the mode of production: "the analysis of form is the analysis of the production and productivity of ideology in the historical moment." Thus, analysis progresses from identifying visible political contradictions (e.g., simplified representations of Middle Eastern masculinity), to understanding how collective imaginaries manage these tensions under multicultural or postcolonial conditions, and finally to uncovering how historical forces during late capitalism restructure cultural forms and their images, including representations of gender identity.

layered representations. In this way, the formal analysis connects the construction of masculine images to artistic agency and the systemic forces of postmodern cultural production.

This methodological framework provides the structural foundation for analyzing the selected case studies: *Aurash* and *The Death of the King*. These productions offer particularly rich material for this approach as they represent adaptations of culturally and historically specific works that have been recontextualized for Canadian audiences. By closely examining these plays and productions using the framework outlined above, we can better understand where and how Modern Times' dramaturgical strategies position Middle Eastern masculinities along a spectrum from culturally specific representation to what will be argued as universalized abstraction.

Case Studies: Adaptations and Productions

The selected plays for this chapter are adaptations rooted in a historical period in Iran and the prehistoric era of Persian mythology. Their choice is based on their deep cultural and historical roots and significance, as well as their frequent performances in Canada and internationally, marking significant contributions to Modern Times's production history. These plays are rich with masculine characters and elements tied to a broad cultural domain from the Middle East, with narratives intertwined with contemporary Iranian identity and national culture. Furthermore, the migration background of the artist under review in this chapter is critical, reflecting individual approaches and ideologies rooted in the collective consciousness of their original environments. As the artist adapts to a new home, so do these ideologies, shaping the materials used in artistic expression. When introducing the selected works, it is crucial to highlight their cultural significance and the political and cultural history that influenced their adaptations. Both plays center on male figures symbolically laden with vast narratives about identity and self-identity. The works under review are direct adaptations of theatrical pieces themselves adapted from myth and history. The explanation of each play emphasizes its origins and first dramatic adaptations in

contemporary Iran, which served as the material sources of adaptations. This clarification is essential to accurately convey their cultural weight and how our artist has adapted them in Canada to align with his perspective.

If this background is only briefly mentioned, the foundation for the forthcoming analysis will be weakened, potentially leading to literature similar to what Knowles wrote about Parsa, which can be easily critiqued as misleading. In his chapter on Parsa's Modern Times theatre company, Knowles claims that the company's works contribute to what Jürgen Habermas calls "the unfinished project of modernity."⁴⁹ Knowles suggests that Parsa's work resists the antimodernism in Iran and rejects the postmodern "instabilities" that challenge modernity's project in the West.⁵⁰ Knowles contrasts Iran's antimodern tendencies with Western notions of modernity without discussing the complexities of Iran's historical and cultural context. Such claims can evade deeper analysis, as the sweeping use of terms like "antimodernism" oversimplifies the historical process that led to the 1979 revolution and the years that followed. Knowles' failure to examine the historical conditions he labels as antimodern risks reinforcing reductive stereotypes. Is it accurate to categorize post-revolutionary Iran as antimodern without delving into the intellectual streams and socio-political movements that emerged before 1979 and continued during the years after the revolution, at least up until 1984, when Parsa left Iran? Without analysis and evidence, sweeping statements about Iran remain unsubstantiated, failing to fully consider the complexities of the cultural forces at play in Parsa's work and its global reception. Such narratives lead to vague and unsubstantiated praise of Parsa's work, claiming that Parsa and similar artists could potentially respond to Habermas's unfinished project, an ambiguous claim that mirrors the praise for an

⁴⁹ Knowles, *Performing the Intercultural City*, 133.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 133-134. Knowles writes, "In spite of Parsa's own experience with antimodernism in Iran, and his rejection of postmodern instabilities, Modern Times is more optimistic and... extends this extravagant expectation to all of the world's peoples, whatever their genders, sexualities, races, or ethnicities." Knowles argues that *Modern Times* contributes to the "unfinished project of modernity," by relocating modernist aesthetics away from appropriative intercultural practices found in Western theatre traditions. However, Knowles does not delve into the complexities of Iran's historical context, simplifying the nature of antimodernism in Iran.

artistic approach without understanding the roots and cultural-historical subtext it carries a characteristic that has become common in the postmodern era. This trait sees everything as unique and distinct, resonating with cultural policies like interculturality. Thus, studying the text without considering its cultural and historical roots may risk playing into the hands of the commodifying forces of today's dominant global culture.

The following section examines two selected productions, *Aurash* and *The Death of the King*, each adapted from original plays by Beyzaie. Each play is first introduced through an outline of its mythological or historical context, followed by a close reading of Modern Times' adaptation, with attention to dramaturgical strategies and the representation of Middle Eastern masculinities.

***Aurash* (2010)**

Co-written with Brian Quirt, Parsa translated *Aurash* based on a monologue (i.e. *Arash*) by Beyzaie between 1958 and 1961 (published in 1980), an adaptation of a mythological narrative.⁵¹ *Aurash* is translated and adapted from Beyzaie's play, which is based on the fable of *Arash-e Kamangir* (*Arash the Archer*), a male figure from Persian mythology and folklore.⁵² The significance of *Arash the Archer* lies in its deep roots in the geocultural history of the Persian-speaking world. It encapsulates symbols of national integrity, self-sacrificing patriotism, justice, and cultural continuity.⁵³

Various accounts of Arash's character exist, from manuscripts of the mid-Persian language to classic (i.e., the period stretching from the post-Arab conquest of Persia in 621 A.D. to the mid-19th century) and contemporary Persian literature.⁵⁴ Before discussing the plot narrative in Parsa's play, it is

⁵¹ Parsa, Farbridge, and Quirt, *Stories from the Rains of Love and Death*. vii; Talajooy. "History and Iranian drama," 189.

⁵² Arash was first mentioned in Avesta, Zoroastrian religion's book. In the midst of the war between Iran and Turan, a conflict that was a significant part of Zoroastrian mythology and often symbolized the struggle between good and evil, Arash releases an arrow. This arrow, thrust with the help of the God of water, plant, and kindness (i.e. Ahura Mazda), was a pivotal moment in the war, as it was to go for a long distance, marking the boundary between the two warring nations.

⁵³ Over time, *Arash the Archer*'s story has been repeatedly adapted, reflecting evolving Iranian cultural identities. This enduring myth connects ancient themes with modern values, serving as a bridge across historical periods.

⁵⁴ Azin Hosseinzadeh and Katayoon Shahparrad, "Rewriting the story of Arash the Archer in Contemporary Iranian Literature from pre-Epic to post-Tragic Texts," *Comparative Literature (Farhangestan Special Edition)* 9, no. 17 (2019): 24. James

essential to explore how the plot has evolved, setting the stage for the story presented in the following segment. The story of *Arash the Archer* is generally a linear narrative from when Iran, in a fantastical and mythical world, was at war with the enemy country of Turan. On the brink of defeat, the Iranians face a humiliating ultimatum from the Turanian king. The Turanians propose a seemingly impossible challenge: if an Iranian can shoot an arrow to the farthest point possible, that spot will mark the new border, the Turanians will retreat, and the Iranians will secure a homeland without occupation and further bloodshed. Arash the Archer steps forward and accepts the impossible. He ascends the Alborz Mountains, a frequent setting in Persian myths, to perform his legendary feat. With divine assistance, Arash launches his arrow, which travels to the limits of the land of Iran and marks their territory. After this miraculous act, Arash the Archer transcends the earthly realm, disappearing into the Persian mythological world. In these narratives and other dramatic and literary adaptations from Iran, the details of Arash's death remain enigmatic. Arash disappears after he saves the nation, giving his character divine and invincible dimensions.

Parsa's adaptation, in line with Beyzaie's, offers an earthy depiction of the mythical character. Beyzaie wrote *Arash* in a monologue form, giving a realistic and tangible dimension to Arash's character. Except for the arrow that never falls, travelling through time and generations, the narrative of *Arash the Archer* does not change in Beyzaie's plot, but there is a significant difference in the character development process compared with the fable. In Parsa's translation and adaptation (trans-adaptation), *Aurash*'s plot remains identical to Beyzaie's *Arash*: Beyzaie's Arash is a stableman, comes from the

Darmesteter, *The Zend-Avesta: Part 2, the Sîrôzahs, Yasts and Nyâyis* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2000), 94-95; Abū Rayhān Bîrūnî, *The Chronology of Ancient Nations: An English Version of the Arabic Text of the Athâr-ul-Bâkiya of Albîrûnî, or "Vestiges of the Past" Collected and Reduced to Writing by the Author in A.H. 390-1, A.D. 1000*, trans. Eduard Sachau (London: W.H. Allen and Co., 1879), 205.

lower strata of society, lacks even the skill and power of a warrior, has never fought in a war, and is subject to mockery, humiliation, and political machinations.⁵⁵

Parsa staged *Aurash* in many countries, including Iran, in 2002 and 2003. *Aurash* was translated into other languages, such as Spanish and Bosnian, and cast by diverse groups worldwide. After its earliest production in 1998, *Auarsh* was then staged in English in 2010 at the Tank House Theatre, Young Centre in Toronto.⁵⁶ In the original play, Parsa uses four actors to portray more than a dozen characters in the story. The productions used for this exploration include several key stagings of *Aurash*. In all productions, *Aurash* is mainly performed by female actors. In the original staging from 1998, Joan Heney played the Commander, while in the 2010 remount in Toronto, Métis Algonquin actor Michelle Latimer took on the role of *Aurash*. Other notable performances include Martina Kujundžić-Đaković's portrayal of *Aurash* in Bosnia and Sarajevo in 2009 and 2010, respectively. Additionally, *Aurash* featured an all-female cast in the 2017 and 2019 productions in Toronto. This study analyzes these performances for their representation of masculinity and consistent casting strategy involving female actors.

The following synopsis outlines the narrative structure and key events of *Aurash* as a necessary foundation for the critical discussion that follows, particularly in relation to its staging of masculinity and use of casting.

⁵⁵ Linda Hutcheon and Siobhan O'Flynn, *A Theory of Adaptation*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2013), 7–8. Hutcheon and O'Flynn define adaptation as “repetition without replication,” emphasizing its dual identity as both process and product. While she does not use the term trans-adaptation, her framework supports its use to describe intercultural reinterpretation that exceeds conventional fidelity discourse. Additionally, Charlotte McIvor, building on Knowles, describes intercultural performance as enabling “performative acts of re-membering across real, acknowledged and respected difference,” thus reinforcing the theoretical grounds for *trans-adaptation* as a term that addresses transformative, culturally mobile aesthetic practices. See Charlotte McIvor, *Migration and Performance in Contemporary Ireland: Towards a New Interculturalism* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 8-9.

⁵⁶ Modern Times Stage Company, “Past Productions.”

Synopsis: Aurash

The characters are all male as indicated by gendered language in the dialogue, and the 1998 premiere featured four performers, three men and one woman, playing male-coded roles.⁵⁷ Alphabets label the roles; it is only character A that takes two roles, which are Aurash and a stage narrator. The staging starts with characters reciting the image of war and describing their army suffering heavy casualties. They represent the protagonist, Aurash, as a stableman burying his dead horse. In the next scene, B is an army commander explaining the conditions their enemy imposes on them.

The enemy wants the almost-defeated army to introduce an archer whose shot of an arrow determines the border between them and the enemy. The commander calls for Kashvad, their best archer. Despite everyone asking Kashvad to throw the arrow, Kashvad rejects because he sees the archery attempt as a burden of humiliation on his shoulders. Kashvad breaks his bow and disappears in the mist. Aurash is heading to bring Kashvad back to the King, but the commander is summoning Aurash to send a message to the enemy. The commander wants Aurash to tell the enemy that the deadline is insufficient. The enemy's king demands that Aurash be the chosen archer despite Aurash having incited the enemy king that he has never released an arrow or been a warrior. The enemy king summons the former messenger, Hooman, a hero who has now joined the enemy. Aurash is shocked to see Hooman's betrayal, who is writing a message (sent by a pigeon) on behalf of the enemy king that Aurash has been chosen as the archer, which is not negotiable. Calling him "the least of men," Aurash's commander thinks Aurash betrayed them and is joining the enemy in the humiliation plot. They delivered Aurash the bow that the enemy king gave; it was Hooman's. Everyone shows respect and sorrow for their lost hero,

⁵⁷ Bahram Beyzaie, "Aurash," in *Stories from the Rains of Love and Death: Four Plays from Iran*, trans. Soheil Parsa, Peter Farbridge, and Brian Quirt (Toronto: Playwrights Canada Press, 2008), 3-5. While the character list in the script uses non-gendered alphabetical markers (A–D), the dialogue consistently refers to the characters as male through titles (e.g., Commander, Corporal), descriptors (e.g., stableman), and third-person masculine pronouns. See Scene One and Two of *Aurash*, dir. Soheil Parsa. The 1998 production by Modern Times Stage Company featured Ron Kennell, Earl Pastko, Todd Hammond, and Joan Heney (the sole female performer), with each actor performing male-coded roles, including Heney as the Commander and the Ghost. For further discussion of gendered language in *Aurash*, see later in this chapter, page 288.

Hooman. Aurash does not tell his fellow army men about Hooman's betrayal and stays silent.⁵⁸ His people beat Aurash. The Corporal warns Aurash that he has no choice but to shoot, or they will kill him.

Aurash agrees to shoot. Prepared by people to climb the mountain, Aurash starts his journey by finally shooting the arrow from up the Elborz mountains. People begin to encourage Aurash as their last hope while he is on his journey. The enemy king is surprised that people agree with Aurash about releasing the arrow. In Scene Eleven, Kashvad blocks Aurash from turning him back. Kashvad is certain Aurash's arrow would not go that far, and people become enslaved by the enemy. Aurash resists, for he says he has no choice after being labelled a liar and traitor, so he prefers to move along and die after releasing the arrow.

In scene twelve, Aurash encounters his inner self. Three other Aurash face him on his journey. All of them threaten and dissuade Aurash from his endeavour. In scene thirteen, the Elbroz mountain and rocks speak with Aurash, aiming to change his mind. In scene fourteen, in the army, there is the word that soldiers will kill Aurash if he returns. In the next scene, Aurash speaks with his father's ghost, encouraging Aurash to throw the arrow with his heart. Aurash reaches the top of the mountain ("the highest of the highs"), releases the arrow, and disappears. Characters narrate that people never saw Aurash coming down from the mountain again. People of every tribe and walk of life watch the arrow in the sky flying forever and never falling. The play ends with people whispering their hope that Aurash will return someday.

To maintain the chapter's structure, the next section begins with contextual and historical background on *The Death of the King*, followed by a synopsis and analysis of its narrative strategies and performative framing of masculinity.

⁵⁸ For brevity, I use the term "army men" throughout this chapter to refer collectively to the Chief Commander, Corporal, Private, and Magu in *The Death of the King*. This terminological choice avoids repetition and emphasizes their shared symbolic function within the play's militarized hierarchy despite internal differences in rank and role.

***The Death of the King* (2016)⁵⁹**

Adapted from Beyzaie's 1980 play, *The Death of Yazdgerd* was translated by Parsa as *The Death of the King* and edited by Farbridge in 2007.⁶⁰ The main plot and sequences of events did not change, and it is mostly the historical specificity that changed in Parsa's adaptation. The general plot of Beyzaie's play is that after being defeated by the Arabs, Yazdgerd, the King of Persia, retreats and stops at a mill. The drama begins with Iranian commanders discovering Yazdgerd's body on the ground inside the mill. The king's men then set up an impromptu court to interrogate and try Miller, his wife, and his daughter. The Miller family manipulates the commanders' minds, stalling for time until they leave as the Arabs are advancing. The play ends with the commanders leaving, having realized the futility of holding a trial for a dead king and the end of an era.

Yazdgerd III, on whom the title of the original play is based and around whose figure the dramatic event unfolds, holds significant semantic importance. This masculine figure is a political, cultural, and historical icon deeply linked to contemporary Iranian national identity. By adapting and changing the play title to "The King," Modern Times signals the potential dramaturgical path chosen for Beyzaie's work and the political and cultural figure of Yazdgerd III. Hence, to grasp the cultural and political significance of the play, it is crucial to step back and comprehend the historical moment that serves as the primary subject matter in Parsa's adaptation of a dramatic adaptation of the historical event. The central historical subject around which the plot revolves marks a critical juncture in Iran's history. The influx of Arab cultures, the advent of Islam into ancient Iran (i.e. Persia), and the fall of an empire significantly altered the cultural and political landscape of the Iranian plateau. Yazdegerd III was

⁵⁹ The characters in *The Death of the King* are not assigned conventional proper names; instead, they are identified by titles or roles such as the Miller, the Woman, the Girl, the Chief Commander, the Magu, the Private, and the Corporal. In this chapter, these characters will be referenced by capitalizing these designations, which should not be mistaken for common nouns but understood as distinct character identifiers within the narrative.

⁶⁰ Parsa, Farbridge, and Quirt, *Stories from the Rains of Love and Death*, 2008.

the last monarch of pre-Islamic Iran of the Sassanid Dynasty.⁶¹ Apart from the historical accuracy of how he died, Yazdgerd III is an essential figure for being the last Persian monarch before Islamic dominance.⁶² In his scholarship about Sassanid Persia, Daryaee briefly associates Yazdgerd III with being “a centre of anti-Arab sentiment.”⁶³ Even among the majority of Shia Muslims in Iran, there is a strong, but without evidence, belief that the imprisoned daughter of Yazdgerd III, known as Bibi Shahrbanu, became the wife of Prophet Muhammad’s grandson, Hossein, who is one of the crucial saints to Shia Muslims.⁶⁴ Therefore, the Shia common sense, particularly in today’s Iran, believes that the rest of the Shia saints descended from Yazdgerd’s daughter; hence, the geocultural identity of some Iranians overlaps with the Shia religious identification. Given these points, Yazdgerd III, along with other pre-Arab invasion Iranian empires, holds significant nationalist and patriotic value in Iranians’ popular culture.

In the last decade of Pahlavi’s reign, most religious Iranians supported the religious figures; most importantly, Ruhollah Khomeini who opposed the Pahlavi monarchy and believed in coupling Islamic learning with politics.⁶⁵ As mentioned earlier, Iran experienced the spread of several ideological narratives united against the Shah’s monarchy in the 1970s. Shortly after the revolution, various non-

⁶¹ In other English texts, Yazdgerd is written as Yazdigird.

⁶² There are different historical accounts of how Yazdgerd died. The Iranologist Touraj Daryaee says a governor killed Yazdgerd in Merv, east of Persia. Although there have been various accounts of his death, the narrative of him being killed by a Miller has permeated Iranian common sense. This historical narrative became Beyzaie’s source of inspiration for the play.

⁶³ Touraj Daryaee, “Sasanian Persia (ca. 224–651 C.E.),” *Iranian Studies* 31, no. 3/4 (1998): 459.

⁶⁴ Shia Islam is a branch of Islam that holds Ali, the cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet Muhammad, and his descendants as Muhammad’s rightful successors based on divine appointment. Before Ali, there three caliphs ruled, the first three of the Rashidun Caliphate, who are not recognized by Shi’a tradition as legitimate successors to the Prophet. Ali was the fourth Caliph of the Rashidun Caliphate (r. 656–661 CE) succeeded by the Umayyad Caliphate (661–750 CE), which was later overthrown by the Abbasids. The Abbasid Caliphate (est. 750 CE) consolidated power across much of the Middle East, including Persia, building on earlier conquests under the second Caliph. Mary Boyce, “Bībī Shahrbānū and the Lady of Pārs,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 30, no. 1 (1967): 33; Also see, Mahbanu Alizadeh, “Bibi Shahrbanu,” *The Centre for The Great Islamic Encyclopedia (Centre for Iranian and Islamic Studies)*, October 4, 2020, accessed August 7, 2024, <https://www.cgie.org.ir/fa/article/229229>. Additionally, this legend exists in various Arab and Iranian historical accounts such as *Bayhaqi History* from 11 AD, *Tarikh al-Yaqubi*, 9 AD, Kariman, Hossein. Manuscripts from Ancient Rey. Tehran. 1982. Iranian official Islamic database and library, www.cgie.org.ir, does not take the narrative as a legend but as a historical reality. However, there is no evidence for such a narrative to be true.

⁶⁵ Some groups brought these two leftist and religious narratives together.

Islamic groups were excluded and subject to oppression by the emerging totalitarian state.⁶⁶ Within a year after the revolution, Beyzaie reflected the post-revolution atmosphere in *The Death of Yazdgerd* in 1980. The year coincides with not only the closure of universities and oppression but also the self-imposed emigration of some, including Parsa. Parsa's source of adaptation, *The Death of Yazdgerd*, refers to an era when the ancient Persian monarchy lost its hegemony to Islamic-Arabic dominance. This reflects the collapse of a monarchic power that sought to revive the glory and culture of pre-Islamic Iran and the rise of a regime with a political Islamic ideology that monopolized the 1979 revolution, suppressing and oppressing dissidents and various political and intellectual groups. Beyzaie's play ends with a warning: "Miller's Wife: Yes, now the true judges are arriving. You (Iranian rulers), whose banner was white, this was your judgement; what will be the verdict of those (invading Arabs) with the black banner?"⁶⁷

Similar to Parsa's adaptation of *Arash*, most references to the cultural and geopolitical specifics within *The Death of Yazdgerd* were altered in *The Death of the King*. The staging case study for this play is the production of *Death of the King* in 2016, directed by Parsa and co-produced by Modern Times Stage Company and The Theatre Centre. Besides the texts (the source and translated plays), the recorded video of *The Death of the King* production in 2016 and the first original production of the play by Beyzaie are comparatively examined to better distinguish what has been revised and the particular

⁶⁶ The term 'Islamic Revolution' can be misleading and reductive of the complexity of the political event, especially to the reader unfamiliar with the context's nuances. It insinuates a predominantly Islamic movement, overlooking the significant contributions of non-Islamic groups. For a detailed analysis of the diverse forces that sparked and sustained the revolution, see Ervand Abrahamian, *Iran Between Two Revolutions* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), 533; it is noted: "Whereas the traditional middle class provided the opposition with a nationwide organization, it was the modern middle class that sparked off the revolution, fueled it, and struck the final blows. Lawyers, judges, and intellectuals began the campaign to publish open letters and form human rights associations. University students started the street demonstrations. White-collar workers, especially bank clerks, civil servants, and customs officials, crippled the economy. Finally, guerrilla fighters, most of whom were college students, brought the revolution to a successful completion." And see Dabashi, *Iran: A People Interrupted*, 2007, 125: Dabashi notes, "Any attempt to reduce the cosmopolitan pluralism of Iranian political culture to an Islamist, nationalist, or social absolutism is at once analytically ludicrous."

⁶⁷ Bahram Beyzaie, *The Death of Yazdgerd* [مرگ یزدگرد], trans. Arash Isapour (adabkade.com, 1980), in Farsi.

dramaturgy of the Modern Times dramatists. The comparative dimension of this exploration does not aim to overshadow Beyzaie's approach in this literature but to extract the formal elements devised in Modern Times's creativity.

Synopsis: The Death of the King

At the start of the play, a brief historical background is provided, explaining that the last Sasanian King, Yazdgerd III, was running away, hiding while the Persian army followed behind him, retreating from the invaders. The play translates the invaders as "fearless and religiously impassioned Moslem army."⁶⁸ The story takes place in a mill where three army men and a high clergyman surround the Miller, his wife, and his daughter. There is a covered dead body in the middle of the stage on which a crown is put. King's men are setting up a court to find out why and how the King is killed and to bring justice for his death. The Miller family gives perplexing stories of what happened, trying to delay their punishment. In the meantime, a soldier gives a report from outside (offstage) suggesting the invaders are coming wearing black and holding a black flag. The Miller tells them the King did not want to return and paid them to get killed. Miller and his wife performed the story as they narrated it. Another story the Miller family performs is that the King dressed as the Miller to evade his status as the King and be freed of his burdens. The clergy and the army men start doubting that Miller might be the King; no one has ever seen the King's face. The family also talks about their lost son, who was forced to join the army. The King's men ask the Miller to put on the crown and perform what the King did.

Miller and his wife narrate another story, giving the impression of the King who gave up his status, offering them money to kill him. The Miller family narrates that they opposed killing the King. While the army men resist believing the family, Miller's story seems to go under their skin, and they desperately ask for proof from the family for their claims. One of the army men, the Corporal, explains

⁶⁸ Bahram Beyzaie, "The Death of the King," in *Stories from the Rains of Love and Death: Four Plays from Iran*, trans. Soheil Parsa, Peter Farbridge, and Brian Quirt (Toronto: Playwrights Canada Press, 2008), 28.

to others that the King first fled, not the army. In the meantime, the private tells the army men that they just captured an enemy prisoner, but they cannot understand the prisoner's words, for it is another language. The wife performing the King tells that once the King cannot convince the Miller to kill him, he starts to humiliate the Miller, threatening to rape their daughter. While the family performs the stories, the King's men express their disbelief and surprise at these unexpected narratives. The daughter explains that the rape was about to happen and that Miller intervened and killed the King. Miller says he lied and did not kill the King, but the King was playful with them. The daughter suddenly starts mourning on the body as if it were her father's body. The King's men struggle and do not know what to believe, for none clearly remembers the King's face. The King's men doubt that Miller might be the King. As the family is left alone, it does not become clear whether the Miller is the King; the daughter seems insane to her parents, for she believes the dead is her father.

The King's men enter, speaking of the enemy retreating. While the Miller family story confuses the King's men, the clergy asks the Miller to wear the robe and the crown. They test the family, asking them questions about the palace (i.e., Ctesiphon omitted in the adaptation) and the King's women.⁶⁹ The Miller's wife, who performs as the King, answers all the inquiries. Miller is surprised at how his wife knows all that. The daughter says that her mother slept with the king. The Miller starts arguing, and it turns out the wife used to sell her body to feed her family during a famine, and the Miller expresses his distrust of her.

The daughter tells the story of seduction, and that the King sends the Miller away into a storm looking for food. As the wife is describing the King seducing her, the Miller returns and kills the abusive

⁶⁹ See Malcolm Andrew Richard Colledge and Josef Wiesehöfer, "Ctesiphon," in *The Oxford Classical Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), accessed December 15, 2024, <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780199545568.001.0001/acref-9780199545568-e-1946>. Authors note, "It became the main Sasanid -empire residence [...] Sasanian kings built palaces and added suburbs; ruins of fortifications and an impressive brick-vaulted palace arch, Taq-e-Kesra (meaning Arch of Chosroes), survive. In 637, Arabs took it."

King. The story moved the King's men, saying that they changed their minds about punishing the family. The chief commander thinks joining the war is in vain and that he will leave the army. Later, they express that the invaders are furiously coming and will conquer their land. The Soldier and the Corporal run out to fight. The clergy carries the body off the stage while praying, and the wife warns that a darker tomorrow for their family is imminent.

Embodied Middle Eastern Male on a Universalist Stage

In *Aurash* and *The Death of the King*, we encounter figures and characters that cannot be broken down and further categorized based on identity categorizations such as political, historical, and social aspects. I will examine the depictions from two angles: political-historical and socio-ideological characteristics in the dramatic world of the plays studied in this chapter. The analysis will demonstrate that these masculinities' social and historical attributes often lack precise signification, or if they do, they impart a contradictory and ambiguous aspect to these images. Therefore, by closely reading the artworks, we demonstrate how these adaptations' manipulation and omission of socio-historical characteristics lead to a depiction oscillating between vague, oversimplified images and operating without engagement with the dimensions of Middle Eastern male identity in its historical and cultural context. By stripping the Middle Eastern masculine figures of historical depth, the portrayals become abstract and structurally aligned with simplified representational patterns, no longer reflecting the specific political, cultural, and social forces that shape individual identities. In contrast, representations anchored in their historical and cultural contexts provide the necessary specificity to portray Middle Eastern masculinities in a nuanced manner, avoiding reductive or monolithic interpretations.

In examining the political-historical characteristics, we explain how these plays and productions picture the dramatic world and situate their characters within this pictured frame. Next, the analysis focuses on the social groups and ideologies associated with these masculinities, linking close reading

with contextual reading to examine the social structures related to the ideologies outside the text. The final stage focuses on the formal aspects of the portrayals, highlighting how the artistic choices of Modern Times's founders adapt history to a way of the universalized dramatic world, where masculinity lacks a specific shape and is prone to being perceived as a stereotype in a world relatively devoid of geocultural and historical specifics. This lack of historical and cultural grounding leaves these masculinities vulnerable to reductive readings, reinforcing stereotypes. In contrast, historical specificity provides the necessary framework to portray these identities with nuance, connecting them to their cultural and political realities and challenging essentialist or stereotypical views of Middle Eastern men.

Political-Historical: Ambiguous Masculinities in a Decontextualized Dramatic World

Without mythological, cultural, and historical specifics, portrayals of Middle Eastern masculinities onstage, such as in *Aurash* and *The Death of the King*, risk becoming generic and susceptible to reductive interpretations. This absence of specifics is critical when portraying Middle Eastern masculinities, whose identities are deeply rooted in historical and geopolitical events. When geoculturally specific markers are removed or obscured, such removal/obscuring disconnects the character from a particular context and reduces the potential to engage with the cultural complexities that shape an understanding of Middle Eastern masculinity. This decontextualization creates semiotic indeterminacy regarding the character's origins and narrative function. This process of identification relies on verbal and non-verbal cues that inform us about the character's world and identity. When these specifics are minimized and absent, the depicted identity becomes vague, making it difficult to connect the character to a particular world or context. In such depictions, only the remaining signs, such as costume or accent, might lead the viewer to associate the character with a specific identity category. However, this identification relies heavily on the viewer's prior familiarity with that category. For example, if a character's appearance, accent, or costume suggests an identity (like wearing a turban, speaking English

with an accent, or Middle Eastern music playing in the background), but the artwork does not provide further nuances about the character's world, the textual gaps remain unfilled by contextual markers. In such cases, meaning may be constructed through surface-level cues, which risks reproducing dominant cultural narratives in the absence of contextual grounding.

In both *Aurash* and *The Death of the King*, representations are framed in a dramatic world devoid of mythological and historical specifics, leaving the reasons and motivations for characters' interactions vague and ambiguous. When such cultural and political frameworks are absent from the dramatic world, the characters' actions become disconnected from their deeper meanings and contexts, reducing complex identities to simplified types that reinforce stereotypical interpretations. For Middle Eastern characters like Aurash, the absence of geocultural context disconnects them from political struggles, cultural values, and societal roles, leaving them floating in a formless, dramatic world that invites stereotypical interpretations. In both case studies, male characters are depicted in an unknown world where factions exist in perpetual conflict. For instance, in *Aurash*, while some residual mythical references remain (such as the arrow motif), the broader political and cultural grievances that ground the myth are de-emphasized, detaching the protagonist's task from any concrete national or historical allegiance.⁷⁰ Similarly, in *The Death of the King*, although scattered signs of cultural specificity exist, the invaders are primarily characterized as "fearless and religiously impassioned," without detailed ethnic, political, or historical anchoring, thus rendering the surrounding conflict abstract and dehistoricized.⁷¹

When Aurash's mythological or cultural background is not made explicit, the reasons behind the conflict between the two factions, where all characters appear as militarized and masculine bodies, risk becoming obscured or overly abstract. For instance, the protagonist's task of shooting the arrow is framed simply as fulfilling a duty, without invocation of historical allegiance or national identity. The

⁷⁰ Beyzaie, "Aurash," 22-23.

⁷¹ Ibid., 28.

Commander declares, “We have agreed that by sundown our finest archer will release an arrow from the peak of the highest mountain. We have agreed that wherever that arrow lands the border of our nation will lie,” reducing national identity to a physical contest, with only minimal reference to historical or mythological causes.⁷²

Similarly, the narrative in *The Death of the King* portrays a world embroiled in a timeless conflict between two sides; subjects are depicted as superior, militarized figures or subordinate serfs and lieges. Due to the play’s lack of mythological and historical specifics, the dramatic world is portrayed as an eternal realm where one power perpetually dominates over a subordinate one. In *The Death of the King*, although the opening summary hints at historical invasion, within the dramatic action itself, characters like the soldier, miller, and woman operate inside a court of accusation and judgment that lacks reference to specific nations, historical armies, or cultural affiliations. The characters’ loyalties and betrayals unfold purely through power relations, transforming the political conflict into a generalized, ahistorical struggle between domination and subjugation. This abstraction is evident where Miller describes himself confronting the King, denouncing him not as a Persian king or a Sasanian figure, but simply as a tyrant who abandoned his people: “Miller: My King, O Ruler, I said, who is responsible for all my suffering. I’ve paid you taxes every single day of my life, I’ve fed your soldiers, and now the enemy is coming, you’re running away and leaving me? Me? Who knows nothing about war [...].”⁷³ Here, the Miller condemns the King for abandoning him to the enemy without specifying who the enemy is, leaving the structure of domination unmoored from identifiable geopolitical realities. Therefore, in this dramaturgically ungrounded backdrop, the masculinities within these works lack

⁷² Ibid., 6. In the section “Formal Analysis: Universalizing the Local“ page starting on 273, I examine in more detail how terms such as “our nation” or “the enemy” replace specific cultural identifiers like “Iran” or “Turan” that appear in Beyzaie’s original text, transforming a culturally embedded conflict into a generic territorial dispute.

⁷³ Beyzaie, “The Death of the King,” 36.

cultural and social grounding, leaving the motivations for character interactions narratively simplified within a generalized power hierarchy contextually ungrounded.

How, then, does this ambiguity in characters' motivations manifest in these case studies? In *Aurash*, the men depicted within this eternal narrative are characters who betray without clear motives, like Hooman; commit to morality ideals sacrificially without concrete basis, as Aurash does when he persists in shooting the arrow; and grapple ambiguously with their inner conflicts to stay true to their ideals, demonstrated by Aurash's struggles with himself, with his father's ghost, with the mountains, and with other characters. The protagonist in *Aurash* operates as a morally ambiguous figure whose self-sacrifice exists with an underdeveloped motivation. This is powerfully illustrated when Kashvad confronts Aurash about his decision, asking, "You're not an archer, Aurash—why did you agree to do this?" to which Aurash simply responds: "Because I want to die."⁷⁴ Further, when confronting his own internal struggle, Aurash acknowledges that his driving force is merely "hopelessness," stating: "this force that grows in my head, runs through my arms, races through my chest and pumps in my veins [...] isn't it hopelessness? Yes. You're right. And I'm thankful for it."⁷⁵ In contrast, in Beyzaie's *Arash*, where the mythological and historical layers are intact, Arash's character is grounded in Iran's cultural and historical struggle. Beyzaie's text repeatedly specifies "Iran" as the homeland Arash defends, with passages declaring "wherever your arrow falls, that place will be Iran," directly connecting the protagonist's sacrifice to national identity.⁷⁶ Unlike Aurash, Beyzaie's Arash articulates a clear moral imperative: "For me there is no path of return, hero. I am a man of truth," reflecting the Persian cultural concept of *javanmardi* (ethical sacrifice for the greater good).⁷⁷ This contextual richness allows Arash to

⁷⁴ Ibid., 17.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 18.

⁷⁶ Bahram Beyzaie, *Arash* [آرش], trans. Arash Isapour (Tehran: Niloofar Publications, 1994), in Farsi, 30. The original text is "تا هرکجا تیر تو برود تا همانجا از آن ایران است؛ تا هرکجا تیر تو برود ای آرش"

⁷⁷ Ibid., 36. The original text is: "برای من راه راه بازگشتی نیست پهلوان؛ من مرد راستی و پرهیزم."

be seen not merely as a symbol but as a fully-formed figure grappling with the dilemmas of his historical/mythological time, thereby avoiding the oversimplification of masculinity into a set of stereotypes.

It's worth noting that while Beyzaie's work maintains traditional gender configurations intact, Parsa's adaptation incorporates female actors in male roles, seemingly introducing a disruption to the masculine-dominated mythological framework. This casting strategy, which will be examined more thoroughly in the formal analysis section, represents one area where Parsa's decontextualization serves a potentially progressive function by destabilizing gender assumptions embedded in the original narrative.⁷⁸

In *The Death of the King*, the narrative presents a king whose reasons for fleeing remain undisclosed in a world without clearly defined conflict. Despite their collapsing power and the uncertain future awaiting them after their king's death, the King's men attempt to assert moral principles as they seek to pass judgment on a serf family. The driving force behind these narratives' actions and character developments hinges primarily on ethical and moral principles. Based on a clear cause-and-effect logic, Miller's struggle for survival in this tumultuous world is the only discernible motivation. Therefore, the men depicted in *Aurash* display schizophrenic traits, while those in *The Death of the King* embody amorphous identities, transcending specific Middle Eastern characteristics.⁷⁹ The absence of geocultural

⁷⁸ See page 308. It will be discussed however that the apparent subversion remains primarily at the surface level, without fundamentally challenging the underlying masculine ideals portrayed in the dramatic world.

⁷⁹ Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 27. Schizophrenia, as used here, is a metaphor borrowed by Jameson from Lacanian theory to describe the effect of the postmodern condition on perception. Lacan's concept refers to a breakdown in the chain of signifiers, where words lose their relational connections. Jameson applies this to illustrate how postmodernity disrupts the subject's relationship to historical depth, making it challenging to understand identities with their nuances when human perception is trapped in an eternal present. Thus, perceiving identity is reduced to what Jameson terms "pure material signifiers"—fragmented, surface-level markers devoid of depth. In *Aurash*, this fragmentation manifests in both the character's construction, which lacks historical and cultural grounding, and the dramaturgy, which reflects the influence of postmodernity on cultural production. As will be further discussed, dramaturgy incorporates postmodern traits, suggesting that Modern Times artists have harmonized their creative process with the ideological state apparatus, where the dominance of postmodernity is inescapable.

particularities renders these men timeless and placeless, with their existence centred solely on morality and survival.

The schizophrenic display of Aurash, in Jamesonian terms, fosters the conditions for stereotyping. Jameson's theory explains that the schizophrenic subject experiences a breakdown in the signifying chain, resulting in a fragmented existence confined to the present, disconnected from any cultural, historical, or temporal context.⁸⁰ In *Aurash*, this disconnection manifests most powerfully in two key moments. First, when Kashvad directly questions Aurash's motivation in Scene Eleven. — "You're not an archer, Aurash—why did you agree to do this?"—Aurash's response is devoid of national or cultural purpose: "Because I want to die."⁸¹ This exchange illustrates how removing historical context transforms what might be a heroic sacrifice for the homeland into what appears as nihilistic self-destruction. Second, Scene Twelve presents a multiplication of self that crystallizes the postmodern condition of identity fragmentation:

A: Stay away from me, Aurash. You stain me with myself.

B: (as Aurash) Where can I go, Aurash? I'm the only one you have. Where can you escape?

[...]

ALL: You deserve the worst, Aurash.⁸²

This multiplication occurs because, stripped of cultural specificity, the character lacks a stable center.

Aurash's haunting plea— "Stay away from me, Aurash. You stain me with myself"—captures the profound alienation when identity loses its cultural moorings. Unlike Beyzaie's original, where internal

⁸⁰Ibid., 26-28. Jameson features the Postmodern subject, which is mostly involved with the present and loses a sense of temporality as a schizophrenic; he notes, "The schizophrenic suffers from a "breakdown of the signifying chain" in his/her use of language until "the schizophrenic is reduced to an experience of pure material signifiers, or, in other words, a series of pure and unrelated presents in time."

⁸¹ Beyzaie, "Aurash," 17.

⁸² Beyzaie, "Aurash," 17.

struggle serves a higher cultural purpose, these fractured selves exist in an ahistorical vacuum, representing nothing beyond their own disintegration.

The absence of cultural framing transforms what should be heroic conflict into mere psychic dissolution, embodying the condition where coherent subjectivity gives way to isolated, floating signifiers. Instead of a fully realized character, Aurash is reduced to isolated gestures that function as decontextualized signifiers within dominant representational systems. The key here is that characters like Aurash, in postmodern culture, exist primarily as surface-level signifiers without historical dimension, circulated as simplified signifiers that reproduce established representational patterns. In this type of portrayal, Aurash appears as a noble yet irrational man, potentially Middle Eastern if identified through staging signs and markers, whose actions exist without developed contextual motivation, positioning him within simplified representational structures. Aurash, thus, becomes not just a dramatic character but a product of postmodern cultural commodification, where the dramaturgy detaches him from—or at least reduces his connection to—mythological and historical origins, rendering him a simplified, one-dimensional figure ready for cultural consumption. What we witness here is an image of masculinity that resonates with the postmodern subject in the context of late capitalism, where identities are understood and consumed in fragmented, schizophrenic ways. Through this lens, *Aurash* serves as a representation shaped by the ideological state apparatus, fitting neatly into commodified frameworks prioritizing cultural consumption over complex, historically grounded engagement. Aurash's motivations appear structurally underdeveloped within the dramatic framework, positioning his sacrifices and endurance of humiliation as narratively ungrounded, as his persistence in shooting an arrow to set a boundary is undeveloped and seemingly static. It appears as if this ethical and moral idealism is divinely inscribed in Aurash, emerging prominently only when the dramatic world is stripped of particularities.

In contrast, Beyzaie's protagonist in *Arash*, faced with misunderstanding and humiliation, grapples with his role in defending Iran with epic descriptions and rich text summoning a collection of symbols, meanings, and cultural discourses. This framework provides narrative coherence for Arash's ethical conflict, portraying him as a subject embedded in a political dilemma rather than as a schizophrenic or dislocated figure. In the context of a war between the army (Iranians) and the enemy (Turanians), Arash grapples with his role in defending Iran. Faced with misunderstanding and humiliation, Arash ponders whether to sacrifice for his nation, a conflict that propels his transformation from a downtrodden individual to a revered hero. Rather than reducing concepts like homeland and Iran to symbolic abstractions, Beyzaie embeds these themes within the dramaturgical structure, enabling a coherent representation of Arash's ethical motivations as historically and politically situated.

As mentioned earlier, the adaptation of *Arash* is an adaptation of a specific ideology and history of Iran in the mid-20th century. While Beyzaie's adaptation reflects a sense of defiance, trauma, and hope of an Iranian collectivity for liberation, *Aurash* reflects the contemporary postmodern subject who is unable "to maintain a unified sense of self amidst the rapid flux of signs and images."⁸³ This transformation demonstrates, as Hutcheon argues, an adaptation process where works are necessarily "framed in a context—a time and a place, a society and a culture," with Parsa's Canadian multicultural context of the 2000s influencing how cultural specificity is reimagined as ambiguity.⁸⁴ In Parsa's co-adaptations, where specific cultural markers are transformed, replacing Beyzaie's explicit references to "Iran" with the

⁸³ Fredric Jameson, *Jameson on Jameson*, ed. Ian Buchanan (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 46. Jameson discusses the condition of the postmodern subject through the lens of the "hysterical sublime," wherein the body, overwhelmed by the relentless flux of images, becomes "volatilized," existing outside itself or losing coherence altogether. This experience, as Jameson explains, reflects a state of autoreferentiality and affective disconnection characteristic of postmodern culture, where moments of extreme intensity punctuate a pervasive lack of affect.

⁸⁴ Hutcheon and O'Flynn, *A Theory of Adaptation*, 7, 142. Hutcheon's and O'Flynn's concept that "adaptation is repetition, but repetition without replication" frames this analysis of transformative processes. She emphasizes that adaptations are "always framed in a context—a time and a place, a society and a culture." This analytical approach aligns with my examination of how specific cultural transformations in adaptation affect the representation of identity, without prescribing how adaptations should function or whether they should maintain cultural specificity.

generalized “our nation” and retaining Elborz Mountain’s name while stripping its mythological significance as “witness to the first rotation of the sun”— Aurash emerges as a character subjected to degradation by both conflicting sides, lacking defined geopolitical boundaries and patriotic values.⁸⁵ Aurash is left without any apparent driving force for his internal struggles. Modern Times’s *Aurash* depicts the protagonist’s masculinity as stoic and resolute, adhering to his decisions despite widespread disbelief from others. This raises the question of what dramatic logic or contextual framing accounts for the degradation and oppression Aurash faces. The absence of specific historical details leaves these aspects unexplored, and consequently, Aurash confronts internal conflicts and ghosts, symbolizing his struggle within an undefined, amorphous world. Despite these challenges, Aurash remains determined to shoot an arrow toward a border that is notably absent in the narrative, highlighting his struggle in a world without a discernible nation and power. This portrayal positions Aurash’s motivations as structurally underdeveloped within the dramatic framework, presented primarily through a sense of duty without specific context or reasoning. In *Aurash*, the only and primary context is that the protagonist departs from a mundane world consumed by perpetual wars and injustice, in which one group subjugates another. Hence, we see a masculinity that, without concrete reason and in a liminal world, proceeds with his actions and dies for moral values in favour of no one, including himself, who disappears at the end of the plot. By stripping away the specific historical and cultural references that define Middle Eastern masculinity, the narrative reinforces stereotypes of Middle Eastern men as inherently conflicted, irrational, and devoid of clear motivations, leaving these characters in a vacuum of simplified, reductive representation. This erasure of historical-cultural grounding structurally transforms Middle Eastern

⁸⁵ Beyzaie, *Arash*, 30. The full sentence in the original play in my translation is “Arash, wherever your arrow falls, that place will be Iran;” Beyzaie, “Aurash,” 14. The corresponding passage reads: “B: And wherever your arrow lands will be our land.” References to “our nation” and “the enemy” appear on pages 6-7.

masculinities into hyper-visible yet socially illegible forms, as Massad and Amar articulate.⁸⁶ In doing so, the representation becomes a blank canvas that reproduces oversimplified ideas of Middle Eastern men, ideas shaped by pervasive stereotypes rather than grounded in a nuanced cultural or historical identity. The following reading shifts focus to *The Death of the King*, examining how its dramatic structure reframes questions of political allegiance and identity under historical erasure.

Having examined how decontextualization affects masculinity in *Aurash*, we now turn to *The Death of the King* to consider how similar dramaturgical strategies reshape historical masculinities within a different narrative context. In *The Death of the King*, a world is depicted where two powers are at war, and without reference to cultural and political coordinates, we are faced with a formless and identity-less world. The play might raise the question of why the generals and soldiers seek to prosecute those accused of killing the King while the war is still ongoing, with soldiers frequently entering the scene with news of the enemy's advance. Why do those in power not immediately punish Miller and his family, and why do they see the need to adhere to the principle of justice amid a war where their defeat is imminent? The motivation of these soldiers is reduced to their loyalty to a dead king. In contrast, in Beyzaie's play, with the knowledge of the historical and cultural context of the dramatic world, the layering of historical and cultural context allows for the emergence of more intertwined motivations related to national, religious, and perhaps ethnic identity, as Beyzaie's play references the conflict

⁸⁶ Joseph A. Massad, *Desiring Arabs* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 41. Historical and cultural references directly constitute Middle Eastern masculine identity through what Joseph A. Massad terms the "ontological structure" of non-Western subjectivities. These specific cultural frameworks are essential because when Middle Eastern masculinities are disconnected from them, they become what Paul Amar calls "hypervisible subjects"—"fetishized figures that preoccupy public discourse and representations but are not actually recognizable or legible as social formations." Paul R. Amar, "Middle East Masculinity Studies: Discourses of 'Men in Crisis,' Industries of Gender in Revolution," *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 7, no. 3 (2011): 40. The relationship between historical specificity and identity construction is further articulated by Talal Asad, who notes that "cultures may be conceived not only in visual terms (such as clearly bounded, interlaced, fragmented) but also in terms of the temporalities of power by which—rightly or wrongly—practices constituting particular forms of life are displaced, outlawed, and penalized, and by which conditions are created for the cultivation of different kinds of human," quoted in Massad, *Desiring Arabs*, 42. These cultural and historical references are not contextual background but essential elements that define masculine identity, determining how it is understood, performed, and signified within these societies.

between the Persians and Arabs. Consequently, the motivations for the characters in *The Death of the King* are reduced to loyalty to the King for the soldiers on the one hand and the struggle for survival for the Miller and his family on the other.

In a dramatic world devoid of historical and cultural specifics, the play's male characters are portrayed with limited narrative development of motivation, resulting in formless and schizophrenic identities. When historical counterparts are removed from the narrative frame, the characters' motivations for their actions are reduced to superficial causes. Consequently, the dramaturgical approach in *Aurash* and *The Death of the King* creates a formless world where masculinities lack cultural and historical identity. These characters act on moral values and the struggle for survival, making significant decisions such as self-sacrifice or justice based on contextually limited motivations. *Aurash* and *The Death of the King* portray eternal human conflicts and moral principles through dramatic actions that symbolize betrayal, self-sacrifice, and inner tension. These dramatic elements represent humanity's internal and external struggles in the perpetual present. In *Aurash*, the recurring motif of the arrow that "flew, followed by the wind [...] day after day, and night after night" stages an internal struggle against fate, suspended outside any concrete historical resolution.⁸⁷ In *The Death of the King*, the perpetual present manifests both internally and externally. Internally, the Miller family's repeated, conflicting reconstructions of the King's death prevent any stable resolution, suspending the action in a cycle of uncertainty. Externally, the ongoing war outside unfolds without a clear origin, end, or geopolitical anchoring, further detaching the dramatic world from specific progression. As the Commander declares, "truth has no meaning anymore," framing both personal loyalties and political struggles within an unending confrontation beyond temporal or cultural specificity.⁸⁸ Hence, both plays depict their masculinities in liminal worlds, rendering these forms of masculinity superficially understandable. They

⁸⁷ Beyzaie, "Aurash," 22.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 58.

are recognizable yet do not evoke a viewer's in-depth interpretation due to their lack of historical depth and distinct form; these are amorphous masculinities. The characters' representational indeterminacy positions them as open signifiers without specific cultural anchoring, presenting the men in their abstract individuality as embodiments of psychological and personalized traits.

The lack of depth and specificity in representing identities and their dramatic world affects even the critical and unconventional aspects that the plays might intend to present. The casting of female actors in traditionally male roles, such as in *Aurash*, can be viewed as an attempt to challenge conventional gender and cultural narratives. Although this cross-gender casting does not affect the story, it invites immediate interpretations as a subversive critique of gender expectations, positioning itself as a disruption of militarized and heroic characteristics typically gendered as masculine. However, within a dramatic world already stripped of cultural and historical specifics, the impact of this casting choice risks being simplified, as it does not provide sufficient socio-historical depth to enhance the portrayal of masculinity. Moreover, this lack of grounding may inadvertently invite connections to Orientalist frameworks, reinforcing broader assumptions about Middle Eastern masculinity. The casting of women in male roles does not introduce a feminine transformation; rather, the same schematic treatment of masculinity is transferred to female actors. The absence of references to *Aurash*'s mythological and cultural origins prevents the casting strategy from articulating a clear critique of gender roles, instead compounding the ambiguity of an already abstracted portrayal of identity. While cross-gender casting might initially seem like a subversive and unconventional innovation, it risks reinforcing the broader formlessness and vagueness of the representation of Middle Eastern masculinity in the play. Without the grounding of historical and cultural markers, the gender-switching strategy may become a formal choice serving the artwork's aesthetic rather than a meaningful critique of a specific form of masculine identity. Rather than offering a substantial critique, the cross-gender casting may only suggest a surface-level

subversion, contributing to the overall ambiguity of the characters and their world. Formal choices in postmodern cultural production often prioritize aesthetics over thematic depth, aligning with broader market trends.⁸⁹ As discussed, the cross-gender casting in *Aurash* operates without establishing a sustained critique of gender expectations; instead, it highlights an artwork in which form takes precedence over substance, resulting in a reductive portrayal prone to reinforcing stereotypes. The broader implications of this casting strategy and its impact on representing Middle Eastern masculinity will be examined in the upcoming formal analysis section - Casting Femininity: Masking Masculinity (page 309).

Social-Ideological: Simplified Masculinities in the Duality of Victim and Victimizer

The removal of cultural and historical specifics presents a superficial social dimension of masculinity in a duality of victimized and victimizer, resulting in a conformist, non-critical image of the men in these works. The characters in the universalizing dramaturgy of Modern Times directors can be divided into two categories, distinguished not by common social factors such as race, ethnicity, nationality, or gender, but solely by their positions of power: the characters are either victims or oppressors, without us knowing the roots of this injustice. In these works, the antagonists often belong to a group of masculinities characterized by military and court figures, representing empowered individuals whose actions revolve around seizing and maintaining authority. On the other side, the protagonists of both plays belong to a group of masculinities depicted as victims. These men do not struggle to escape their subordinate and oppressed positions and offer no critique of their oppressors. Unlike Beyzaie's works, the plays discussed here present characters whose motivations exist without developed

⁸⁹ Jameson identifies "a new kind of flatness or depthlessness, a new kind of superficiality in the most literal sense" as the dominant formal trait of postmodern cultural production, in which "depth is replaced by surface, or by multiple surfaces." He ties this aesthetic shift directly to economic conditions, writing that "postmodernism is the consumption of sheer commodification as a process," and that culture itself has become "a product in its own right" (x). These formal tendencies, according to Jameson, reflect the internal logic of late capitalism, where representation is shaped by market imperatives rather than thematic or historical depth. See Jameson, *Postmodernism*, x, 9, 12.

contextual frameworks for their actions beyond moral principles, and the dramatic world does not provide a context or reasons for their vital actions related to sacrifice or moral dilemmas. Consequently, the lack of specifics in the dramatic world diminishes the will to emancipate from the power hierarchy in the representation of oppressed men, making oppressed masculinity conform to its oppressed position.

The conformist and passive nature of defying the oppressor can be deduced from the characterization of the protagonist in *Aurash*. Aurash is characterized as belonging to the underclass, striving for social justice through adherence to ethics and human values. He is depicted as a stableman and gravedigger for dead horses, not a soldier or low-ranking military man. This portrayal of the underclass is not solely the creation of Parsa and his collaborators but is already present in Beyzaie's original play, where Arash is explicitly characterized as a stableman who has never shot an arrow and has no place among warriors. However, what sets the character of Aurash apart from Arash is the motivation and reasons behind their dramatic conflicts. Clarifying this ideological trait of Aurash helps us understand the importance of the social and class dimensions of his representation and its contextual relevance. Beyzaie's Arash connects with the Iranian man, disillusioned by tyranny and hopeful for liberation. When Beyzaie wrote *Arash*, Iran was under the impact of the 1953 coup and ongoing social unrest and oppression; Arash was written a few years after the coup.⁹⁰ Beyzaie's *Arash* addressed themes that reflected the social conditions in Iran at the time, exploring collective anxiety and disillusionment through mythological allegory, as Talajooy notes in his analysis of Iranian drama of this period.⁹¹ The character of Arash transcends the mythological concept, seeking a saviour within the national collective psyche.⁹²

⁹⁰ Talajooy, "History and Iranian drama," 189.

⁹¹ Ibid., 188-189. Talajooy explains that Beyzaie's *Arash* engages Iranian mythological history to "deconstruct cultural discourses about heroism, power and knowledge" and reflect "the cultural and political failures that prevented Iranians from uniting at critical moments of history," dramatizing collective anxiety and disillusionment in post-coup Iran.

⁹² Even two decades after the coup, *Arash* mirroring the social struggle in Iran was still relatable. While the socio-political shifts in the post-1979 period failed to establish a democratic system, Beyzaie's development of Arash into an earthy character with inner struggles critiques the idea of seeking liberation deferred to a superior individual figure. Beyzaie's

What distinct characteristic does Modern Times's Aurash possess, and for what purpose does he strive and struggle? To identify the thematic difference, we must understand the arrow's symbolism in both plays: it never lands, representing the relentless, collective hope for a liberated future. What distinct hope drives Aurash, contrasting with the mythological and fable character Arash's hope for liberating a fictional Iran? The answer lies in the contextual differences between *Aurash* and *Arash*.⁹³ Modern Times's *Aurash* is no longer focused on hope for the liberation of Iran from despotism but is instead concerned with the issue of social equality in Canada. By eliminating specific cultural contexts and focusing on universal moral principles, as highlighted in *Aurash*, Modern Times practitioners' dramaturgy seems to find the solution to equality in universalist ideals through shared moral values and human commonalities. This shift towards universalism and away from specific cultural struggles highlights the passive and conformist nature of Aurash's masculinity, which mirrors the context of inequality and othering that Parsa experienced.

Parsa experienced a profound sense of hopelessness when he encountered barriers to pursuing his career as a theatre practitioner in Canada after graduating from York University. In a CBC interview, he speaks about the discrimination he faced based on his background at York University, which led him to embrace a universalist view in the theatre company he co-founded:

Interviewer: *One of Your Professors said something to you, didn't he?*

Parsa: It was the day of my graduation, and I was in his office, and he said, "Soheil, you are an amazing theatre artist; you are very talented, but I have to tell you the truth that there would be no opportunities for you as a theatre artist in this country and I hope that Iranian regime changes one day and you can go back and become the head of the National Theatre in Iran [...]. So, that

picturing Arash as an underdog suggests that the masses must find solutions from within rather than investing hope in a new messiah.

⁹³ In this analysis, Aurash refers to Modern Times' character, whereas Arash denotes the mythological figure and Beyzaie's interpretation. See footnote 28.

was the message from York University and theatre community in a way that there were no opportunities for me that was basically the central motivation for me to form the company.

Because I recognize that there would be little or no opportunities for me as a racialized immigrant artist to be higher by Canadian theatres. Immediately after I graduated from York, I co-founded Modern Times, and it went on for 31 years.⁹⁴

The protagonist in *Aurash*, representing marginalized, victimized, and uncritical masculinities, is situated in the disempowered category of masculinities, which are distinguished in these plays solely by their position of power. As a stable servant, not a warrior, Aurash is humiliated and used as a pawn in political games, yet he endures oppression, remains steadfast in his moral principles, and ultimately sacrifices his life. Aurash's character status parallels Modern Times artists who see themselves as dominated by mainstream art. Parsa, as an immigrant artist, faced systemic barriers and obstacles that hindered his ability to pursue his career in the Canadian theatre scene. The struggle for recognition as an immigrant artist from the Global South in a predominantly Western cultural space highlights his experience of being othered. Migration to Canada placed an immigrant artist from the Global South in a position to observe a world perceived as divided into East and West, tyranny, and freedom, highlighting this duality in their lived experience and artistic creations. This existential situation includes experiencing a form of injustice from identity politics, echoing Aurash's experience of being oppressed by his troops and humiliated by the enemy. In this context, it is significant that Modern Times' founders take a specific stance on identity politics, shaping the company's mandate.⁹⁵ The artists of Modern Times declare that they do not prioritize identity politics and that identity is not of primary importance to them: "For me, it was not about identity politics."⁹⁶ Here, Parsa suggests that his artistic vision

⁹⁴ "Soheil Parsa Reflects," *Q with Tom Power*, CBC.

⁹⁵ See note 38 for more details.

⁹⁶ UVicFineArts, "Orion Lecture Series with Soheil Parsa."

transcends identity politics, which he sees as limiting or reductive to his work. He clarifies this stance by stating:

Plays about identity are not my favourite thing, not my style, not my concern. I'm not saying they shouldn't be done; what I'm saying is that I'm not interested. As an individual, I have different concerns and different things in my head. Even as a refugee, an immigrant coming to Canada, I've never had the urge or desire to direct a play about the refugee experience.⁹⁷

Despite experiencing discrimination and being othered in his professional life as a racialized immigrant, Parsa resists focusing on identity politics in his artistic creations. This distancing from identity politics and his preference for emphasizing broader human themes could be seen as a strategy to transcend the barriers that identity politics not only fails to resolve but may also intensify. Perhaps, rather than addressing issues of identity, such as stereotyping or the marginalization of certain groups, Modern Times founders seek a solution that foregrounds shared human or universal values. As Parsa explained in an interview: "There is a cultural difference, but at the same time, it was very important for me that humanity shares a lot, so if we find those shared points, there will be less likely to be war in the world. And it is the theme of all my works."⁹⁸ In this way, Modern Times Theatre strives to find solutions without first confronting the problematic aspects of identity politics directly. This approach, which sidesteps identity politics, reflects a similar ambivalence in *Aurash*, where masculinity, though victimized, avoids engaging with the political structures and power hierarchies that oppress it. Just as Parsa hesitates to focus on identity politics in his artistic approach, *Aurash* presents a masculinity that accepts its victimization and focuses on moral values rather than challenging the power systems that sustain inequality. Thus, to combat this inequality, both the character of Aurash and its creators adhere

⁹⁷ Antaki, "In Conversation: Soheil Parsa," *Intermission*.

⁹⁸ Soheil Parsa, "Theater Talk Soheil Parsa Part 1," interview by Hamid Mozafari, trans. Arash Isapour, Hidden Treasure Productions, YouTube video, 15:51, posted September 21, 2020, accessed June 7, 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0H3bTT4rATM>.

firmly to the idea of shared human values and commonality rather than critiquing power structures within and outside the dramatic world.⁹⁹ This approach presents masculinity that accepts its victimized position, refrains from criticizing the power hierarchy and attributes the root of inequality to a lack of adherence to universal humanist principles. As a result, this masculinity neither confronts power nor holds a solid critical stance; instead, it conforms to the ideals promoted by the power structures that perpetuate inequality.

In *The Death of the King*, the protagonists, including the male character Miller, are depicted as underprivileged and inferior within the power hierarchy in an unspecified dramatic world. The Miller family, like Aurash, is an unfortunate victim of the power, miserable and oppressed. While Aurash passively endures his fate, the Miller family actively resists for their survival. Setting the characters in a timeless world with unspecified conflicts among the powerful makes the depiction of the protagonist in *The Death of the King* distinct from the image in the source play; the Modern Times adaptation leaves the reasons for the characters' actions ambiguous. Contrastingly, the source play provides historical context, with the killing of the King, Yazdegerd, by a lower class reflecting societal dissatisfaction with the monarchy and the oppressive feudal-like system of a specific era and society. The subplots in Beyzaie's narrative delve into a society experiencing poverty and oppression, burdened by external invasion; thus, the Miller family's situation parallels conditions within contemporary Iranian lived experiences under unjust regimes, both pre- and post-revolution. However, when disconnected from the specific historical and political context of the source play, the characters in *The Death of the King* are presented with reduced layers, portraying an image of subjugation under ambiguous power structures without a clear rationale. By omitting the specifics, Modern Times simplifies the characters'

⁹⁹ UVicFineArts, "Orion Lecture Series with Soheil Parsa." In this lecture, Parsa outlines Modern Times' stance on identity politics, emphasizing the company's focus on human experience and aesthetics that express the "shared human spirit" while challenging the concept of a "unique, singular, and choiceless identity."

motivations, presenting a miller who kills a perceived unjust king without deeper justification. The presentation of *Modern Times* flattens these deeper meanings, reducing the complexity of characters and motivations. Thus, the representation of masculinity is reduced to a dichotomy of the powerless and the powerful in a liminal space, where the struggle for survival is the only motive, lacking deeper historical and cultural contexts.

There are subtle critiques regarding inequalities and social injustices in both plays, reflecting the director's concern with certain inequities affecting specific characters. The protagonist of *Aurash* does not openly defy the humiliation imposed by both sides but conforms to the demands placed upon him. However, Aurash's dissatisfaction with this unjust world is revealed through his adherence to moral values like self-sacrifice and righteousness, even at the cost of his life. This offers a faint sense of resistance against injustice, though it is not focused on themes of identity but rather on a universal struggle for shared human values. Consequently, while *Aurash* contains a critique of injustice, it remains limited in addressing issues of identity. Similarly, traces of criticism in *The Death of the King* reflect the context of its production. Parsa co-founded the company to create what he wants, free from institutional constraints and mainstream theatre's limitations, which resonates with the Miller family's astuteness in *The Death of the King*. As a result, the depicted masculinity from the lower class in *The Death of the King* exhibits intelligence, cunning, and perseverance when caught in moral and existential dilemmas created by those in positions of power. Hence, the adaptations and the creators' approach reflect an ongoing attempt to defy conformity to the dominant power structures. For the adapters of *Arash*, the focus shifts from fighting colonial or totalitarian oppression to defining freedom as equal citizenship and participation in societal issues.¹⁰⁰ Experiencing a paradox of social freedom and a lack of equal

¹⁰⁰ Hannah Arendt distinguishes liberation from freedom; to her, "liberation is indeed a condition of freedom," and its definition is coordinated with oppressive "regimes that had overstepped their powers" See Hannah Arendt, "The Freedom to Be Free," *New England Review* 38, no. 2 (2017): 60. To Arendt, freedom is interconnected with politics. It can only fulfill its meaning in public life under the idea of togetherness, which can be realized if equal citizens participate in common public

opportunities, Parsa faces marginalization within a social and cultural mechanism. This biographical context coincides with his engagement with adaptations like *Arash*, where themes of resistance are reframed through a modernist lens.¹⁰¹ With the ideological sediments of both anti-colonial and colonial modernity from Iran, Parsa, in collaboration with Farbridge, seeks remedies rooted in modernist thinking. To navigate the contradictions he faces in Canada, Parsa revisits those plays, critiquing unjust and marginalizing structures, resonating with his experiences of being underprivileged. Parsa's commitment to defying systematic discrimination rather than fully adapting to fragmentary identity politics aligns with Aurash's quasi-stoic persistence, despite Aurash lacking a defined context in the dramatic world, as Parsa does in historical reality. As a result, despite the presence of critical perspectives on social injustices in both plays, the director's emphasis on universal human values over specific cultural and historical identities leads to representations of masculinity that are ambiguous and lack depth. By avoiding engagement with identity politics and the complexities of cultural specificity, the portrayals of masculinity in these works become simplified into a binary of good versus evil. This approach positions outside its framework the nuanced experiences and identities of Middle Eastern men, presenting them within universal archetypes rather than as characters with developed historical and cultural dimensions. Consequently, the representations of masculinity function without disrupting established representational patterns, operating within them by not incorporating a critical examination of the cultural and historical factors that shape these identities.

Thus far in the discussion, the context has been integrated to enhance the analysis of embodied masculinities and better understand the social dimension of masculinity representations, characterized by

issues. Also, see Mehmet Kanatlı, "The Concept of Freedom in Hannah Arendt's Political Thought," *Journal of Current Researches on Social Sciences* 7, no. 2 (2017): 109-110.

¹⁰¹ While remaining steadfast in his commitment to the ideals of modernity, Parsa encounters a contradiction in the world that has directly inherited Enlightenment thinking. In this setting, he discovers a sense of defiance in the cultural works that were themselves created in a time of resistance to despotism. Although it is uncertain whether the artist consciously recognizes all these efforts, Parsa, amidst his confusion in resolving the dilemma of assimilation versus defiance against the effects of multiculturalism, finds that the emancipatory narratives he became familiar with in Iran are still applicable to his situation.

their duality in possession and lack of power. The preceding discussion demonstrates that there is a direct link between the artist's lived experience and the adoption of a specific dramaturgical approach. This relationship will be explored further in the formal aspects of these two productions and plays.

Formal Analysis: Universalizing the Local

This formal analysis will examine features such as pastiche and simulacrum to illuminate how these images function within representational systems, exploring their relationship to established patterns of depicting Middle Eastern masculinity and their engagement with cultural specificity. The preceding discussion explores how social characteristics and historical context give meaning to the characterization of masculinity. The depictions of masculinity in *Aurash* and *The Death of the King* tend to portray flattened, uncomplicated masculinities that align with their marginalized and victimized status in the dramatic world. Despite their dissatisfaction with a world where some are powerful and others oppressed, the protagonists' masculinities do not exhibit a critical stance against this power structure. Instead, their characters revolve around universal human issues such as morality, adherence to shared universal values, and the struggle for survival. This section delves deeper into what dramatic and staging formal elements contribute to such an image. This exploration involves comparing the case studies with their source adaptations to distinguish the formal creativity of Modern Times practitioners from that of the original works. This examination begins with a close reading of the dramatic elements to see what has changed in the textual semiosis that distinguishes it from its source of adaptation. We will explore the linguistic dimensions to understand the dramatic world depicted and the characteristics it imparts to the represented masculinities. Subsequently, staging elements such as costume design will be examined to explain the lack of historical referents that shape the previously mentioned amorphous and schizophrenic image. Such ambiguity results from a fragmented semiosis in these adaptations, where the relationship between signifiers and the signified is disrupted, and in some cases, the signifiers lose their

link to their original meanings and referents. This confusion of signs leads to a loss of depth and historical nuances in the dramatic world and its characterizations, making the perception of masculinities superficial.

Dramatic Resignification in *The Death of the King*: Fragmentarily Historical

This section examines the Modern Times' adaptation of *The Death of the King*, focusing on how translation and adaptation choices reframe or obscure the cultural and historical markers originally embedded by Beyzaie, particularly in the construction of masculine identities.

The translation of *The Death of the King* functions as textual dramaturgy, negotiating a rich volume of cultural and historical signifiers. The source plays of *The Death of the King* were written based on the playwright's deep familiarity with Persian classical literature, mythology, and historical context. Beyzaie, being not just a dramatist but also a researcher who has conducted in-depth scholarship on the history of Persian literature and drama, imbues the dialogues of the source play with a texture of unified signifiers from Persian literature, embedding the play within a network of signifiers intelligible through a Persian literary and historical frame. However, in the textual dramaturgy of *The Death of the King*, terms such as *Atashkadeh* and *Dasatir* from the source play were omitted in the translation, along with many other altered words, resulting in the loss of their culturally specific significance. The following section intends to demonstrate how these verbal alterations affect the picturization of masculinities in a dramatic world abundant with historical and cultural ambiguities.

One key example of how translation choices impact masculine representation is the character of Magu. In *The Death of the King* Magu's masculine identity becomes ambiguous due to translation choices that blend cultural and religious references, affecting both his name and the nuances of his dialogue, which selectively include certain cultural symbols while omitting others, ultimately impacting the portrayal of his masculinity. Although "Magu" is somehow a defined word in English (addressed as

Magus), it is commonly unknown to the English-speaking public and is used in *The Death of the King*.¹⁰² Magu's name is only mentioned once in the production when the Corporal asks him to pray.

According to the Oxford Dictionary, a "Magus" is defined as:

Originally members of a Median tribe or clan with responsibility for cultic ritual, the magi assumed an important official position with the unification of the Persian Empire in the 6th cent. BC, adopting and adapting the spreading religion of Zoroastrianism. It is probable that during the Achaemenid period the magi became involved (in Babylon, a major administrative center) in the magical practices and beliefs subsequently named after them, and in astrology.¹⁰³

However, Parsa, Farbridge, and Quirt's translation refer to this character variably as "Magu," "Priest" and "High Priest."¹⁰⁴ This terminological inconsistency, along with the single use of the culturally specific term "Magu," creates a fluctuating symbolic framework for the character's identity.¹⁰⁵ However, the question arises about why the word Priest was not consistently translated for the Magu character throughout the text. The inconsistent use of cultural markers leads to masculinity that lacks a clear definition, obscuring the character's masculine role and identity, and rendering the portrayal more susceptible to reductive interpretation.

The inconsistency of cultural markers in translation is not just in the character's name but also in their dialogues, such as the Magu's prayer. The Magu's prayer in Beyzaie's play is delivered in a distinct Persian literary style, using non-Arabic words to signal a non-Islamic faith, which, in Persian literature,

¹⁰² As it might sound controversial to use a word in English frequently, the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) and British National Corpus (BNC) databases have been explored for this claim that Magu is not commonly known. Of the 60,000 words in COCA, Magu's similar term in terms of meaning is ranked 51445. Its use is in written texts, academic and fictional, with its least use in contexts of spoken, news, web, blog, magazines, and multimedia including TV; See Corpus of Contemporary American English, "Word Frequency and Context for Magus," accessed June 16, 2024, <https://www.english-corpora.org/coca/>. According to British National Corpus (BNC), the close word to Magu, that is, Magus, is only distributed and used in written texts, majorly Fiction and Verse, and Academic; see British National Corpus, "Word Frequency and Context for Magus," accessed June 16, 2024, <https://www.english-corpora.org/bnc/>.

¹⁰³ *Oxford English Dictionary*, (Oxford University Press), s.v. "magus, n.," accessed August 15, 2024, <https://www.oed.com>.

¹⁰⁴ Beyzaie, "The Death of the King," 38, 46, 54, 57.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 34.

likely points to a Zoroastrian prayer. Given the inherent loss of meaning in translation, Modern Times' trans-adaptation diminishes the subtleties and cultural markers of Magu's prayer. However, the prayer may still be recognizable as Zoroastrian due to retaining elements like the Magu's name, although it is addressed inconsistently and interchangeably with the title "Priest," a term commonly associated with Christianity in Western contexts. In *The Death of the King*, the translation of Magu's prayer not only reduces the meaning but also shifts its cultural signs. For instance, the line I translate as "I swear to the lives of all believers," which, like many translations of literary works, inevitably involves some reduction in meaning, is altered in the Modern Times adaptation to "I swear in the name of the church."

¹⁰⁶ This shift introduces a semiotic system from a different cultural and religious context, namely Christianity, contributing to the overall heterogeneous set of signs presented in this adaptation. In this way, the translation partially introduces representational signs related to cultures associated with Christianity alongside components related to other cultural roots, resulting in the representation of an ambiguous construct of masculinity. When Magu is interchangeably addressed as a Priest and Magu and utters semantically heterogeneous and contradictory invocations in his prayer, the resulting inconsistency creates a blurred semiotic profile for the character. This instability leaves unresolved whether the figure represents a Zoroastrian clergy, as suggested by his name, or a Christian priest, as implied by the term church and the title Priest. Even if "Magu" is interpreted simply as a proper name, verbal, and non-verbal markers, including Magu's costume, continue reinforcing the instability of his cultural and religious identification throughout the performance.¹⁰⁷ Such confusion in naming, language, and costume prevents a coherent depiction of Magu as a Middle Eastern masculine subject. The interplay of Zoroastrian and Christian semiotics results in a character whose cultural and ideological

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 54.

¹⁰⁷ For the analysis of costume design, see the section Costume Design: Semiotic Disarray in *The Death of the King* on page 297.

alignment remains indeterminate, defined only by his role as a court clergy without a stable identity framework.¹⁰⁸ The ambiguity in Magu's masculine identity persists through other verbal signs in his dialogues. The character, who is occasionally addressed as a Priest and High Priest, uses Zoroastrian terms such as "Ahriman" in his dialogues:

The Magu: A curse upon the evil deeds of Ahriman. Once, twice, thrice, a thousand times.

The Magu: Die! I forswear you, impious ones. I rebuke you, evildoers. Die! I abjure you, unbelievers. The followers of Ahriman be destroyed. May we never follow him [...]

The Magu: Stop! Stop this blasphemy! You look like the worshippers of Ahriman. Have you renounced your faith?¹⁰⁹

The ambiguity in masculine identity is not limited to Magu but is also present in other characters. Other masculine characters, such as the Miller and the Corporal, mention the Ancient Iranian (later Zoroastrian) God, "Ahura Mazda," in the production.¹¹⁰ However, in the published text, "Ahura Mazda" changes to a divine entity in one scene and is omitted in another. The following pieces are extracted from the 2016 production's recorded video:

¹⁰⁸ Even when we read fantasy literature, where the story world is completely different from the real world, we can still understand identity with depth if the story world and its content evoke parallels with the real world. A prime example is Tolkien's works, which are studied in universities for their parallels with the medieval world and other historical periods.
¹⁰⁹ Beyzaie, "The Death of the King," 34, 36.

¹¹⁰ Ahriman is "The principle of evil in Persian mythology." See Arthur Cotterell, "Ahriman," in *A Dictionary of World Mythology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), accessed December 15, 2024, <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780192177476.001.0001/acref-9780192177476-e-4>; *Ahura Mazda* is "The chief god of the ancient Iranians, and later the Zoroastrians first came to Iran during the Aryan (Indo-Iranian) invasions of the second millennium B.C.E. as one of the *ahura* Gods whose roots were in the ancient Indo-European past." See David Leeming, *The Oxford Companion to World Mythology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), s.v. "Ahura Mazda," accessed June 7, 2025, <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780195156690.001.0001/acref-9780195156690>.

The Corporal: May Ahura Mazda forgive me. His Kingdom had become a cliff for him to fall from. He didn't run from his sheep; he ran away from misfortune.

The Miller: (Handing the Woman a knife) The command of Ahura Mazda.¹¹¹

In the published translation, the dialogues are as follows:

The Corporal: Not his sheep, no, he ran away from misfortune. I saw him with my own eyes, strapping the saddle to his horse's back.

The Miller: (handing the Woman a knife) The Divine command.¹¹²

Another way the depiction of masculine identity appears ambiguous, besides omitting specific nuances, is by using signifiers with varying implications across cultural contexts. Marking the contradictions of cultural implications of a term or phrase is crucial in studying productions within the Canadian landscape, where the cultural diversity of the audience is a crucial factor in the reception of the image. Hence, the argument here points to the oversight of the context of production in translating as a mode of dramaturgy of the text. An instance is the use of theological and cultural terms like "Daeva," which have opposing meanings for different cultures, further complicating the understanding of the staged identity.¹¹³ *Daeva* is a demon in Persian mythology and, contrastingly, "a divinity; one of the good spirits of Hindu mythology."¹¹⁴ Consequently, the verbal presentations of characters are constructed through signs that may permit contradictory interpretations, generating composite personas and confusion about the plot's signs. Hence, the assortment of signifiers is prone to destabilizing the coherence of character construction within a cross-cultural semiotic field. The contradictory construction

¹¹¹ Soheil Parsa, dir., "The Death of the King," Modern Times Stage Company, performed at the Theatre Centre, Toronto, April 6, 2016, YouTube video, 1:18:41, posted April 16, 2016, accessed June 7, 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Odqkj5xnTuo>.

¹¹² Beyzaie, "The Death of the King," 45.

¹¹³ Persian and Hindu Mythology share divines, some of which hold opposite cultural values. *Daeva* (written as دیو) vs. *Deva*, for the English-speaking reader, do have different dictation, insinuating a difference in meaning. They are actually the exact words and gods but with different definitions for the two ancient cultures.

¹¹⁴ *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "deva, n."

of the Magu is further evidenced in his apocalyptic declarations, which draw on disparate theological vocabularies and destabilize the coherence of his masculine identity.

The Magu: May Daevas be destroyed, be destroyed, be destroyed the Daevas. May blackness be expelled be expelled be expelled the blackness. Let light come from the shadow. Let the fire burn smokeless. May Daevas be destroyed, be destroyed, be destroyed, the Daevas. May blackness be expelled be expelled be expelled the blackness [...].¹¹⁵

The Magu: When the millennium ends, the Age of the Lamb will be over, the Time of the Wolf shall begin, and Daevas will dance on the corpses of angels.¹¹⁶

The Woman: [...] But then a wind rose up, a dark wind, like a Daevas' scorching breath, and a hundred whistling hooves hurled sand into my eyes.¹¹⁷

The Miller: He who refuses a King's command will be disgraced in death. The Daevas will break his body, and he will live nine thousand years of nightmares under the earth.¹¹⁸

By blending cultural and religious signifiers inconsistently, the translation renders Magu's masculinity ambiguous and detached from a specific cultural identity, thus producing instability in the character's cultural, religious, and gendered signification.

Some words and proper names remain untouched amid these alterations, but this does not clarify the dramatic world or add nuance to the characters. Instead, it increases ambiguity, as the initial changes and omissions disrupt the coherence of the cultural meanings.¹¹⁹ Consequently, the understanding and representation of masculinity lack consistency in presenting an identifiable construct. An instance is

¹¹⁵ Beyzaie, "The Death of the King," 29.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 30.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 39.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 46.

¹¹⁹ In this analysis, "*dramatic ambiguity*" refers to the instability or fragmentation of cultural, historical, and religious signifiers within the theatrical text, resulting in characters whose identities cannot be coherently situated within specific socio-cultural frameworks. Rather than producing interpretive openness in a deliberate aesthetic sense, this form of ambiguity undermines the construction of depth and specificity in characterization, leaving masculinities suspended between competing symbolic fields without clear anchoring.

Bahram Gur, a Sassanid king, translated simply as “the mighty warrior, Bahram.”¹²⁰ In the original play, the reference to this historical figure adds significance to the dramatic moment. In contrast, in Modern Times’s adaptation, the referent Bahram Gur is not contextually framed, and the historical and cultural weight of the name is unarticulated, especially in the absence of additional markers. The dramaturgical decision to leave such names untranslated yet unexplained weakens the text’s ability to convey a coherent masculine construct. The focus of the argument is not whether the translation is faithful to the source but the adapters’ approach and the depth of the constructed identity, considering the context of the production and its audiences. Thus, although some terms remain unchanged throughout the adaptation, they function as isolated markers that lack cultural specificity within the translated performance’s semiotic field.¹²¹

The term Harem is another alteration in the textual dramaturgy that contributes to the increasing ambiguity in the identity construct; this term repeats more than six times in *The Death of the King*.

Woman: In the palace of the Kings?

Girl: [...] The black chambers for Traitors, the Ruby chambers for the Harem and [...].¹²²

The term *harem* is strongly associated with Islamic terminology and was later adopted by European Orientalists in their descriptions and accounts of the Middle East since the 16th century - in literature, travelogues, and fictional narratives, as the word itself “comes (in the mid-17th century) from Arabic *ḥaram*, *ḥarīm*, literally prohibited, prohibited place, and from this sanctuary, women’s quarters, women.”¹²³ The intention here is not to suggest that the term generally insinuates the chambers of the

¹²⁰ Parsa, “The Death of the King.”

¹²¹ This analysis does not evaluate whether restoring cultural specificity would solve dramaturgical challenges. Rather, it examines how the displacement or fragmentation of historical and cultural signifiers produces semiotic instability, generating representations of masculinity suspended between incomplete symbolic systems. Such instability offers critical insights into the mechanisms of intercultural dramaturgy and the complex reimagining of masculinities within displaced contexts.

¹²² Beyzaie, “The Death of the King,” 60.

¹²³ Elizabeth Knowles, “Harem,” in *The Oxford Dictionary of Phrase and Fable* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), accessed June 7, 2025, <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780198609810.001.0001/acref-9780198609810-e-3201>.

Monarch's wives (or concubines) as being solely related to the Arab-speaking realm but rather to highlight that the chamber's function and meaning were different from what the term "harem" per se insinuates—a section private to the Patriarch's mere pleasure.¹²⁴ In ancient Persia, members of these chambers had levels of political agency, and the chamber functioned as a diplomatic tool and was only implied to chambers in the Monarch and Rulers' divisions of power:

Pre-Islamic rulers in Egypt, Persia, and Assyria often had large harems in their royal courts. These consisted of wives, concubines, female attendants, and other attendants who served as court officials. Rulers added wives from prestigious and influential families to their harems to forge political alliances. Some of these women played public roles. Others jockeyed for positions from within the harem to gain power for themselves or their sons. Internal struggles within a harem had major political consequences, sometimes leading to the downfall of a dynasty.¹²⁵

However, the Arabic term of harem for the "chamber of wives" gives it a different implication, "meaning forbidden, the word conveys a sense of sacredness and inviolability."¹²⁶ In the post-Islamic rule, "Harem" turns into a specific property for "Muslims and Arabs of *all* classes [...] Among the nobility, the practice of enclosing women in a harem served as a sign of status, showing that the family did not need its women to work for a living."¹²⁷ The emphasis here is that such heterogeneous and inconsistent usage in the play directs attention to specific historical and cultural associations, such as Islamic rule, and then shifts to markers like "church" and "high priest," leading to a fragmented representation of the dramatic world and its characters. This discontinuity in the spatial and ideological construction of the dramatic world disrupts the coherence of identity construction on stage, as meanings

¹²⁴ A term the Orientalists of the past centuries became familiar with and employed in their translations of manuscripts from the Middle East, such as *One Thousand and One Nights*.

¹²⁵ "Harem," in *The Islamic World: Past and Present*, ed. John L. Esposito (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), accessed March 29, 2024, <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780195165203.001.0001/acref-9780195165203-e-128>.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

oscillate across divergent religious and temporal codes. Other terms anchor the narrative in a Middle Eastern cultural field, giving the plot of *The Death of the King* a semblance of geographic specificity, while the historical frame remains unarticulated. Thus, the masculinities depicted in such a confusing dramatic world become difficult to signify, impeding interpretive coherence and rendering them depthless and superficial.

A subsequent moment reinforces the same semiotic construction mentioned previously. The Woman (Miller's wife) pretends to be the King to prove her knowledge of intimate details, such as the configuration of the royal chambers, to the King's men. This dramatic moment, through its references to the palace and *harem*, aligns the King's representation with stereotypical portrayals of a sultan from Arab and Islamic contexts, evoking associations with patriarchal, oppressive, and polygamous masculinity.

Chief Commander: If you are the King, tell me how many chambers there are in the Palace of the Kings?

Woman: The Black Chambers for the Traitors, the Ruby Chambers for the Harem.¹²⁸

Here, the Commander's questioning emphasizes knowledge of the *harem* as a test of legitimacy and authority, directly linking masculinity to power over women. The Woman's accurate response suggests intimate knowledge of royal privileges, further reinforcing the association of the King with patriarchal dominance. Similarly, the King's men, such as the Commander, portray oppressive and violent masculinity, reinforcing this perception:

The Commander: [...] *The King unfolding himself to the baseness of such a slave-girl? He, who had three thousand lovers in his harem, each one more ravishing than the last.*¹²⁹

¹²⁸ Beyzaie, "The Death of the King," 55.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 42.

In this dialogue, the Commander expresses outrage at the idea of the King lowering himself to interact with a slave-girl, emphasizing the King's possession of numerous lovers in his harem. This portrayal accentuates the image of the King as oversexualized and tyrannical, aligning with Orientalist stereotypes of Middle Eastern masculinity.¹³⁰

These interactions depict male characters who embody patriarchal and oppressive masculinity. The repeated mention of the harem amplifies associations with a historical period characterized by gender inequality and male dominance. The male characters' preoccupation with the harem reflects traits often stereotypically associated with oppressive masculinity—control, dominance, and sexual entitlement. The character of Magu, the court cleric, adds another layer of ambiguity. Previously discussed as having an unclear identity due to inconsistent cultural markers, Magu's reference to the harem further complicates his portrayal:

Magu: I'm the only one who knows the precise number of concubines in the King's harem. What is it?

Woman: Two hundred two and twenty.¹³¹

Magu's claim suggests intimate knowledge of the King's harem, signifying him at this dramatic moment as an Islamic cleric in a patriarchal society. This contradicts earlier indications that Magu might be a Zoroastrian or Christian clergy, given his name and certain terminologies he uses. Such inconsistency in his character blurs the lines between different cultural and religious identities, leading to a perception

¹³⁰ In Beyzaie's original *Death of Yazdgerd*, the references to the King's chambers are embedded in a distinctly Persian historical framework that carry specific ancient Persian cultural connotations and court structures. The adaptation's choice to use the term "harem" repeatedly—a word with strong Orientalist connotations in Western discourse—likely represents a significant shift from the original text's more culturally specific references. This shift in terminology erases the political and diplomatic functions that such spaces served in Sassanian court culture and redirects the imagery toward broader, stereotypical notions of patriarchal and polygamous masculinity. This transformation exemplifies the broader pattern of decontextualization examined throughout this chapter, where culturally specific markers are replaced with generalized terms that evoke familiar stereotypes.

¹³¹ Ibid., 56.

that oscillates between ambiguous, depthless identities and relies on signifiers such as the use of the word harem to direct the viewer toward a stereotypical conception.

Another example of an unchanged proper name is the name of the Iranian king, Yazdgerd. Alongside a prologue presented in the play that introduces the king and places him in the specific historical context of ancient Iran, even though this prologue has been removed in the 2016 production of *The Death of the King*, the name of King Yazdgerd is still mentioned. Below is an excerpt from the prologue in the translation of *The Death of the King*:

Around the Middle of the seventh century CE, Persia faced ten years of onslaughts from a fearless and religiously impassioned Moslem army. It was a ruthless and brutal invasion, one which would spell the end of the opulent Persian Empire. The Reigning monarch at the time was King Yazdegird III, the last of the Sasanian Kings. Yazdgird rushed from city to city, hiding from the invaders and vainly attempting to solicit help from neighboring countries. His final stop was a mill in the city of Merv. The year is 642 CE.¹³²

The opening dialogues in *The Death of the King*, both in the play and the 2016 production, clearly refer to the King (assuming the body on stage is a character rather than a prop) as “the King of all kings. King Yazdgird the Third.”¹³³ Considering what was mentioned earlier regarding the term “harem,” if we place the King’s proper name, Yazdgerd, alongside the term *harem* in the semiosis of the text, we see that the text continually shifts between distinct historical and cultural references, preventing a coherent sense of setting or identity. Therefore, while certain words have been preserved, other changes contribute to inconsistent signifiers, impeding an in-depth understanding of the dramatic world and its characters. Once again, by balancing faithfulness to the original adaptation with the need to make the source play accessible to diverse audiences, Modern Times practitioners’ dramaturgy presents simplistic constructs.

¹³² Beyzaie, “The Death of the King,” 28.

¹³³ Ibid., 28.

This disconnection from historical and cultural frameworks constructs masculinities as fragmented and dehistoricized figures, vulnerable to stereotypical readings. As Hall argues, cultural identity is “not an essence but a positioning,” always formed “within the discourses of history and culture.”¹³⁴ The removal of historical specificity in representation, therefore, does not merely simplify identity—it “cripples and deforms” the possibility of engaging critically with how identities are constructed through “the fatal couplet power/knowledge.”¹³⁵ In these case studies, the masculine figures emerge not as historically and politically situated subjects, but as aesthetic images deprived of intelligibility, and thus particularly vulnerable to stereotypical consumption.

In Parsa and Farbridge’s approach, there is a dramaturgical and ideological effort to critique cultural and identity politics. However, their strategy in textual devices produces problematic constructions of masculine identity, marked by fragmentation, historical erasure, and susceptibility to stereotypical interpretation. A dramaturgical approach emphasizing transcending cultural characteristics and focusing on human commonalities results in superficial depictions of characters, lacking identity nuances that were more fully articulated in the source texts. This semiotic reconfiguration can be observed in the alteration of the term *Tazi*, which carries discriminatory implications in Persian, from the source play in *The Death of the King*.¹³⁶ Although the word’s origins are contested, *Tazi* functions as a discriminatory signifier in Iranian public culture, connoting hound in Persian. In common usage in Iran, it is a derogatory term used by Persian speakers to refer to Arabs, and it also appears in some Persian literary works to refer to Arabic-speaking populations.¹³⁷ While this alteration avoids reproducing an

¹³⁴ Stuart Hall, “Cultural Identity and Diaspora,” in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, ed. Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990), 226.

¹³⁵ Ibid., 226. Hall vividly describes this fragmentation as producing subjects “without anchor, without horizon, colourless, stateless, rootless—a race of angels.”

¹³⁶ From the pre-invasion up to the Middle Persian literature, Iranians address Arabs as *Tazi*, which was used in the original play to refer to Arabs as *Tazi*, which has been used in ancient Persian and Middle Persian literature.

¹³⁷ However, other research manifests the word’s origin as an abbreviated word for the name of a big Arab tribe, which Iranians knew and called *Tazik* or *Tajik*. See Abdunnabi Qayem, “About the Word *Tāzī*,” *The Quarterly Journal Ayeneh-Ye-Pazhoohesh* 33, no. 193 (2022): 99. [In Farsi].

overtly discriminatory term, it simultaneously contributes to the broader decontextualization that destabilizes the setting's cultural specificity. To eliminate an aspect of representation in the source play that might be perceived as discriminatory, Modern Times artists change the term *Tazi* into enemy. One effect of this dramaturgical adjustment is that, although the discriminatory aspect has been removed, there are very subtle signs that can slightly specify the invader's identity, which did not alter in the translation. However, understanding them depends on the viewer's familiarity with specific indicators. These subtle descriptions include the colour of their clothes and flags, which are black, and the shape of their swords. For instance, in a scene where the Private brings news of capturing an enemy, he mentions: "The Private: His sword is shaped like the crescent moon. Furthermore, his clothes are made of black wool. Look, a flea."¹³⁸ The term crescent adds to this implication, as it is a symbol featured in the flag of Muslim-majority nations such as Saudi Arabia, as well as in the banners of fundamentalist groups like ISIS and some other militias in the Middle East, identifying their religious and regional affiliation. However, the dramaturgical choices in the text fragment the semiotic system, producing semantic confusion and disrupting coherence. Adjusting a potentially discriminatory term, such as replacing *Tazi* with enemy, does not resolve these broader instabilities, when other textual modifications create a shallow dramatic world and characters lack nuanced motivations. Thus, even critical, or constructive measures become difficult to interpret within this incoherent semiotic field. As a result, while isolated gestures of critique appear, they do not fundamentally alter the amorphous and depthless depiction of masculinities.

As discussed in the textual dramaturgy of *The Death of the King*, the historical depth and specificity of terms are obscured, depicting masculinities against a fragmented and eclectic historical backdrop. This method aligns with Parsa's universalizing view: "Usually my productions were timeless

¹³⁸ Parsa, "The Death of the King."

and placeless [...]. That lack of time and place allowed me to bring cultural diversity. Although my works are timeless and placeless, they get close to our current location and time.”¹³⁹ Despite this emphasis on timelessness and placelessness, the cultural diversity he interprets in his works is marked by significant inconsistencies in *The Death of the King*, where semantic disorder and irrelevance persist among some signifiers that lack coherent meaning. This is evident in the retention of terms signifying specific regions in the Middle East alongside others linked to various historical periods and spaces (e.g., Magu to High Priest). This eclectic approach, a hallmark of postmodern art, resonates with the concept of pastiche. It embraces mixed styles, cultural references, and historical specifics, leading to a conflation of signs and consistent ambiguity that reflects the fragmented nature of contemporary experience. The Modern Times’ occasional critical gestures toward identity politics result in minor adjustments that only partially distance identity embodiments from discriminatory frameworks, affecting merely the surface of the depicted image. Such heterogeneity of signs and lack of referents produce interpretive instability around identity constructions, enabling the persistence of stereotypical readings. Represented characters begin to resemble stereotypical authoritarian and misogynistic Middle Eastern men when terms like *harem* circulate in the dialogues, as these terms evoke Orientalist stereotypes and reinforce patriarchal images associated with Middle Eastern masculinity. The masculinity constructed in this pastiche style emerges as a simulacrum, a commodifiable image without original reality.

Dramatic Resignification in *Aurash*: Ambiguously Mythological

To understand the dramaturgy of Modern Times’ *Aurash*, one must grasp the cultural and symbolic significance of *Arash the Archer*, a symbol of heroism and sacrifice in Iranian mythology and literature. This symbolism was employed in contemporary Iranian literary adaptations concerned with patriotism, reflecting a collective concern over historical events at various moments in Iran’s modern history, such

¹³⁹ Parsa, “Theater Talk Part1.”

as the CIA-backed Coup in Tehran in 1953.¹⁴⁰ To comprehend Modern Times's adaptation of *Arash*, it is crucial to examine the specific meaning and context of Beyzaie's adaptation, distinguishing it from the original myth as well as Modern Times's *Aurash*. The collective trauma of the Iranians of the mid-20th century is reflected in Beyzaie's *Arash*, where the masculinities are portrayed through their despair and disillusionment with the notion of nationhood. Beyzaie's *Arash* symbolically portrays the masculinities of anticolonialism, opposing colonialism's promoting despotism symbolically imposed by the Turanian Monarch and the Iranian King. This understanding helps us distinguish the significance of the protagonist in *Aurash* from *Arash*. The textual dramaturgy in *Aurash* disrupts the cultural and symbolic significance attached to *Arash* within the Iranian nationalist tradition. In the adapted version, masculinities are depicted in a world stripped of historical depth, losing much of the defiant and critical masculinity that characterized the original play. However, it will be explained that masculinities in *Aurash* retain their emancipatory characteristics as expressed in Beyzaie's play, but only on a surface level, where these characteristics are stripped of critical engagement and historical specificity.

Among the textual elements retained in the adaptation are signs marking Aurash's male gender and implicitly signify the protagonist's location and nationality. Through gendered language and character descriptions emphasizing masculinity, "Aurash" is depicted as a male within a male-dominated dramatic world, where the repeated use of the name Elborz Mountain signifies an association with Iran. The various narratives and historical accounts of *Arash the Archer* consistently depict him as a male from

¹⁴⁰ Abrahamian's extensive research underscores the CIA's involvement in the 1953 coup and its impact on the Iranians' collective memory. When the CIA, along with MI6, organized tank officers to overthrow Mossadeq, it created a defining fault line in Iranian history. The trauma of 1953 inspired some writers to see *Arash the Archer* as a symbol of their collective views. For post-1953 Iranians, Arash's story symbolizes the loss of political agency and independence to absolute monarchy and foreign powers. Anti-colonial writers connected the themes of nationhood and defiance in Arash to the collective trauma following the collapse of the Mossadeq government and the Shah's CIA-backed consolidation of power. See Ervand Abrahamian, *The Coup: 1953, the CIA, and the Roots of Modern U.S.-Iranian Relations* (New York: The New Press, 2013), 2.

Northern Iran who was raised in the mountains, likely the Alborz Mountain range.¹⁴¹ The play starts by emphasizing the gendered context of the dramatic world as male-dominated:

A: Men came—thousands and thousands, from across the country, from far, far, away—to defend their land. But none of these men would return to their homes.¹⁴²

The Elborz mountains (or Alborz; Parsa chooses a different transcription) are symbolic in Iranian mythology and literature. They are seen as symbols of majesty and resilience, representing Iran's natural strength and historical depth.¹⁴³ Both Modern Times' *Aurash* and the original play, *Arash*, explicitly mention Elborz, where the protagonist climbs to throw the arrow. In *Aurash*, the name Elborz remains preserved without alteration, as the mountain is repeatedly referenced throughout the adaptation, except in scenes fourteen and eighteen, where Elborz is personified and takes on a character role.

C: The Elborz, the highest, shrouded in mist, brushed the clouds aside and saw Aurash on her slope.

D: (*as the Elborz*) Who is this man who travels towards me with his bow and arrow?¹⁴⁴

[...]

D: The mountain, that all mountain, the Elborz, speaks to Aurash: (*as the Elborz mountain*)

Aurash, will it so and I will pour a deadly flood upon your foes [...] Aurash, where are you off to so quickly? You are reaching the highest of the highs, the playground of the gods, where no man is allowed to go.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴¹ The Alborz range, a majestic mountain range stretching from East to West in the North of Iran, is a testament to the geographical diversity of our country.

¹⁴² Beyzaie, "Aurash," 5.

¹⁴³ The Alborz range, stretching from East to West in the North of Iran, holds a significant place in Persian literature and mythology. It is a site of heroic tales and legendary battles, serving as a natural barrier protecting the northern borders of the Iranian plateau and a historical defense against invasions. Moreover, these mountains are imbued with spiritual significance in Zoroastrianism, housing many sacred sites.

¹⁴⁴ Beyzaie, "Aurash," 18.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 21.

Other terms preserved from translation are also particular to the Persian language, such as *parsang*, an ancient Iranian unit of distance frequently mentioned in literary works. Although such terms are not repeated as often as in Elborz Mountain, they slightly contribute to the cultural specificity of the play.

B: [...] If you fire it with all your might, how far would it travel?

C: (*as Kashvad*) One *parsang*.¹⁴⁶

However, retaining specific geocultural references (e.g., Elborz or Parsang) alongside the omission or alteration of others leads to a fragmented symbolic system, thus not guaranteeing interpretive clarity. Rather than constructing a coherent representational framework, the adaptation oscillates between specificity and generalization. Consequently, the dramatic world appears indeterminate in location, temporality, and ideological alignment, and the masculine identities within it risk becoming detached from specific historical or cultural referents, making their interpretive legibility increasingly unstable.

As previously discussed, a closer look at the verbal signifiers in *Aurash* reveals a dramaturgical field marked by inconsistency: some culturally specific markers are preserved (e.g., Elborz, Parsang), while others—as will be exemplified in the following analysis—are replaced with terms from different cultural imaginaries or terms that are generalized. This system of contradictory signification progressively weakens cultural legibility and disrupts the ideological coherence of the dramatic world.

Another specific alteration in the textual dramaturgy of *Aurash* is the replacement of the Persian mythological creature *Simurgh*, which belongs to the symbolic repertoire of Persian literature, with the Phoenix, a figure associated with different cultural imaginaries. While both are mythical bird-like creatures, their similarity is superficial, and their symbolic significance is entirely different.¹⁴⁷ The

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 6.

¹⁴⁷ Jorge Luis Borges, *The Book of Imaginary Beings*, trans. Norman Thomas di Giovanni (New York: Penguin, 1969), 130–31. In his collection of imaginary characters from across world literature, Borges offers a brief introduction to Simurgh. Alongside Simurgh, Hooman is a warrior character mentioned in *Shahnameh*.

Simurgh, a wise bird in Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh*, protects and guides heroes and, through them, protects Iran.¹⁴⁸ The Simurgh's guidance imbues characters like Arash with wisdom, spiritual depth, and a profound connection to Persian cultural heritage, reinforcing a model of masculinity rooted in introspection, self-sacrifice, and national allegiance. The Phoenix, by contrast, symbolizes cyclical rebirth across Greco-Roman and Christian traditions but lacks the ideological and narrative role the Simurgh occupies in Persian epics.¹⁴⁹ The presence of the Phoenix reframes Arash's heroism through a transhistorical and decontextualized archetype of masculine renewal, one aligned less with Middle Eastern mythopoetics than with Western narratives of resurrection and individualized transcendence. What matters here is not the absence of the Simurgh but the appearance of the Phoenix within the dramatic dialogue, where it becomes a visible marker of symbolic dissonance. Unlike culturally situated figures like Elborz or Parsang, or references to *Ahura Mazda*, the Phoenix introduces a mythic register coexisting with both generalized signifiers and preserved specific ones from Persian Mythology, further destabilizing the play's semiotic logic.

B: [...] You know the art of archery well, Kashvad, and your arrow has the wings of the phoenix.¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁸ Jennifer Speake and Mark LaFlaur, "Simurg," in *The Oxford Essential Dictionary of Foreign Terms in English* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), accessed April 22, 2025,

<https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780199891573.001.0001/acref-9780199891573-e-6611>.

¹⁴⁹ The Phoenix is associated with various mythological traditions, often from Egyptian, Arabian, or Greco-Roman contexts, and does not hold the same guiding or protective role as the Simurgh in Persian mythology. Leeming, *Oxford Companion to World Mythology*, s.v. "Phoenix." Leeming defines the Phoenix as "A symbol of resurrection for Christians and others. The Phoenix was an Egyptian bird that had always lived to be 500 years old before burning itself in a sacrificial fire. Out of the ashes of that fire sprang a new, young Phoenix." Herodotus offers one of the earliest Greek accounts of the Phoenix, describing it as a bird from Egypt that regenerates after death. Herodotus, *The Histories*, trans. Aubrey de Séincourt, (London: Penguin Classics, 1954), 107. Ovid also discusses the Phoenix in relation to themes of rebirth and the cyclical nature of life; See Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. David Raeburn, (London: Penguin Classics, 2004), 519–520. Additionally, Joseph Nigg provides a detailed analysis of the Phoenix's evolution from Greco-Roman mythology into later traditions. See Joseph Nigg, *The Phoenix: An Unnatural Biography of a Mythical Beast* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 45–63.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 6.

The invocation of the Phoenix displaces Iranian mythopoetics with a transhistorical symbol of rebirth. This reorientation fragments the play's symbolic system, contributing to a dramatic world whose semiotic logic is unstable and ideologically unmoored. This dissonance will be further explored in subsequent pages, where the cumulative effect of such substitutions contributes to a dramatic world increasingly shaped by pastiche and simulacral logic.

Alongside such cross-cultural substitutions, the adaptation employs generalized terms in place of culturally and historically specific ones. In *Aurash*, the enemy is no longer *Turan*, and the homeland is no longer Iran; instead, characters refer to abstract collectives—“the enemy,” “our nation,” or “our country”—stripping the narrative of its geopolitical and historical stakes and gesturing toward a universalist dimension.¹⁵¹ For instance, Turan shifts to “the enemy:”

D: A cry rose from the troops: “Kashvad, go, go to the enemy, and tell them you will fire the arrow!

C: [...] Those who remain captive, thousand upon thousand, will say that it was Kashvad's arrow that fell short and gave them to the enemy.

B: Kashvad. Look at the enemy troops [...]¹⁵²

Similarly, Iran becomes a “country” and a “nation.”

B: [...] We have agreed that wherever that arrow lands, the border of our nation will lie.

C: Redemption is worthless; we have lost our country.¹⁵³

The term “Persian” is also transformed into “your language.”

“D: We must write a letter, a message, Hooman, a message in your language.”¹⁵⁴

¹⁵¹ For a brief introduction to Turan in Iranian Mythology and literature, see footnote 52.

¹⁵² Ibid., 6.

¹⁵³ Ibid., 6.

¹⁵⁴ Beyzaie, “Aurash,” 10. In Beyzaie's play, it can be translated as: “I must prepare a message Hooman, get ready. A message in Persian.” Beyzaie, *Arash*, 20.

Such generalizations evacuate the ideological substance of the conflict, rendering both antagonism and heroism narratively underdefined. Although this dramaturgical approach may aim to foster intertextual (and by extension, intercultural) resonance by establishing relational bridges between cultural systems, it does not result in a dynamic of mutual signification. Instead, meaning is disrupted as a consequence of the adaptation's uneven handling of signifiers.

Consequently, the signifying field of *Aurash*, whether in the text or on stage, presents a juxtaposition of uncontextualized references, such as Phoenix, and generalized terms, such as “our country” and “the enemy,” while other culturally specific markers, like Parsang and Elborz, are retained.

In such a simulacrum-featured portrayal, masculinities in *Aurash* are characterized by uttering terms that sometimes evade their original cultural significance and sometimes belong to a specific history, culture, and system of meaning (e.g., Elborz, Phoenix, Parsang). In such an ambiguous framework, some expressions have no origin (e.g., nation, country, enemy) and, consequently, no identity. Substituting culturally specific terms with generalized or foreign ones, such as Simurgh with Phoenix, Turan with “the enemy,” and Persian with “your language,” disconnects the characters from their cultural origins and fails to connect them to a coherent system of meaning. For instance, replacing the Simurgh with the Phoenix removes the unique cultural symbolism associated with the Simurgh, stripping Aurash of a symbolic figure that, in Persian epics, reinforces a model of masculinity grounded in spiritual depth and national allegiance.¹⁵⁵ By introducing the Phoenix, a symbol from different mythological traditions often associated with rebirth, Aurash's masculinity becomes less defined and more aligned with generic heroic archetypes of the cultures where the Phoenix holds meaning. Similarly, changing “Turan” to “the enemy” and “Iran” to “country” or “nation” removes cultural context, making

¹⁵⁵ See Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh* for the Simurgh's mentorship role in guiding heroes toward moral clarity and national sacrifice, especially the tale of Zal, where the Simurgh nurtures and guides the hero. Abolqasem Ferdowsi, *Shahnameh: The Persian Book of Kings*, trans. Dick Davis, deluxe ed. (New York: Penguin Books, 2007).

the conflict and the characters involved less specific. This lack of specificity renders the masculinities in *Aurash* amorphous, much like a doppelgänger, a figure that resembles someone but lacks a unique identity. The male characters function as symbolic vessels: lacking cultural anchoring, their masculinities are shaped through generalized signifiers that risk reproducing familiar heroic archetypes or superficial stereotypes.

The portrayal of masculinities in *Aurash*, characterized by a blend of culturally detached verbal signifiers, results in ambiguous identities that perpetuate stereotypes, contributing to a dramatic world marked by weakened symbolic coherence and cultural detachment. This world is constructed as a simulacrum, where masculinities are depicted through characters using terms that evade their original cultural significance; their expressions lack origin and, consequently, identity. For example, in Beyzaie's play, Arash's interaction with the Simurgh imbues his character with wisdom, spiritual depth, and a profound connection to Persian cultural heritage. Simurgh's guidance elevates Arash's masculinity beyond mere physical heroism by fostering introspection about his role and responsibilities and reinforcing his cultural identity as an Iranian hero. This connection situates Arash the Archer within a specific cultural narrative that values wisdom, self-sacrifice for the greater good, and deep ties to the land and its mythology. In *Aurash*, the replacement of the Simurgh with the Phoenix alters this dynamic significantly. The Phoenix, symbolizing rebirth, does not hold the same cultural resonance or historical significance in Persian mythology, nor does it play the specific guiding role that the Simurgh occupies in the hero's journey. This change aligns *Aurash* more with the trope of the reborn hero. As a result, *Aurash*'s masculinity is prone to be shaped into a more stereotypical form, centred on themes of sacrifice and renewal without the nuanced cultural context. This can lead to *Aurash* being perceived as a generic heroic figure rather than a culturally grounded character, reinforcing stereotypical notions of masculinity focused on individual heroism and self-sacrifice.

How can masculinity retain cultural coherence when an Egyptian-Arabian bird, a Christian symbol of resurrection, is situated in the high mountains of Persian mythology?¹⁵⁶ In the play, Aurash mentions the Phoenix and then departs to Elborz, the realm of gods in Persian mythology, “the highest of highs, the playground of gods where no man is allowed to go.”¹⁵⁷ Aurash and other male characters appear confined within a dramatic realm with a mixture of irrelevant specifics alongside non-specifics. A portrayal featuring a simulacrum may prevent the audience from discerning the characters’ identities or establishing a connection between Aurash’s world and the real world. Thus, the masculine identities are articulated within a symbolic field that offers no stable cultural referents, rendering them open-ended and narratively underdefined. Alternatively, the audience may dismiss the attempt to coordinate these identities, perceiving the dramatic world as akin to a fantastical realm typical of English fantasy literature.¹⁵⁸ Hence, the masculinities portrayed in all the characters of *Aurash* are more likely to perpetuate stereotypical constructs.

Beyond linguistic alterations, the actions of male characters in *Aurash* further contribute to stereotypical portrayals of masculinity. Aurash’s decision to undertake a perilous journey alone to shoot the arrow, knowing it will likely result in his death, embodies the trope of the stoic, self-sacrificing hero. This emphasizes traits such as bravery, physical strength, and emotional restraint, common stereotypes associated with masculinity. Without the cultural context that provides deeper meaning to his sacrifices,

¹⁵⁶ John Everett-Heath, “Elburz Mountains,” in *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of World Place Names*, 6th ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), accessed March 29, 2024, <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780191905636.001.0001/acref-9780191905636-e-9799>. Also, see “Phoenix,” in *The Oxford Companion to Classical Literature*, 3rd ed., ed. M. C. Howatson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), accessed August 15, 2024, <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780199548545.001.0001/acref-9780199548545-e-2387>. Also, see Leeming, *Oxford Companion to World Mythology*, s.v. “Phoenix.”

¹⁵⁷ Beyzaie, “Aurash,” 21.

¹⁵⁸ The settings of the fantastical world in this genre of literature are typically not Earth but entirely imagined worlds that operate with their own set of rules, cultures, and histories. Mark Wolf refers to fantasy worlds as Secondary and Subcreation as opposed to our reality; he refers to them as the Primary world. Secondary worlds reflect or resemble the primary world in some way because the reader could be able to relate to them, but they are distinct worlds. See Mark J.P. Wolf, *Building Imaginary Worlds: The Theory and History of Subcreation* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 62–63.

such as the collective struggle for the homeland and the historical significance in the original myth, Aurash's actions may be interpreted as aligning with common Western heroic tropes that emphasize individualism and personal redemption, as often depicted in Western literature and media.¹⁵⁹ Similarly, other male characters exhibit skepticism towards Aurash's abilities, challenging his masculinity and reinforcing notions of competitiveness and the need to prove oneself within a militarized and hierarchical context. The play's setting is gendered as masculine, with the military environment emphasizing power hierarchies and expectations of strength and dominance, traits traditionally associated with masculinity. This competitiveness is not merely a general human trait but is depicted within a specifically masculine domain where physical prowess and authority are paramount. These portrayals reinforce stereotypical masculine behaviours, emphasizing the need to assert one's superiority and capability. Such depictions lack the nuanced exploration of masculinity found in the original play's context, where masculinity is situated within a culturally and historically specific framework, and instead present the characters through familiar masculine stereotypes.

Costume Design: Semiotic Disarray in *The Death of the King*

¹⁵⁹ Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 362. In modern times (in the section "The Hero Today"), Campbell observes that the individual quest has become the central theme of Western heroism, with the hero pursuing personal redemption rather than societal transformation. He states: "It is not society that is to guide and save the creative hero, but precisely the reverse." This shift toward individualism contrasts with more communal conceptions of heroism, as seen in the Persian figure of Aurash, whose sacrifice is historically linked to collective liberation rather than personal glory. Even in the adaptation of *Arash, the Archer* in contemporary Persian literature, this conception of heroism is reflected as discussed earlier in this chapter in the section Parsa and Modern Times: Inspirations and Adaptations.

This section builds on the earlier discussion of how the dramatic world's layered signifiers are selectively simplified or obscured. Costume design in *Aurash* and *The Death of the King* blends diverse cultural and historical symbols, producing semiotic inconsistencies that disrupt cultural legibility. These inconsistencies blur character construction and the representation of the dramatic world. As a result, masculinity is flattened into generalized traits of moral authority and purity, detached from culturally embedded meanings.

The Magu's signification of costume design partially adapts to the semiotics of clergies from Christendom or the European region when the notion of the nation emerged. The costume design in *The Death of the King* merges distinct historical elements with minimalist modern theatre aesthetics, creating a sense of semiotic disjunction within the design logic of the production. This approach, evident in

Figure 14. (Left) Clergy members in traditional cassocks during a Mass at the Basilica of Saint Paul Outside the Walls, April 14, 2013. Source: Vatican.va



Figure 13. (Right) Pope Benedict XVI and Pope Francis both wear traditional cassocks; Pope Francis wears a Pellegrina with a cassock. Source: The Telegraph.



characters like the Magu, a Zoroastrian clergy, aligns with the directors' intent to transcend cultural and political boundaries through a universalist and humanistic lens. Magu's long white garment resembles a cassock, a long garment worn by Christian clergy (Figure 14 and 14). Even today, this sign remains

interpretable because a white cassock is still worn by high-ranking Catholic clergies, including the Pope: "For priests, it is black (white in the tropics), for bishops purple, for cardinals red, and white for the

pope. In the Church of England, clerics who wear it often use a leather belt.”¹⁶⁰ The cassock still signifies a high-ranking figure in a power position: “[...] though, except for the pope, coloured cassocks are no longer everyday wear.”¹⁶¹ This example illustrates how a single sign can direct the audience’s perception to discourses from various temporalities and localities, where masculinity archetypes are entirely different from those later referred to by Europeans as the Middle East. In other words, a single sign can shift the audience’s perception across a broad domain from one set of identity archetypes to another.



Figure 16. (Left) Poster of the first production of the play directed by Beyzaie. 1982 Tehran. The middle figure is the Magu, and the military characters showcase detailed historical and cultural costume elements. Credit. Euronews.com



Figure 15. (Right) Wearing a long white garment, Magu stands by the Private reciting—*The Death of the King*, 2016, Toronto. Source: YouTube video by Modern Times Stage Company

The army men’s costumes in *The Death of the King* lack specific historical markers, resembling generic warriors or bandits from past centuries. Unlike soldiers from distinct cultures and periods, who often dressed in unique helmets, hairstyles, or headbands signifying their origin, these costumes lack such details.¹⁶² This ambiguity suggests a deliberate choice to create a timeless and universal

¹⁶⁰ “Cassock,” in *The Oxford Dictionary of Christian Art and Architecture*, 2nd ed., eds. Tom Devonshire Jones, Linda Murray, and Peter Murray (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), accessed December 15, 2024, <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780199680276.001.0001/acref-9780199680276-e-312>.

¹⁶¹ “Cassock,” in *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 4th ed., ed. Andrew Louth (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), accessed December 15, 2024, <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780199642465.001.0001/acref-9780199642465-e-1278>.

¹⁶² Military helmets, hairstyles, and headbands have historically featured distinct designs that signify the cultural and social identity of their wearers. This is evident in the Haniwa warrior sculptures from Japan, the feathered headdresses of Plains Indians, the jaguar helmets of Mesoamerican warriors, and the cross-cultural adaptations seen in ancient Greek and Phoenician military attire. These distinctive features not only provided practical benefits but also conveyed important cultural

representation of conflict and power. Modern Times's approach stands out in its sharp contrasts with Beyzaie's *The Death of Yazdgerd*, which demonstrates the source material's stress on historical and cultural specificity (Figure 16). The minimalist costume design in *The Death of the King* is a deliberate dramaturgical choice: the soldiers wear generic armour and no headgear, contributing to a sense of ambiguity concerning these characters' historical and cultural identities (Figure 17). This visual collision of militarized, clerical, and culturally displaced signifiers exemplifies how the adaptation's dramaturgy renders masculinity both legible and illegible, codified through dominant symbols of power yet detached from any historically grounded identity.



Figure 17. *The Death of the King*, 2016. Illustrating the ambiguous nature of the costume design. Credit: NowToronto

The costume design contributes to simulacral masculinity by aligning with other displaced semiotic codes, such as actions and verbal signs, that lack culturally grounded specificity. As noted throughout this study, such layered inconsistencies destabilize the semiotic framework of the production and weaken the symbolic coherence of characters and their world. Without clear historical or cultural

and social messages, marking the wearer's rank, achievements, and cultural background. See Peter Turchin et al., "Rise of the War Machines: Charting the Evolution of Military Technologies from the Neolithic to the Industrial Revolution," *PLOS ONE* 16, no. 10 (2021): 1–23.

referents, masculine identities risk being rendered as generalized figures of authority, purity, or heroism. The lack of specific cultural and historical markers in the costume design renders character identity increasingly schematic, which can lead to a generalized or stereotypical interpretation of the characters. The artists' minimalistic design features a pastiche style, leading to fragmented and superficial depictions in which characters grapple with an unreasonable and unrealistic world, lacking coherent motivation within such an ambiguous dramatic world. This ambiguity does not rely on prior cultural knowledge; while visual cues are present, they operate through cross-cultural layering rather than historical specificity, generating a disjunctive "no-place" in which characters' identities remain unstable. The absence of overarching historical specificity and the adapter's arbitrary alterations in costume signifiers imbue the production with postmodern features such as a simulacrum of masculinity, resulting in depictions that distance themselves from nuanced and potentially critical dimensions.

Form: Narrative Deformation and Schizophrenic Masculinities

Both sources of adaptation in the case studies utilize the narrative form *naqqali*, one of the "oldest Iranian performance traditions are *naqqali* (i.e., storytelling)."¹⁶³ In both plays, the narrative evolves from the recitative style of *naqqali* to a dialogic form, where interactions between characters are explicitly portrayed rather than narrated by a single *naqqal*. While the *naqqali* form does not entirely disappear in these adaptations, the descriptive verse and prose, particularly in *Aurash*, are partially transformed into dialogue and dispersed among four characters identified as A, B, C, and D. This transformation results in a more dynamic staging of characters through interactions and confrontations, shifting *Aurash* from a recitative, *naqqali*-inflected style toward a more dialogic theatrical form. This dialogic shift contrasts with a recitative performance, where gestures, tones, movements, and verbal elements deliver an epic narrative rooted in Persian literature (Figure 18):

¹⁶³ Shahrokh Yadegari, "The Scarlet Stone: An Infatuated Wisdom," in *Performing Iran: Culture, Performance, Theatre*, ed. Babak Rahimi (London: I.B. Tauris, 2021), 49.

Naqqali, meaning to recount, is the term used to refer to the dramatic reading or recitation of tales. Hannaway defines the difference between the storyteller and the *naqqal* by arguing that while storytellers mainly performed and narrated folkloric tales, *naqqals* were skilled at performing stories popular romances and epic collections of poetry such as the *Shahnameh*, the *Abumoslemnāmeḥ* and more [...] An essential element of *naqqali* that needs to be pointed out here is its performative and dramatic nature.¹⁶⁴



Figure 18. (Left) *Naqqali*, performed by one of the last Iranian master *naqqals*, Valiollah Torabi Sefidabi, uses body movements in recitation. Credit: unesco.org



Figure 19. (Right) The Miller family interacts while reciting the King's actions to the commanders in *The Death of the King*, 2016, Toronto. Credit: Soheil Parsa

Naqqali is predominantly a masculine narrative form, evoking a world characterized by masculine attributes such as patriotism, bravery in warfare, and epic storytelling, where men are active, and women are often pictured as passive. Through poetic and detailed descriptions, *naqqali* places characters in a masculine and heroic world in Persian literature, reinforcing a particular heroic and idealized masculine national identity. Historically, *naqqali* was a cultural tool for promoting epic tales of kings and heroes, preserving historical and cultural memory, and fostering social unity under various rules.¹⁶⁵ In mid-20th-

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 211, n.9.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 32. In the chapter “Minstrels: The Wise Teachers of Ancient Iran,” Soodabeh Malekzadeh argues that, even within its pre-modern context, such performances were utilized as didactic tools for social instruction and, at times, royal intervention and argues that the roots of *naqqali* have extended in Iranian history as archival practices in the transmission of cultural memory and the continuity of Iranian ideals and traditions.

century Iran, *naqqali* was still familiar to the public and performed in coffeehouses, streets, public places, and theatres.

With the transformation of the *naqqali* narrative into a dialogic structure, the epic representation of masculinity is detached from a distinctly Persian performative tradition and reconfigured through the conventions of Western theatrical form, characterized by dialogue, linear development, and dramatic resolution, a model that Laura Mulvey describes as a masculinist structure of pleasure.¹⁶⁶ This shift from one masculinist narrative structure to another relocates Middle Eastern male characters from a Persian narrative framework to a Western one. Rather than disrupting the patriarchal gaze, this formal transformation simply repositions these characters within an alternative masculine pleasure economy, where the adapted masculine characters become subject to controlling looks that determine how bodies and identities are to be understood and consumed.¹⁶⁷ This transformation structurally parallels the Modern Times creators' intention to give their staging a universal dimension, as Parsa states regarding *Aurash*, "In our adaptation, we extended the universal dimensions of the story [...] for instance, we removed the title of Iran so that the story can be adopted in any nation and local culture and could be understandable for anyone."¹⁶⁸ This so-called universalizing strategy functions as a postmodern flattening mechanism that dislocates Iranian masculinity from its regional specificity and re-inserts it into a globally dominant masculinist aesthetic. The adaptation exemplifies how, under the cultural logic of late capitalism, the particular masculinist gaze that Mulvey identifies becomes globally dominating,

¹⁶⁶ Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), 14–15. See also Anneke Smelik's discussion of Teresa de Lauretis's work: narrative structures are inherently oedipal and socio-political, framing male desire as central and rendering woman as the enigmatic object of knowledge. Such narrative constructs empower male desire while disempowering female perspectives, thus reinforcing a dualistic opposition that prioritizes male pleasure. Anneke Smelik, *And the Mirror Cracked: Feminist Cinema and Film Theory* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press Ltd., 1998), 16.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 14–15. Although Mulvey's analysis focuses on cinema, her critique of narrative pleasure extends to theatrical forms that employ similar structural logics. Also, it is worth emphasizing that this "male gaze" specifically reflects what Connell identifies as "hegemonic masculinity"—not all masculinities, but the dominant configuration that maintains patriarchal power relations across cultural contexts. Connell, *Masculinities*, 77.

¹⁶⁸ "TVT Canada, "Arash Directed by Soheil Parsa."

establishing hierarchical relationships between the hegemonic masculinity of the Global North and regional masculine representations¹⁶⁹ The adaptation process thus subordinates culturally specific masculine representations to narrative structures that have become dominant in global cultural production. In *Aurash*, the fragmentary *naqqali* elements that remain in the dialogue become isolated stylistic markers, disconnected from their original semiotic system and unable to counterbalance the dramaturgical structure that now contains them. Rather than clarifying Middle Eastern masculinity, this transformation renders it semiotically fractured, visually distinctive, but severed from the cultural systems that would provide interpretive depth.

Parsa and his collaborators appear to perceive the traditional *naqqali* structure as limiting when expressing humanistic themes focused on characters' moral dilemmas and struggles. This perspective is evident in their adaptation of *Aurash*, where, as previously discussed, they transform the *naqqali* narrative into a dialogic form. In the original play, the recitative style manifests Aurash's determination to self-sacrifice, linked to protecting the homeland of Iran and resisting the Turanians, who are described as vicious and bloodthirsty as Daevas.¹⁷⁰ The *naqqali* narration emphasizes the epic nature of the conflict, highlighting themes of patriotism, collective struggle, and the moral justification behind Aurash's actions. For instance, the original play includes rich, poetic descriptions that reinforce Aurash's deep connection to his cultural heritage and collective identity:

Then they beat the drums and blew into the horns. A great fire was lit on the high rampart, and a falcon was released to soar into the sky with a flaming spear tied to its tail, and the watchmen gazed from under the towers as flames rose from the grand pavilion, reaching the sky, with smoke swirling. At that moment, they blew the horns. Now the men, the men of Iran, shouted in their loudest voice: "O Arash, go forward to the Turanians, whose group resembled a horde of demons,

¹⁶⁹ Connell, *Masculinities*, 76-77.

¹⁷⁰ See page 279 on the definition of Daevas and its use throughout the play.

and tell them that you will shoot your arrow. Wherever your arrow flies, there, the land shall belong to Iran; wherever your arrow flies, O Arash.” And he, Arash, stepped forward and went towards the Turanians—whose group resembled Daevas—and shouted: “I will shoot my arrow, wherever it lands, that place will belong to Iran, wherever it lands.” And the Turanians, whose group resembled Daevas, said: “O Arash, O Arash, shoot your arrow, and wherever it lands, that place shall belong to Iran, wherever your arrow lands, O Arash.” Every Turanian said so. And on every lip was another question: “How far can his arrow reach? How far can his arrow fly?” And to the farthest ends of the heavens, the Turanians sneered wickedly.¹⁷¹

In contrast, the Modern Times adaptation presents this scene in a more concise, dialogic form:

D: Drums again.

B: Trumpets again.

A: A falcon soars through the sky like a javelin.

B: And the people cry out, the people of this land with their loudest cry, say:

D: Yes, Aurash, go, go to the enemy and tell them you will fire the arrow,

And wherever your arrow lands will be our land.

C: Wherever your arrow lands!

D: And Aurash goes toward the enemy and cries:

A: I will fire the arrow. And wherever my arrow lands will be our land.

B: And they, the enemy, they say:

¹⁷¹ Beyzaie, *Arash* 30-31. The original text is:

آنگاه بر طبل‌ها می‌کوبند و در کرناها می‌دمند. بر خاکریز بلند آتشی می‌افروزند بزرگ، و شهبازی را پرواز می‌دهند؛ بر دم او زوبینی افروخته، و دیدبانان از زیر برج می‌نگرند کز برابر انبوه سرا پرده‌های دور آتشی برخاست تا آسمان با دود، و در گام دم‌نغیر می‌دمند. اینک مردان، مردان ایران، به فریاد، با بلندترین فریاد می‌گویند: ای آرش پیش برو، به سوی تورانیان- که گروهشان به گروه دیوان می‌ماند- و به ایشان بگو که تو تیر خواهی انداخت. تا هرکجا تیر تو برود تا همانجا از آن ایران است، تا هرکجا تیر تو برود ای آرش. و او -آرش- پیش رفت، و به سوی تورانیان رفت - که گروهشان به گروه دیوان می‌مانست - و فریاد برآورد که من تیر خواهم انداخت، تا هرکجا تیر من برود تا همانجا از آن ایران است، تا هرکجا تیر من برود. و ایشان، تورانیان - که گروهشان به گروه دیوان می‌مانست - گفتند: ای آرش، تو تیر بینداز، تا هرکجا تیر تو برود تا همانجا از آن ایران است، تا هرکجا تیر تو برود، ای آرش. هر تورانی چنین و بر هر لب سخنی دیگر بود: تیر او تا کجا می‌تواند برود؟ - تیر او تا کجا می‌تواند برود؟ و تا آن سوی گیهان تورانیان لبخند زشت زدند. می‌گفت

C: Yes, Aurash, draw the bow, and wherever your arrow lands will be your land.

D: But they sneered at Aurash and said to each other:

C: How far can his arrow go?

B: How far can his arrow fly?¹⁷²

The *naqqali* narrative of the original play extends a sense of wonder to all characters, presenting a world at a turning point, captured in the line, “Every lip was another question.”¹⁷³ In contrast, the Modern Times translation narrows this inquiry to the enemy’s humiliating insinuation. In the original, the protagonist is linked with a collective fate, where his inner struggle and decisions are intertwined with the destiny of the entire community. However, in the adaptation, this connection is reduced to an individual being subjected to the enemy’s humiliation, with the collective people of Aurash only pressuring him into action, whether out of desperation or expectation. Modern Times’ Aurash appears as an isolated figure, subject to the world’s cruelty without a clear cause, and his submission to these expectations seems similarly unfounded.

The formal shift renders masculine characters, like Aurash, without complexity and detached from their cultural context. In the *naqqali* form of the original play, the protagonist’s actions and motivations find meaning in their bond to the collective identity of a particular heritage. Aurash’s portrayed masculinity is imbued with a sense of duty to his homeland and the moral weight of his impending sacrifice. In the dialogic form of the Modern Times adaptation, the focus shifts to immediate actions and spoken lines, with less emphasis on the narratorial context that initially provided depth to Aurash’s character; thus, Aurash’s motivations and internal conflicts are less explicitly explored. For example, the adaptation presents the pivotal moment of Aurash’s decision to shoot the arrow with minimal

¹⁷² Beyzaie, “Aurash,” 14.

¹⁷³ Beyzaie, *Arash*, 31.

contextualization: “A: I will fire the arrow. And wherever my arrow lands will be our land.”¹⁷⁴ Without the rich background provided by the *naqqali* narration, Aurash’s character may appear as a generic hero archetype, and his actions may seem driven by plot necessity rather than deep personal conviction. This simplification diminishes the complexity of his masculinity without replacing these layers with something that can possibly be communicated with the diverse Canadian audiences and keep the nuances of a masculine identity from the Middle East.

Aurash aims to highlight these internal ethical conflicts and human values on stage through character interactions, verbal communication, movements, actors’ arrangement, and dynamics with the *mise-en-scène*, using the form of dialogue. The epic ambiance remaining from the *naqqali* narrative fails to depict a heroic resistance against oppression and leaves unanswered questions about the motivations behind these masculine actions. These victimized masculinities “came from across the country, from far, far away, in thousands, to defend their land” and are involved in a war without any contextual grounding.¹⁷⁵ When the signs and semantic elements within the transformed narrative lack coherence, and this combined narrative format fails to establish any relative semantic connection, the confusion in understanding the characters tends to increase.¹⁷⁶ Therefore, while the narrative form imparts a distinct style to the performance, the overall effect of this narrative technique, along with other changes, is incapable of bestowing historical depth to the masculine characters and any level of coherence among

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., 14.

¹⁷⁵ It’s an excerpt from *Aurash*. See Beyzaie, “Aurash,” 6.

¹⁷⁶ An audience might ask why Aurash, an underdog humiliated by everyone, persists in trying to save the country or help his side avoid defeat when Kashvad, the best archer, has lost hope and abandoned the war. Is Aurash taking this opportunity to end his own misery? Does he act out of hurt and emotional reaction rather than stoicism? The lack of a well-defined story world with clear political and historical specifics leaves these questions unanswered. Even in a fantastical world like Tolkien’s, the reasons behind each character’s actions are understandable. Fantasy worlds are always created in parallel with the real world and history.

the signs, and *Aurash* and *The Death of the King* present images of masculinities without origin, creating simulacra of masculinities and their dramatic worlds.¹⁷⁷

The characteristics of postmodernity materialize in the masculinities staged in the co-adaptations of *Aurash* and *The Death of the King*, rendering them as simulacra with schizophrenic qualities, inclining them towards commodified images that lack critical perspective and do not challenge the mechanisms of stereotyping. Parsa's co-creation employs pastiche by blending traditional *naqqali* storytelling with elements of European theatrical style. Dialogues replace monologue-like recitations, and focusing on interpersonal conflicts replaces epic narratives. This approach enhances audience engagement but distances the performance from the original *naqqali* ethos, stripping historical and cultural specificity from masculinities. The result is a simulacrum of Middle Eastern masculinities fixed in an eternal present, where the past has disappeared.¹⁷⁸ These dramatic settings trap characters in cycles of power struggles devoid of historical causality, reducing their actions to general humanist themes stripped of contextual meaning. This adaptation offers a homogenized portrayal of masculinity characterized by a loss of historical specificity, cultural rootedness, and symbolic coherence, transforming a traditional art form into a universally recognizable but unrooted spectacle. The features of postmodernity in cultural products, such as simulacra spawned by pastiche, manifest in the masculinities portrayed, embodying the concept of schizophrenic subjectivity characterized by fragmented and incoherent identities. The portrayal of masculinities, untethered from their geocultural roots, appears as generic figures in a struggle for power and integrity rather than as embodiments of historically grounded identities.

¹⁷⁷ These works do not offer even a superficial narrative of the past, for there is no specific nation or world to be referred to. Hence, as Jameson speaks of pastiche and the creation of nostalgia, these works do not "consume the past in the form of glossy images." See Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 287.

¹⁷⁸ As Jameson observes, in such an eternal present, "the past itself has disappeared (along with the well-known "sense of the past" or historicity and collective memory)." See Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 309.

Casting Femininity: Masking Masculinity

This part examines the impact of cross-gender casting in *Aurash* on characterizing male figures, particularly the protagonist. Cross-gender casting (a form of non-traditional casting where an actor is assigned a role not aligned with their gender identity) creates a distinct visual and dramaturgical effect through its unconventional nature.¹⁷⁹ This casting approach creates a semiotic tension between performer and character that can invite interpretative associations with gender critique and identity construction. The semiotic tension relies on recognition of the masculinity interwoven within the



Figure 21. (Left) *Aurash*, 2010 in Columbia Credit: Soheil Parsa Figure 20. (Right) *Aurash* 2010, Toronto Credit: Soheil Parsa

character of Arash, a traditionally male hero in Iranian mythology whose cultural significance is tied to masculine heroic virtues. When this culturally masculine figure is portrayed by a female actor, the production establishes a representational contradiction that could function as a critique. Without this recognition, the representational contradiction between the performer's gender and the character's cultural identity becomes indiscernible within the production's visual system. The semiotic system presents competing signifiers (elements that contradict each other in meaning) that don't fully integrate into a coherent critical statement about gender or masculinity. While the cross-gender casting introduces

¹⁷⁹ (Re)Setting the Stage, "Non-Traditional Casting," accessed March 6, 2025, <https://castingcanadiantheatre.ca/archives/2066>. Non-Traditional Casting is defined as a broad term for the concept of casting actors in roles that defy "traditional" racial, gender, and ability boundaries and encompasses four specific approaches to casting: Colour-blind Casting, Conceptual Casting, Cross-Cultural Casting, and Societal Casting.

a potentially subversive element to the theatrical language, the dramaturgical structure maintains conventional narrative elements that constrain the transformative potential of this casting choice. This analysis will demonstrate how this dramaturgical structure positions the cross-gender casting as a formal innovation that remains separate from the production's treatment of cultural identity. The representational system creates a visual subversion that operates primarily at the formal level, without extending into a substantive engagement with how masculinity is constructed and performed within specific cultural contexts. Various accounts of *Aurash*'s productions, from its earliest in 1998, suggest that female performers played the protagonist's role, that is, Aurash: "as in the original staging, when Joan Heney played the Commander or in the 2010 remount in Toronto, when the Métis Algonquin actor Michelle Latimer played Aurash."¹⁸⁰ Martina Kujundžić-Đaković plays Aurash with three other male characters in two productions in Bosnia (2009) and Sarajevo (2010).¹⁸¹ Michelle Latimer performed as Aurash in the 2010 production in Toronto.¹⁸²

In later productions of *Aurash*, female performers dominated the cast, and in the 2017 production in Toronto, *Aurash* went on stage with an all-female cast (Figure 20, 21, 22). Moreover, the same casting strategy continues in another production in 2019 in Toronto, as Farbridge's account suggests, describing the details of the rehearsals in the workshop that took place at Concordia University:

¹⁸⁰ Knowles, *Performing the Intercultural City*, 146.

¹⁸¹ Soheil Parsa, Araš: OKC Abrašević," video recording of a performance in Mostar, Bosnia and Herzegovina, June 2009, provided to the author by Soheil Parsa.

¹⁸² Modern Times Stage Company, "Past Productions."

The workshop rehearsal of *Aurash* that this article addresses was slated for a French-language production in Montreal, Quebec, in 2021. Actors Maya Kuroki (Japanese, she/her), Ligia Borges (Brazilian, she/her), Benita Jacques (Haitian, she/her) and Roxanne de Bruyn (Belgian, she/her) were present in the rehearsal hall, alongside Amir Sâm Nakhjavani (Iranian, he/him) and Laura Gallo-Tapias (Colombian, she/her), who assisted with the research and translated for unilingual English or French speakers.¹⁸³



Figure 22. *Aurash*, 2017 Toronto Credit: Soheil Parsa

When the verbal expressions of the actors preserve the sense of masculinity as strongly as in the original work, presenting them in a female body does not induce a subversive transformation at the conceptual and critical level in the construction of the characters' masculinity and the dramatic world. This may prompt the audience to interpret the mythic figure of Arash as being portrayed by a woman, which in itself could be perceived as a form of critique. Casting a woman as Aurash invites the audience to reconsider traditional gender roles and the association of heroism with masculinity. This portrayal can be perceived as a critique of the gender binary by demonstrating that qualities such as bravery, sacrifice, and leadership are not exclusive to male figures. By embodying a mythic male hero in a female body,

¹⁸³ Peter Farbridge, "The Spiritual Reformation of Theatrical Practice: Interculturalism and the Modern Times Stage Company," *Critical Stages/Scènes critiques*, no. 21, June 2020, accessed June 6, 2025. <https://www.critical-stages.org/21/the-spiritual-reformation-of-theatrical-practice-a-modern-times-stage-company-workshop-with-soheil-parsa/>.

the production challenges societal norms surrounding gender and prompts the audience to question the conventional linkage between masculinity and heroism.

However, if one inquires about the critical nature of this portrayal, there is no evidence to suggest that the alteration in body engenders a distinct conceptual synthesis with the actor's spoken words or body language that would indicate a critique or discussion of gender issues.¹⁸⁴ Moreover, this casting choice may unwittingly critique masculinity by exposing its constructed and performative aspects while also challenging the Orientalist lens that often essentializes Middle Eastern masculinity as oppressive and hypermasculine. Female performers' physical embodiment of masculine roles can highlight how gender is enacted through behaviours, gestures, and speech patterns; this juxtaposition might lead the audience to recognize that masculinity is not an inherent quality tied to male bodies but a set of characteristics that can be adopted and portrayed by anyone, thereby questioning the rigidity of gender norms.

As examined in previous sections, gender signifiers convey the sense of a masculinity-dominated dramatic world and its characters, and the emphasis on male gender has been meticulously preserved throughout the adaptation process. The comparative reading of *Aurash* and its source in Persian manifests that the abundant mention of the gendered body, "man," did not alter through this trans-adaptation. Like its original play, *Aurash* starts depicting a male-dominated world, not only through addressing the gendered male (i.e. man) but also within a militaristic landscape and the notions around patriotism, which are featured as masculinist within the common sense of different eras.¹⁸⁵

¹⁸⁴ The actors' body language does not contradict the militaristic and aggressive world conveyed through the verbal expressions. The scenes in the 2017 production of "Aurash" even show that the aggression of the characters is exaggerated in their facial expressions, stances, and gestures. TVT Canada, "Arash Directed by Soheil Parsa."

¹⁸⁵ Joane Nagel, "Nation," in *Handbook of Studies on Men and Masculinities*, eds. Michael Kimmel, Jeff Hearn, and Raewyn Connell (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2005), 401. Joan Nagel writes: "By definition, nationalism is political and closely linked to the state and its institutions. Like the military, most state institutions have been historically and remain dominated by men. It is therefore no surprise that the culture and ideology of hegemonic masculinity go hand in hand with the culture and ideology of hegemonic nationalism."

Music, Images of war.

A: Men came-thousands and thousands, from across the country, from far, far away-to defend their land. But none of these men would return to their homes.”

[...]

D: The Elborz mountain- [...] -sees the furious men with their feet on the ground and their heads turned to the sky, striking with their swords, striking.

*Music, Images of war.*¹⁸⁶

Despite the presence of cross-gender casting in later productions, the representational structure of masculinity remains largely intact. While cross-gender casting here can be interpreted as challenging gender binaries and norms, in this context, it does not yield a layered or culturally specific portrayal of Middle Eastern masculinity. The substitution of female bodies into male-coded roles does little to disrupt the underlying symbolic framework, which continues to depict masculinity through militarized, heroic tropes. Rather than offering complexity, the casting choice contributes to a symbolic framework where masculinity becomes ambiguous, generalized, or detached from culturally grounded referents. This approach causes the artistic work to perpetuate stereotypes by reconstructing a patriarchal order in the dramatic world. Using a female body for male roles does not fundamentally disrupt the depiction of a male-dominated, militaristic, and unjust world where some characters are victims and others are oppressors, as no liberating or revolutionary dimension is added to the oppressed characters. While using female performers introduces complexity to portraying masculinity, the underlying narratives and power structures remain unchanged. The casting choice challenges stereotypical masculinity to some extent by blurring gender boundaries; however, it does not fully address or subvert the patriarchal dynamics at play within the dramatic world. The characters in *Aurash* continue to operate within the

¹⁸⁶ Beyzaie, “Aurash,” 6.

same militaristic and hierarchical framework inherited from Beyzaie's *Arash*, yet the adaptation neither destabilizes nor reconfigures these structures. Instead, its casting and dialogue choices reiterate traditional masculine tropes without offering a more layered or culturally specific portrayal. This approach causes the artistic work to perpetuate stereotypes by reconstructing a patriarchal order in the dramatic world.

In *Aurash* and relatively in *The Death of the King*, despite the majority of performer-*naqqals* being female - two women and one man from Miller's family – the text presents characters in a conventional/traditional template: the form is still semi-*naqqali*, the plot remains in the Aristotelian model of storytelling, and the characters carry male signifiers (e.g. "Men came – thousands and thousands"), and the dramatic world retains a masculinist structure, characterized by hierarchical roles, militaristic language, and gendered tropes.¹⁸⁷ The patriarchal world is depicted through the dynamic of oppressor and victim between characters throughout the dramatic world, and the power hierarchy remains unchanged: the protagonists do not challenge the existing power structure and merely face moral dilemmas imposed by the powerful upon the powerless.

There is no evidence to suggest that cross-gender casting creates a conceptual synthesis with the signs that would lead to defiance and critique of the patriarchal and despotic power structures. This approach, rather than subverting traditional gender dynamics, reinforces the binary representation of Middle Eastern subjects through the repetition of established power configurations. When female performers embody male characters who remain fixed in positions of either oppression or domination, the production reiterates rather than disrupts the gendered aspects of these stereotypes. Following Butler's theory of performativity, these repeated enactments consolidate rather than challenge simplified

¹⁸⁷ Ibid., 5.

or stereotypical representations of Middle Eastern masculinity.¹⁸⁸ The cross-gender casting, paradoxically, amplifies the polarized portrayal by extending it beyond male bodies, suggesting that subjugation is intrinsic to Middle Eastern identity regardless of embodiment. For instance, in *Aurash*, despite female performers playing male roles, the characters remain fixed in their oppressed or oppressor characterizations, and the power dynamics stay unaltered. In Scene One, the narrative describes men going to war and dying: “[...] none of these men would return to their homes.”¹⁸⁹ This portrayal emphasizes the sacrifice and victimization of male warriors, reinforcing traditional masculine roles within a context of suffering and loss. The cross-gender casting does not alter this depiction; instead, it structurally intensifies the victimhood narrative through the juxtaposition of feminine-coded bodies performing male sacrifice. In an interview about his production of *Aurash*, Parsa acknowledges this dynamic: “In fact, the vulnerable image of Aurash would be more closely depicted with a female actor. Another reason is to keep the character away from cliché (stereotype); the masculinity of Aurash, who is strong and tough. I took all that from the character, so the female can bring another dimension to the character.”¹⁹⁰ This statement reveals how the production’s dramaturgical strategy employs gender as a signifying system to emphasize vulnerability, inadvertently reinforcing rather than disrupting the binary representation of Middle Eastern subjects. Similarly, in Scene Four, Aurash is falsely accused of betrayal by his own people and is physically beaten:

“Aurash is beaten by his people.”¹⁹¹

¹⁸⁸ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 33. Butler writes: “Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being.” This concept of performativity explains how cross-gender casting in *Aurash* may appear subversive but ultimately reinforces existing power relations through repeated enactment of the same oppressive dynamics.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., 5.

¹⁹⁰ Parsa, “Theater Talk Part 2.”

¹⁹¹ Beyzaie, “Aurash,” 13.

This scene further entrenches the character's victimization within a rigid power structure. The use of a female performer in the role of Aurash does not challenge the oppressive dynamics but may even amplify the portrayal of suffering to those with an essentialist view of gender. The visual of a female body enduring such hardship may evoke stronger emotional responses without necessarily subverting the underlying patriarchal constructs. This can lead to the stereotype of Middle Eastern femininity as defenceless and oppressed, figures needing protection.

In the dialogues, characters remain fixed in their roles as victims, rulers, military figures, or religious authorities, and despite the gender switch in actors, these roles persist. Consequently, the cross-gender casting does not critique patriarchal or despotic power dynamics but rather generalizes the oppressor-oppressed narrative to all Middle Eastern identities. The power structure in which the characters are depicted continues to reinforce a binary opposition of powerful and powerless, perpetuating an essentialist view of gender and its associated stereotypes.

Chapter Two Conclusion

As the artistic director of Modern Times in the productions of *Aurash* and *The Death of the King*, Parsa's exposure to anti-colonial modernity ideologies in the 1970s must be considered as significantly influencing his views on theatre and the concept of masculinity. Although he experienced anti-colonial modern perspectives in the material sources of his co-adaptations, his changing living context led him to find the emancipatory potential in these works less applicable to the Canadian context. Hence, his concern shifted towards identity politics. Modern Times Theatre makers find the emancipatory themes in the source plays relevant in addressing social injustice for minoritized populations in Canada, something Parsa himself encountered as he pursued his artistic career in Canada after immigration. Hence, these artists employ a universalist worldview that resonates with European interculturalists like Grotowski and

Brook, who claim to focus on human commonality, rooted in Enlightenment thinking.¹⁹² This interculturalist approach is seen in the artworks examined in this chapter, decontextualizing narratives from other non-Western cultures, cutting social and historical referents, and appropriating adaptations to hegemonic norms. Such a dramaturgical style has garnered the attention and admiration of some Canadian scholars to the point that they assert that Modern Times would continue the modernist universalist utopia, completing its unfinished project.¹⁹³

However, these adaptations exhibit characteristics that align with Jameson's analysis of postmodernity, particularly the notions of pastiche and simulacra. Whether intentionally or unintentionally, the dramaturgy harmonizes with commodifying forces prevalent in postmodern cultural production. By embracing pastiche, a stylistic imitation without satire or homage, the productions create a collage of historical and cultural elements detached from their original contexts. This approach results in representations of Middle Eastern masculinities as depthless simulacra, images without original referents, which can be easily commodified and consumed within Western cultural markets. This superficial assemblage not only commodifies the representations but also perpetuates stereotypes, as the absence of a specific and genuine context leads to reliance on generalized and often stereotypical depictions of Middle Eastern masculinities.

Modern Times founders transform the cultural specificity of their source texts to prioritize universal human experiences over cultural specificity, emphasizing themes such as stoic loneliness, moral principles, existential uncertainty, and the conflict between will and fate in an eternally unsettling world. They aim to reflect the human condition on stage beyond specific cultural contexts.¹⁹⁴ In these

¹⁹² Parsa's collaborator, Farbridge mentions: "Parsa's directorial style and universalist leanings have been strongly influenced by British theatre director Peter Brook, whose internationalist productions (according to his critics) fall within the "appropriative type practiced by western interculturalists," such as Richard Schechner, Ariane Mnouchkine and Eugenio Barba." See Farbridge, "The Spiritual Reformation of Theatrical Practice."

¹⁹³ Knowles, *Performing the Intercultural City*, 133.

¹⁹⁴ Antaki, "In Conversation: Soheil Parsa."

works, the Middle Eastern man does not portray the plurality among Middle Eastern masculinities, nor does this identity category appear with its nuances and complexities. However, the generalized images of these pictured men differ merely by their moral values and power status.

Moreover, these depictions are framed in a manner, both formally and in terms of content, that creates narrative indeterminacy for the constructed characters within the portrayed dramatic world. The masculinities are situated in a world of ongoing battles between good and evil within a male-dominated military context. In such a dramatic context, men are sorted into two groups: the underclass (e.g., Aurash, the servant, and the Miller family) and the powerful and wealthy (e.g., military men, kings, and high-ranking religious figures). In *The Death of the King*, where war persists with unaltered power dynamics, and in *Aurash*, where a bleak landscape of conflict and perpetual hope for Aurash's return remains unchanged, close readings reveal that, due to the semiotic simplification of the dramatic world and its characters, figures like Aurash exhibit contradictory representational elements, creating an incoherent set of signifiers. The result is a portrayal of masculinity that is symbolically detached from specific cultural and historical contexts, rendering it underdefined within the dramatic structure. By selectively attributing, altering, and omitting cultural and historical specifics, the artworks discussed in this chapter establish a signifying system with substantial interpretive gaps within a simplified hierarchy of victim and victimizer. This ambiguity and lack of depth facilitate the reproduction of stereotypes, as the textual gaps create spaces where dominant cultural narratives about Middle Eastern identities can persist unchallenged.

The masculine characters reside in ambiguous territories infused with regional and cultural details, such as the Alborz mountains and the mythical Phoenix, adding specificity to otherwise unspecified settings. This simplification and ambiguity impede any in-depth conception of the depicted characters, which exist in dramatic worlds that lose historical depth and cultural specificity. Indeed, signs are fluid

and change their meaning depending on the signifying field of the stage and the dramatic text; however, the issue here is that the signifying field on the Modern Times stage presents disconnected signifiers without establishing structural integration of such heterogeneity. Hall explains that identity markers such as race and gender derive meaning through relationships with other signs within a signifying field.¹⁹⁵ Thus, on the stage as the signifying field, masculinity is presented with reduced dimensionality, exhibiting limited symbolic complexity, and is prone to stereotypical and simplified representational patterns.

The formal choices could not establish a coherent semantic system among these disconnected and wandering signs and do not exhibit a groundbreaking approach to characterize the masculinities with nuances of specifics to Middle Eastern identity. While these productions have distinct creative aspects and critical nuances, they demonstrate that the dramaturgy of Modern Times's founders does not introduce a distinctive voice and critical dimension to its theatrical depictions. Instead, the dramatic styles and staging techniques employ artistic styles of the past that belong to various periods and cultures, such as incorporating elements of modern experimental theatre and the *naqqali* narrative form. The formal aspects of these works feature pastiches, and the presentation of masculinities through these forms creates a simulated reality. By presenting characters and settings stripped of their original cultural and historical contexts, the plays produce images that lack genuine connections to the identities they portray. The outcome of representations featuring simulacra and dramaturgy characterized by pastiche suggests that the dramaturgy, from translation to casting choices and costume design, is in harmony with the commodifying style of cultural production.

Besides the chaotic set of signs in these characterizations giving them ambiguous dimensions, these masculine figures are formless and depthless, their expressions fragmented and disconnected,

¹⁹⁵ Stuart Hall, "Race, the Floating Signifier: What More Is There to Say about 'Race'?" in *Selected Writings on Race and Difference*, eds. Paul Gilroy and Ruth Wilson Gilmore (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021), 359-60.

devoid of motivations and coherent narratives. In a depthless and amorphous dramatic world, the binarist (or essentialist) view of gender remains outside the critical scope, with traces on the surface of the depictions (e.g., cross-gender casting). The cross-gender casting strategy signals only an implicit and passive illusion of critique in gender perception, not explicitly addressing Middle Eastern contexts. These plays and productions do not critique the power and gender dichotomy but operate within it, redefining men as victims while maintaining the figure of the oppressor away from critical scope. This approach leads to a repetition and reconstruction of the patriarchal structure. Cross-gender casting in *Aurash*, while intended as a critical dramaturgical measure, remains limited in its capacity to reconfigure gender images due to the internally contradictory symbolic structure and lack of nuances. In *The Death of the King*, the combination of classical Aristotelian dialogue and traditional Iranian *naqqali* narrative forms reconstructs masculinity in a binarist and essentialist manner, as both are inherently gendered. Despite these formal changes, the portrayal of male characters did not experience a fundamental shift, continuing to depict a world structured by a gendered order and focused on male-dominated power struggles. Consequently, the critical aspect of the image is reduced to superficial and transient signals in these presentations.

Modern Times's adaptations and productions exhibit characteristics of pastiche, imitating past styles without original context and depth, a hodgepodge of ideas without clear historical development.¹⁹⁶ By adapting plays rooted in Iranian mythology and history within a pastiche, Modern Times founders present masculine figures that appear amorphous and origin-less, and even, at times, hard to identify as Middle Easterners. When postmodern symptoms manifest in the form and content of these works, these images primarily feature commodifying aspects, distancing themselves from offering any critical commentary on identity and gender order and closing to stereotypical perception. As a result, measures

¹⁹⁶ Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 65-66.

that could provide a critical or deconstructive dimension to these performances, such as cross-gender casting and innovative narrative forms, do not generate an in-depth critical dimension to the depictions.

Although the adaptations produce representations that are fragmented and lack contextual depth, attending to the semiotic disjunctions and unstable identity constructions in these performances reveals important dynamics of intercultural dramaturgy. These representations illuminate the difficulties inherent in depicting culturally specific masculinities when historical and social frameworks are displaced or selectively referenced. By analyzing how masculinities emerge through patterns of ambiguity and incoherence, we can better understand the structural challenges and interpretive tensions that shape identity formation within transposed theatrical contexts.

CHAPTER THREE

Staging Masculinities and Memory in the Israel-Palestine

Conflict: *Soldiers of Tomorrow* and *This is Not a Conversation*

Brittle masculinity, in the right setting, becomes a political atrocity. Strength brings problems; weakness brings others, but weakness posing as strength is the most dangerous of all.

— *Historian Timothy D. Snyder, writing in The Guardian, April 2017*¹

Introduction

This chapter reveals a paradoxical pattern in theatrical representation: how dramaturgical structures can simultaneously produce stereotypical and non-stereotypical portrayals within the same work, demonstrating that progressive political critique of an artist doesn't necessarily result in balanced representation of diverse identities. Through examining solo testimonial and dialogic theatrical forms, I analyze how the structures that enable depth and complexity for one identity, specifically non-conformist Israeli masculinity rejecting Zionism, simultaneously constrain others to stereotypical positions. The solo testimonial structure creates inevitable hierarchies where Palestinians appear only through memory and narration, existing as either victimizer or victim as encountered by the narrator, while other Israelis become types like aggressive or ultra-nationalist figures. Even when dialogic structure attempts to balance by including Palestinian voices speaking their own experiences of exile and trauma, structural inequality persists: while the Israeli character develops political complexity through self-interrogation and gradual awakening, Palestinian portrayals feature melodramatic elements emphasizing vulnerability through nostalgia, with voluntary migration showing agency contrasted

¹ Timothy D. Snyder, "Don't Underestimate the Harm Brittle Masculinity Can Do to the World," *The Guardian*, April 20, 2017, accessed June 7, 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/apr/20/dont-underestimate-harm-brittle-masculinity-do-world>.

against forced displacement, suggesting victimhood. This analysis demonstrates how individual critical consciousness remains limited by the conventional theatrical forms through which it is expressed, revealing that the very dramaturgical structures enabling dissenting Israeli masculinity to achieve depth simultaneously reinforce stereotypical frameworks for others.

Categorizing masculinities from the Israeli region—whose identities are primarily associated with Judaism, whether religious or secular, as Middle Eastern is controversial among many non-Jewish Middle Eastern populations.² Since the birth of the Israeli nation in 1948, several other Middle Eastern States, such as Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Syria, have been against the recognition of Israel as a nation to the level that several wars between them and Israel have taken place.³ However, these diplomatic stances have not remained static among all Middle Eastern nations; for instance, pre-1979, Iran had diplomatic relations with Israel, and in recent years, several Arab nations and Turkey started to establish diplomatic relations with Israel. Still, a portion of Middle Eastern states, that are, today's Iran,

² Aziza Khazzoom, "The Social Scientific Study of Jewry: Sources, Approaches, Debates," in *The Social Scientific Study of Jewry: Sources, Approaches, Debates*, ed. Uzi Rebhun (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 199–207. Khazzoom discusses Yehouda Shenhav's analysis of the "de-Arabization" process in Israel, which involved efforts to distance Mizrahi Jews from their Arab heritage by discouraging the use of Arabic and the adoption of Western cultural practices. This deliberate disconnection, Shenhav argues, reinforced a separation between Israeli Jews and their Arab neighbours, reducing the chances for peaceful relations and contributing to the broader debate over whether Jewish-Israeli identities should be classified as Middle Eastern. Raffaella A. Del Sarto, "Israel's Contested Identity and the Mediterranean," *Mediterranean Politics* 8, no. 1 (2003): 28–31. Del Sarto observes that "Israel cannot engage in being part of a Mediterranean region so long as it has not sorted out what kind of state and society it wants to be," highlighting Israel's internal struggle to define its identity between Western and Middle Eastern orientations. Externally, the perception of Israel as a "non-Arab island in an Arab Middle East" persists, contributing to Israel's controversial regional positioning and complicating its relationships with neighboring countries. Elie Podeh, "Israel and the Arab Peace Initiative, 2002–2014: A Plausible Missed Opportunity," *Middle East Journal* 68, no. 4 (2014): 584–603, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43698184>. Podeh emphasizes how Arab states, particularly Syria and Lebanon, resisted the Arab Peace Initiative's implicit call for normalization with Israel. Their opposition stemmed from the view that Israel remained fundamentally alien to the Arab world, both culturally and politically, unless it fulfilled specific conditions such as full withdrawal from the 1967 borders and addressing Palestinian refugee rights. Podeh underscores that the initiative itself, while groundbreaking in offering normalization, revealed the broader regional perception of Israel as a state requiring fundamental shifts in policy and identity before being considered a legitimate part of the Middle Eastern order.

³ A) Five Arab nations invaded the Palestinian territories that were settled by Israeli newcomers in 1948. B) In the Suez Crisis in 1956, Israel invaded Egypt's Sinai Peninsula. C) The six-day war in 1967 took place between three Arab nations (Egypt, Jordan, and Syria) and Israel. There are several other wars waged between Arab nations and Israel, such as Yom Kippur in 1973, the Lebanon War in 1982, and civil conflict with Palestinians under the title of Intifada from 1987 to 2005. War in South Lebanon in 2006. Several conflicts with the Gaza government from 2008 to 2024.

Syria, and Iraq, do not recognize the Israeli state. Additionally, Palestinians, as the closest society to the Israeli state, have remained in conflict over ancestries of their land, and Palestine has never been recognized as a State by Israel. This persistent denial of a Palestinian nation has contributed to the increasing support of groups whose ideology denies Israel's existence; some of these Palestinian groups see Israel as a mere colonial occupier with no right to the land. These dynamics between Israelis and other states and public opinion, with its multiplicity in the Middle East, create an image of a region that features a stark divide, where conflict between two sides of distinct ideologies (i.e., Jewish and Muslim) has been ongoing since 1948.

Within such a historically divided region, Middle Eastern masculinities fall into two distinct groups: Israeli and non-Israeli. However, as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict persists and discourses about the conflict spread, the binary conception starts to erode. In these discourses, from politics to academia, we see diverse groups across the Middle East and within Israeli society, each expressing different views on issues of occupation and division. This diversity of ideological stance appears to include Israelis who oppose Zionist ideology entirely, alongside others who, as will be examined through Erdal's perspective, maintain aspects of Zionist allegiance while advocating for Palestinian rights.⁴

The case study in this chapter focuses on Israeli theatre artist Itai Erdal, whose work presents critical perspectives on Israeli state policies toward Palestinian populations and expresses strong opposition to Zionist ideology. Throughout his theatre productions, Erdal, as a character, presents his

⁴ The ideological spectrum in Israeli society includes groups that entirely reject Zionist ideology, alongside liberal Zionists who support certain civil rights for Palestinians. Mohammad Fadel critiques the latter for seeking only "a humane solution to the conflict," arguing that liberal Zionism reflects an ideological orientation "distinct from more explicitly chauvinistic strands of Zionism." See Mohammad Fadel, "Beyond Liberal Zionism: International Law, Political Liberalism and the Possibility of a Just Zionism," *Transnational Law and Contemporary Problems* 34, no. 1 (Fall 2024), 48, 51. To contextualize broader patterns of ideological diversity, the 2017 *Israeli Democracy Index* finds that "among the Jewish respondents, the two groups that are the least satisfied with Israel's overall situation [...] are secular Jews and those who identify with the political Left," communities often aligned with anti-occupation and anti-Zionist critiques. Tamar Hermann et al., *The Israeli Democracy Index 2017* (Jerusalem: Israel Democracy Institute, 2017), 10, accessed June 7, 2025, <https://en.idi.org.il/media/10545/the-israeli-democracy-index-2017.pdf>.

views, experiences, and subjective perspectives on stage, mainly focusing on Israeli masculinity in the context of conflict and national identity.⁵

The central questions this chapter addresses are: To what extent do the ideological and social shifts in the Israel-Palestine region resonate in Erdal's theatrical depictions of masculinity? What images of masculinities from the Israel-Palestine region does Erdal portray, and to what extent do these portrayals reinforce and/or challenge stereotypical representations? Which portrayals offer more nuanced and critical depictions of masculinity? How has portrayal of masculine identity in Erdal's work critiqued or reinforced a simplified image of masculine identities in the Israel-Palestine region?

This chapter starts by introducing Erdal's critical perspective, providing a biographical account, and then a detailed discussion of the themes and concerns in his productions. Notably, Erdal critiques the Israeli state's militaristic approach to conflict resolution. Seemingly, his representation of masculinities from the divided region is intertwined with historical contexts, as Erdal uses his memories and personal experiences, his body itself serving as a vessel of historical knowledge, to offer real-life subjective insights into the depiction of Middle Eastern subjects. Since recognizing diversity among men and masculinities is a fundamental premise in masculinity studies, this analysis begins by exploring the range of masculinities presented in Erdal's works, focusing on the social and historical backgrounds of these men within the dramatic world, identifying who these men are, where they are from. This exploration further investigates how Erdal stages these varied masculinities and how his staging techniques help to distinguish and define them on stage. Thus, through a close analysis of Erdal's performances in the first part of the analysis, various images of men are categorized based on their historical and geographical backgrounds. This categorization is further complemented by examining

⁵ In this research, Erdal, who performs on stage as a storyteller and character, is distinguished by referring to him as Erdal's character to differentiate him from Erdal as a person.

their ideological and social characteristics, highlighting how these diverse portrayals are juxtaposed against one another.

This chapter ~~primarily~~ argues that Erdal adopts a dual approach to portraying characters from the Israel-Palestine region, where the nuanced depiction of a particular group comes at the expense of oversimplifying not only other masculine categories but also Middle Eastern women. While Erdal's strategy foregrounds the complexity of dissenting Israeli masculinity, it simultaneously reinforces stereotypes of other Israeli masculinities and non-Israeli Middle Eastern identities, particularly women. This dynamic raises critical questions about the implications of a Middle Eastern male's nuanced portrayal in contrast to the reductive depictions of Middle Eastern women. Erdal's works thus both challenge and perpetuate fixed perceptions of Middle Eastern characters, employing stereotypical representations of men and women to heighten his portrayal of non-conformist Israeli masculinity. Erdal's dramaturgy constructs layered depictions of non-conformist Israeli masculinities by juxtaposing their depth and complexity with the stereotypical portrayals of militaristic Israeli and non-Israeli characters, often rendered through imitative forms such as melodrama, where their underexplored and simplified presentation can lead to stereotyping. This dramaturgical approach highlights the multifaceted nature of dissenting Israeli masculinities, setting them apart from simplifying narratives about Middle Eastern identities, yet achieves this distinction by generalizing and categorizing other groups.

By examining how Erdal stereotypes militaristic Israelis along with non-Israelis to highlight the complexity of non-conformist Israeli masculinity, this research emphasizes the unintended consequences of contrast-driven dramaturgy.⁶ The analysis reveals that even works with progressive intentions, like

⁶ Contrast-driven dramaturgy" is a term I use to describe theatrical structures that frame identity through oppositional binaries—such as Israeli/non-Israeli or dissenting/conformist masculinity. While the term is original, it draws conceptually on critiques of binary representation and symbolic polarization in postcolonial studies (Spivak, Bhabha) and critical performance theory (Diamond, Reinelt), concerned with representation and identity formation. The chapters that follow trace how this pattern surfaces across Erdal's works.

Erdal's, can inadvertently reinforce Orientalist or reductive narratives when historical, cultural, and gendered contexts are unevenly applied. By unpacking the limitations of Erdal's portrayals, this thesis underscores the need for theatrical representations that move beyond stark contrasts, reduce complex identity formations to binary oppositions, and engage with the diverse histories and perspectives shaping the Israel-Palestine context. Ultimately, this analysis demonstrates that achieving historically grounded and structurally complex portrayals of Middle Eastern identities, such as those of militaristic Israeli men, non-Israeli characters, and non-conformist Israelis, requires resisting essentialist and binary oppositions and critically addressing the broader cultural and historical frameworks in which these masculinities are situated.

The importance of this thesis lies in highlighting a dramaturgical approach that, while providing a non-stereotypical image and breaking away from a monolithic view of Israeli masculinity, reinforces fixed perceptions of other masculinities. This approach highlights both the critique and reinforcement of fixed perceptions of masculinity in the Middle East, particularly within the Israel-Palestine context. This chapter contributes to the academic conversation by demonstrating how even well-intentioned portrayals that utilize formally self-reflexive techniques, such as breaking the fourth wall and metatheatre, may still rely on contrast, structuring identity through oppositional emphasis, where one group's complexity is highlighted while others are oversimplified. The absence of a broader historical context beyond Erdal's personal experiences risks perpetuating the storyteller's biases. Through this lens, Erdal presents a nuanced and sympathetic depiction of non-conformist Israeli masculinity, challenging the stereotypical image of Israeli men as patriots, militaristic, and protective of the nation at all costs. However, this critique operates primarily within his personal narrative, where Palestinians are depicted as victims and non-conformist Israelis as morally distinct from their conformist, militaristic counterparts. Thus, this

chapter underscores the need for a more balanced representation that acknowledges the complexities of all masculinities within the Israel-Palestine context rather than reinforcing a simplified binary.

Erdal: From Soldier to Stage

As this research will later explore, Erdal advocates for a non-conformist Israeli masculinity, deeply influenced by his military service and experiences in conflict zones across Palestine-Israel and southern Lebanon. Highlighting this aspect of his life is essential, as the societal pressures and military experiences he faced were crucial in forming the masculinity he now portrays on stage. Like many men in militarized societies with mandatory service, his time in the military played a pivotal role in shaping his identity.⁷ Feminist scholars have noted that military environments are sites where masculinity is both shaped and reinforced, often emphasizing traits such as aggression, toughness, and emotional restraint.⁸ Such environments socialize men into roles idealized in many cultures, especially in societies like Israel, where military service is both compulsory and a significant marker of citizenship and masculinity.

Erdal's reflections on his time in the Israel Defense Force (IDF) highlight the tension between personal beliefs and societal expectations of masculinity and patriotism. The military plays a critical role in shaping these expectations, nurturing what Sandra Whitworth describes as "exaggerated ideals of manhood and masculinity demanded by national militaries."⁹ This influence is central to understanding how Erdal navigates and critiques these constructs in his theatre work. Therefore, an overview of his

⁷ In Israel, military service is compulsory for most citizens upon age 18. The mandatory service period is 32 months (2.5 years) for men and 24 months (2 years) for women. Moreover, the military's role has evolved from a militia-based defence force to one focused on technological superiority, influencing not only defence policies but also societal constructs of masculinity. For more information, see Eviatar Matania, "Behind Mandatory Service in Israel: From the Rationale of the Militia to the Rationale of Military-Technological Superiority," *Strategic Assessment* 25, no. 2 (July 2022): 3–23, accessed June 7, 2025, <https://www.inss.org.il/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/Matania.pdf>.

⁸ Claire Duncanson, "Masculinities, War and Militarism," in *Routledge International Handbook of Masculinity Studies*, eds. Lucas Gottzén, Ulf Mellström, and Tamara Shefer (London: Routledge, 2019), 471.

⁹ Sandra Whitworth, *Men, Militarism, and UN Peacekeeping: A Gendered Analysis* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2007), 161.

experience in the IDF is essential to fully grasp how military service shaped his concepts of manhood, masculinity, and identity.

Born in 1975 in the city of Jerusalem (*Al-Quds* in Arabic), where groups from both Palestinians and Israelis claim the city, Erdal served mandatory military service in the IDF and, at the age of 25, left Israel for Canada because he wanted to avoid serving as a reservist each year. He mentions his main and only reason to serve was because of the Holocaust, which he expresses impacted his life like many other Israelis.¹⁰ Erdal was deployed in the Palestinian territories, such as Tulkarem and Gaza, when he was nineteen. In all years of service, Erdal was an infantry soldier, “a role only a small percentage of IDF soldiers experience,” as Nawal Musleh-Motut observes.¹¹ Erdal believed that when he joined the IDF at the age of eighteen, he was politically aware and recognized Palestinian civil rights. However, despite his political awareness and recognition of Palestinian civil rights, it was ultimately the influence of Israeli cultural hegemony that convinced him to serve the country:

[B]oth my parents are what we call leftists, they sort of recognized the Palestinians’ right to be people and [...] [are] humanists and [...] care about [...] injustice all around the world. And yet [...] the only reason that somebody like me would choose to go to the army in the first place and go and serve in the Occupied Territories [...] I feel like I was brainwashed in a way and lied to by the government, by the school system, by the media, growing up in Israel. [...] I feel like Israelis are all being brainwashed and lied to, and Israelis use the Holocaust as an excuse to do that.¹²

Regarding the cruelty that has been forced on the Arab-Palestinian population since the birth of the Israeli nation in 1948, Erdal adds:

¹⁰ Nawal Musleh-Motut, *Connecting the Holocaust and the Nakba Through Photograph-based Storytelling* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023), 167.

¹¹ Ibid., 169.

¹² Erdal, as quoted in Musleh-Motut, *Connecting the Holocaust*, 171.

[N]owadays, people know that there were actually fifty-two different massacres that happened where Palestinians didn't run away and were slaughtered. [...] Now we know that [...] three years after the Holocaust [...], Jews were determined to never be victims again and would do anything in order not to be.¹³

Erdal's acknowledgment of historical atrocities committed against Palestinians reflects a critical engagement with narratives often presented in mainstream discourse, which avoids critiquing the IDF for what Erdal sees as crimes. This admission signifies a departure from the patriotic and idealized image of Israeli masculinity, which tends to suppress such critiques to maintain a united national front but also emphasizes the moral conflict experienced by individuals aware of these historical events. By confronting these uncomfortable accounts of the nation's past actions, Erdal embodies a non-conformist Israeli masculinity, disrupting the hegemonic image of Israeli man as the rigour protector of the nation without any show of softness.¹⁴

Adding to his reasons for joining the IDF, Erdal highlights the social consequences of opting out of Israel, such as potential social humiliation, stigmatization, and being labelled a pacifist and a "parasite" to society.¹⁵ This underscores the hegemonic narratives deeply ingrained in the Israeli public consciousness, which function as a pervasive, non-institutional force upholding hegemonic power without explicit coercion.

I feel like that's [...] sort of the direct connection that led me to become a soldier, because I grew up in a country where you couldn't be—or that's how I felt—a pacifist because if you were, you would die [...] you would get killed by somebody. So I felt like as [...] somebody who's growing up in that country part of my duty—in order not to be parasite, in order to be a good citizen, in

¹³ Ibid., 171.

¹⁴ In the section IDF's Role in Idealizing the Israeli Masculinity, pages (332 - 338) the traits and context of Israeli masculinity as an idealized and militaristic model will be further discussed.

¹⁵ Erdal, as quoted in Musleh-Motut, *Connecting the Holocaust*, 172.

order to do the right thing—was to go and serve my country [...] in the army. [...] If it wasn't for all the lies that we were told that really directly connected to the Holocaust. [...] I maybe would have seen this conflict like I see it now, with two people who have equal rights to the land, one side that has everything and one side that has nothing [...] A lot of people choose not to serve, [but] not for ideological reasons. They wanna have a career, they want to go to the university, they just hate guns [...] they're not masculine.¹⁶

In this interview, Erdal reflects on his experiences growing up in a society where military service is deeply intertwined with notions of citizenship and duty. Although he does not explicitly equate masculinity with military service, his reflections reveal the societal pressures that link military participation with fulfilling the role of a “good citizen” and avoiding stigmatization. The fear of being labelled a parasite or perceived as unmasculine for rejecting military participation highlights how certain expectations around masculinity are reinforced within Israeli society. Erdal's reflection highlights how avoiding military service is framed not only as a failure of duty but as a failure of gender, where opting out marks one as both unpatriotic and insufficiently male. Erdal's statement implicitly resonates with scholarly discussions on the idea that military environments reinforce certain masculine ideals, such as toughness, aggression, and authority, while marginalizing alternative expressions of masculinity that do not conform to these ideals.¹⁷

Erdal served in Gaza and South Lebanon. Both experiences were unpleasant for him:

I was in Gaza for a bit, and I did not wanna be in Gaza. Gaza was horrible, horrible [...], so I went to Lebanon quite a bit because Lebanon was [...], in my mind, much better. I had no moral

¹⁶ Ibid., 172,173.

¹⁷ Duncanson, “Masculinities, War and Militarism,” 471. Duncanson writes, “It [concept of hegemonic masculinity] is context-dependent, but in many militaries, it is associated with the practices, skills and symbolic importance of combat (toughness, endurance, courage, action, risk-taking), often with hard-drinking, heterosexual prowess and disdain of homosexuality but also often with the authority and control of the commanding officer. It is a cultural ideal, but it has important material effects – certain ways of acting are privileged: competition over compromise, action over consultation, force over talking, etc. – and those men who most resemble the hegemonic model are privileged.”

conflicts about being in Lebanon [...] even though that seems crazy now, too. But at the time, you knew that if you go to Lebanon, you gonna fight Hezbollah, who are trained soldiers like you, who have guns [...] whereas in the Occupied Territories, it was women and children. [...] So I went to Lebanon, and I was in combat. I was shot at and bombed. Then, I shot a friend in the foot by mistake when I was in basic training. So the military was quite traumatized for me.¹⁸

Committed never to serve even as a reservist, Erdal moved to Vancouver at the age of 25. He claims his political ideology is leftist and mentions many active leftist organizations in Israel that are representing people thinking similar to Erdal. Erdal notes, “Israel has many leftist organizations. [...] [T]here’s B’Tselem, there’s Zochrot. Zochrot is maybe the most amazing organization for that.”¹⁹

Erdal’s reflections in his interviews and his plays can be summarized in several key ideas:

The Holocaust is linked to his Jewish identity and his skepticism towards the Israeli State’s historical narratives, particularly regarding the birth of the Israeli nation and the IDF’s role in shaping these narratives. Erdal is part of a dwindling group of Israelis who advocate for equal social and political rights for Palestinians and reject Zionist ideals.²⁰

¹⁸ Erdal, as quoted in Musleh-Motut, *Connecting the Holocaust*, 173. Hezbollah, or the “Party of God,” is a Lebanese Shiite political and militant organization formed during the Lebanese Civil War (1975–1990). Its origins lie in the influence of the Iranian Islamic Revolution and the Israel-Lebanon War of 1982, positioning itself as a resistance movement against Israeli occupation. Combining armed resistance, political engagement, and socio-religious activities, Hezbollah frames its ideology through documents like the 1985 “Open Letter,” which articulates its opposition to Zionism and its commitment to Shiite Islamic governance. See Dominique Avon and Anaïs-Trissa Khatchadourian, *Hezbollah: A History of the “Party of God,”* trans. Jane Marie Todd (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 11–12, 103–105.

¹⁹ Ibid., 176.

²⁰ Zionism is a form of Jewish nationalism that emerged in the late 19th century. Lockman writes, “The main premises on which Zionism as an ideology rests include the definition of all Jews everywhere as constituting a single nation; the inevitability of antisemitism wherever Jews and non-Jews live together and its ineradicability by means of education or social reform; the irredeemable abnormality of Jewish life in “exile,” a result of Jewish rootlessness and powerlessness; and the necessity of achieving the territorial concentration of all or most of the world’s Jews in Palestine, where Jewish national rebirth and sovereignty are to be realized.” Zachary Lockman, “Zionism,” in *The Oxford Companion to Comparative Politics*, ed. Joel Krieger (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), accessed June 7, 2025, <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780199738595.001.0001/acref-9780199738595-e-413>.

The right is [a] *huge* majority. The left is tiny, tiny, tiny. And most people who say they are left, are not left at all, they're right-wing or center [...] There's very few people ... who actually see Palestinians as equal, very, very few.²¹

This statement underscores Erdal's positioning as a non-conformist within Israeli society. He challenges dominant political ideologies and the mainstream masculine ideal that often accompanies them. His recognition of the marginalization of genuine leftist perspectives reflects the societal resistance to alternative viewpoints that advocate for Palestinian equality. The non-conformist masculinity Erdal expresses in this interview is reflected in his theatrical works, examined as case studies in this chapter.

As he pursued a career in the performing arts, lighting design became his main area of focus, but in recent years, Erdal has also written, directed, and performed theatre works, some of which are mainly concerned with the issues of the conflict between Israel and Palestine. Two of these plays are this chapter's case studies: *This is Not a Conversation* and *Soldiers of Tomorrow*. Erdal states that his works aim to raise awareness by sharing his own lived experiences through his theatre. He notes that his artworks are intended to promote public discourse on the Israeli conflict, challenging the dominant narrative that favours one side: "I feel like I have a moral obligation of telling people what I saw, what is happening in Palestine, what Israelis are doing. But on the other hand, I feel like. [...] I wanna make a play that makes it okay for Jews to criticize Israel [...] because [...] that's the only thing I can do."²²

Erdal's personal experiences are not unique but reflect the broader cultural and ideological framework shaped by the IDF. To understand the full extent of how the Israeli military institution moulds masculinity and the social forces that shaped Erdal's perspective, it is crucial to examine the IDF's role in constructing a monolithic and hegemonic image of Israeli masculinity.

IDF's Role in Idealizing the Israeli Masculinity

²¹ Erdal, as quoted in Musleh-Motut, "Erdal," 180.

²² Ibid., 181.

Within the context of Israeli society, the IDF has emerged as a pivotal institution in maintaining the dominant narrative on Israeli identity since its establishment in 1948. After the impact of the Holocaust, the new state of Israel aimed to construct an image of the Israelis as strong, patriotic, and undefeatable. This cultural identity construction strategy started with the establishment of Israel in 1948, as early Zionist leaders sought to reconstruct Jewish identity by rejecting the diasporic associations of weakness and victimhood. This gendered transformation of Jewish identity, shaped by the rejection of diasporic vulnerability and the construction of a strong, embodied national subject, is theorized directly in Eran Shor's account of early Zionist discourse:

The prominent leaders of the emerging European Zionist movement (such as Theodor Herzl and Max Nordau) saw Jewish Diasporas as essentially queer and Diaspora men as weak and effeminate. In their view, only breaking off from Europe and establishing a strong independent Jewish state could rescue Jewish masculinity and return the national erection. The Zionist leaders sought to create an alternative, muscular Jewish body (drawn mainly from the Aryan imagery), as well as a new spry and belligerent Jewish spirit. For that, they tried to revive, and often to rewrite and reconstruct, a glorious Jewish past.²³

The identity construction strategy of the Zionist leaders consistently continued to develop, as in the IDF, where there was a focus on the physical aesthetic of an Israeli soldier. The military body is preconceived as masculine for its signifying strength alongside associations with military institutions as gendered; adding to that is situating that idealized image in contrast with an effeminate body as a sign of weakness besides diasporic a sign of lack of homeland. This strategy is associated with the Zionist ideology that aimed to establish an independent, self-sufficient, and strong state: "The Zionists perceived the diaspora Jew as passive and effeminate. The Zionist ideal of manliness was constructed as an antithesis of the

²³ Eran Shor, "Contested Masculinities: The New Jew and the Construction of Black and Palestinian Athletes in Israeli Media," *Journal of Sport and Social Issues* 32, no. 3 (2008): 257.

diaspora Jew.”²⁴ Here, the contrast between a “passive diaspora Jew” and a strong, “self-sufficient Israeli” is made explicit. This antithesis shaped how the new Israeli identity was cast: to be masculine, patriotic, and militarily capable, to stand apart from, and correct, the perceived vulnerabilities of exilic life. Therefore, the new image of Jewish subjectivities under the Israeli state can no longer continue from the prevailing images of victims of genocide in the Second World War and the immigrating Jewish communities.

Over the decades, training in the IDF remained focused on reifying this idealized image, suggesting that the IDF has continuously played a key role in what seems to be an ongoing project of building an ideal militaristic image of Israeli masculinity that aligns with and reinforces the national identity. This seemingly sustained emphasis on constructing Israeli masculinity focuses meticulously on every detail of physical and bodily attributes, including posture, strength, and beauty, and how these traits are socially perceived. The objective seems to be to construct an image of Israeli men as self-reliant and undefeatable, showing no signs of softness in confronting their enemies. The rigour and intensity of this endeavour were so extensive that even the slightest physical traits were scrutinized for any indication of weakness or lack of power. For instance, about two decades after establishing the State of Israel, a 1967 IDF sports training book highlights how this ongoing idealization process has been actively maintained:

In *The Israel Army Physical Fitness Book*, published in 1967, a few months after the surprise victory of the Israeli Army over neighbouring Arab states in the Six Day War, Max Nordau’s ideal of muscular Jews emerged as the foundation of the Israeli soldier. Against the view of the

²⁴ Uta Klein, “Our Best Boys: The Gendered Nature of Civil-Military Relations in Israel,” *Men and Masculinities* 2, no. 1 (1999): 50.

effeminate exilic Jew, with “his weak arm” and “soft back and belly muscles,” the Israeli soldier-citizen stands “taller” with “broad shoulders” and stronger muscles.²⁵

Considering that military service is compulsory in Israel, with most Israelis returning annually for reserve duty lasting up to a month (only for men), the IDF remains a continuous and influential force in shaping Israeli masculinity.²⁶ This ongoing military involvement reinforces the values developed within the IDF, tying the definition of being Israeli to masculine traits such as aggression, protection, patriotism, and the image of the undefeatable soldier. For Israeli men, military service marks a crucial transition from boyhood to manhood. Sociologist Danny Kaplan notes that military service serves as a rite of passage into manhood, where “military aspects of masculinity signal the arrival and inclusion of the man as a venerated citizen.”²⁷ This idealization of masculinity, ingrained in the minds of the majority who served in the IDF, shapes public perceptions across generations, social groups, and broader discussions of Israeli identity.²⁸ This long-standing, unacknowledged project of shaping Israeli masculinity persisted into the 1980s and beyond, extending its reach into broader aspects of Israeli identity formation.

Israel of the 1980s marked a transition from focusing on muscularity to promoting a “natural body.”²⁹ The new approach was designed to enable a seamless transition from the battlefield to civilian life, emphasizing the creation of a healthy, gendered, and dutiful Israeli citizen-soldier.³⁰ Hence, these

²⁵ Yehuda Sharim, “Choreographing Masculinity in Contemporary Israeli Culture,” in *Choreographies of 21st Century Wars*, eds. Gay Morris and Jens Richard Giersdorf (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 138-139.

²⁶ Danny Kaplan, “The Military as a Second Bar Mitzvah: Combat Service as Initiation to Zionist Masculinity,” in *Imagined Masculinities: Male Identity and Culture in the Modern Middle East*, eds. Mai Ghoussoub and Emma Sinclair-Webb (London: Saqi Books, 2000), 127. Kaplan writes, “Only men may participate in a combat-related activity and are called up annually for varying periods of reserve duty throughout much of their adult life. Functioning as the all-Israeli “melting pot,” the military attempts to mould all men in a uniform guise of masculinity.”

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 136.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 127. Kaplan refers to various studies that manifest “the military’s predominant role as an agent of socialization into Israeli society.”

²⁹ Sharim, “Choreographing Masculinity,” 140.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 147.

accounts manifest the continuing attempt to idealize the military Israeli as non-effeminate, non-exilic, and undefeatable. The broad reach of the IDF extends into various societal aspects, including education, where it significantly shapes the narratives and constructs surrounding masculinities. One of the case studies in this chapter, *Soldiers of Tomorrow*, reflects a school practice that fosters a bond between students and their potential patriotic roles in the IDF.³¹

Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinity argues that masculinity is hierarchical and often aligned with military ideals, especially in militarized societies where national strength is equated with masculine traits like power, control, and protection.³² Erdal's journey reflects the tensions inherent in Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity, where dominant cultural ideals of masculinity inferiorize alternative expressions.³³ In Israel, the IDF reinforces this image of masculinity by mandating military service, further shaped by ongoing conflicts, creating a monolithic masculinity focused on aggression, endurance, and patriotism.³⁴ In this context, Israeli masculinity can be referred to as conformist or patriotic, as the monolithic image of males from Israel.

In an essay about the gendering effect of the military in Israel, Uta Klein examines how civil society and armed society go hand in hand to hegemonize the motivation and necessity of military service: "While still in school, Israeli Jewish youths prepare themselves to join the military forces. Lectures are held in school classes delivered by members of the Defense forces who give information and impression of life in the Israeli army."³⁵ Yehuda Sharim uses the term soldier-citizen when she refers

³¹ Itai Erdal, dir., "Soldiers of Tomorrow," performed by Itai Erdal, filmed at Roundhouse Theatre, Vancouver, 2022, YouTube video, 1:12:04, posted July 29, 2024, accessed March 28, 2024, <https://youtu.be/sspUN-qK9oE>.

³² Connell, *Masculinities*, 213. Connell writes: "Violence on the largest possible scale is the purpose of the military, and no arena has been more important for the definition of hegemonic masculinity in European/American culture."

³³ Ibid., 80-81. Connell notes, "Marginalization is always relative to the authorization of the hegemonic masculinity of the dominant group."

³⁴ Kaplan, "The Military as a Second Bar Mitzvah," 127. Kaplan further enumerates the traits males in IDF adopt through their service, noting, "It does so through an organizational culture that encourages ideal assets of soldiery such as physical ability, endurance, self-control, professionalism, sociability, aggressiveness and heterosexuality. These traits tap on masculine performance by contrasting them with images of Otherness such as femininity, homosexuality and the Arab enemy."

³⁵ Klein, "Our Best Boys," 54.

to military Israeli subjects, signifying the conflated duality in Israeli subjectivities.³⁶ Erdal's narrative, as presented in his play *Soldiers of Tomorrow*, opposes the dominant narrative of Israeli hegemony. In the play, Erdal acts as the sole storyteller, recounting his own experiences of military service and describing a conversation he once had with his nephew. Through this account, Erdal's character attempts to challenge the cultural normalization of military service. However, as the narrative unfolds, the nephew, despite Erdal's efforts, decides to join the IDF and is highly motivated to do so. This development underscores the enduring influence of the IDF in maintaining cultural hegemony to the present day.

The impact of the IDF extends beyond pre-military service preparations and continues through post-military service into all stages of Israeli life. Military service is mandatory for all citizens, regardless of gender, with annual recalls for reserve duty until their late 40s, making the IDF the largest institution in Israel involving almost all citizens, though this call to reserve is not mentioned in Erdal's portrayals. In *This is Not a Conversation*, Erdal recounts the IDF's influence on the social status and positions of individuals by reflecting on how his mother, convinced by the state's narrative, encouraged him to serve. Klein's scholarship supports this view, noting the military's role in defining societal boundaries and shaping social arrangements:

The military has determined the boundaries of the collective. Military service defines who is in and who is out concerning the collective and the informal system. It has strongly influenced the social arrangement in Israeli society. The Israeli Defence Force, thus, must be regarded as a military as well as a political and cultural institution.³⁷

Klein explains that the mentality influenced by the IDF has shaped the Jewish communities to believe they can no longer be traumatized as they were during World War II, homogenizing Israelis around the idea of defying victimization. Hence, the IDF functions as both an armed society and a dominant force

³⁶ Sharim, "Choreographing Masculinity in Contemporary Israeli Culture," 145.

³⁷ Klein, "Our Best Boys," 48.

over Israeli civil society. Despite being mandatory, the majority are motivated to serve for several years in the IDF.

Participation in the military is compulsory for Jewish men and women. Conscientious objection is not possible to date, and motivation to serve in the military is high. This means that the military currently socializes most Jewish Israelis. [...] Given the geopolitical situation of Israel and the persecution of Jewish people throughout history, the armed forces maintain a centrality in Israeli society that [...] structures gendered social practices in daily life.³⁸

Since its establishment in 1948, the IDF has shaped Israeli society as a defence force with a dominating influence over societal institutions, promoting values of national service and unity. Erdal's critique of the IDF reflects not only his individual experience but also represents a segment of the Israeli population dissatisfied with the IDF's dominance over social and cultural life. The authority of the IDF in shaping the Israeli masculine ideal, as undefeatable, and patriotic, aligns closely with Erdal's portrayal of Israeli masculinities. However, these theatrical images do not explicitly address the IDF's direct influence on the formation of Israeli identity. Instead, these images reference aspects of the IDF's machinery of masculinity construction, observable in narratives of historical trauma that justify the existence of military and violent force. These narratives also promote joining the IDF as an essential aspect of any Israeli's identity and life experience, influencing educational institutions. Various scholars show that the role and impact of the IDF go beyond protecting the state from external threats. The masculinities represented in Erdal's plays are all under the shadow of such dominance, even the self-imposed exilic individual living far from the horizon of the IDF apparatus, manifesting the impactful forces of this institution on social life. Thus, it can be concluded that the authority of the IDF in shaping

³⁸ Ibid., 50.

Israeli masculinities aligns closely with Erdal's portrayal, yet highlights the broader, often unspoken, influence of the IDF on Israeli identity and social structures.

Erdal critiques these hegemonic ideals in his theatrical works, particularly in *Soldiers of Tomorrow* and *This is Not a Conversation*, where he explores the effects of military narratives on Israeli and Palestinian identities.

Erdal's Plays as Critiques of Israeli Masculinity and IDF Influence

Erdal's critical stance on the IDF's role in shaping Israeli masculinity is deeply embedded in his theatre work, where he often stages his personal reflections on the tension between societal expectations and his own evolving understanding of masculinity. This becomes particularly evident in his autobiographical plays, where the audience is confronted with both the trauma of military service and Erdal's growing skepticism towards the ideals perpetuated by Israeli society.

A few years after immigrating to Canada, Erdal worked as a light and set designer on over 300 theatre, dance, and opera productions.³⁹ His recent production, *Soldiers of Tomorrow* (2023), received awards and nominations at several theatre festivals. This chapter focuses on two of Erdal's theatrical works that foreground his inner conflict and self-reflection concerning identity and lived experience as an Israeli.

In *This is Not a Conversation*, Erdal performs alongside Dima Alansari, a Canadian artist of Lebanese-Palestinian descent. Together, they share personal stories connected to the Israel-Palestine conflict. These narrations create different dynamics between the two, swinging between agreements and disagreements on various matters. In *Soldiers of Tomorrow*, Erdal narrates his experience in the IDF and delivers critical comments on the effect of conflict and Israeli politics on generations of Israelis and Palestinians.

³⁹ Itai Erdal, "Portfolio," Itai Erdal, accessed October 12, 2024, <https://www.itaierdal.com/portfolio-2>.

***This is Not a Conversation* (2016)**

Providing several images and narratives about the divide between Israeli and non-Israeli identities, Erdal's co-written play *This is Not a Conversation* foregrounds a real-life encounter between both sides, where the seemingly monolithic image of Israeli masculinity begins to crack, revealing a nuanced form of Israeli identity. The play was first performed at the Belfry Theatre in Victoria, BC, in 2016. It is a collaborative production by The Elbow Theatre, founded by Erdal and Salish Sea Productions.⁴⁰ Co-written by Erdal, Alansari, and Ker Wells, the play features Erdal and Alansari playing their real-life selves.⁴¹ In an interview, Erdal explained why he collaborated in the writing of this play:

I want to make a play that shows people that it's okay to criticize Israel. [...] I am Jewish. [...] If I can criticize Israel, then so can you. [...] I feel that the more we tell people about the atrocities that happened in Palestine, then it's good, then [...] more people know, then maybe we can shift something in the public opinion in the world.⁴²

Drawing on the performers' memories, *This is Not a Conversation* presents two perspectives shaped by the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Erdal portrays himself as a self-imposed exile, having left Israel after serving in the IDF, with memories of being stationed in active war zones, including occupied Lebanon in the mid-1990s, forming a central part of his narrative. Alansari, a Lebanese-Palestinian film and theatre performer and producer, ties her story to her refugee identity. While she does not explicitly frame herself as an asylum seeker, her narrative emphasizes the experience of being a refugee affected by war. Moments of agreement surface between Dima and Erdal, introducing a non-conformist image of Israeli masculinity and suggesting that the binary distinction between Israeli and non-Israeli identities is not as fixed as it initially seems. Yet, these fleeting understandings never lead to

⁴⁰ Erdal, "Portfolio."

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Erdal, as quoted in Musleh-Motut, "Erdal," 181.

a resolution. As the play's title implies, the conflict remains unresolved, never evolving into a conversation.

One key reason for choosing the 2016 production is the availability of a recorded video, which provides a direct primary source for analysis beyond text or secondary sources. This allows for a detailed examination of the actors' performances, stage direction, and audience interaction, although viewing a performance through film presents limitations, such as missing subtle staging nuances. Despite these limitations, the video offers a comprehensive look at the production, making it possible to analyze it in depth. Additionally, this is the first production of *This is Not a Conversation*, allowing for an analysis of the original creative vision and raw presentation of its core themes.

Synopsis: This is Not a Conversation

The play unfolds on a bare stage, with the audience seated on two sides, surrounding an empty space with only a wooden chair. Each actor enters carrying bags containing outfits linked to their stories and memories—Erdal's IDF uniform and Dima's grandmother's dress. Midway through the play, Erdal places his military uniform on the stage floor while Dima drapes her grandmother's dress on the chair, describing her memories of Palestine. The minimal props and set design enhance the imagery of homeland and identity portrayed on stage. When Erdal speaks of his military service, his uniform creates a visual bridge between his memories and the masculinity embodied in the clothing. Similarly, Dima's grandmother's dress brings to life the non-Israeli world she narrates, vividly representing her heritage through clothing and shoes. Throughout the play, both Erdal and Alansari engage directly with the audience, revealing and withholding aspects of their identities shaped by the complex and conflicted history of the region.

The play opens with both actors, Dima, and Itai, entering. They each carry travel bags and place them under the audience's seats on either side. The initial scene is marked by a series of movements that

depict a sense of being trapped and unable to reconcile with one another's presence. Erdal begins by recalling a memory from Jerusalem, sparking a conversation with Dima about the city and its significant landmarks, including the ancient Al-Aqsa Mosque. This dialogue paints a vivid picture of Jerusalem and the West Bank, situated west of Jordan, and touches on the palpable segregation between Israeli settlers and Palestinians, separated by a wall.

A critical moment in Erdal's story occurs when Erdal wants to disembark in the West Bank, but the bus driver advises against it, citing safety concerns. This incident leads to a discussion about the varying perspectives among Israelis regarding the use of terms like "settler," with some preferring euphemisms like "town" or "city."⁴³ This part of the play reveals the nuanced differences between Israeli nationalism and patriotism. Dima and Erdal then engage in a role-play, with Dima acting as a driver and Erdal as a soldier at a checkpoint by the separating wall. Dima discloses her identity as a Palestinian born in Lebanon, raised in Kuwait, and now living in Canada. This prompts Erdal to share his complex identity: half Turkish, half Paraguayan, born in Jerusalem, and a former soldier who served in Lebanon and Israel.

Erdal and Alansari's conversation escalates into an argument about their identities as Palestinian-Lebanese and Israeli. They switch to speaking in their native languages (Hebrew for Erdal and Arabic for Alansari), returning to an earlier staged scene that can be read as a performative metaphor for disconnection, now reframed through layered ambient sound, including Muslim calls to prayer. The play takes a more introspective turn as Erdal and Alansari engage in a game of two-option questions, revealing more about their identities. Erdal expresses regret and guilt about his military service and his socialist, anti-nationalist stance, contrasting with his Zionist loved ones. The questions become

⁴³ Itai Erdal, dir., "This Is Not a Conversation," performed by Itai Erdal and Dima Alansari, filmed at the Belfry Theatre, Victoria, 2016, Vimeo video, 1:09:39, posted by The Elbow, March 10, 2017, accessed March 28, 2024, <https://vimeo.com/209683020>.

increasingly intense, probing into hypothetical moral dilemmas faced by soldiers. As the conversation deepens, Alansari asks about Erdal's time in Lebanon, leading to a revelation that her family's village was occupied by Israeli forces. Erdal shares a haunting memory of shooting in the dark during his service, only to discover the bodies of two Hezbollah fighters the next day. Alansari contrasts this with her recollections of the beauty of Lebanon during the same period.

The play further explores their backgrounds, with Alansari discussing her family's exile from Palestine in 1948 and Erdal admitting the harsh realities of occupation and ethnic cleansing. This admission leads to a broader discussion about Israeli society, its founding narratives, and the ethical complexities of being part of a nation with such a troubled history. In a poignant moment, Erdal confesses his reasons for leaving Israel, citing the injustices he witnessed against Palestinians. Alansari sympathizes, sharing her experiences of political turmoil in the Middle East and the luxury and injustice she observed in Dubai. Erdal recounts a harrowing story of house-to-house combat, focusing on a night filled with uncertainty and fear. Erdal describes that amidst the darkness, he and other IDF soldiers heard shots fired, leading to a chaotic exchange. The next morning, this confusion culminated in the discovery of two Lebanese fighters' bodies. Erdal grapples with the haunting possibility that his bullet might have inadvertently caused the death of a fellow soldier.

In the final moments of the play, they open their bags and reveal clothing iconic to their respective life experiences: Erdal lays down his military service uniform, and Dima displays her outfit and keffiyeh, both emblematic of Palestinian attire. As Erdal narrates this intense memory, he lays out a military uniform on the ground, symbolically arranging it to resemble a soldier lying fallen, capturing the gravity and tragedy of the moment. Alansari shares a poignant aspect of her family's narrative, highlighting the pressure to leave behind their Palestinian heritage and focus on the future. She draws a parallel between her experience and the plight of Indigenous peoples under colonial rule. This

comparison sparks a debate with Erdal. He points out that, unlike the Canadian government, which has made formal apologies for its past actions, the Israeli government has not extended similar acknowledgments or apologies. Alansari counters his argument, leading to a deeper discussion on the topic. Amidst these exchanges, Erdal expresses a sincere hope that their play could shift perspectives, encouraging the audience to envision peace and question governmental narratives rather than accepting them at face value.

Soldiers of Tomorrow (2023)

Another key work demonstrating Erdal's critical examination of Israeli masculinity is *Soldiers of Tomorrow*, which portrays the internal conflicts faced by soldiers like Erdal, highlighting the pressures placed on masculinity to conform to an idealized and nationalist Israeli standard. The play was first performed at the PuSh Festival in Vancouver in January 2023 by Elbow Theatre, collaboratively written by Erdal and Colleen Murphy and performed by Erdal.⁴⁴ A recorded version of this production is available on YouTube, similar to *This is Not a Conversation*, but filmed from different angles, offering close-ups of the performers. This provides a valuable primary source for analysis beyond the text or secondary sources, allowing for a detailed examination of the artwork.

The stage contains a large canvas that stretches from the ground up and stands in the background. This backdrop, designed by Brian Ball and seemingly painted abstractly, depicts a map of the region, including Palestine, Israel, Jordan, and Lebanon.⁴⁵ This backdrop serves as a narrative device for Erdal, complementing his direct, engaging performance style with the audience. On one side of the stage sits a musician surrounded by various instruments, who rarely speaks throughout the play.

⁴⁴ Erdal, "Portfolio."

⁴⁵ "Soldiers of Tomorrow," *PuSh International Performing Arts Festival*, accessed April 22, 2025, <https://pushfestival.ca/shows/soldiers-of-tomorrow/>.

The leading performer, Erdal, directly engages with the audience throughout the performance, using the illustrated map as a visual aid while narrating his stories. On the opposite side of the stage, a barbershop chair is placed, where, towards the end of the play, a third actor portraying a barber makes his appearance. Similar to the musician, the barber speaks very little.



Figure 23. Erdal is the main performer/narrator in Soldiers of Tomorrow. Vancouver 2023. Photo by Matt Rezneck Source: itaierdal.com

Synopsis: Soldiers of Tomorrow

The play is not a mere monologue, but Erdal speaks as the sole performer directly to the audience for most of the performance. In the middle of the stage, there is a big sketch from the ground to the ceiling, which is revealed to be a map of the Israel-Palestine zone, but it looks like a painting with no city or border. Erdal starts telling his stories by unfolding his interactions with Abed, an Iraqi barber in his neighbourhood. There is a barber seat on the side of the stage, and on the other side, there is a man with musical instruments. Erdal says that his conversations with Abed, often occurring in Abed's bustling barbershop, are filled with shared experiences and reflections on their families, particularly their fathers. Erdal describes the shop as resonating with Arabic conversations and evoking Erdal's childhood memories in Al-Quds (i.e. Jerusalem). Initially hesitant to reveal his Israeli identity, Erdal eventually opens up about his past. Erdal shares his fears that every time Abed shaves his beard, he

imagines that Abed, who, despite being an Arab Christian, might harbour resentment towards Israelis, “could slice [his] neck from ear to ear.”⁴⁶

Then, Erdal recounts his time as a soldier in Gaza and Lebanon, revealing his internal conflict and fears. His imagination, tainted by his experiences and identity, leads him to irrational fears, even in the mundane act of getting a shave from Abed. The play introduces a Barbadian musician, a Syrian refugee, who parallels Erdal’s journey of leaving a homeland marred by conflict. Erdal speaks fondly of his life in Israel, highlighting the diversity and vibrancy of cities like Jerusalem. However, he is troubled by the militarization of Israeli society, exemplified by a story about his nephew receiving a box at school labelled “from the soldiers of today to the soldiers of tomorrow,” filled with military gear.⁴⁷

Erdal’s character, considering himself a leftist, joined the army with the hope of being a moderating influence, but he grapples with the realities of military service and its impact on his principles. He reflects on his efforts to persuade his nephew, Ito, against enlisting, revealing his internal conflict about the role of the IDF and the broader implications of military service in Israeli society. The play delves into the personal histories of other characters (absent from the stage), like Raphael, Erdal’s friend during military service, who struggled to enlist due to close Palestinian ties in his family. Erdal’s narrative includes detailed accounts of military training and operations, providing insight into the experiences of Israeli soldiers during times of conflict.

⁴⁶ Erdal, “Soldiers of Tomorrow.”

⁴⁷ Ibid.



Figure 24. Erdal is holding Ito's picture and wearing a military uniform. Soldiers of Tomorrow. Push Festival 2023. Photo by Matt Reznick Source: itaierdal.com

Erdal uses flags and other symbols to illustrate the changing powers in Palestine, eventually highlighting the commonality of being Middle Easterners before the rise of nationalistic divides. Erdal recounts instances from his military service, including interactions at checkpoints and the difficult decisions soldiers must make, often under intense pressure and in morally ambiguous situations. Towards the end of the play, Erdal reflects on the broader implications of his actions and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. He contemplates the narratives taught in Israeli society, the justifications used for specific actions, and the persistent hope for peace and reconciliation. The play concludes with a poignant scene involving Erdal and Abed, the barber, symbolizing the ongoing struggle for understanding and coexistence amidst a backdrop of deep-seated conflict and historical trauma.

Who, When, Where: Three Identity Categories on Stage

The social and political landscape of Israel and Palestine is more nuanced than a binary distinction between Israeli Jews and Palestinian Arabs. Within Israeli Society, there's significant ethnic diversity among Jews, including Ashkenazi Jews from European backgrounds and Mizrahi and Sephardi Jews, respectively, from Middle Eastern and North African backgrounds. Israeli Jews range from secular to ultra-Orthodox, with differing views on the role of religion in state affairs, social life, and rights to the land (including areas where Palestinians reside and were evicted). Another minority group in Israel is the Arab-speaking groups, who are citizens of Israel and often identified as Palestinian citizens of Israel.

In the political spectrum, Israelis can be categorized into two: left-wing groups advocating for a two-state solution and equality and rights for Palestinians, and right-wing groups prioritizing security concerns and, in some cases, favouring expanded settlement in the occupied territories. Like Israeli society, Palestinian society is not monolithic but contains diverse perspectives shaped by geography, politics, and social conditions. Palestinian political life is marked by divisions between political factions like Fatah as a part of the Palestinian Liberation Organization since the mid-1990s, which has controlled the Palestinian authority in the West Bank, and since 2007, Hamas, a political and military movement group, has governed the Gaza Strip.

In Erdal's plays, not all the groups named above are reflected, but three social groups are represented: Anti-Zionist, a leftist group supporting Palestinian rights; Zionist Israelis, primarily concerned with the Israeli State's legitimacy to the Promised Land and believing military violence is necessary to defend the Jewish state; and non-Israelis, including Palestinians and non-Muslim Arab speakers. Erdal's representations of identities are associated with such a triple model of categorization, reflecting contrasting ideological views on Zionism and two ethnic/religious distinctions: Jewish and non-Jewish serving the IDF and civilian or militant Muslim Arabs. For instance, in *This is Not a Conversation*, there are three main characters: Past Erdal (pre-emigration and in military service), Present Erdal (an expat, artist, storyteller-performer, anti-militaristic Israeli), and Dima (an Arabic-speaker, non-Jewish in exile). Other characters in both plays, including those appearing in Erdal's stories, such as the soldiers he served with, some of whom seem to align their views with Zionism, and others are critical of Zionist Ideals. Similarly, identities addressed in *Soldiers of Tomorrow* fall within these three categories, which are differentiated by their religious, political standpoints, and ethnic backgrounds.

In the following, each of these categorical depictions will be explored and put in conversation with one another to argue that while these elements create a nuanced image of non-conformist Israeli masculinities, they often stand in stark contrast to the simplified depictions of other groups. Each categorical depiction will be explored to argue that while Erdal creates a nuanced image of non-conformist Israeli masculinities, he often simplifies other groups.

Erdal's dramaturgical approach highlights the challenge of balancing personal narrative with broader social critique, as deconstructing one stereotype can inadvertently reinforce others. By focusing on the internal conflicts of non-conformist Israeli masculinity, Erdal challenges hegemonic norms but underdevelops other groups, ultimately narrowing the scope of his critique of other stereotypes. Erdal's dramaturgical choices carry two significant implications. First, his portrayal of Israeli masculinity challenges the dominant stereotype of Israeli men as uniformly patriotic and militaristic. By introducing a masculinity that is self-reflective, critical of hegemonic norms, and open to questioning national narratives, Erdal deconstructs the rigid archetype traditionally associated with Israeli identity. This nuanced portrayal allows for a broader understanding of how Israeli masculinities can resist dominant political and cultural ideologies, positioning them within a more complex framework. However, the second impact of Erdal's dramaturgy reveals a limitation: while he effectively critiques the monolithic image of Israeli masculinity, this nuanced approach is selectively applied. His depiction of other groups, such as conformist Israelis or non-Israelis, remains simplified, often serving as a backdrop to highlight the complexity of the non-conformist identity. This selective dramaturgical focus suggests that Erdal's critique, while insightful, relies on maintaining certain stereotypes to nuance another identity group.

Erdal's dramaturgical choices carry broader implications. Artistically, his focus on non-conformist Israeli masculinity offers a self-reflective and critical portrayal that counters the dominant archetype of Israeli men as uniformly patriotic and militaristic, a representation that extends from Israeli contexts into

Canadian theatrical spaces where Erdal's work is performed.⁴⁸ This enduring archetype provides a recognizable ideological contrast against which Erdal's dramaturgical departures gain their critical force. However, by relying on less nuanced depictions of conformist Israelis and non-Israeli Middle Easterners, Erdal risks perpetuating reductive narratives for these groups, framing them as narrative contrasts rather than fully realized identities. Socially and politically, the imbalance in the nuances of representations reflects broader hierarchies in representation, where certain groups, like non-conformist Israelis, are afforded individuality and agency, while others, including Palestinian women and conformist Israelis, are flattened into archetypes. Such dramaturgical choices may ultimately reinforce the same structures of exclusion and simplification that Erdal seeks to critique. While Erdal's dramaturgy aims to deconstruct hegemonic norms of Israeli masculinity, it raises important questions

⁴⁸ The archetype of the Israeli man as patriotic and militaristic originates within Israeli society, where it is culturally institutionalized through state mechanisms such as the military. Klein argues that military service in Israel is not only a national obligation but also a gendered rite of passage that reinforces hegemonic masculinity. She explains that "in Israel, where war is always present, war creates the challenge for manly virtues," and that for Jewish Israeli males, "military service is an inherent part of maturation, a rite of passage to male adulthood." Klein further cites Rela Mazali, who describes military service as being "spoken of in fatalistic, quasi-religious terms, as an inevitable, inescapable, pseudo-biological phase of male maturation." See Klein, "Our Best Boys," 53–54, quoting Rela Mazali, "Soldiers Born—Military Service as Initiation Rite in Israel," unpublished lecture, 1993. In Canadian cultural contexts, where Erdal's plays are performed, this archetype circulates through both media and diasporic institutions, maintaining symbolic salience even as it is contested. Michael Jening's discourse analysis of Canadian newspapers reveals how Israeli military dominance is normalized through representational codes that "are often entrenched in predefined ways of portraying the Other," producing an Israeli-Palestinian "spiral of silence." See Michael Jening, "Compliance and Silence of Political Opinions in the Canadian Print Media: Israeli-Palestinian Spiral" (MA thesis, University of Ottawa, 2011), ii, 46. Brym and Jedwab's survey affirms that while generational critique of Israeli policies is increasing, the militaristic identity of Israel remains a recognizable point in Canadian political discourse—not because it is uncontested, but because it continues to operate as a symbolic shorthand in media and community narratives: "Encampment supporters were more likely to support Hamas and less likely to take pride in being Canadian [or] regard Jews highly." See Robert Brym and Jack Jedwab, "Public Opinion and Canadian Jewry, 2024 (Part 1): Who Are the Supporters and Opponents of the Pro-Palestinian Encampments?" *Canadian Jewish Studies/Études juives canadiennes* 39 (2024): 108, accessed June 1, 2025, <https://cjs.journals.yorku.ca/index.php/cjs/article/view/40403>. These academic insights are corroborated by journalistic findings: *The Maple* reports that Canadian lone soldiers in the IDF are "celebrated by [Jewish] institutions and respected by the people around them." See Davide Mastracci, "Meet 85 Canadians That Have Fought for Israel," *The Maple*, February 24, 2025, accessed June 7, 2025, <https://www.readthemaple.com/meet-85-canadians-that-have-fought-for-israel/>. *The Breach* found that CBC's *The National* featured significantly more Israeli than Palestinian voices following the October 7 attacks. See Molly Schumann, "CBC Has Whitewashed Israel's Crimes in Gaza. I Saw It Firsthand," *The Breach*, May 16, 2024, accessed April 25, 2025, <https://breachmedia.ca/cbc-whitewashed-israels-crimes-gaza-firsthand/>. Similarly, *Ricochet* reported that Canadian coverage of the conflict "downplays Israeli violence and oversimplifies the context," normalizing Israeli militarism. See Elizabeth Leier, "Canadian Media Show Their Bias in Downplaying Israeli Violence," *Ricochet*, May 18, 2021, accessed June 7, 2025, <https://ricochet.media/en/3657/canadian-media-show-their-bias-in-downplaying-israeli-violence>. Together, these sources confirm that although increasingly contested, the archetype of the militaristic Israeli man remains operative in Canadian cultural and discursive spaces.

about the broader consequences of selectively offering nuanced portrayals for one group over others. These dramaturgical choices determine which identities are seen as fully developed and which remain symbolic or oppositional.

Non-Conformist Israeli

Erdal's dramatization of his memories marks a departure from the commonly perceived image of Israeli masculinity, presenting a critical stance. In both *This is Not a Conversation* and *Soldiers of Tomorrow*, where Erdal appears as a self-imposed immigrant in Canada, he rejects the foundational Israeli ideologies propagated by the IDF and mass media, maintaining his anti-military position. This portrayal contrasts sharply with the image of a patriotic, anti-Palestinian Israeli. As discussed earlier, the foundation of the Israeli state in 1948 and the subsequent Arab-Israeli conflicts significantly shaped the national identity, with the IDF playing a crucial role in defending the state and propagating national ideologies. These ideologies are challenged in Erdal's portrayal of Israeli masculinity, which goes beyond a surface-level critique. Erdal introduces an image of non-conformist Israeli masculinity on stage, one that advocates for those critical of the state's politics toward Palestinians.

This non-conformist masculinity is shaped by Erdal's critical subjectivity, which stems from his leftist background and his experience during his military service in the IDF. As his biographical account suggests, facing repeated inhumane and unjust situations during his service years led him to move away from a patriotic and militaristic Israeli stance. The following discussion will explore how Erdal's theatrical narratives reveal the complexities of the conditions that led him to question the foundations of the Israeli state and the intertwined identities of being Jewish and Israeli. On stage, Erdal represents his current self as a Canadian-Israeli artist, staging his memories through various forms continuing the critical trajectory of his younger self. Erdal's radical critique extends to labelling Zionism as discriminatory and challenging the foundational principles of the Israeli state. This multifaceted, layered

portrayal provides a comprehensive image of a critical man rooted in historical reality and thorough examination. The historical references to the figure of a non-conformist Israeli are explored through various dramatic components and narrative elements in the way Erdal projects nuances of his subjectivity, life experiences, ideologies, memories, and personal items; his intricate depiction of his critical subjectivity highlights the complexities of non-conformist Israeli masculinities.

Unfolding Nonconformist Masculinity in Segregated, Occupied Settings

By associating the seemingly monolithic image of Israeli masculinity with the concept of division and establishing the theme of separation from the outset, the plays gradually fracture this uniformity, allowing the non-conformist character to emerge and develop. By highlighting the idea of segregation, Erdal situates his portrayals in settings where division holds significant meaning, thereby advancing his critical perspective on Israeli masculinities. Erdal employs settings of segregation, such as checkpoints, as a dramaturgical device to construct and convey the image of the non-conformist Israeli male, dramatized in contrast with conformist Israeli and non-Israeli subjects. In both *Soldiers of Tomorrow* and *This is Not a Conversation*, Erdal begins with vivid descriptions of Jerusalem—the divided city where he grew up—establishing segregation as the foundational context of the narratives. The subject of segregation within Jerusalem serves as the initial historical and political backdrop in both plays, prioritizing the idea of division upon which their plots develop. For instance, the dialogue in *This is Not a Conversation* starts as follows:

Erdal: I'm on my way to a job interview in a remote neighbourhood in Jerusalem. The interview went really well, but on my way back, I got on the wrong bus. Then I thought, "Let's see where it goes." The bus ended up in East Jerusalem.

Dima: East? How are East and West Jerusalem divided?

Erdal: The East is the Palestinian side.

Dima: But it's controlled by Israel, right?

Erdal: Yes, and it's surrounded by Israeli settlements.

Dima: Wait, so the Old City is that in the East or West?

Erdal: It's in the East.⁴⁹

Similarly, *Soldiers of Tomorrow* continues to dramatize the segregation points and Erdal's memories in occupied territories, as geographies of ideological segregation and power asymmetry. One such moment occurs when a Palestinian woman arrives at a remote checkpoint: "Our checkpoint was in the middle of nowhere. There was some traffic early in the morning when Palestinian labourers crossed to work in Israel and some traffic when they came back between 5 and 6, but other than that, it was pretty dead. We had to stay on high alert, though, because these checkpoints have all been attacked in the past."⁵⁰ The asymmetry becomes particularly vivid when Erdal describes an encounter with an elderly Palestinian woman: "She was wearing a red jellabiya [...] she had deep wrinkles on her cheeks and forehead. Rafael signalled for her to stop. Then he asked Yochai, who was up in the tower, if she was definitely alone. [Yochai says:] Affirmative. Alone. One bag. [*Pause*] I could tell Rafael was tense. We all know women have stabbed soldiers at checkpoints in the past. Yochai said to tell her to raise her arms."⁵¹ This encounter underscores how checkpoint geographies stage militarized masculinity through a choreography of surveillance, suspicion, and power, setting the groundwork for Erdal's later critique of this conformist stance.

At checkpoints and border crossings, high-tension spaces where authority is enacted and contested, Israeli masculinities reveal themselves through contrasting responses to civilian encounters, as well as differing views on morality and military protocols. In both plays, segregation points serve as

⁴⁹ Erdal, "This Is Not a Conversation."

⁵⁰ Erdal, "Soldiers of Tomorrow."

⁵¹ Ibid.

pivotal dramatic moments that distinguish Israeli men based on their responses to Palestinian civilians, emphasizing how authority and morality intersect in these tense interactions. The uniform image of Israeli masculinity in both plays gradually starts to fragment as more subplots and scenarios are introduced and staged in checkpoint settings. The segregation settings reflect not only the physical separation within the Israel-Palestine context but also the internal divisions among Israeli masculinities, emphasizing the tension between conformity and dissent. Through diverse narrative techniques across both plays - including role-play in *This is Not a Conversation* and the use of miniature figures in *Soldiers of Tomorrow* - Erdal creates staged confrontations between different Israeli masculinities.

The non-conformist Israeli's portrayal does not emerge abruptly; instead, Erdal's character of non-conformist masculinity develops gradually through the narratives. At first, Erdal's character reflects the internal conflict of someone grappling with hegemonic Israeli ideals, occasionally aligning with conformist perspectives ingrained during his service in the IDF. These moments set the stage for a deeper critique as the narrative progresses. For instance, in an early checkpoint narrative in *Soldiers of Tomorrow*, Erdal stages an encounter where his character makes non-pacifist comments to an elderly Palestinian woman. At this point, Erdal's character justifies Israeli actions by invoking historical grievances and Holocaust-related trauma, echoing conformist attitudes. Using miniature figures and props, Erdal recreates the checkpoint setting to dramatize the encounter and highlight the moral complexities of these interactions (Figure 25):

Erdal [*Narrating*]: [*Old Palestinian woman said*] You are pointing your gun at an old woman and a baby, and you get mad that I mention Nazis? Why do we have to pay for what the Nazis did to you? Everyone felt bad for the Jews after the war. They said the land was for people with no land, but that was a lie. We were on the land, but you didn't see us because Jews do not see Arabs.

Erdal [*To the audience*]: I couldn't help myself; I said, Okay, maybe our ancestors were racist, but that was 45 years ago after the Holocaust.' She laced into me.

[Woman said] You stole our homes; you put us in refugee camps. No school, can't vote, no rights. For 40 years, we kept quiet, then the kids were born into this conflict, threw stones at you, and you started killing us [...].

Erdal: [*To the audience*] I hit back; we're not the ones blowing ourselves up in crowded buses [*Pause, music plays*].⁵²



Figure 25. Erdal performs a scene at a checkpoint where soldiers encounter an elderly woman with a child, using small figurines to represent the soldiers and the woman. *Soldiers of Tomorrow*. Screenshot from YouTube video

These exchanges reveal Erdal's internal struggle to reconcile inherited narratives with his evolving views as he defends Israeli actions and invokes historical grievances. Over time, through subsequent checkpoint scenarios and reflective monologues, his character begins to distance himself from these conformist positions, developing a critical stance toward Israeli militarism and its impact on Palestinian lives. This evolution reflects the complexity of his masculinity, which oscillates between inherited ideologies and a growing sense of dissent. Erdal's critical representation is an internal evolutionary process rather than an exonerating image of himself as always being a non-conformist subject. As this

⁵² Erdal, "Soldiers of Tomorrow."

subplot (the previous example) concludes, the accompanying sombre music, dimmed lights, and Erdal's reflective tone convey his growing sense of regret and internal conflict. This dramatization signifies the cracking of the monolithic image of Israeli masculinity as determined, patriotic, and aggressive toward his enemies.

The characterization of the non-conformist ranges from patriotic to critical and even to extremely critical, as the plays conclude, suggesting a nuanced portrayal. This character evolution manifests the stance of the Israeli male who, seemingly at the start of the play, lacks a clear-cut division between critical and conformist views but, by the end, fully embodies the portrayal of a non-conformist Israeli man. The focus on this transformation and construction of non-conformist masculinity, both internally and externally, in these points of segregation and tension provides a nuanced and deep representation of the non-conformist Israeli male. In each subplot and interaction between characters, Erdal reveals aspects of his views along with experiences, adding nuance to the image throughout both plot narratives. This aligns with our understanding of identity as a fluid social construct shaped by context, and Erdal's representation effectively showcases this. Thus, the non-conformist is portrayed with nuances that mirror the fluidity and complexity of social identities. For instance, he praises Canada's reconciliation with Indigenous nations while condemning Israel for not doing the same. At the end of *This is Not a Conversation*, a stark critical image emerges through an inter-contextual link, comparing the occupation in the Israel-Palestine context with the occupation of Indigenous lands in Canada.

Dima: It's within living memory, Itai. Besides, Indigenous people who are alive today and their families and children are feeling the effects of it every day. It may be happening in ways that are hidden from you, but it's happening.

Erdal: Absolutely, but the big difference is that the Canadian government gave an official apology.

Dima: Oh, come on.

Erdal: And as empty as you might think that apology is, it's still an official apology. The Israeli government will never apologize to Palestinians because, normally, they think they haven't done anything wrong. They think the Palestinians are wronging them.

Dima: The Canadian government apologized for residential schools, not for their colonial history or ethnic cleansing.

Erdal: Well, at least they're admitting that injustice happened and they're trying to take steps to correct it. In Israel, they're stealing more land and building more settlements every day. The Canadian government is trying to give land back to Native people, with treaties being won.

Dima: What? It's the exact opposite. How can you say that? Indigenous people have to go to court for ages, sometimes 25 years, to win a small piece of land back.

Erdal: Sure, but at least it's happening. And the place names, Tsawwassen, Capilano, Kitsilano, Kwantlen, they're all Native names.⁵³

Through this comparison, Erdal offers a strong critique of the Israeli state's actions and contrasts these actions with Canada's reconciliation efforts. As Dima and Erdal debate, Erdal underscores the inconsistency of state behaviours, criticizing Israel for not recognizing Palestinian rights while somewhat legitimizing occupation if the occupiers' behaviours were to improve. This portrayal shows the nuanced depiction of non-conformist Israeli masculinity navigating complex stances on occupation.

What stands out in the non-conformist's depiction is the current narrator's (i.e., Erdal) expression of distancing from the conformist image of his past. The current narrator pictures masculinity by contrasting it with his conformist past and the other conformist side, dramatizing the segregation and conflicting zones. Both plays reveal the subtle transformation and construction of the non-conformist character, demonstrating that the conformist aspect exists not only between individuals but also

⁵³ Erdal, "This Is Not a Conversation."

internally, highlighting the complexity of the non-conformist image. By re-imagining borderline situations, the non-conformist reveals aspects of his current opposition and anti-occupation stance toward Israeli State policies. At these points of division, Erdal emphasizes the nuanced distinctions of the non-conformist, creating a threefold categorization of identities: the conformist Israeli, the non-Israeli, and the non-conformist Israeli. However, other characters are not depicted with the same level of nuance.

In both plays, Erdal portrays two different approaches towards non-Israelis at the segregation points. On one hand, some Israeli soldiers perceive non-Israelis as aggressive and react with violence. On the other, the non-conformist Israeli, represented by Erdal himself, approaches non-Israelis with empathy and kindness. Unlike the latter, whose attitudes evolve throughout the performance, the former group remains fixed in its perspective. Additionally, there is no nuanced character development for the non-Israelis, who are similarly portrayed with a consistent, one-dimensional stance, often dramatized as victims, which supports the dynamic Erdal creates. The unequal development and portrayal of characters from three identity groups amplify the presence of the non-conformist, allowing him to assert his identity and differentiate his portrayal from the fixed, conformist images. An example of this unequal portrayal is the Palestinian woman with a hungry child, perceived as a threat by some Israeli soldiers. While the soldiers react aggressively, the reasons behind their behaviour are not explored, nor is there any development of the woman's character beyond her son being on a vague "blacklist."⁵⁴ The narrative does not clarify what this list entails or why it leads to such hostility, leaving the encounter reduced to a simplified conflict based on unexplored and unsubstantiated perceptions of threat.

The unsettling experiences of non-conformist masculine characters manifest not only at checkpoints but also through the reactions of soldiers when deployed in territories like the West Bank,

⁵⁴ Erdal, "Soldiers of Tomorrow."

Gaza, and Lebanon. The following analysis will explore how Erdal's narratives, set in non-Israeli lands, dramatize the non-conformist opposition to justifying the occupation and exclusion of non-Israeli residents from their rights. By portraying non-conformist characters through emotions like unease and anxiety, along with perspectives that emerge from intense dialogues, Erdal presents a nuanced image. This contrasts sharply with depictions of Israelis who justify the occupation through claims of ancestral rights.

Extending the theme of segregation beyond border settings like checkpoints, the portrayal of non-conformist masculinity gains distinction by opposing the conformist perspective that often justifies occupation and the use of force toward non-Israelis on their lands. This justification, deeply rooted in Zionist ideology, frames the Israeli right to the land as both a moral and historical entitlement.⁵⁵ Zionist ideology prevails within Israeli society, institutionalized through entities like the IDF, where the occupation and exclusion of Palestinians, even from their own land, are perceived as righteous acts within a nationalistic and redemptive framework.⁵⁶ As historian Ilan Pappé notes, early Zionist leaders, such as Menachem Ussishkin, described the acquisition of land in terms of "redemption," akin to a historical reclamation of what was seen as rightfully Jewish.⁵⁷ This perception of ancestral rights

⁵⁵ Baruch Kimmerling, "Religion, Nationalism, and Democracy in Israel," *Constellations* 6, no. 3 (1999): 341. Kimmerling explores how religious narratives and claims of ancestral rights legitimize territorial expansion and the exclusion of perceived threats to Israel's existence. He describes the Zionist project as a "return to Zion," framing Jewish immigration as a moral and historical right, distinct from colonial endeavours. According to Kimmerling, this ideology justified settlement activities as a reclamation of ancestral land, embedding the belief that the land inherently belongs to the Jewish people and legitimizing ongoing occupation and expansion: "The Jewish immigration movement was successfully represented as a "return to Zion," correcting an injustice which had lasted for thousands of years, and as totally disconnected from the movements of European immigration to other continents."

⁵⁶ Kaplan, "The Military as a Second Bar Mitzvah," 128. Kaplan discusses how the IDF is not just a military institution but also a cultural force that shapes Israeli masculinity and reinforces Zionist ideals. Military service is portrayed as a rite of passage that aligns personal identity with national ideology. Kaplan writes, "The IDF is also bound by underlying Zionist ideology. The Zionist revolution entailed not only the return of the Jewish people to their old-new homeland, but also an emancipation of the Jewish man."

⁵⁷ Ilan Pappé, "Zionism as Colonialism: A Comparative View of Diluted Colonialism in Asia and Africa," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 107, no. 4 (2008): 616. Pappé compares Zionism to other colonial movements, arguing that it framed the Jewish return to Palestine as a nationalistic and redemptive project. This perception of ancestral rights provided ideological justification for dispossessing the local Palestinian population, who were depicted as obstacles to the fulfillment of a historical mission. Pappé observes, "The Promised Land, in national or religious terms, had to be bought or forcefully taken

provided ideological justification for the Israeli subjects, including masculinities, to dispossess the local Palestinian population of their land and historical recognition, portraying them as obstacles to the fulfillment of a historical mission. Therefore, the non-conformist Israeli stance opposes these justifications, highlighting a divergence within Israeli masculinities. In both plays, Erdal sets subplots against the backdrop of occupation, depicting Israeli masculinities as uninvited presences on non-Israeli land. However, within the Canadian land upon which the performances are staged, Erdal takes centre stage, with the non-Israeli (as seen in *Soldiers of Tomorrow*) often at the margins. The segregation settings in Erdal's works reveal the internal conflicts and emotions of non-conformist characters, who feel out of place and conflicted, in stark contrast to conformist Israelis who justify their presence through ancestral claims.

Similar to the gradual distancing of Erdal's non-conformist image from the monolithic portrayal of conformist Israelis in border settings, the depiction of Israelis on the Other's land does not immediately present a stark contrast. Instead, the portrayal of non-conformists gradually reveals differentiating stances; as more stories unfold in these settings, the non-conformist identity increasingly diverges from the conformist image. For instance, early in the plot of *This is Not a Conversation*, Erdal speaks of deciding to get off a bus passing through Palestinian neighbourhoods, where he observed intense anxiety among passengers. Amid warnings from the driver, who expressed concern, Erdal was advised not to get off the bus, as he might endanger himself:

Erdal: I climb on it, and I start taking photos. I'm taking such great photos that I don't even notice that the bus gets full of people and then starts driving.

Dima: Full of who? Who takes these buses?

Erdal: Israelis, tourists, soldiers. They're separate buses for us.

from the local population [...]. When the Zionist movement took over most of the land of historical Palestine by force, it was still referred to as redemption of the land."

Dima: Separate buses?

Erdal: Sometimes there's the occasional Palestinian on the bus. There's no law against it. This dream bus? Mostly settlers. So, I moved to the front of the bus to tell the driver that I didn't pay for this bus, that I shouldn't be on it. But there are so many people on the bus that by the time I get to the front, we're already driving outside of the West Bank, and now we're in the middle of the desert. I explained my mistake to the driver, who's older and nice, but he said he couldn't help me. He's not allowed to let people off in the West Bank because it's dangerous for Jews. He's going to Tel Aviv, and I just have to go with him. I explained to him that I was going to Jerusalem and that Tel Aviv was way out of my way. I say, come on, I'm the one taking the risk. Just drop me off right here. But he refuses. We drive into a settlement that is so big, it's like a city. I say to the driver, you can drop me off right here in the settlement. But he refuses, and some of the passengers get mad at me for calling it a settlement and saying, *shtachim*.⁵⁸

In this narrative, Erdal depicts the contrasting reactions of Israelis, who express anxiety upon seeing him attempt to get off the bus in a Palestinian region. Additionally, Erdal illustrates the stark division among Israeli bus passengers over the terminology used to describe Israeli residents in the occupied territories of the West Bank (i.e., city vs. settlements). This division highlights the deep-rooted conflict over acknowledging Palestinians' rights to their lands in the Israeli collective consciousness.

Dima: What do they call it?

Erdal: They call it *Yehudah B'Shomron*, Judea and Samaria. That's the biblical name for the West Bank.

⁵⁸ Erdal, "This Is Not a Conversation." *Shtachim* (the plural of *shetach*) refers to the lands conquered by Israel during the Six-Day War of 1967, previously designated as "ha'gada ha'maaravit" (the West Bank). The term carries political connotations, reflecting divergent views: from "shitchei ye'huda ve'shomron" (Judea and Samaria, the biblical designation), and "shtachim me'shucharim" (freed territories), to "shtachim muchzakim" (occupied territories), and "shtachim kvushim" (conquered territories). Over time, it has been abbreviated to "shtachim," symbolizing these contested areas. See Amos Morris-Reich, "End on Surface: Teleology and Ground in Israeli Culture," *Representations* 97, no. 1 (2007): 123–25.

Dima: You mean, they don't admit that it's a settlement?

Erdal: No, they call it a town or a village. I don't want to get into a political argument, so I also call it a town.⁵⁹

The debate over terminology—“town” versus “settlement”—reflects contrasting subjectivities within Israeli society, particularly among masculine Israelis. As described by the character Erdal, reflecting on past events, some passengers on the bus, such as the non-conformist Erdal, called areas “settlements” from which Palestinians have been forcibly evicted, while others opted for more neutral terms like “city” or “town,” highlighting the ongoing debate and tension surrounding the recognition of these areas among Israelis. Conformist masculinity aligns with the hegemonic ideals of Israeli nationalism, which emphasize territorial entitlement and assert a historical claim to the land based on Jewish ancestral rights while simultaneously denying the ancestral claims of Palestinians.⁶⁰ In contrast, non-conformist Israeli masculinity critiques hegemonic norms embedded in language, advocating for historical acknowledgment and justice. By choosing the term “settlement,” a non-conformist character like Erdal signals his rejection of the conformist narrative that legitimizes occupation, instead aligning his masculinity with dissent and critique of Zionist ideology.

Erdal's dramaturgy emphasizes these ideological divides by dramatizing contrasting masculinities through everyday interactions, such as commuting between Palestinian and Israeli territories. Even in the civilian setting in the example above, the staged narrative emphasizes how contrasting Israeli stances express their ideologies through their use of terms, shaping ideological divides over land and identity.

⁵⁹ Erdal, “This Is Not a Conversation.”

⁶⁰ Nationalist ideals in the Zionist context are rooted in the ideological and emotional attachment to the Land of Israel (Eretz Yisrael) as the central space for Jewish sovereignty. As Kimmerling argues, Zionist thinkers were compelled to adopt this territorial framework due to its symbolic and historical significance, despite alternative options. This attachment not only shaped the Jewish national movement but also framed the Zionist project as a “return to Zion,” legitimizing Jewish ancestral claims while excluding the Palestinian presence. See Kimmerling, “Religion, Nationalism, and Democracy in Israel,” 343. Pappé further contextualizes this narrative by describing how Zionist settlers used the discourse of ancestral return to prioritize their national impulse over local Palestinian claims, embedding territorial entitlement as a central tenet of Zionist nationalism. See Pappé, “Zionism as Colonialism,” 613–14

The tension embedded in Erdal's choice of language challenges the monolithic portrayal of Israeli masculinity as uniformly patriotic, showing that not all Israelis normalize occupied territories as "towns." Instead, the term "settlement" implies a forcible takeover of land, explicitly recognizing the displacement of Palestinians. The possibility of an Israeli stepping into the Other's land, though it does not materialize, as Erdal's character remains on the bus while in Palestinian territories, heightens the scene's tension, underscoring unresolved territorial claims and ideological divides. By situating his character within these interactions, Erdal resists ideological stances that deny non-Israelis' ancestral rights, advancing his broader project of breaking stereotypes of Israeli men on stage.

Another example of how a non-conformist Israeli identity distinguishes itself in the context of occupying foreign land appears in *Soldiers of Tomorrow*, particularly through the portrayal of a character other than Erdal, brought to life on stage using props and figurines (Figure 26). In these situations, the non-conformist's feelings of unease and anxiety are even more pronounced than in the earlier bus scenario from *This is Not a Conversation*.



Figure 26. Erdal uses figurines to portray Israeli soldiers, narrating dialogues between them as they are depicted arguing while stationed in Gaza. Screenshot from *Soldiers of Tomorrow*. Source: YouTube.com

Through this staging, Erdal introduces Raphael, a non-conformist Israeli soldier who takes a critical stance in a debate with a conformist Israeli counterpart. In one scene, Erdal recalls a tense exchange

between Raphael and a soldier who supports the military's policies, emphasizing their contrasting viewpoints.

Erdal [*Narrating*]: Yochai and Raphael always argued. Like one time, Raphael didn't know how a soldier would know whether a command was unlawful or not. Yochai said, you have to apply common sense. But Raphael said, What if common sense keeps changing? Like when Rabin gave the order to break the limbs of Palestinian kids who were caught throwing stones, and then later, the Supreme Court decided that that was unlawful. He didn't want to blindly follow orders like the Nazis did. Yochai jumped at him; How dare you compare Israeli soldiers to Nazis? [Raphael said,] I wasn't comparing, Yochai. I was just saying that the Nazis also said they were only following orders. [Yochai said,] Oh, well, excuse me, Raphael, I only lost about thirty relatives during the Holocaust. [Raphael said,] Oh, boo-hoo, I lost lots of relatives too. Do you want to play the pity game? Fuck you, Raphael. I may be sensitive, but you're an asshole. Okay, forget about the Nazis.⁶¹

While stationed in Gaza, Raphael felt deeply uncomfortable, perceiving himself as an unwelcome soldier violating the rights of non-Israeli civilians. Raphael expressed that staying on another's land was unjustifiable, in contrast to the conformist view that justified their presence as a defence of ancestral rights or homeland security.

Erdal [*Narrating*]: [Raphael said,] "My point is, I'm concerned that if they send us to Gaza, Avi might ask me to do unlawful things." Yochai said, Israel is pulling out of Gaza." [Raphael said,] "I sure hope so, Yochai. Gaza is an awful place, the most crowded place on earth, with more people per square meter than Manhattan, living in abject poverty." Yochai said, "You'd rather be sent to Gaza than Lebanon?" Yochai disagrees. "You'd rather fight the Hezbollah?" "Yes," said Raphael.

⁶¹ Erdal, "Soldiers of Tomorrow."

“The chances of getting shot are much higher in Lebanon, but at least you don’t have to fight women and children.” [*Pause, Erdal to audience*] The next day, Avi told us that we’re being deployed to Lebanon for four months. We all cheered: “Finally! Some active duty.” [*Silence*]⁶²

Raphael’s deployment to southern Lebanon brought a different kind of unease compared to Gaza. While Raphael still found the occupation morally troubling, the tension was less acute; in Lebanon, he was facing enemy soldiers rather than potentially having to use force against civilians.

Another aspect of the non-conformist character in the setting of being on occupied land is depicted in *Soldiers of Tomorrow* through Erdal and Raphael’s deep feeling of shame during their military duties as they encounter Lebanese civilians daily without exchanging a word. As the sole narrator of these events, Erdal reflects on this shame, presenting it as a visceral response to the reality of occupation and complicating the dominant stereotype of Israeli masculinity as emotionally detached, militaristic, and justified in its use of power. Unlike hegemonic masculinity, which normalizes dominance and suppresses vulnerability, non-conformist masculinity in Erdal’s narrative reflects an internal moral conflict: a soldier’s shame at holding power over civilians and children who are rendered powerless in the face of military force. As seen earlier in Raphael’s exchange with Yochai, non-conformists expressed a sense of relief at not being stationed in Gaza, where combat in densely populated areas inevitably endangered civilians. However, this relief proved fragile, as Erdal and Raphael’s deployment to Lebanon brought new challenges. The justification that the army was there to confront another military force, rather than civilians, unravelled as Erdal and Raphael faced the unsettling reality of their power and complicity in a system (i.e., IDF) that perpetuated fear and subjugation among non-Israeli residents. On stage, Erdal recounts this shame through a vivid reflection, describing the trauma of pointing a gun at a

⁶² Erdal, “Soldiers of Tomorrow.”

child in Bint Jbeil.⁶³ Erdal's reflection dramatizes the emotional tension between the soldier's physical dominance and his moral discomfort, exposing a masculinity shaped not by patriotic pride but by a profound awareness of ethical failure:

Erdal: It was important to me that I do understand that even though it can be exhilarating to be a soldier, the risks are real, and it can turn really awful when you deal with civilians. I was very self-conscious walking around with a loaded gun, having all that power at my fingertips. When you're in combat formation, your barrel always follows your gaze. Walking the streets of Bint Jbeil in Lebanon, I let my barrel follow my gaze onto a small child many times. It felt horrible pointing my gun at a child. Most kids were used to it. They grew up around soldiers. But every now and then, I would see a look of utter horror on the child's face. I would immediately lower my gun to the ground in shame, but it was too late. The damage was done [*Pause*] for both of us.⁶⁴

Despite being stationed in Lebanon, where they were not directly engaged in civilian conflict, non-conformist characters like Raphael and Erdal still confronted the unsettling reality of their presence among civilians. The sense of relief they initially felt at avoiding combat in Gaza was overshadowed by moments of shame and discomfort, revealing that the justification for their presence was not as solid as it appeared. This complexity adds another layer to the portrayal of non-conformist masculinity, marked not only by critique but by a deep internal conflict over their actions and the consequences of their presence.

Erdal's reflections on his service in Lebanon reveal a slight discomfort, as he continuously justifies that he wasn't responsible for any direct harm, even when potentially inflicting damage on enemy

⁶³ Bint Jbeil, located near the Israeli-Lebanese border, was a significant site during Israel's occupation of South Lebanon (1985–2000). Frequent confrontations occurred between Israeli forces, their allied South Lebanon Army (SLA), and local Lebanese inhabitants, particularly those opposing the occupation. See Susann Kassem, "UNIFIL's "Blue Line" Demarcation: Spatial Ordering, Political Subjectivity, and Settler Colonialism in South Lebanese Borderlands," *International Studies Quarterly* 68, no. 2 (June 2024): sqae051.

⁶⁴ Erdal, "Soldiers of Tomorrow."

soldiers. This sentiment sets him apart from conformist soldiers who perceive opposition forces merely as enemies deserving of death. In a scene from *This is Not a Conversation*, Dima asks if Erdal ever shot an Arab, to which he responds ambiguously, prompting Dima to ask for clarification. Erdal then recounts an incident from his time in Lebanon when the IDF occupied southern Lebanon:

[Describing while his eyes are closed, as Dima asks him to imagine the shooting that took place during the night toward Erdal's division in Lebanon.]

Erdal: Where was I?

Dima: Someone is shooting at you.

Erdal: Right. It was pitch black. I couldn't see a thing except for the occasional tracer.

Dima: What is a tracer?

Erdal: *[Opens his eyes]* It's a bullet that flares red.

Dima: Oh, keep your eyes closed.

Erdal: It's a bullet that flares red. In an assault rifle magazine, you always put a tracer bullet five rounds before the last one, so you know when a magazine is about to run out. When the Hezbollah started shooting at us, I could hear the bullets whistle, but it would only be five rounds before the last one.

Erdal: I was standing next to a big machine gun, so I jumped with it, and I started shooting into the night. The whole thing was very scary and chaotic. Everyone was screaming and firing, so the noise was deafening. There was no moon, so I was literally shooting into the dark. I never aimed at a person, and I don't think I hit anybody.

Dima: But?

Erdal: But when the sun came up, there were two dead Hezbollah fighters lying on the ground.

Dima: Are you sure they were Hezbollah?

Erdal: Yes. It's likely that the tank spotted them because the tank had night vision, and we didn't really shoot into the dark. But I'll never know for sure.

Dima: You were just shooting into the dark?

Erdal: The bullet box feeding the machine gun I was using was two inches over my head.

Dima: How can you be sure they were Hezbollah?

Erdal: No one else was attacking us.

Dima: Oh, you keep saying "attacking." Hezbollah was defending South Lebanon.

Erdal: They started shooting at us, and I didn't start shooting at anybody.⁶⁵

In this exchange, Erdal's tone continues to carry a sense of justification, especially when Dima repeatedly asks if he is certain they were Hezbollah and challenges his phrasing by emphasizing that Hezbollah was defending, not attacking.⁶⁶ Erdal's justifications do not align with the conformist defence of military actions but seem to be a way to navigate the potential guilt he may carry. This sentiment becomes clearer in *Soldiers of Tomorrow*, where Erdal offers a more nuanced depiction of Hezbollah, avoiding what is often a stereotypical portrayal of them as vicious terrorists deserving of death.⁶⁷ Instead, he emphasizes their role in South Lebanon, noting their civil and infrastructural contributions, which Israeli hegemonic narratives often overlook to maintain a darker, more antagonistic image. This distinction signals Erdal's departure from the typical conformist stance, even if he remains conflicted.

Erdal: Hezbollah is a militant organization that was founded by Iran in order to support the Muslim Shia minority in South Lebanon and to resist the Israeli invasion. They kidnap and kill Israeli soldiers, but they also run schools and hospitals and soup kitchens, and they were treated

⁶⁵ Erdal, "This Is Not a Conversation."

⁶⁶ See footnote 18 for brief introduction of Hezbollah.

⁶⁷ Canada officially lists Hezbollah as a terrorist organization under its Criminal Code. This designation is maintained by Public Safety Canada, the federal department responsible for national security. See Public Safety Canada, "Currently Listed Entities," accessed April 25, 2025, <https://www.publicsafety.gc.ca/cnt/ntnl-sert/cntr-trrrsm/lstd-ntts/crrnt-lstd-ntts-en.aspx>. Accordingly, the classification of Hezbollah as a terrorist organization by Canada has been widely reported in Canadian and international media.

like heroes anywhere in South Lebanon. Since ancient times, armies have always attacked just before the sun comes up. It allows you to get closer to your target under the cover of darkness.⁶⁸

Erdal's representational strategy diverges from the usual framing of Hezbollah as purely antagonistic, emphasizing the internal conflict he carries as a non-conformist soldier. In *This is Not a Conversation*, Erdal's staged recollections highlight his unresolved discomfort about whether he inflicted harm, resisting the emotional detachment and moral certainty associated with hegemonic Israeli masculinity. This introspective dimension of non-conformist masculinity, presented through Erdal's ethical self-questioning and emotional complexity, rejects the reductive narratives of heroic defence or inevitable violence, challenging the conformist logic that legitimizes violence by demonizing the enemy. By acknowledging Hezbollah's civil and infrastructural contributions in South Lebanon, Erdal further rejects the conformist logic that legitimizes violence and critiques the binary framing of heroism and villainy that underpins hegemonic Israeli narratives. However, while Erdal's non-conformist masculinity is portrayed with depth and nuance, the depiction of Hezbollah, even as a complex force, remains limited compared to the layered introspection afforded to his own character.

In *Soldiers of Tomorrow*, Erdal revisits the recollections he presented in the previous example, demonstrating how the memory weighs on him. Through reflective monologues and fragmented recollections, Erdal's retelling on stage becomes a dramaturgical act of confronting guilt and moral ambiguity, portraying non-conformist masculinity that is emotionally complex and ethically fraught. These dramaturgical choices critique the rigidity of militaristic masculinity while exposing the fragility of its ideological foundations. However, this emphasis on Erdal's internal conflict raises questions about the trade-offs in his dramaturgy: while dissenting Israeli masculinity is portrayed with nuance, conformist masculinity is simplified as unreflective violence, and non-Israeli figures, like Hezbollah

⁶⁸ Erdal, "Soldiers of Tomorrow."

members, are only partially explored. The limited depth afforded to conformist masculinity frames it primarily as a contrast to the non-conformist soldier, depicting it as unquestioning and aggressive. Similarly, non-Israeli groups, such as Hezbollah, are seemingly humanized only to the extent that they highlight the moral complexity of Erdal's perspective, but their broader socio-political roles remain unexplored. The following staged memory in *Soldiers of Tomorrow* highlights Erdal's dramaturgical focus on the ethical tension of the non-conformist soldier as he confronts the uncertainty of his actions and their unseen consequences. While his retelling conveys the burden militaristic masculinity places on his conscience, it remains centred on his internal struggle, leaving broader systemic dynamics and other categories underexplored.

Erdal: I was standing next to a heavy machine gun, so I jumped on it and started shooting into the night. There was no moon, so I was literally shooting into the black. I never saw the enemy. I don't know if I hurt anybody. But when the sun came up, there were two bullet holes in my ammunition case, three inches from my head. If we hadn't been standing there, they would have climbed the wall, snuck into the base, and slaughtered us in our sleep.⁶⁹

Through these exchanges, Erdal does not provide a simplistic justification but rather reveals the heavy burden these memories carry, using narrative to confront and possibly come to terms with his experiences. This subtle yet persistent attempt to balance his actions with their consequences underscores the discomfort he continues to grapple with, setting him apart from more straightforward, conformist perspectives that unconditionally support military actions.

Confronting Conformity: Resistance to Militarism and Right-Wing Hegemony in Israel

Erdal's portrayal of non-conformist masculinity gains further depth through the staging of his ideological stance, revealing how his leftist views offer a nuanced critique that distinguishes him from

⁶⁹ Erdal, "Soldiers of Tomorrow."

the conformist image of Israeli masculinity. This ideological dimension is not merely a personal characteristic but connects him to a broader segment of Israeli society that is critical of right-wing policies toward Palestinians. In *Soldiers of Tomorrow*, Erdal identifies himself as a “leftist,” expressing political disillusionment with the Israeli right and recalling his support for the Israeli Prime Minister in the 1990s— “a leftist right-wing”—whose assassination by a far-right Israeli shattered his hopes for a peaceful two-state solution.⁷⁰

Erdal: In a way, the timing of my service was lucky. I enlisted four months after Rabin was elected Prime Minister. Remember Rabin? It was a hopeful time. Arafat and Rabin just had the famous handshake in Camp David. And for the first time ever, it looked like there might be a way to solve the conflict in the entire region. I hated Rabin for most of my life. He was the one who gave the order to break the limbs of Palestinian kids who were caught throwing stones. But then later he realized that the conflict cannot be resolved by force alone. And that he was in a unique position. A right-wing leftist who was elected in a huge majority and appealed to both sides. So, even though I had my reservations, I was happy to attend a huge rally to support the peace process after I was discharged.⁷¹

Erdal’s support for a political figure who adopted leftist principles to address the conflict illustrates his belief in pragmatic solutions that transcend partisan boundaries. This reflects his support for political approaches that, regardless of who implements them, aim for what he views as beneficial for Israeli society. However, the optimism for such leftist political solutions was short-lived. The assassination of the Israeli Prime Minister at the time marked a turning point, effectively ending hopes for a peaceful resolution and reinforcing the dominance of conformist ideologies. Erdal’s narrative captures this ideological divide by contrasting the non-conformist stance that advocates for negotiation, reform, and

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Erdal, “Soldiers of Tomorrow.”

empathy with conformist perspectives that align with militaristic, radical, and disagree with peace talks for a two-state solution.

Erdal: There were 200,000 of us in the square. Complete euphoria. [...]. On the way back to the car, someone said Rabin was shot. And I was like, No, he wasn't. What are you talking about? We just saw him talking. But everyone was running back to the square, so we ran too. And then we got the word. Rabin was assassinated by a Jewish right-wing settler. The assassination broke my spirit. Not because the man I just saw talking was dead, but because I knew immediately that the chance for peace was over. Until then, peace seemed inevitable. [...]. When Rabin was assassinated, people were crying in the streets, putting candles and flowers everywhere. We grieved the man, and we grieved the fact that it had come to this, that a Jew murdered another Jew for their beliefs. Everyone said the assassination will surely boost the left, and we would easily win the next election. But less than a year later, Bibi was elected, and he is still the prime minister today.⁷²

Erdal's reflections in *Soldiers of Tomorrow* illustrate how his ideology positions him against Israeli hegemonic norms, which are rooted in Zionist ideals that emphasize territorial defence, societal expectations tied to IDF service, and narratives denying Palestinians' ancestral claims to the land.⁷³ Erdal's reflection addresses the ideological divide within Israeli society, contrasting non-conformist perspectives advocating negotiation and empathy with conformist ideologies rooted in militarism and territorial exclusivity. By referencing the historical context of Rabin's assassination, Erdal situates himself within a dissenting segment of Israeli society that did not conform to Zionist exclusivity and supported Rabin's mid-1990s peace initiatives. Erdal's presentation of this historical context adds further

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Avon and Khatchadourian, *Hezbollah: A History of the "Party of God,"* 11, 12, 143. Israeli hegemonic norms, as outlined in this text, are deeply tied to Zionist ideology, emphasizing militarism, territorial sovereignty, and collective identity. Hegemonic Israeli masculinity reflects these norms by portraying Jewish men as militarized and patriotic, contrasting sharply with historical depictions of Jewish men as weak or passive (pp. 11–12). The IDF plays a central role, serving as a rite of passage that defines citizenship, professional credibility, and masculinity, embedding values of strength and national defence into the fabric of Israeli social and cultural life.

nuance to his portrayal of non-conformist masculinity while highlighting the societal shift from hopes for a peaceful resolution to the rise of right-wing exclusivism embodied by Netanyahu's leadership. However, Erdal's nuanced representation of non-conformist masculinity relies on the audience's presumed familiarity with Netanyahu and the Israeli right-wing perspectives, leaving their ideological stance static and unexamined. This trade-off between depth in non-conformist masculinity and the generalization of conformist ideologies heightens the contrast between Erdal's reform-oriented vision and the rigid constructs of masculinity it critiques, prioritizing the non-conformist voice over a fuller engagement with its ideological opposition.

Erdal's critique of the foundational ideologies of Israel is sharply articulated through his assertion that "Zionism is kind of racist by definition," a statement that highlights his sharp critical perspective on the establishment and maintenance of a Jewish homeland in the territory historically known as Palestine.⁷⁴

Another aspect that Erdal presents of the nonconformist and critical masculinity is his criticism of the influence of the IDF on public mentality, including himself and his nephew, who first experienced this influence in school. The importance of this issue is so significant that the title of Erdal's play is derived from an event that occurred at his nephew's school, where the military tries to persuade teenagers about the necessity of service and the importance of having a role in a military establishment. This significance is placed alongside narratives of the Holocaust. According to Erdal, the Holocaust is intertwined with Israelis' Jewish identity, but the military uses the event to emphasize a victimized image of their ancestors and Jewish identity to justify the necessity of military service and the promise of not being victims again. This instance echoes earlier discussions in this chapter about the construction of a nationalist Israeli identity designed to replace the historically perceived image of the Jewish

⁷⁴ Erdal, "This Is Not a Conversation," 24:12.

individual as effeminate, weak, and victimized. However, unlike earlier points that focused on the IDF's direct influence, this example emphasizes the educational system's role as a subtler yet pervasive mechanism for normalizing hegemonic masculinity and nationalist ideologies. The influence of institutions like the IDF, and in this case, the educational system, perpetuates and normalizes conformist ideologies, reinforcing the hegemonic construction of Israeli masculinity and its associated worldview. By incorporating personal anecdotes, such as his nephew's experiences, Erdal critiques how the educational system intertwines militarism with cultural memory, shaping perceptions of duty and identity from a young age. This shift in focus from direct military influence on the systemic role of education highlights the intergenerational transmission of these norms, showing how schools embed hegemonic masculinity into the broader fabric of Israeli society. While this critique deepens Erdal's non-conformist portrayal by illustrating his resistance to these ingrained expectations, it also depicts conformist masculinity as largely passive and shaped by systemic forces. This portrayal heightens the contrast between non-conformist and conformist perspectives, but it risks oversimplifying the latter by reducing them to victims of an unyielding system rather than engaging with their ideological agency.

In *Soldiers of Tomorrow*, Erdal portrays a version of Israeli masculinity shaped by the collaboration between educational institutions and the IDF, using the real-life example of his nephew, Ito. This depiction underscores the internalization of military service as a key component of the masculinity construct within the Israeli education system. Through Ito's experience, Erdal highlights how Israeli civil society prepares youth for military service, reinforcing the idea that serving in the IDF is both a rite of passage and a defining aspect of Israeli masculinity. As sociologist Danny Kaplan notes, even before young men officially join the military, values and symbols associated with service are embedded through ritualized experiences in youth education, mentally preparing them for military life

and reinforcing their sense of belonging to the Zionist state.⁷⁵ Erdal narrates that Ito receives a box in which military gear is gifted by IDF soldiers to students, who are addressed as “soldiers of tomorrow.”

Erdal: When Ito was 10, my sister called me one day, livid. She said, “You won’t believe this.

Ido came home from school today with a box he was given to send to the soldiers on the front line. You know, filled with socks and candy and stuff.” She said, “Inside the lid of the box, the inscription reads, “To the soldiers of tomorrow, from the soldiers of today.”⁷⁶

Erdal then emphasizes that this sense of duty, instilled from a young age, reflects the broader societal expectation that all Israeli masculinities will serve, showcasing how deeply the idea of being shaped by military service permeates the collective memory. In parallel with his narrative about Ito, Erdal also reflects on his own upbringing, where leftist ideologies were instilled in him by his family. Unlike Ito, who faces a more hegemonic push toward enlisting, Erdal’s decision to join the military was shaped by a blend of social duty and learned ideology from his parents:

Erdal: I knew I was going to be a soldier from infancy. My father was a soldier. My cousin was a soldier. But I was hesitant to enlist. [...] My mother said that if I lived in this country, then I would have to do my share. She said the first question in every job interview will always be, “What did you do in the army?” And more importantly, if all the leftists refuse to serve, we’ll be leaving the military to the right-wing fanatics.⁷⁷

Later in the performance, Erdal speaks of Ito, who is “seventeen now.”⁷⁸ Erdal recounts speaking for many hours on the phone, trying to convince Ito not to enlist, demonstrating the IDF’s influence on the collective consciousness and the perceived necessity to serve.

⁷⁵ Kaplan, “The Military as a Second Bar Mitzvah,” 138.

⁷⁶ Erdal, “Soldiers of Tomorrow.”

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

Erdal: I wish I didn't have to tell you this, but seven years after my sister called me about the box that Ito was given, filled with stuff to the soldiers of tomorrow, she called to let me know that Ito decided not to evade military service. He is going to be a soldier.⁷⁹

Additionally, in *This is Not a Conversation*, Erdal implicitly discusses the lessons Israeli subjectivities have internalized about the foundations of their nation, which he refers to as a "story." These stories contribute to the motivation for joining the military and are presented through lessons learned in school, teachings from his parents, daily conversations, and various narratives conveyed through civil society, gaining the collective's consent to take a role in military institutions, hence sustaining the IDF's dominance.

Erdal: I left because I came to believe that the whole country was founded on a lie. Growing up in Israel, I feel like I was brainwashed and lied to in my whole life. We were told a story, and the entire country bought the story without ever doubting it, objecting to it, really. My mom believed the story, that is why she pressured me to go to the army [...] how good the story must be in order to convince my mother that it was worth risking her own son's life for.⁸⁰

Erdal's narrative manifests a notion of Israeli masculinity whose consciousness was equipped with learnings to justify the necessity of serving in the IDF. Historical narratives about the Promised Land and the Holocaust were not limited to educational institutions but were present in every aspect of Israeli life, including ceremonies and social interactions. Hence, the mandate to serve in the IDF did not merely come as a direct message but through discursive conceptions in different sectors of Israeli civil society. Serving the IDF creates a "manly" duty of every Jewish Israeli to instill patriotism in their identities.⁸¹ The masculine character highlights the justification for joining the IDF through family, rituals, and

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Erdal, "This Is Not a Conversation."

⁸¹ Klein, "Our Best Boys," 53: Klein notes, "In Israel, where war is always present, war creates the challenge for manly virtues."

education, portraying the Other as the enemy and equating joining the IDF with “we will never be victims again.”

Erdal: [*to the audience*] When I say Jew, what’s the first thing you think of? Do not answer that; do not answer. It’s the Holocaust, right? Growing up, the Holocaust was always there. My mother would light a candle on Holocaust Day and show us faded photos of relatives we lost. It’s cool they would make us watch grainy black and white films with lots of barbed wire and thin naked people [...] I had a nice voice, so I was chosen to be one of the speakers in the [Holocaust] ceremony [...]. We study the Holocaust in class, and we would discuss our personal connection to it. There were very few children whose families didn’t lose some relatives. The slogan “We never forget, we never forgive” is a lived reality in Israel. We are a small country surrounded by enemies, but we will never be victims again. And that’s why it was so easy for me to believe that we were the most moral military in the world because I heard it hundreds of times before. Our collective suffering has made us into moral people.⁸²

Erdal’s reflections in *Soldiers of Tomorrow* reveal how Israeli masculinity is shaped by a deep-rooted sense of duty to serve in the IDF, presented as a manly duty, an obligation that links military service to patriotism and national defence. This duty is seen as a rite of passage, transforming young men into defenders of the nation and reinforcing an image of strength that contrasts with historical portrayals of Jewish men as weak or effeminate.⁸³ Through educational systems and broader social norms, the idea of “never being victims again” underscores this sense of duty, where enlisting is equated with asserting agency and safeguarding national identity. Kaplan supports this view that military service

⁸² Erdal, “Soldiers of Tomorrow.”

⁸³ Kaplan, “The Military as a Second Bar Mitzvah,” 139-40. Kaplan writes, “Since the Zionist shift within Judaism aimed at ridding the image of Jewish masculinity of its historic associations with effeminate, dislocated Jews who surrendered themselves to the study of the Torah, and transforming it into an identity associated with fighting men in the land of Israel, it is hardly surprising that Zionism has institutionalized combat military service as a dominant developmental marker.”

acts as a primary rite of passage, embedding values of masculinity and nationalism into young Israelis long before they enlist. Kaplan writes, “The IDF is also bound by underlying Zionist ideology. The Zionist revolution entailed not only the return of the Jewish people to their “old-new” homeland but also an emancipation of the Jewish man.”⁸⁴ By highlighting these broader social norms and expectations, Erdal’s narrative not only critiques the pressure to conform to these ideals but also illustrates how masculinity, nationalism, and militarism are intertwined in the monolithic construction of Israeli identity.

Another critique of Erdal in his works about the dominance of IDF in constructing conformist and militarist Israeli masculinities is that any social and professional standing in Israel is deeply linked to each Israeli’s military service experience. Social credibility and the acquisition of job opportunities for a better future life depend on an Israeli’s service in the army. Erdal recounts his mother’s advice, reminding him of the necessity of his service concerning his social life: “My mother said that if I live in this country, then I have to do my share. She said the first question in every job interview will always be, What did you do in the army?”⁸⁵ Thus, Erdal’s critiques point towards IDF’s influence in constructing their identities as masculine Israelis, whose duty is not to let the Jewish people “be a victim again,” which manifests IDF’s influence over the social and economic life of Israelis.⁸⁶

The analysis has thus far examined how Erdal constructs a non-conformist identity through various dramatic elements, including subplots, characterizations, dialogues, and narrative scenarios set at points of separation and within the tense contexts of occupation and uninvited presence in foreign territories. These depictions reveal facets of non-conformity, such as empathetic interactions with non-Israelis, an anti-war stance, and a dissociation from Zionist ideologies. Unlike conformist portrayals that resist acknowledging these issues, Erdal’s non-conformist narrative conveys a sense of collective shame

⁸⁴ Kaplan, “The Military as a Second Bar Mitzvah,” 128.

⁸⁵ Erdal, “Soldiers of Tomorrow.”

⁸⁶ Ibid.

regarding the occupation and the perceived threats to non-Israelis, reflecting how societal mechanisms and the IDF have historically shaped Israeli masculinity to justify militarization and aggression towards Palestinians. The dramatic elements gradually picture a nuanced non-conformist contrasting with fixed and unexplored portrayals of other groups: the conformist Israeli, embodied by Yochai, appears inflexible and suspicious, resistant to narratives that challenge the state's stance on Palestinians. Conversely, non-Israelis are often depicted as passive victims, such as a woman carrying a child or children in occupied Lebanon, represented through figurines, underscoring the nuanced non-conformist against the backdrop of a simplistic aggressor-victim dynamic.

Although some staging elements (like the use of figurines to represent other characters) have been briefly mentioned, the primary embodiment of the characters is achieved through Erdal's speech and narrative, which reconstructs their identities. Building on these dramatic elements, the following section will delve deeper into staging and dramaturgical techniques, including minimalistic set design, personal props, and direct engagement with the audience. These strategies will further illustrate how Erdal's non-conformist portrayal distinguishes itself from more uniform, conformist representations, offering a more comprehensive exploration of how masculinity is represented on stage.

Critical Stance through Staging Narrative Techniques

Erdal's minimalistic staging and use of personal props emphasize his reverse diasporic identity, where his non-conformist masculinity opposes the traditional Zionist narrative of returning to Israel to

forge a unified, masculine national identity. Historically, the Zionist narrative of returning Jews sought to counter perceptions of effeminacy and weakness associated with the diasporic Jew.⁸⁷



Figure 27. The opening scene. Screenshot from *This Is Not a Conversation*, Belfry Theatre, 2016. Source: vimeo.com

The non-conformist image is further symbolized through Erdal's use of props, such as travel bags and his military uniform, enhancing what he reveals through his speech and adding layers of subtlety to his portrayal. For instance, at the beginning of *This Is Not a Conversation*, Erdal and Dima enter the stage carrying two travel bags, each revealing their status as expats and refugees (Figure 27). Throughout the play, both characters refer to their migration status and reasons for leaving their homeland due to social and political tensions, with Canada becoming their new home.

Alongside these props and narratives, Erdal's nonconformity is manifested through his opening of the travel bag containing his military uniform and his expression of defiance in rejoining the army as a reservist, which led to his self-imposed exile, further highlighting his critical stance. In *This is Not a Conversation*, the bags' containers of personal objects with historical significance (e.g., Erdal's military uniform and Dima's traditional dress), imbued with personal narratives of a geopolitical condition, allow these props, which signify a historical narrative like the Israeli uniform, to adopt a different narrative that diverges from the prevailing narratives of patriotic military masculinities. The IDF uniform

⁸⁷ See Shor and Klein's views on effeminacy linked to the diasporic Jew and its subversion in Israeli identity post-statehood, discussed on page 333 under the section "IDF's Role in Idealizing the Israeli Masculinity."

represents the collective image of Jewish soldiers unified in their acts of war, heroism, or crimes.

However, Erdal's narrative challenges this uniformity, suggesting that not all share this unified stance.



Figure 28. Dima and Erdal exhibit their bags' contents. *This Is Not a Conversation*. Belfry Theatre, 2016. Photo by Matt Rezneck. Source: itaierdal.com

There are individuals like Erdal who, despite wearing the uniform, stand against the narratives of masculine heroism and potential war crimes associated with it. Erdal's use of his military uniform serves to highlight the personal costs of broader political ideologies. In the final scene of *This Is Not a Conversation*, Erdal spreads his military uniform on the stage as if laying down a human figure, presenting it as an empty shell devoid of the person it once represented (Figure 28). By carrying the uniform in a bag, he suggests that it is not merely a distant memory but a part of his identity that he continues to bear, even as he opposes what it symbolizes—conformity. By bringing it out of the bag, Erdal makes this aspect of his past visible, highlighting how it remains with him even as he seeks to redefine himself. Standing beside the uniform, he embodies his reverse diasporic identity and everything he has revealed about himself throughout the play. The contrast between Erdal and the empty uniform forms a powerful visual metaphor, symbolizing the weight of expectations, roles, and ideologies—militarized masculinity, national duty, and conformity—that the uniform represents but which he has chosen to reject. By distancing himself from it, Erdal underscores his non-conformist stance and the personal struggle involved in breaking away from these dominant narratives.

The minimalistic staging in *This is Not a Conversation* emphasizes Erdal's reverse diasporic identity by visually representing themes of displacement and transience. The stage is defined by an empty space with a single wooden chair complemented by travel bags placed beneath the audience's seats. This setup, featuring empty space and characters portrayed as travellers, casts a sense of displacement and movement onto the characters, Erdal as a self-imposed immigrant and Dima as a refugee asylum seeker. The minimalist design, combined with autobiographical elements and dialogues, shifts the focus to a narrative rooted in personal experience, emotions, and real-life events. By reducing the stage to these core elements, the production shifts focus to the characters' personal stories, emphasizing how their diasporic identities are defined by a constant negotiation between spaces. Through these expressions, a nuanced and complex understanding of Erdal emerges, revealing layers of his past life, the reasons behind his migration, and his present self, now performing as a reverse diasporic Israeli. Erdal's non-conformist identity is shaped not only by his memories but also through staging elements that symbolize his journey, further enriched by his current status as an immigrant. This layering of memory, migration, and immigrant identity creates a multidimensional portrayal that illuminates the intricacies of Erdal's non-conformist masculinity. While staging elements give Erdal's character depth, revealing the layers of his non-conformist, reverse diasporic identity, they render Dima's portrayal more simplified, fitting the stereotype of a Middle Eastern woman as a passive, displaced refugee. Dima's character is framed primarily through nostalgic recollections of loss and exile, such as remembering Palestine as "memories," "childhood," and "everything we lost."⁸⁸ In the play, Dima's identity is defined almost exclusively through narratives of exile and displacement: "My grandfather, Adin, and his whole generation were driven out of Palestine. When I was three, my mother and I had to escape the Lebanese civil war. When I was 13, my entire family fled the Iraqi invasion of

⁸⁸ Erdal, "This Is Not a Conversation."

Kuwait.”⁸⁹ Unlike Erdal’s character, who articulates complex ideological positions and engages critically with his past military service, Dima’s character lacks comparable opportunities for self-reflection beyond her victim status. While Erdal appears as an Israeli expat with more agency in choosing to embrace a reverse diaspora, Dima’s relationship to Palestinian identity is also shaped through maternal suppression, as when her mother insists, “Palestinians are finished. They don’t have a future.”⁹⁰ These dramaturgical choices reinforce a portrayal of Dima as a passive subject shaped by historical trauma, contrasting with Erdal’s active negotiation of Israeli identity through processes of critical introspection and ideological dissent.

The stage setup, which positions the spectators on both sides without conventional distances found in most theatre spaces, enables a distinct engagement between actors and spectators, which highlights the reality of being too close to each other. Actors sit next to audience members, sharing personal narratives directly with them. This configuration necessitates a further focus on personal narratives and experiences, fostering a more intimate space that prompts the audience to further reflect on individual perspectives that seem to differ from the prevailing narratives in mass media. The performer aims to achieve a presentation rooted in reality with origin, underlining that what is being shared is a real-life experience, a memory, and a history.⁹¹ Therefore, the staging choice highlights the personal aspects of geopolitical narratives, unveiling a lesser-known image of Israeli masculinity that is critical of Israeli

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ By “original reality,” I refer to representations or narratives that maintain a connection to tangible human experience, social elements, and historical origins—concepts that contrast with “simulacra,” which are disconnected from these roots. Simulacra, as theorized in postmodern critique, are representations where signs and symbols lose their connection to any origin in human social or historical existence. While Jameson uses terms like “reality with origins” or “genuine reality” to describe the antithesis of simulacra, he does not always clarify the depth of what constitutes “genuine.” In my view, this entails representations grounded in historical depth—an inclusive history that integrates human experiences and material realities rather than a chronological account of events. This distinction aligns with the Marxist traditions of thought, particularly cultural studies influenced by Jameson and Hall, which critique the postmodern tendency to dehistoricize and flatten complex realities into consumable images. See Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), 9–10, 37–39.

state politics, anchored in reality with origin, opposing Zionist ideals and advocating for equal rights for non-Israelis. Hence, breaking the fourth wall and directly engaging with the audience aims to link the individual's personal narrative to a reality shared with a non-conformist collectivity. Now, it becomes a subject of exploration whether Erdal's metatheatrical form casts skepticism on the common dichotomous understandings about Middle Eastern masculinities in the divided region, that is, Arabs versus Israelis. An understanding that is based on the contrast between the patriotic Jewish Israelis and the non-Israeli and anti-Israeli subjects in the region. The engagements between performer and audience in both productions reflect Erdal's commitment to fostering active spectatorship and ensuring the recognition of his subjectivities. This strategy constructs a critical portrayal of Israeli masculinity by sharing personal experiences rich in emotions and rational inquiries, challenging what is commonly portrayed in mass media as an Israeli.⁹² While Erdal employs direct address to the audience in both plays, it is specifically in *Soldiers of Tomorrow* that he performs against a backdrop of a borderless map, using this spatial element to critique nationalist narratives and the artificial boundaries dividing people. Erdal's breaking of the fourth wall, accompanied by delivering a subjective narrative that diverges from the hegemonic one, implicitly confronts historical amnesia and the sanitization of narratives, compelling an examination of the complexities and entanglements of personal histories. Techniques such as direct engagement, role-play, and breaking the fourth wall, particularly in the minimalist stage design of *This is Not a Conversation*, highlight the conveyance of personal memories, distinguishing them from the common understanding and linking them to a geopolitical conflict. At the end of *This is Not a Conversation*, Erdal emphasizes the importance for the audiences to listen to his stories and understand the masculinity he is advocating, using this method to underscore the relevance of the broader context to

⁹² It is essential to note that in Canada, audiences are diverse, and mass media do not necessarily convey a single dominant narrative. Depending on the audience's background, mass media may depict the image of an evil and violent Israeli soldier or, conversely, a unified picture of soldiers protecting their nation against threats of Islamophobia and fundamentalism.

his real-life memories and thus presenting a narrative that differs from the mass media's portrayal of Israeli masculinities versus non-Israeli residents of the region, often depicted in stereotypical figures. Erdal explicitly asserts that theatre has a duty to "tell people what's happening" and "reflect life," emphasizing the ethical responsibility behind his storytelling.⁹³

The metatheatrical forms in Erdal's plays facilitate the delivery and reception of personal memories and real-life experiences, adopting an emotional and contemplative connection with the audiences. Through set and staging choices that bring Erdal's character into close physical proximity with the audience, this approach fosters an intimacy that supports the emotional connection offered by the text, breaking down traditional barriers between performer and spectator. This approach also empowers the narrator to assert the grounded historicity of his narrative, emphasizing that it is rooted in genuine, real-life experience rather than fabrication.⁹⁴ As a result, a less familiar portrayal of an IDF soldier emerges, one that embodies Israeli masculinity while acknowledging Palestinian rights, starkly opposes Israeli state ideology (Zionism) and maintains his pride in his Israeli identity. By placing the non-conformist man closer to the audience, Erdal challenges the Israeli masculine ideal that Klein documents in her study of military culture. Klein identifies that in Israeli society, the "Israeli male norm respects performance and achievement more than words and feelings," where "expressing emotions" is "regarded as feminine."⁹⁵ Erdal's staging choices present an alternative to this emotionally restrained model, instead portraying a form of masculinity that is open, vulnerable, and willing to connect. This nuanced representation of Israeli masculinity simultaneously disrupts the antisemitic stereotype commonly attributed to critics of Israel's policies towards its non-Israeli residents and neighbours,

⁹³ Erdal, "This Is Not a Conversation."

⁹⁴ Grounded historicity refers to representations tied to historical depth and tangible human experiences, resisting the flattening effect of simulacra, where signs are detached from their origins. Jameson critiques this loss of depth in postmodern culture, emphasizing the need to "think the present historically" by anchoring representations in socio-historical contexts. See Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 9–10, 284–285.

⁹⁵ Klein, "Our Best Boys," 57.

demonstrating that it is possible to critique Israeli hegemony without negating Judaism in any form.

Erdal, as a representative of such critical masculinity, delivers his potentially controversial comments in an engaging style by breaking the fourth wall, thus enhancing the credibility and impact of his narrative within the theatrical space as a form of social space.

Hence, Erdal's intricate depiction of his critical subjectivity highlights the complexities of non-conformist Israeli masculinities through various dramatic components and staging elements. This detailed focus, while providing a multifaceted understanding of his own identity, often results in the overshadowing and simplifying of other groups within his narratives. In the following sections, it will be further explained that the conformist Israeli and non-Israeli characters lack the same level of richness and detail as the non-conformist Israeli masculinity that Erdal advocates. Such categorization, despite the inherent diversity within conformist and non-Israeli groups, leads to their generalized and flattened depiction. While it is not suggested that there is no historical depth to these generalizations, the representation between these groups is unequal. This inequality often serves to keep the focus on the group whose complexities are more thoroughly explored, namely, the non-conformist Israeli masculinity. By examining these character development disparities, we can better understand how Erdal's narratives contribute to the reinforcement of certain stereotypes and the marginalization of diverse perspectives within these groups.

Conformist Israeli

This section focuses on the simplified representations of conformist and militarist Israeli characters that are juxtaposed in contrast to the nuanced depiction of the critical Israeli man. At the plot setting of segregation in the Palestine-Israel divide (e.g., checkpoint), Erdal portrays soldiers with contrasting stances towards non-Israeli residents, highlighting the distinction between conformist militarist Israelis and critical Israelis. Whenever the conformist militarist Israeli soldiers are depicted, the presence of the critical soldier is also highlighted, whether this critical soldier is embodied by a young Erdal or his fellow soldier, Raphael, who shares relatively similar views. In both productions, Erdal narrates stories set at checkpoints, where he describes his humane treatment of non-Israeli residents passing through, in stark contrast to the indifference shown by other soldiers towards a woman and her sick baby. Additionally, during a role-play with Dima, Erdal demonstrates how a typical soldier searches for a car and questions with an aggressive and suspicious attitude towards the civilians who are passing through the checkpoints. These role-played scenes are not staging Erdal's own actions and subjectivities but rather his illustration of typical behaviours of IDF soldiers at checkpoints, emphasizing the contrast between his pacifist stance and the aggressive approach of his fellow soldiers.



*Figure 29. Role-Playing Scene: Dima (right) acts as a Palestinian driver passing the checkpoint, and Erdal (left) as a soldier holding a gun pointing at the driver. Belfry Theatre, 2016. Screenshot from *This is Not a Conversation*. Source: Vimeo.com*

Through theatrical techniques such as role-play, puppetry, and storytelling recitations, Erdal's aggressive and militarist Israelis highlight their conforming to the view that sees Palestinians of all walks of life as potential threats. For example, in *This is Not a Conversation*, the subplot narrative,

which has checkpoint themes, is enacted through role-plays showing the high alert and suspiciousness of Israeli soldiers in each encounter with non-Israeli civilians (Figure 29).

Erdal: You rather to be a pedestrian or drive a car?

Dima: No, I'll be a pedestrian [*pause*]. No, I'll drive a car.

Erdal: You should drive. You have a better chance of crossing if you drive.

Dima: Okay. I'll drive a car.

Erdal: Now, are you going to Israel, or you are trying to go back home?

Dima: I am trying to go back home.

Erdal: If you go home, we'll still search you to harass you because you are not going to be your own village [...] So I'll be standing here and over here, there is another soldier, and he's got a bullet in the chamber. He's pointing his gun at you. He's covering me to ensure that I am secure in case you have a knife.

Dima: I don't have a knife [*Stands up*].

Erdal: [*Gestures to her to sit*] You never know. It has happened. That a woman has stabbed soldiers at the checkpoint. Do you have a permit?

Dima: Yes, I have a permit [*Dima pretends to open the glovebox to fetch the permit.*]

Erdal: Slow! [*Dima pretends to hand over a permit paper to Erdal.*] If you didn't have a permit, I would have to detain you. [...] Open the Window!

Dima: It's open. [*Erdal continues interrogating the driver. Then they change roles.*]

Dima: Now, this is like a dream: an Arab questioning an Israeli at the checkpoint (Figure 30).⁹⁶



Figure 30. Role-playing scene: Erdal is driving a car; and Dima is holding a gun. Belfry Theatre, 2016. Screenshot from This is Not a Conversation. Source: Vimeo.com

This role-play sequence demonstrates how Erdal's dramaturgy constructs conformist Israeli masculinity through a limited set of structural and institutional behaviours rather than through historical or social complexity. By embodying the checkpoint soldier through stylized, reproducible gestures and language patterns, Erdal presents this conformist masculinity primarily through its relationship to state power and surveillance practices. The performance highlights the procedural nature of militaristic behaviour, reducing the conformist soldier to a functional extension of institutional control.⁹⁷ When roles are reversed, with Dima noting that "an Arab questioning an Israeli at the checkpoint" is "like a dream," the scene further emphasizes how conformist Israeli masculinity is defined through power asymmetry rather than through the nuanced ideological positioning that characterizes Erdal's portrayal of non-conformist Israeli masculinity. This dramaturgical approach creates a representational imbalance that serves Erdal's broader narrative strategy: by depicting conformist masculinity through formulaic interactions and institutional speech, he establishes a simplified contrast that heightens the audience's perception of the non-conformist Israeli masculine identity as more structurally and socially complex.

⁹⁶ Erdal, "This Is Not a Conversation."

⁹⁷ Ibid. Militaristic conduct can be read through these lines: "I'll be standing here," "another soldier [...] pointing his gun," "If you didn't have a permit, I would have to detain you."

In *Soldiers of Tomorrow*, while the play is primarily performed and narrated by a single actor, conformist characters still play a significant role.⁹⁸ As highlighted earlier, the director, Erdal, often embodies other characters, including conformist Israeli soldiers who served with him in the IDF, not by casting multiple actors but by utilizing figurines, narrative descriptions, and verbal portrayals. By conflating conformist soldiers with static—yet occasionally animated—props, Erdal symbolically underscores their limited agency and passive complicity, contrasting them with his own non-conformist stance as more self-reflective and active. The conformist characters, along with non-Israeli characters, including a Palestinian woman, gain a tangible presence akin to puppetry but with a distinct approach: Erdal does not always physically animate the figurines.⁹⁹ Instead, Erdal positions the figurines on stage, occasionally adjusting their direction while maintaining a clear presence as the narrator, contrasting the unseen or covered puppet master. Through these techniques, while Erdal himself represents a non-conformist figure, he takes on the role of the performer, allowing the focus to shift toward the conformist characters, even within a mostly solo performance. In this setup, we see two conformist characters at a checkpoint, previously described as a setting where Erdal interacted with non-Israelis. These characters exhibit a different approach and attitude compared to Erdal, particularly in their interactions with non-Israelis and their debates over military policies and the ethical considerations they believe should be upheld within the army.

In *Soldiers of Tomorrow*, the portrayal of conformist Israeli masculinities emphasizes their contrasting attitudes and actions, especially within the settings of checkpoints and occupied territories. Two examples are Yochai and Avi in *Soldiers of Tomorrow*, where these characters are represented

⁹⁸ It is mostly, but not all, performed by Erdal; other performers on stage advocate for non-Israeli perspectives, such as a Syrian music player positioned on the right edge of the scene and Abed, an Iraqi character, who appears briefly at the end of the play. This will be further discussed in the next section on non-Israeli masculinities in Erdal's works.

⁹⁹ For instance, in certain scenes (e.g., the IDF soldiers' encounter with an elderly Palestinian woman shown in Figure 31 page 391), Erdal does use more miniature figurines more actively.

through figurative props (Figure 31). Yochai and Avi illustrate this contrast by embodying rigid nationalist views and confrontational interactions with non-Israelis, diverging sharply from the more critical and empathetic stances of Raphael and Erdal. Yochai, who frequently argues over his nationalist political ideas with Erdal's friend Raphael, denies the existence of Palestine and shows little empathy towards Arab civilians. One of the topics of argument between Raphael and Yochai was about morality dilemmas when a soldier is given an unlawful order they must follow according to common sense, where Raphael challenged what if common sense justifies criminal acts like Nazis.¹⁰⁰ Erdal addresses his commander, Avi, during his service on the idea of morality and not following unlawful orders in the IDF and describes a situation where Raphael and Yochai argue:

Erdal: Avi said that the soldier's right to refuse an order is what makes the Israeli Defence Force the most moral military in the world. They give you the illusion that you have a choice. *[Pause]*

Yochai Raphael always argued. Like one time, Raphael didn't know how a soldier would know whether a command was unlawful or not.

Yochai said You have to apply common sense.

But Raphael said, What if common sense keeps changing? Like when Rabin gave the order to break the limbs of Palestinian kids who were caught throwing stones, and then later, the Supreme Court decided that that was unlawful. He didn't want to blindly follow orders like the Nazis did.

Yochai jumped at him; how dare you! Caught throwing a stone.

[Raphael:] I wasn't comparing you, Yochai. I was just saying that the Nazis also said they were only following orders. Don't be so sensitive.

[Yochai:] Oh, well, excuse me, Raphael. I only lost about 30 relatives during the Holocaust.

[Raphael:] Oh, boo-hoo. I lost lots of relatives, too. Do you want to play the pity game?

¹⁰⁰ Erdal, "Soldiers of Tomorrow."

[Yochai:] Fuck you, Rafael. I may be sensitive, but you're an asshole.

[Raphael:] Okay, forget about the Nazis. My point is, I'm concerned that if they send us to Gaza,

Avi [their commander] might ask me to do unlawful things.¹⁰¹



Figure 31. Erdal in Soldiers of Tomorrow narrates through objects. 2023 Push Festival. Photo by Matt Reznek

The dissenting side, represented by Raphael, warns that the use of military violence leads to acts of crime within any military institution. This dramatized clash of ideas illustrates a critical divide: one side is cautious and reflective, while the other denies the possibility of wrongdoing, asserting the moral superiority of their army. By highlighting the self-reflexive dimension of dissenting masculinities through Raphael and Erdal, the performance narrows its portrayal of the conformist side, reducing it to a monolithic category rooted in rigidity and opposition. This framing oversimplifies the diversity among those ideologically opposed to the non-conformists, particularly in their views on the Israeli nation, Zionist beliefs, and peace talks, while leaving unexplored how factors such as generation, immigration background, social class, and religious practice shape these masculinities. This selective emphasis heightens the contrast between the richly developed portrayal of non-conformist characters and the

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

limited exploration of the diversity within conformist masculinities, overlooking the historical and social nuances that shape their perspectives.¹⁰²

In another scene in *Soldiers of Tomorrow*, Yochai and Avi conduct a physical search of an older woman at a checkpoint; while Raphael engages her in conversation, Yochai's approach is rigid, inflexible, and dehumanizing, treating her as a threat. Despite this, the woman does not use her native language (Arabic); instead, she speaks Hebrew in a friendly manner, possibly to create a more communicative and conciliatory dynamic. The tension in this interaction highlights Yochai's rigidity, not just as a character trait but as a reflection of hegemonic masculinity ingrained within certain aspects of the Israeli military. The gendered dynamic between Yochai's domineering masculinity and the woman's portrayal as vulnerable and victimized amplifies the power disparity at the checkpoint, consolidating the stereotypical image of the aggressive, conformist Israeli and the defenceless stereotype of the Middle Eastern woman. The woman's attempts at communication and her peaceful demeanour further emphasize her innocence, contrasting with Yochai's suspicion, which renders her an object of a threat despite her efforts. This interaction underscores the polarization between Yochai's rigid, conformist masculinity, and Raphael's empathetic, non-conformist masculinity, which, while contrasting, does not entirely challenge the gendered power structures in the narrative. Instead, Raphael's protective and compassionate demeanour offers a counterpoint to Yochai's dehumanizing actions, but Raphael's role also reinforces the trope of the Middle Eastern woman as dependent on male intervention for protection. As a result, the depiction of the woman as powerless reconstructs the historical stereotype of Middle Eastern femininity while more broadly reinforcing the victimized stereotype of non-Israeli Middle

¹⁰² This research highlights the categorization and divide represented in Erdal's works on Israeli masculinities, using the duality of conformist versus non-conformist masculinity as its primary framework. However, this does not suggest that all individuals categorized as conformist are uniformly so. Rather, both case studies directed by Erdal frame Israeli masculinities, particularly IDF soldiers, in this way for dramaturgical purposes, simplifying their diversity to emphasize Erdal's critique of hegemonic norms.

Eastern characters. These gendered representations function as one among several mechanisms through which different masculinities are distinguished in Erdal's work, conformist masculinity partially defines itself through dominance over feminized subjects, while non-conformist masculinity, though more empathetic, still positions itself in relation to women portrayed with limited agency.

Through Yochai, the play depicts how conformist attitudes often manifest as a superior stance that refuses to recognize non-Israeli residents as civilians with equal rights, particularly those deemed outsiders or threats. Yochai's unwillingness to soften his approach, even when confronted with the woman's friendliness, reconstructs the conformist Israeli's image with psychological and ideological rigidity. This inflexibility further manifests in the subsequent exchange between Yochai and Raphael, where their clashing perspectives highlight the ideological divide underpinning their contrasting masculinities.

Erdal [*Narrates the situation in role play*]: After she left, Yochai confronted Raphael.

[Yochai:] Do you have to be so fucking chatty?

Raphael said He was nervous because this was his first interaction with a civilian.

[Yochai:] What are you talking about? I saw you talking to lots of people in Lebanon.

[Raphael:] Lebanon is different. We are in Palestine now.

Yochai pounced.

[Yochai:] There is no such thing as Palestine. It's made up.

[Raphael:] Yochai, look around you; you are in Palestine, surrounded by Palestinians.

[Yochai:] There is no such thing as Palestinians. They have no history or culture dating back to before the Six-Day War. We, on the other hand, have a history and culture dating back 5000 years ago.

[Raphael:] Yochai! We left here two thousand years ago. For centuries, this place has been called Palestine, so people living here are Palestinians.

But Yochai wasn't swayed.

[Yochai:] Yeah? Then, how come there is no ancient coin with the face of the Palestinian king?

The Judean desert is filled with archeological artifacts proving that this is Israel.

[Raphael:] Yochai, these people do not need ancient coins to tell them that they're Palestinians.

Who the fuck are you to tell them who they are?

[*Erdal narrates himself in the situation*] I said, Okay, enough, enough, you guys! I can't take it anymore.¹⁰³

Yochai's assertions reflect a mindset of denial, dismissing the historical and cultural identity of Palestinians and using historical narratives to justify dominance over the land. The scene at the checkpoint, where Yochai's aggressive and dehumanizing treatment of the Palestinian woman triggers the argument with Raphael, serves as a key moment illustrating this divide. This confrontation between the conformist and non-conformist viewpoints highlights a broader ideological divide. The portrayal of conformist Israeli masculinity is characterized by dismissiveness, condescension, and rejection of any perspective that challenges right-wing ideals, particularly those opposing Palestinian historical claims and the two-state solution. However, these conformist traits are mainly left unexplored; the play does not delve into the deeper reasons behind such attitudes or their internal contradictions. Instead, the conformists are presented as rigid and unwilling to engage, ultimately flat and lacking nuance, which further contrasts with the more layered depiction of the non-conformist. Unlike the gradual and nuanced development of the non-conformist, shaped by his military experiences, varied perspectives, and autobiographical accounts, the conformist characters remain static. The conformist's presence primarily

¹⁰³ Erdal, "Soldiers of Tomorrow."

serves to clarify the non-conformist's stance, offering a contrast that defines him more clearly. As the non-conformist character gains depth on stage, distancing from a monolithic image, the conformists are portrayed as unbending, consistently opposing non-military solutions and denying the Other's rights and historical presence.

Erdal's platoon commander, Avi, is depicted with nuanced characteristics rather than as a mere aggressive, unemotional figure. Erdal introduces Avi as someone who "was only twenty, but to us, he seemed like a charismatic mature adult almost like a father figure [...] I think I worshiped Avi,"¹⁰⁴ To Erdal, as he narrates, Avi was a reasonable commander who tried to fulfill his military duties lawfully and avoid any criminal acts. However, as subplots are presented, the character of Avi does not seem to break out of a generalized image of an IDF soldier. In a situation where Avi is training soldiers on their responsibilities at checkpoints, he creates violent scenarios in which civilians, such as an older woman and a civilian driver, are presumed to be imminent threats, in all these situations. In the situation where the IDF soldiers encounter the older woman described in the Yochai-Raphael encounter, she returns to the checkpoint with a baby with no ID and is sick. Despite Erdal's positive description of Avi, the plot reveals the opposite. Yochai is still harsh and does not allow women to pass through for lack of a baby's ID. Erdal and Raphael argue with Avi about letting her go, but Avi sides with Yochai, reasoning that the woman's son is on the list of threats, and they can't let the woman and baby go. This dramatic moment renders all the positive attributes of Avi's character meaningless in light of his cruel reaction to solving the woman and child situation.

Erdal: Raphael was upset that we're holding her, but

Yochai said: Her son's a fucking terrorist.

And I said We do not know that. He's [i.e. the son] on the list. That's all we know.

¹⁰⁴ Erdal, "Soldiers of Tomorrow."

[Woman said:] I must get the baby home.

I explained to her that we had to wait and that it wasn't my call. Then the baby woke up.

[Woman said:] Baby needs milk and medicine; you're stopping him from getting that; what kind of person stops the baby from eating?

Raphael had a little burner. He offered to boil water, but she said she had to get him home. [...] I promised her we'd sort things out when an officer arrived. I told her Avi is a good man and she'll get justice. [...] I saw Avi arriving [...], and [Avi] asked what the problem was [...]. He [Raphael] assured her we'd get them through as soon as possible.

Avi is interrogating the woman on why she is taking the sick baby at that time with no ID.

[Avi:] Your son didn't go to work, did he? Where did he go? Why did he leave?

[Woman:] His cousin was arrested, so he became afraid and thought they might come for him next.

[Avi:] If he didn't do anything wrong, why was he afraid?

[Woman:] We are afraid all the time. You come into our home in the middle of the night, you take people away [...] when he was fifteen, my son threw stones, and you held him for six months without a trial. I had to sell my house to get a lawyer.

[Avi:] He threw stones. That's a crime.

[Woman:] He was fifteen.

Avi stepped closer to her.

[Avi:] Listen, a friend of mine is sitting in a wheelchair because a fifteen-year-old dropped a cinder block on his head. If they held him for six months, they must have had a good reason.

Avi said that if she told him where her son was, she can go home, and when she said she does not know, he [Avi] shouted.

[Avi:] Stop lying already.

[Woman to Erdal:] You said my officer is a good man, but this man is cruel.

Erdal: [...] Just then, I'll never forget it, Avi yelled.

[Avi:] Lady, will you shut that fucking baby up?¹⁰⁵



Figure 32. Erdal performs the checkpoint scene where Avi interrogates the Palestinian Woman in *Soldiers of Tomorrow*. Screenshot from *Soldiers of Tomorrow*, YouTube video, 2022

In both productions, conformist Israeli masculinity functions primarily as a contrast to non-conformist identities, underscoring the complexities of the latter. Drawing from Jacques Derrida's concept of *différance*, the meaning of conformist/militarist/Zionist Israeli masculinity is understood not by its intrinsic qualities but by how it differs from other elements. This temporal difference (meaning it is always *deferred*) positions contemporary perceptions of Israeli masculinity in stark contrast to the anti-Zionist grouping of critical Israelis highlights this contrast.¹⁰⁶ The examples in this section manifest conformist Israeli masculinity portrayed in juxtaposition to the pacifist and non-conformist characters of Erdal and Raphael. Similarly, the non-Israeli identity is portrayed through this method, differentiating groupings by placing them in contrast within the story. The two Israeli groupings in these artworks are distinguished by their ideologies, manifested through dialogues and actions in the same dramatic situation where other groupings are present, such as checkpoints. The militaristic grouping's ideological components (i.e., ideologemes delivered through verbal expressions) are not explicitly explained in the production; they are merely assertions negating the views of their non-conformist counterparts.

¹⁰⁵ Erdal, "Soldiers of Tomorrow."

¹⁰⁶ Erdal, "This Is Not a Conversation." Erdal's announcement in the play "Zionism is a kind of racism, by definition" marks his opposing Zionist Masculinity.

Additionally, their aggressive stance towards Palestinians underscores their ideological differences, highlighting their unapologetic and hostile figure. Thus, the contrast is seen when the three groupings are juxtaposed; characters embodying non-Israeli masculinities are seen as threats by militarists and as victims or unjustly presumed threats by non-conformists. These differing views serve as a backdrop against which the complexities of non-conformist Israeli masculinities are explored, revealing further imbalance in the representation of the conformist grouping that lacks depth and complexity. This imbalance in depiction, given the juxtaposition of images that influence the formation of identities, results in the construction of the critical Israeli's image being more pervasive throughout the story compared to other identities. The question previously raised about the conformist and militaristic Israeli man is: Has his identity and portrayal been given the same depth and detail as the critical Israeli man?

In both productions, the conformist Israeli is characterized by specific melodramatic techniques (as established in Chapter One): moral polarization, emotionally evocative scenes, exaggeration, and sensationalized conflict.¹⁰⁷ These melodramatic elements are particularly evident in how Erdal stages the checkpoint scenes. In *Soldiers of Tomorrow*, when Avi sharply commands the older Palestinian woman, “Lady, will you shut that fucking baby up!”, the scene employs moral polarization—positioning the soldier (i.e., Avi) as a callous authority figure against the suffering innocents (i.e., the woman and the baby).¹⁰⁸ The scene's structure follows melodramatic convention through its escalating tension, dramatic climax when “Avi reached over and looked at the baby's face,” noticing the baby seems really weak and needs medical attention and the emotional resolution when Avi finally permits passage.¹⁰⁹ Similarly,

¹⁰⁷ See Chapter One, (sub-section “Reconstructing Stereotypes in *A Line in the Sand*” (page 139), for a comprehensive analysis of melodrama as a theatrical form. The concept of melodrama as “drama of articulation” comes from Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination*, 56. Brooks argues that melodrama emphasizes the “recognition of the sign of virtue” through moral binaries and emotional excess, which emerged during industrialization to simplify complex social realities. In the theatrical context, melodramatic techniques include clear villains and victims, exaggerated confrontations, sensationalized staging, and moral resolutions. Erdal's dramatic portrayal of conformist soldiers utilizes these techniques, particularly through the checkpoint scenes' procedural speech patterns, exaggerated suspicion, and moral absolutes.

¹⁰⁸ Erdal, “Soldiers of Tomorrow.”

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

Yochai's character demonstrates melodramatic exaggeration through his excessive patriotic declarations ("There's no such thing as Palestine. It's made up") and heightened emotional outbursts ("How dare you compare Israeli soldiers to Nazis!").¹¹⁰ Yochai's binary worldview, expressed through absolutist statements about Israeli moral superiority, "what makes the Israeli Defence Force the most moral military in the world," reflects melodrama's tendency toward simplified moral positions.¹¹¹

In *This is Not a Conversation*, the checkpoint role-play scene employs quintessential melodramatic techniques through exaggerated physical staging and heightened verbal confrontation. Erdal's staging instruction, "he's got a bullet in the chamber. He's pointing his gun at you [...] in case you have a knife," creates the visual tableau of threat and vulnerability central to melodrama.¹¹² The dialogue escalates tension through suspicion and paranoia: "You never know. It has happened. That a woman has stabbed soldiers at the checkpoint."¹¹³ Later in the play, the statement "Because Palestinians are finished. They don't have a future" creates the fatalistic proclamation typical of melodramatic moral absolutism.¹¹⁴ These staging and dialogue choices construct conformist Israeli masculinity through recognizable melodramatic types—suspicious authority figures defined by institutional power. These portrayals often emphasize the perceived cruelty of conformist Israeli masculinity, such as soldiers encountering an older woman with a child. While moments of sympathy toward conformist soldiers occasionally emerge, such as when Erdal acknowledges the fear experienced by young conscripts, these humanizing glimpses remain secondary to the overall dramatic structure that privileges non-conformist perspectives through more developed characterization.¹¹⁵ Thus, this melodramatic portrayal, predominantly critical of

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Erdal, "This Is Not a Conversation."

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ For instance, in *Soldiers of Tomorrow*, Erdal acknowledges the institutional pressures on conformist soldiers when he states, "Kind-hearted people who never hurt anybody in their lives until somebody dropped a cinder block on their buddy's head, and that was the end of their kindness." This momentary sympathy, however, serves to highlight how institutional

conformist figures and depicting non-Israelis as victims, serves to accentuate Erdal's nuanced and expansive representation of non-conformist subjectivity.

Non-Israeli Characters

Between the three distinct groupings in these two plays and productions, there is a clear line of differentiation, either dramatized in checkpoints, situated on the margins of the stage or remains less explored within dialogues. The distinction between the non-Israeli and other groups manifests in three distinct ways, all indicating a lack of interaction and connection on equal terms: the potential threat perceived by the non-Israeli group, the lack of exchange of ideas, and the portrayal of the non-Israeli group as primarily emotional and victimized. The non-Israeli group is often depicted as victims (or unjustly seen as threats), with even non-conformist characters who are critical of conditions unfavourable to non-Israelis, failing to show much sympathy to create even superficial emotional interaction. Consequently, the bond between these groups lacks exploratory interaction and exchange of ideas, limiting their interactions to presumptions of the non-Israeli as a potential oppressor or oppressed for the Israeli side, thus reinforcing stereotypes and simplistic perceptions.



Figure 33. Screenshot from *This Is Not a Conversation*, by Erdal. Belfry Theatre, 2016. Source: vimeo.com.

violence transforms individuals rather than to develop conformist characters with equivalent complexity to their non-conformist counterparts. The sympathy reinforces rather than undermines the contrast between character types.

Erdal's staging of non-Israelis gradually tends to be cast uniformly as suspects or victims, highlighting the overlooked diversity within the non-Israeli category. For instance, in *This is Not a Conversation*, the staging of interactions with non-Israeli characters is typically set within a military setting (e.g., at checkpoints), portraying the dynamic with the non-Israeli in a potentially volatile and tense situation.¹¹⁶ Other instances of non-Israelis appear through dialogues and role-play, creating and maintaining tension with Israeli masculinities. For example, Erdal stages scenarios at checkpoints where non-Israeli residents are depicted as potential threats, dramatized through role-play with Dima to highlight perceived dangers. Similarly, in *Soldiers of Tomorrow*, Erdal narrates a tense encounter between IDF soldiers and a woman at a checkpoint during his service, further illustrating the contrast between the two groups and the unjust labels applied to the generalized, unexplored Other groups. These depictions contrast the aggressive, conformist Israeli masculinities with the vulnerable and victimized non-Israeli characters, reinforcing stereotypical associations for both sides: conformist Israelis are repeatedly aligned with aggression and a lack of compassion, while non-Israelis are presented as defenceless and passively suffering. Through repeated emphasis on this binary across different scenarios, the dramaturgy entrenches these stereotypes, overshadowing the potential to explore the complexities of both groups. This sustained focus on the victim-aggressor dynamic redirects attention toward the non-conformist masculinity, which emerges as the most nuanced and developed identity, while the conformist and non-Israeli characters remain simplified and unexplored. Furthermore, by framing non-Israelis as either threats or victims, the dramaturgy creates a moral contrast that amplifies

¹¹⁶ While Dima maintains an ongoing physical presence throughout *This is Not a Conversation*, active physical presence does not per se guarantee meaningful dramaturgical function or afford depth and complexity to the character. Therefore, Dima's dramaturgical function remains consistent with the argument presented here. As analyzed in the "Unequal Representation of Identity Through Movement and Narrative" section (page 406), Dima's character is primarily framed through displacement narratives and nostalgia rather than developed with the ideological complexity afforded to Erdal's character. Her participation in role-plays and movement sequences serves to highlight power asymmetries rather than provide a multidimensional exploration of Palestinian identity. Similarly, the Syrian musician in *Soldiers of Tomorrow*, though continually present and contributing musically, remains dramaturgically underdeveloped. This representational disparity, where physical presence is not matched with narrative depth, reinforces rather than challenges the argument presented in this chapter.

the non-conformist's dissenting stance against its Israeli opponent. This approach reinforces the construct of conformist masculinity while indirectly linking non-Israeli masculinities to silence, passivity, victimhood, and vulnerability, often associated with non-Israeli women. The repeated duality between oppressor and victim leaves little room for nuanced interaction between the groups, shaping a stage dynamic that prioritizes the development of dissenting masculinity over exploring others' perspectives.

Another example in *Soldiers of Tomorrow* is Erdal's fear of his barber, Abed, whose character appears on stage toward the end of the play, preparing to shave Erdal's beard while engaging in conversation. As Erdal describes in the play's opening, his fear is triggered by the sight of Abed with a razor, culminating in a scene where Abed places the razor under Erdal's throat before the stage fades, leaving the tension unresolved and the potential threat toward non-Israeli Middle Easterners unaddressed. Erdal acknowledges this fear as imagined, noting that his military experiences in the IDF fuel his projection of tensions onto their interaction, highlighting his internal conflict and underlying mistrust. However, when Abed appears on stage, this tension is not seen in their interaction but remains a potential threat every time a non-Israeli Middle Eastern encounters an ex-IDF soldier. Thus, even without dramatic moments of tension between Israelis and non-Israelis, non-Israeli characters feature prominently in Erdal's memories, intensifying tensions when juxtaposed with Israeli masculinities. While Erdal's depiction aims to critique this perception by revealing its unjustified dimensions, his portrayal shifts the non-Israeli category from perceived threats to victims of suspicion, thus overlooking the diversity and nuances within the non-Israeli group.

Presumed Subjects of Threat

The non-Israelis' unexplored nuances have their original reference; their portrayals are connected to reality with origin but remain unopened, and hence, prone to be delivered in a nostalgia mode that

oversimplifies and romanticizes a memory and history. In both plays, the actors' verbal roles (silent or dialogical), use of sound and light, and other props present a nuanced image of the Israeli critical stance and an unexplored, less nuanced image of the non-Israeli from the region, who express themselves in silence. This surface realism results in identities that seem real and original but are fundamentally oversimplified, lacking the deeper historical and cultural contexts necessary for a fuller understanding. Such flattened and simplified picturization of non-Israelis is seen in the arrangement of the non-Israeli performers in *Soldiers of Tomorrow*. When the Syrian musician plays, the lighting changes to dark blue, one of the few moments lighting changes throughout the performance. Hence, the masculinities of the non-Israeli remain pictured as non-spoken, strange, but heard in an emotionally evoking form.

Another non-Israeli masculine character, Abed, has a limited presence on stage and within the narrative. Positioned on the opposite side of the stage, the barbershop chair symbolizes everyday life and personal encounters in a Canadian barbershop. However, this setting reveals little about Abed, and his characterization remains confined to Erdal's narration, which describes Abed as an Arab barbershop owner where Erdal is a regular:

Erdal: He was a soldier in the first Iraqi war in 1991, and then he deserted and walked through the mountains to Turkey, where he lived in a refugee camp for two and a half years before immigrating to Canada.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁷ Erdal, "Soldiers of Tomorrow."

The plot then shifts its focus back to Erdal, centring on his unfolding subjectivities, painting Erdal's masculinity as regretful, fearful, and a victim of the violent politics of the Israeli state. In the barbershop scene, Erdal's interactions with Abed, set in this everyday environment, transform the chair into a symbol of vulnerability and trust, emphasizing the critical masculinity concerned with coexistence with the non-Israeli Other, even though both subjects are far from the context that created this tension. However, does this narrative extend the same concern of threat and tension for Abed or the musician? As the plot progresses, this question remains unanswered, leaving the portrayal of the non-Israeli narrative underdeveloped, thereby remaining perceived as it is in common sense and mass media. In both plays, actor's arrangements, their verbal role (silent or dialogical), use of sound and light, and other props present a nuanced image of the Israeli critical stance and an unexplored, less nuanced image of the non-Israeli from the region, who express themselves in silence.



Figure 34. Abed (left) and Erdal (right) in the closing scene. Screenshot from *Soldiers of Tomorrow*. Source: YouTube.com

In *Soldiers of Tomorrow*, two non-Israeli characters (i.e., Arabs as identified through the dialogues) create the contrast and tension: A Christian Iraqi barber who inspires fear of death in Erdal and a Syrian musician who barely speaks on stage. The barber, Abed, in *Soldiers of Tomorrow*, appears in Erdal's story as a potential threat even though they are both away from the conflicting lands and live in Canada. Erdal describes Abed as a man who, each time he shaves, poses an imaginary threat simply because he is

an Arab from Iraq, even though Erdal stresses “he is a Christian.”¹¹⁸ The Syrian player, Emad, in *Soldier of Tomorrow*, is not involved much in dialogues; his art, musical instruments, and singing in Arabic, as well as Erdal’s introduction, are adequate to establish the “us and them” divide.

Similarly, in *This is Not a Conversation*, the oversimplification mixed with a sense of nostalgia is seen in the background of the forced immigration of non-Israeli Dima vis-à-vis the non-conformist Israeli Erdal. Erdal’s journey represents a deliberate departure from the Promised Land, unlike Dima’s status and the Jewish Diaspora. We understand Erdal’s critique and the reasons, which are conveyed through various angles and details on stage, for his departure from the conflicted land more deeply than Dima’s situation, who is portrayed merely as a victim on stage. While Dima expresses her dissatisfaction with the discriminatory stance of the Israeli state towards Palestinians, echoing Erdal’s critical stance, these expressions do not reveal the historical roots and identity of her group’s forced migration. Thus, both characters come from a situation of forced displacement, but Erdal’s self-imposed immigration is explored and dissected in the play, whereas Dima is presented as one expelled from her homeland and a mere victim of an unopened historical past. Consequently, Dima’s identity is framed in a nostalgic mode, lacking the depth of character development and repeating the narrative of the victimized Middle Eastern female, thereby normalizing the simplistic image of Middle Eastern femininity. Since this study focuses on Middle Eastern masculine identities, Dima’s background becomes significant. Whether portrayed in a feminine or masculine manner, her Middle Eastern subjectivity lacks nuance, being emotionally evocative yet historically depthless on stage, highlighting the unexplored and superficial portrayal of non-Israeli identities throughout the narrative. Even if the production emphasizes Dima’s femininity, this simplification simultaneously reduces the complexity of masculinity. To illustrate this point, we can invoke Derrida’s concept of *différance*, which emphasizes the dependence of meanings on their

¹¹⁸ Erdal, “Soldiers of Tomorrow.”

differences and the relational definition of terms such as femininity and its counterpart, masculinity.¹¹⁹

The reasons for Dina's displacement from Palestine remain only passing to a conflict, allowing the narrative to be filled with images that create this condition for the Middle Eastern female, which can be either the despotic Middle Eastern Israeli or Non-Israeli Muslim/Arab masculinities whose despotic image has been reproduced since Orientalism.¹²⁰

Unequal Representation of Identity Through Movement and Narrative

The initial movements between Dima and Erdal manifest a sense of entanglement between the two sides without a moment of contact with one another. These movements repeat three times: at the opening, it is nonverbal; we see movements that bear no specific meaning, but two characters performing an arrangement of movements, tangling intricately without touching each other. Their eye contact and their movements indicate that they do not even recognize each other's presence. The second time these movements are performed is by Dima and Erdal, respectively, and simultaneously speak in



Figure 35. Dima and Erdal's movement scene in *This Is Not a Conversation*. Belfry Theatre 2016. Photo by Matt Rezneck Source: itaierdal.com

¹¹⁹ Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 3–5. Derrida's concept of *différance* refers to how meanings are deferred and differ in language, highlighting signs' fluid and relational nature rather than their fixed meanings.

¹²⁰ Michael Curtis, "Political Thinkers and the Orient," in *Orientalism and Islam: European Thinkers on Oriental Despotism in the Middle East and India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 51–71. In this chapter, Curtis explains how the term "Oriental despotism" has historically been attached to Eastern regions in academic studies and official texts by diplomats and politicians from the Global North.

Arabic and Hebrew, manifesting the contrast between the two through verbal elements. There is no exchange; the overlapping creates a tumultuous interaction where the performers do not hear one another, and the simultaneous use of different languages renders the verbal content largely indecipherable, regardless of potential linguistic familiarity. Hence, the two movements with the same arrangements deliver a sense of persistent disconnect between two separate, distinct sides. But for the third time, both performers speak in English, alternatively speaking without any overlap. They narrate their memories of the past, autobiographical accounts from childhood, and images of lived experiences in the region (i.e., Israel, Palestine, and a Refugee camp in Lebanon).

Erdal: When I was a kid in Jerusalem, we lived in a one-bedroom apartment [*Walking towards the center of the stage*], so my mom stayed at the loft above the living room.

Dima: [*Standing behind Itai on one edge of the stage*] It's 1980. I am three years old. Beirut is in the middle of [a] civil war.

Erdal: [*Sitting on the chair on the other edge of the stage*] When I was eight, she inherited some money and did some renovations around the same time she sprained her ankle.

Dima: Let's go, Dima. My grandmother and my grandfather came through the gunfire to rescue me.

Erdal: [*Walks to center*] The apartment was a huge mess; we have packed boxes all over the living room...

Dima: Hurry, Dima [*Dima is moving her body carefully as if she must move with deep caution*].

Erdal: [...] I started harassing my sister [*Erdal pretends to throw objects*].

Dima: [*On her feet, walking slowly*] Be careful.

[Erdal continues throwing the object, and Dima looks down, walks carefully, and gets very close to Erdal's back].¹²¹



Figure 36. Dima and Erdal's movement scene. This is Not a Conversation. Belfry Theatre 2016. Photo by Matt Rezneck Source: itaierdal.com

These memories are narrated in parallel while their bodies perform the stories through movements. They keep moving around one another, giving the impression of two ongoing narratives: Dima's trauma of escaping from the war zone and Erdal's memories of small tensions at home with his family. These narratives manifest as two parallel streams that never cross paths, although their contexts impact each other's living conditions. The movements convey not just a sense of disconnection but also two distinct, very personal narratives within the context of the Palestine-Israel divide. These narratives are not exchanged between the performers but are recited like monologues to the audience. Hence, despite shifts in the content of these three staged narrations, the repeated movements, all with similar arrangements, reinforce the sense of divide and lack of exchange between non-Israeli and conformist Israelis. From the first movement to the third, there is character development into a nostalgic mode of representing these two identity groupings. However, because the non-conformist Israeli is explored and expressed in more layers throughout the performance, while the non-Israeli is less dissected and expressed, the latter remains represented through memories, emotions, traumatic experiences, and childhood recollections. This imbalance is evident in the dramatic structure: Erdal's character evolves through multiple

¹²¹ Erdal, "This Is Not a Conversation."

dramaturgical techniques—direct address, role-play, personal narrative, political commentary, and ethical reflection, while Dima’s character development relies primarily on nostalgic recollection. When Dima places her grandmother’s traditional dress on the chair, her narrative focuses on memory (“Everything we lost”) and symbolic displacement rather than political ideology or historical analysis that would contextualize her experience.¹²² In contrast, when Erdal displays his military uniform, this object becomes a catalyst for extended critical examination of IDF policies, moral dilemmas of occupation, and his evolving political consciousness. While Erdal’s character articulates complex positions like equalizing Zionism with racial discrimination alongside personal reflections, Dima’s ideological framework remains unexplored beyond her status as a displaced Palestinian. In dialogue scenes, Erdal frequently interrupts or redirects conversations toward his experiences, such as when Dima attempts to discuss Lebanon and Erdal shifts to his military perspective: “Hezbollah was defending South Lebanon,” and “They started shooting at us, and I didn’t start shooting at anybody,” Erdal responds.¹²³ This structural imbalance in the representation of their identity histories, one with more layers and the other with fewer highlights the unequal portrayal of their nuanced character details.

¹²² Erdal, “This Is Not a Conversation.”

¹²³ Ibid.



Figure 37. Movement scene. *This is Not a Conversation*. Belfry Theatre 2016. Photo by Matt Rezneck Source: itaierdal.com

The gender dynamics between the male Israeli and the female Palestinian characters reveal a pronounced power imbalance. Dima's portrayal, rooted in her status as a refugee, emphasizes vulnerability and dependence, reinforcing stereotypes of Middle Eastern women as passive, lacking agency, and in need of protection from external threats.¹²⁴ Defined as a refugee female with past traumas, Dima is framed as needing protection from a violent environment, which subtly positions her as reliant on external forces for safety. In contrast, Erdal, a male Israeli immigrant, navigates his identity with agency, using reflective storytelling that grants his image depth and control. The contrast between Erdal's voluntary migration and Dima's forced displacement underscores the gender power dynamic disparity: while Erdal's journey appears as an act of self-determination, Dima's is depicted as constrained by circumstances beyond her control. This imbalance reflects how male authority can overshadow female voices, even when both characters share the stage. Through Erdal's self-reflective complexity and Dima's portrayal, the scene perpetuates stereotypes that cast Middle Eastern women as

¹²⁴ Middle Eastern women are often stereotypically portrayed as lacking agency and needing protection from male figures, a narrative deeply rooted in Orientalist discourses. Leila Ahmed discusses how Western narratives have positioned themselves as liberators of Muslim women, framing "women's oppression in Islam" as a prevalent theme, which has been used to justify intervention; see Leila Ahmed, *A Quiet Revolution: The Veil's Resurgence, from the Middle East to America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 14, 195, 224–25. Additionally, colonial powers appropriated feminist rhetoric to support their missions. As Farahani and Thapar-Björkert argue, "colonial feminism" was deployed to "save brown women from brown men," underscoring how stereotypes were used to justify control; see Fataneh Farahani and Suruchi Thapar-Björkert, "Postcolonial Masculinities," in *Routledge International Handbook of Masculinity Studies*, eds. Lucas Gottzén, Ulf Mellström, and Tamara Shefer (London: Routledge, 2019), 94.

dependent and in need of rescue, reinforcing cultural patterns where male narratives dominate and female identities remain simplified.

In *Soldiers of Tomorrow*, the portrayal of non-Israeli masculinities, such as the Syrian musician Emad, mirrors earlier dynamics discussed with Dima, where meaning is dependent on contrast with a counterpart. Emad is positioned on the far edge of the stage, while Erdal, the narrator, occupies the center, occasionally integrating Emad's contributions through music and rare verbal expressions. Emad's background is hinted at briefly, with minimal depth; his music primarily serves as intermissions, suggesting his origins without exploring the complexities of his exile. These brief hints are indicated through the use of instruments like the oud, along with melodies that occasionally create an ambiance reminiscent of a Middle Eastern theme (Figure 38). The music serves as an aural backdrop, mainly when Erdal's narrative takes a sombre turn, subtly linking Emad's presence to a broader regional atmosphere without fully exploring his complex background. The verbal introductions of Erdal and Emad to the audiences equate their reasons for leaving their respective countries, overlooking the profound differences between the civil war in Syria and Erdal's dissatisfaction with the socio-political environment in Israel.

Erdal: This is Emad Armoush. He's a wonderful musician. He plays flamenco in Arab music all over the world. He left Syria for the same reasons I left Israel.

Emad: This is Erdal. He is a local lighting designer and a playwright. He left Israel for the same reason I left Syria.¹²⁵

¹²⁵ Erdal, "Soldiers of Tomorrow."

Erdal's background is explored in depth, with his presence dominating the stage through dynamic storytelling and varied narrative techniques. In contrast, despite a shared experience of migration, Emad's portrayal remains limited. Positioned on the periphery, Emad's contributions are mostly through music, with minimal verbal engagement. This contrast reduces Emad's background to brief interludes, leaving much of his story untold and overshadowed by Erdal's more comprehensive narrative. Additionally, Emad's one of the very few moments of verbal expression juxtaposed with Erdal's expression does not manifest a sense of interaction between the two.



*Figure 38. Emad, the Syrian musician, plays the oud (عود) in *Soldiers of Tomorrow*. Photo by Matt Reznik. Push Festival, 2023. Source: itaierdal.com*

Non-Israeli Middle Eastern Masculinities: Emotionally Framed and Simplified

Erdal's dramaturgy reduces non-Israeli characters to emotional signifiers (i.e., nostalgic memories, musical interludes, and expressions of suffering), which flatten their identities into one-dimensional figures and hinder deeper understanding. This approach diminishes the complex subjectivities of non-Israeli Middle Easterners, stripping away nuanced character details. Rather than offering layered and nuanced portrayals, these representations often resort to emotionally charged depictions that evoke pity and fear, focusing on elements like victimhood, gender power dynamics, or music to trigger sentimentality. Such emotionally charged depictions operate as melodramatic structures, where affect displaces political complexity and renders non-Israeli figures legible primarily through their suffering.

For instance, Dima's characterization combines oversimplification with nostalgia, set against the backdrop of her forced migration, and contrasted with the non-conformist Israeli Erdal. Her identity is presented through a nostalgic lens, reinforcing the trope of a victimized Middle Eastern female without exploring her deeper context. As discussed earlier about Dima's depiction, invoking Derrida's concept of *différance* highlights how simplifying one subgroup of the Middle Eastern category reduces the complexity of the entire identity groupings. Another example is Emad, a Syrian music player in *Soldiers of Tomorrow*, who primarily adds emotional layers through music, with vague references to a shared migration experience with Erdal, who "left Israel for the same reason I [Emad] left Syria."¹²⁶ The lack of further background for Emad forces the audience to rely on stereotypes of Syrian migrants to fill in the gaps. While it's easy to infer he might be a war refugee, the play never confirms this; Emad could have left for reasons unrelated to conflicts in Syria, such as political or social discontent. This ambiguity reduces Emad's character to a generalized figure of suffering, for all that is shared is "he's a wonderful musician; he plays flamenco in Arab music all over the world. He left Syria for the same reasons I [Erdal] left Israel."¹²⁷ Thus, rather than offering an in-depth portrayal, the representation resorts to a superficial depiction aimed at eliciting emotional responses.

While characters like Dima and Emad are presented through this emotional framing, Abed's character initially appears to offer a departure from this pattern, suggesting the potential for a more nuanced exploration of non-Israeli masculinity. Introduced as a former Iraqi soldier who deserted the army and now lives as a refugee in Canada, Abed's background holds conflicting sentiments that evoke both sympathy and intrigue—a soldier who deserted, ended up in a refugee camp, and is now a refugee in Canada. These elements carry emotional weight, seemingly promising a deeper, more complex character.

¹²⁶ Erdal, "Soldiers of Tomorrow."

¹²⁷ Ibid.

However, despite these promising aspects, Abed's portrayal ultimately relies on melodramatic techniques - his brief appearance with a razor invokes visual threat and emotional tension without extending his earlier character backstory. The barbershop scene employs suspense through staging and silence, while the dialogue remains limited to superficial cultural references ("What kind of Arabs are you guys?"), emphasizing affective impact over complex subjectivity.¹²⁸ These dramaturgical choices align with melodrama's reliance on emotional spectacle rather than analytical depth, reducing Abed's character to an ethnic type within a moral tableau. The conflicting aspects of his militarized past and vulnerable present remain unexplored, leaving Abed's character underdeveloped and the opportunity for more profound complexity unfulfilled. Abed's portrayal in *Soldiers of Tomorrow* tends toward a simplified, gendered, and racial categorization that intersects with superficial perceptions paradoxically juxtaposed in his character, that is, militarized (thereby aggressive) and refugee (thereby a victim). While the potential for a nuanced character is present, the lack of synthesis and depth in these masculine images exacerbates Abed's simplified portrayal, both racially and gender-wise, reducing his identity to stereotypical notions of Middle Eastern men. This simplification is further emphasized in the ending scene of *Soldiers of Tomorrow*, which confirms and stages Abed's being stereotyped. The dialogue between Erdal and Abed touches only superficially on cultural and national affiliations, slotting Abed into a broad racial grouping without delving into his personal history or the reasons for his immigration from Iraq. All the audience knows and is left to perceive is that Abed is an atypical Iraqi who, being neither Muslim nor Jew but a Christian, presents a familiar religious identity in an unfamiliar body (i.e., ethnic minority). This dynamic is further illustrated in the following dialogue between Erdal and Abed, where their exchange underscores the reliance on ethnic stereotypes over personal depth.

Erdal: Did you support Morocco?

¹²⁸ Ibid.

Abed: No, Argentina! Messi, my friend. Come on!

Erdal: What! But it's the first time that an Arab country made it to the quarterfinal.

Abed: Well, you know, I've been an Argentina fan for a long time.

Erdal: Really?

Abed: Yes.

Erdal: I'm an Argentina fan, too; I have a Messi shirt and bought it in Buenos Aires. *[Pause]* But Morocco, didn't you want it to beat France at least?

Abed: No.

Erdal: What! Come on! Just for the history of colonialism, you know?

Abed: I do not know, just like, you know.

[Erdal laughs]

Erdal: *[Referring to Abed's Arab customers]*, didn't they *[Unidentified word]* from Morocco?

Abed: No one, I guess.

Erdal: What! What kind of Arabs are you guys? Come on.

Abed: I do not know *[Abed giggles]*.

Erdal: I wanted Morocco to win so bad.¹²⁹



Figure 39. Abed (left) and Erdal (right) in the closing scene. Screenshot from Soldiers of Tomorrow. Push Festival, 2023. Source: YouTube.com

¹²⁹ Erdal, "Soldiers of Tomorrow"

Erdal's non-conformist masculinity subtly perpetuates cultural stereotypes in its framing of non-Israeli masculinities. Whether improvisational or pre-written, Erdal's repeated questioning of why Abed does not support an Arab team like Morocco but instead favours a non-Arab team reflects an implicit assumption that Abed's identity as an Arab should determine his loyalty, revealing a generalized perception of cultural alignment based on ethnicity. This reinforces gender stereotypes associated with Abed's Middle Eastern identity, portraying him alternately as a militarized aggressor, a refugee victim, and ultimately a threat, especially highlighted in the culminating scene where he holds a razor under Erdal's throat. The play concludes with Abed preparing to shave Erdal's beard, placing a razor under his throat and asking, "Ready?" as the scene goes dark.¹³⁰

Dima's portrayal is focused on emotional aspects without depth. Apart from the movement scene where Dima speaks of her memories, it is through the subplot of *This is Not a Conversation* that Dima's background is exposed through emotional accounts, including her childhood in a war zone and her diasporic experiences as a refugee. Throughout the production, Dima's personal memories of exile from Palestine introduce the image of a Middle Eastern subject primarily in one dimension, that of a female refugee, a prevalent and familiar portrayal in today's globalizing mass culture. While Dima's image adds a personalized account and emphasizes the reality of this experience using her memories and body (or presence) as historical evidence, it does not delve into the deeper context of the conflict from her perspective. Dima's image emphasizes traditional gender roles by highlighting vulnerability and passive victimhood associated with Middle Eastern women in Western representations rather than presenting her as an active agent in her narrative.¹³¹ Dima's subjectivity is framed through emotionally charged

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ Ella Shohat, "Gender and Culture of Empire: Toward a Feminist Ethnography of the Cinema," *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 13, no. 1–3 (1991): 63. Shohat demonstrates how Western narratives project "literal narratives of rescue, specifically of Western and non-Western women—from African, Asian, Arab, or Native American men." Leila Ahmed similarly analyzes how colonial discourse positioned Muslim women as lacking agency, noting that "the idea that Other men, men in colonized societies or societies beyond the borders of the civilized West, oppressed women was to be used, in the rhetoric of colonialism, to render morally justifiable its project of undermining or eradicating the cultures of colonized

depictions, emphasizing idealized memories of childhood peace contrasted with intense suffering during an ambiguous conflict. Compared to Erdal's more nuanced depiction, Dima's narrative lacks a multifaceted examination of the historical background and reasons behind the forced migration of Palestinians. The narrative of Palestinian displacement and expulsion is not thoroughly explored but is merely addressed in a generally emotional passing account. Hence, a key distinction is made between Erdal's self-imposed exile and Dima's forced refugee status in the detailed background they each provide. This unequal presentation not only highlights the contrast between Dima's one-dimensional portrayal and Erdal's layered identity but also underscores how gender influences their character development, Dima as a stereotyped Middle Eastern woman and Erdal as a complex anti-Zionist Jew in a contemporary diaspora.

Non-Israelis' Stereotypical Simulacra vs. Nuanced Non-conformist Israeli

In Erdal's plays, the portrayal of non-Israeli characters often contrasts sharply with that of the non-conformist Israeli protagonist. While non-Israeli characters are depicted through superficial and stereotypical representations—essentially simulacra lacking depth—the Israeli character is presented as a nuanced individual with agency and complexity.

The ending scene in *Soldiers of Tomorrow* blurs the boundaries between the imaginary and the real, yet the portrayal of non-Israeli characters like Abed remains superficial and lacks depth, resulting in simulacra. This blurring of boundaries between the imaginary and the real suggests that characters previously absent from the stage are grounded in genuine experiences. However, while Erdal's portrayal of non-Israeli Middle Eastern characters like Abed is based on reality, it remains superficial and fleeting, lacking depth. This depiction exemplifies a simulacrum, where the representation extends beyond mere

peoples.” Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots to a Modern Debate* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 151.

resemblance, detaching from any profound original context to become an autonomous semblance of reality.

Dima's portrayal in *This is Not a Conversation* employs nostalgia and emotional framing, offering a superficial layer of her identity that reinforces stereotypes and exemplifies postmodern narrative techniques, resulting in simulacra. In *This is Not a Conversation*, unlike *Soldiers of Tomorrow*, the non-Israeli character, Dima, verbally shares her experiences by employing props, movements, and verbal expressions, primarily projecting the nuances of her status as a victim of geopolitical determinism, burdened with nostalgic memories of her past. This portrayal, focusing on nostalgia for her exilic past using items like her grandmother's dress, barely provides an in-depth understanding of her character's social and historical layers and shows her as lacking socio-political agency in the Israel-Palestine context.¹³² The checkpoint subplots, such as the story of an older woman with a child, are marked by emotionally charged moments that remain unexplored in terms of the deeper tensions behind the scenes, creating a portrayal that primarily seeks to evoke pity. This depiction lacks nuance, presenting Dima and the woman with the child as passive figures, defined mainly by their victimhood and absence of agency. These emotionally saturated portrayals rely on melodramatic structures that invoke suffering through visual and auditory cues, movement sequences, personal objects, and a sentimental tone rather than tracing socio-political causality. While possibly serving to further emotional engagement with spectators, the metatheatrical approach assigns a melodramatic tone to Middle Eastern subjects, suggesting a limited exploration of their identities. This melodramatic framing reduces Dima to a symbol of suffering rather than a complex political subject with historical agency. The flattening of

¹³² While Erdal also employs nostalgic objects, specifically his military uniform, his dramaturgical framing uses them as entry points for critical self-reflection and ideological interrogation, including critiques of militarism, Zionism, and masculinities shaped by state power. His nostalgic object catalyzes a transformative analysis of complicity, whereas Dima's dress functions primarily as a sentimental signifier of cultural loss, reinforcing her portrayal as a passive recipient of historical forces rather than an agential subject.

Dima's character also reinforces a dramaturgical binary in which non-conformist Israeli masculinity, embodied by Erdal, becomes the site of ethical introspection and intellectual depth. Victimhood, by contrast, is feminized, framed through emotional suffering, thereby constructing masculinity as the privileged register of critical engagement.

In *Soldiers of Tomorrow*, non-Israeli characters like Emad and Abed are introduced through melodramatic characterization that relies heavily on emotional appeal and simplistic conceptions of Middle Eastern masculinity. These characters enter the scene without introducing themselves verbally or engaging in dialogue with the audience or in expanded dramatic situations, as Erdal does. These scenes operate within a melodramatic mode by employing emotional intensification, simplified relational dynamics, and symbolic contrast. Rather than presenting non-Israeli characters as historically grounded or contextually complex, Erdal positions them as affective devices, underdeveloped in speech or background and framed primarily through emotion-laden imagery. This dramaturgical asymmetry amplifies the moral depth of the non-conformist Israeli character by staging other subjectivities in reductive, symbolic terms. Emad, for instance, plays instruments, including Arabic musical instruments, evoking exoticism, and nostalgia, while Abed appears only briefly at the end of the performance. The presence of these two non-Israelis functions to create contrast and better highlight the focus on the characterization of the non-conformist Israeli. The contrast serves to justify the non-conformist Israeli's criticism of discrimination against non-Israeli residents by staging silent non-Israeli victims alongside him. Erdal's dramaturgy of the Othered non-Israeli features a dual approach that is melodramatic and critically inclined. The exotic music of the Syrian player evokes a nostalgic image of the Middle East. At the same time, Abed, the barber, highlights the contradiction in the stereotype of an Arab who is neither Jewish nor Muslim but as Christian as many Canadian Europeans. Such a strategy can find its roots in

the Orientalists' one-dimensional gaze on the exotic subject. From the seventeenth century onwards, Orientalism depicted the Middle East as a land of despotic men and passive, powerless women.¹³³

In contrast to the non-Israeli characters, Erdal is shown as an active individual with political and intellectual agency. Erdal's non-conformist image is accentuated by contrasting him with Emad, Abed, and Dima, who are portrayed as mere victims, with the audience sympathizing only through emotional narratives, exotic music, or generalized portrayals. The juxtaposition of these two groupings highlights the imbalance in character development and historical context depth between them.

Characterizing the non-conformist Israeli, despite Erdal's self-identification as a critic of Zionism, mainly focuses on emphasizing his own identity, often at the cost of rendering non-Israeli identities as clichéd and superficial. This dissident character fails to change perspectives towards non-Israelis because the dramaturgy maintains the same stance as the Zionist and conformist collectivity: as examined here, non-Israelis are presented superficially, revealing only an emotional layer and showing an inability to exchange views or engage in dialogue with Israelis. This non-probing representation can be seen as a reflection of the collective mentality prevalent in Israeli society towards non-Israelis. Consequently, even the non-conformist fails to challenge or change this simplistic perception and depiction.

The prevalence of a generalized view of the Other, frames Erdal's depiction of the Other within the broader context of the Israeli political unconscious. Across various studies of the social divide between Israel and Palestine, evidence consistently shows a legal and social deprivileging of Arab-Palestinian groups. Ilan Saban's scholarship, for instance, notes the persistent divide in rights between

¹³³ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* (London: Penguin Books, 2003), 207-208. Said writes, "The Oriental male was considered in isolation from the total community in which he lived and which many Orientalists, following Lane, have viewed with something resembling contempt and fear [...] Women are usually the creatures of a male power-fantasy. They express unlimited sensuality, they are more or less stupid, and above all, they are willing. Flaubert's *Kuchuk Hanem* is the prototype of such caricatures, which were common enough in pornographic novels [...] the male conception of the world, in its effect upon the practicing Orientalist, tends to be static, frozen, fixed eternally."

the two communities.¹³⁴ Despite the Israeli supreme court's efforts against polarization, as evidenced in a series of significant rulings, the non-Israeli groups remain starkly separate due to their diverse ideological stances and other differentiating factors.¹³⁵ Saban specifically focuses on Arab Palestinians, only those populations recognized as citizens of Israel, not including those in the West Bank and Gaza or Palestinian refugees worldwide. This racialized differentiation continues to dominate, with Israeli society and state maintaining a homogenizing gaze toward Palestinians of any civil status.

In their extensive study on the conception of Otherness in Jewish communities (i.e., Gentile or Goy), Adi Ophir and Ishay Rosen-Zvi identify two perceptions of the Other: pluriform and generalized. Over centuries, the latter has come to dominate, leading to the “erasure of the distinction between ethnicities.”¹³⁶ It is important to note that referencing this study does not imply that the religious narratives in all Jewish manuscripts have historically contributed to a generalized Other that undermines diversity; such a view would be an overgeneralization of the complex nature of Judaic teachings and culture. However, Ophir and Rosen-Zvi's work does highlight the enduring influence of generalized perceptions in shaping contemporary ideologies in the establishment of the Jewish State of Israel under the title of Zionism:

The point is not to prove that the rabbinic *goy* [i.e., the generalized Other] was, historically speaking, the only operative figure of the Other for Jews, but rather that it has been persistent, recurring, and dominant and that it is still with us today. It is as if this minor figure has re-emerged or gained new power as part of the revolutions in Jewish life generated by the Zionist project, the Holocaust, and the establishment of a modern Jewish State.¹³⁷

¹³⁴ Ilan Saban, “Minority Rights in Deeply Divided Societies: A Framework for Analysis and the Case of the Arab-Palestinian Minority in Israel,” *New York University Journal of International Law & Politics* 36 (2004): 885-1003, accessed June 7, 2025, <https://ssrn.com/abstract=903518>.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 1002.

¹³⁶ Adi Ophir and Ishay Rosen-Zvi, *Goy: Israel's Multiple Others and the Birth of the Gentile* (Oxford University Press, 2018), 197.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 265.

As Zionism continues to shape the ideological perception of the Israeli nation, it also influences the generalized view of the Other, particularly those residing within the same territory. As a discursive construct, identity solidifies this binary perspective as a fundamental assumption. Consequently, even critical discourses aiming to recognize the Other, such as those articulated through Erdal's critical masculinities, tend to neglect the deeper layers of diversity within the Other category. Thus, depending on the ideological stance of Israeli masculinities, the Other is often perceived as either a threat or a victim. This simplified perception, reducing complex identities to mere stereotypes, aligns with the notion of simulacrum, where representations replace and distort reality.

In summary, the productions fail to enrich the audience's understanding of Arab masculinities in the Israel-Palestine region. Erdal's depiction aligns with the binary perspective prevalent in Israeli common sense and even in academic literature, which overlooks the diversities among non-Israeli residents. The critical approach of the dissident Israeli, despite opposing the concept of discrimination, still appears influenced by Zionist thought. His views, despite being progressive, lead to the reproduction of clichés and shallow perceptions about non-Israelis on stage. As a result, the non-Israeli Middle Easterners, including the masculine subjects, are reconstructed in a singular category, whether as victims or threats, lacking nuanced differentiation. Consequently, contrary to the foundational principle of masculinity studies, which emphasizes the diversity of masculinity categories and advocates for a multifaceted approach, Erdal's works maintain a monolithic perspective when it comes to portraying Arab, non-Jewish, non-Israeli, or Palestinian subjects.

While Erdal's non-conformist masculinity offers a critical lens on Israeli militarism and Zionism, this representational strategy paradoxically reinforces the very structure of Israeli masculine identity it seeks to disrupt. By positioning non-Israeli characters primarily as victims devoid of complexity, the dramaturgy re-centers Israeli masculinity, even in its dissenting form, as the privileged site of moral

reasoning and critical agency. As a result, the fundamental Israeli/non-Israeli binary remains intact, and the hegemonic hierarchy it underpins is reproduced rather than dismantled.

Chapter Three Conclusion

Erdal's dramaturgy in *Soldiers of Tomorrow* and *This is Not a Conversation* demonstrates a dual approach to the conception of masculinity that both challenges and perpetuates fixed perceptions. The analysis identifies three social groups linked to the plays: critical masculinities within Israel, militaristic Israelis, and non-Israelis. Erdal's works simultaneously present a nuanced image of non-conformist Israeli masculinities while oversimplifying militaristic Israelis along with non-Israeli characters, particularly non-Israeli women. This contrast serves to highlight the multifaceted nature of critical Israeli masculinities, setting them apart from the simplifying narratives that often dominate portrayals of Middle Eastern identities. Through an innovative combination of dramaturgical techniques, such as minimalistic staging, direct audience engagement, and personal props, Erdal provides depth and complexity to the characterization of the critical Israeli male. However, this nuanced depiction comes at the expense of simplifying other groups. Militaristic Israelis and non-Israeli characters are often paired with nostalgic or melodramatic elements, fostering a nostalgic art aesthetic that reduces these characters to stereotypical victims or aggressors. Israeli masculinities, other than Erdal's character, are depicted through objects and figurines, and their verbal picturization emphasizes the ideological differences between these groups and resonates with the historical context of contemporary Israeli society. On the other hand, the non-Israelis are depicted as threats in the eyes of conformist Israelis or victims in the eyes of critical Israelis. In both plays, non-Israeli characters are often gendered as women, though there are occasional references to non-Israeli masculine characters, such as the brief appearance of two male non-Israelis in *Soldiers of Tomorrow*. All the non-Israelis remain underexplored in their dramatic activity and character development. Dima, for instance, is framed primarily through her victimhood and forced

displacement, portraying her identity through a nostalgic and emotionally charged lens that oversimplifies her complexity. The victimization of non-Israeli women, particularly in their interactions with Israeli masculinities, whether supportive or oppressive, reinforces gendered power dynamics, perpetuates stereotypes, and limits a fuller understanding of non-Israeli identities. When the narrative emphasizes the violent aspects of the Israeli IDF, the non-Israeli perspective is often absent, leaving it subject to varied audience perceptions, hence making the stereotypical perception more probable. Such generalized depictions contribute to the simulacrum effect in contemporary identity politics under multicultural policies, glossing over the historical and cultural complexities of these characters and promoting a uniform image that overlooks the true diversity of their experiences.

This chapter explored whether the images of these three groupings possess an original reality rooted in historical depth or whether they exist as simulacra, disconnected from any tangible origin.¹³⁸ As discussed, Erdal's staging links the narrative to realities he experienced in the past through minimalistic aesthetics and personal storytelling. Using metatheatrical elements, Erdal creates a form of staging that presents groupings with equal reality in the context of Israel-Palestine. Even the simplified groupings possess an original reality, yet they remain unexplored, with their characterization primarily developed in a single, emotionally evocative layer. The underexplored characters are portrayed primarily through their emotional responses to historical experiences without further analysis of what those experiences and contexts entailed. Erdal's reality of critical masculinity is twofold: a virtual reality that gains originality when connected to the narrator's body, expressed through staged reflections, memories, and the presence of Erdal's character as a conduit for past experiences, and a current reality rooted in Erdal's perspective as a former IDF soldier and now theatre practitioner, all set against the backdrop of the Israel-Palestine conflict. Metatheatrical techniques transform personal history into a shared,

¹³⁸ Original reality refers to representations rooted in tangible human experience, social elements, and historical origins, as opposed to "simulacra," which lack such connections. See footnote 91 for further details.

performative memory, thereby creating a staged reality imbued with original elements. The imbalance in the nuances of these groupings results in detailed commentary on the socio-historical context that underscores the IDF's influence on Israeli masculine identities. In contrast, non-Israeli characters, including Dima, whose portrayal as a non-Israeli woman is central to the gendered power dynamics explored in the plays, and male figures like Imad and Abed, gain more tangibility through their physical presence on stage, blurring the lines between reality and hyperreality. Thus, while all these groupings possess an original reality, they are not depicted with equal complexity or depth in their characterizations and the nuances of their identities.

Erdal's dichotomous dramaturgy in portraying masculine identities underscores an interplay where critical portrayals of certain groups come at the expense of oversimplifying others. While the non-conformist Israeli masculinity is depicted with depth and ideological divergence, the militaristic Israeli and non-Israeli masculinities are rendered through simplified, nostalgic, and melodramatic lenses. This approach highlights both the critique and reinforcement of fixed perceptions of masculinity in the Middle East, particularly within the Israel-Palestine context. Although these portrayals differ from some stereotypes, they merely replace old stereotypes with new ones. Stereotypes are always fluid and shifting, yet they keep perceptions within a fixed frame. In summary, Erdal's dramaturgy sets dissenting Israeli masculinities apart from conformist and non-Israeli characters and reveals the limitations of such portrayals, emphasizing the need for a more balanced and multifaceted approach to representing diverse masculinities in contemporary theatre.

CONCLUSION

This dissertation set out to investigate how Middle Eastern masculinities are represented, contested, or reimagined in contemporary Canadian theatre. Grounded in an interdisciplinary framework that brings together theatre studies, critical masculinity studies, postcolonial theory, and Canadian multicultural discourse, the dissertation, at its core, asked: How are stereotypes of Middle Eastern masculinity represented or critiqued in Canadian theatre, and through what dramaturgical strategies are they conveyed and deconstructed? To answer this, the research developed a formal-ideological framework grounded in dramaturgical analysis, aiming to identify how the structure of performance (i.e., its narrative forms, staging choices, aesthetic codes, and translation strategies) shapes the legibility and ideological function of masculinity on stage.

The motivation for this research is underscored by several intersecting cultural dynamics: the persistence of racialized stereotypes in global media, the ongoing legacy of Orientalism in Western representational regimes, and the contradictions embedded in Canadian multiculturalism, which often celebrates diversity while reinforcing hegemonic norms. Within this context, representations of Middle Eastern masculinities are frequently entangled in narratives of violence, victimhood, or silence. While Middle Eastern characters increasingly appear in contemporary theatre, their portrayals are often structured through polarized dramaturgical tropes, ranging from villainy to sentimental victimhood. Theatre, as a medium of embodied and affective representation, holds unique potential to reproduce and disrupt these dominant scripts. This study addresses not only the content of these portrayals but also the dramaturgical form—the structural, visual, and performative means through which identity is produced, mediated, and interpreted.

This study began by situating its questions within these overlapping discourses (i.e., discourses of postmodern aesthetics, multicultural nationalism, and Orientalist typologies) and by proposing that dramaturgy, as both a critical lens and a set of theatrical practices, offers a powerful method for analyzing how masculinity is ideologically produced. These questions were approached with the understanding that masculinity is not a fixed or essential category but a historically and culturally contingent construct. In this light, the dissertation foregrounds the ideology of form, building on the work of Jameson, as a critical lens for unpacking how aesthetic choices encode systems of power, gender, and cultural legibility. The aim was to identify not only what images of masculinity are shown but also how theatrical form itself functions as a vehicle of ideological expression. As the chapters demonstrated, different dramaturgical forms make different masculinities visible, viable, or unintelligible. This conclusion returns to those questions posed in the introduction and case studies to synthesize the dissertation's key contributions, theoretical innovations, and future directions. Echoing the opening chapter, this conclusion reaffirms the project's central claim: that dramaturgical strategies and artistic choices are not ideologically neutral but rather constitutive of how racialized masculinities are imagined, contested, and circulated within settler-colonial cultural systems like Canadian theatre.

This dissertation has argued that theatrical form is not merely a vehicle for representation but a structuring force that shapes how racialized masculinities, particularly Middle Eastern masculinities, are constructed and made visible, legible, and interpretable. Across the three chapters, six case studies were examined not only for their thematic content but also for their dramaturgical composition: their aesthetic logic, narrative architectures, staging strategies, and intertextual choices. Synthesizing across these diverse plays and productions, the analysis identified dramaturgical strategies such as melodramatic humanism, satirical disruption, and universalist aesthetic, each of which ideologically structures the depiction of Middle Eastern masculinity. These strategies, concerned with shared human experience and

the narrative aligned with the Enlightenment, rooted in a Eurocentric perspective of universalization, comprise a typology of theatrical strategies that function ideologically. Each strategic element encodes specific relations of power, empathy, and identity, and each carries distinct implications for how masculinity is othered, politicized, and contextualized within the settler-colonial landscape of Canadian performance.

1. Melodrama: The first dramaturgical strategy identified is what this research refers to as melodramatic humanism, a structure grounded in binary moral logic, heightened affect, and sentimental identification. This form was exemplified by *A Line in the Sand*, which stages a relationship between a Canadian soldier and a Middle Eastern boy within a war-zone narrative marked by moral polarization and emotional intensity. The dramaturgical features of melodrama (i.e., simplified moral conflicts, emotional excess, and a victim-victimizer framework) serve to humanize the racialized Other while simultaneously reinscribing their victimhood.

Here, Middle Eastern masculinity is rendered vulnerable, even sympathetic, but not structurally agentic or nuanced and layered in its characterization. Rather than engaging complex socio-political conditions, it prioritizes affective legibility, staging the character's suffering as a primary mode of meaning-making while limiting the dramaturgical conditions through which political agency could emerge. The form avoids directly confronting structural conditions, such as colonialism, militarism, or xenophobia, that shape his vulnerability. The formal logic of melodrama thus produces a softening of stereotype without its dismantling. The character's depth emerges through sentiment rather than complexity, and the result is a politically ambivalent form that tugs at affect without challenging ideology. This structure reflects a kind of compassionate essentialism, where empathy is achieved through simplification of difference rather than political critique. The result is a politically ambivalent strategy, which is emotionally persuasive, but ideologically conservative.

2. **Satirical Disruption:** The second strategy is what this project refers to as satirical disruption, which engages the tools of metatheatrical parody, and comic inversion to challenge dominant narratives and expose the constructedness of cultural and gendered identities. This dramaturgical method was enacted in *Ali and Ali and the Axes of Evil*. *Ali and Ali* employs exaggerated performance styles, direct audience address, and satirical appropriations of Western media to rupture the passive consumption of stereotypical tropes. Masculinity here is not presented as fixed or essential but as a performative role constantly negotiated in relation to power, history, and institutional structures. This dramaturgical mode favours dissonance over resolution, irony over sentiment, and rupture over closure. Unlike the moral binaries of melodrama, satirical disruption creates a critical distance between the audience and the represented figure, enabling interrogation of the norms that render certain masculinities intelligible or suspect. While not without its own risks, such as interpretive misreadings or alienation, this strategy opens space for a richer critique of both masculinity and the formal mechanisms that shape its visibility.

3. **Universalist Aesthetic Ambiguity:** The third dramaturgical strategy, universalist aesthetic, is marked by the erasure of specific cultural markers, the abstraction of narrative contexts, and the blending of semiotic codes from multiple traditions. This strategy was examined in *Aurash* and *The Death of the King*, where the original Iranian plays were adapted for Canadian audiences through approaches that remove or neutralize historical, ethnic, or linguistic specificity.

In *Aurash*, the protagonist's struggle is cast in allegorical terms, and national signifiers such as "Iran" or "Turan" are replaced with generic labels like "our nation" and "the enemy." Costumes, gestures, and language draw from multiple semiotic registers, Eastern, Western, classical, and modern, without resolving into a coherent cultural frame. Similarly, *The Death of the King* stages a narrative of state violence and scapegoating within an abstract, timeless setting, using minimalistic staging and ambiguous language. While the intent may be to universalize the experience, this ambiguity often results

in simulacral representation—images that float free from historical grounding and are easily reabsorbed into dominant stereotypes. As Jameson argues, such forms are symptomatic of postmodern cultural logic, where signs circulate as commodities, severed from their referents. This strategy does not generate political openness but ideological abstraction. Its aesthetic ambiguity masks its Eurocentric foundations, recoding an approach type of neutrality as a privileging of Western interpretive frames. Within this dramaturgical register, Middle Eastern masculinities are made formally legible but politically and culturally vacant, stripped of the historical and material contexts necessary for critique.

Together, these dramaturgical strategies constitute a typology that captures the ideological range of Middle Eastern masculinity representation in Canadian theatre. From the emotional appeals of melodrama to the critical reflexivity of satire and the interpretive slippage of universalist abstraction, these strategies illustrate how dramaturgical structure mediates cultural meaning. They also reflect the constraints and possibilities for artists navigating Canada's settler-colonial and multicultural frameworks. Importantly, this framework is not meant to be a rigid set of categories but a flexible critical tool—one that helps identify recurring strategies, highlight tensions, and assess what is at stake in how Middle Eastern masculinities are staged. It invites further inquiry into how theatrical form encodes ideology and shapes the possibilities of interpretation. Each dramaturgical approach situates masculinity differently within affective, political, epistemological, and historical frames, ultimately determining not just what is represented but how it can be known. In this way, theatrical form is not simply a matter of aesthetic style but a constitutive dimension of cultural representation. As this dissertation argues, to understand how Middle Eastern masculinities are racialized, politicized, or contested in Canadian theatre, we must attend to the dramaturgical logic through which they are staged.

This dissertation advances three central theoretical contributions at the intersection of theatre studies, critical masculinity studies, and postcolonial theory. Building on the dramaturgical typology

outlined in the previous section, these contributions articulate how theatrical form reflects and actively constructs political legibility, gendered visibility, and racialized identity within Canadian theatre.

1. Extending ideology of form to dramaturgical criticism: The first contribution expands Jameson's concept of the "ideology of form" into the domain of theatre studies by demonstrating how dramaturgical structures, such as narrative framing, metatheatricality, and aesthetic abstraction, carry embedded ideological positions.¹ In particular, this dissertation shows that dramaturgical choices are not ideologically neutral containers for content but material expressions of the social and historical contradictions embedded within an artwork. Jameson's model, originally articulated for literary and cinematic analysis, is here extended to the staging of racialized masculinities in live performance, where form conditions not just interpretation but affective engagement and representational viability. For instance, the melodramatic structure in *A Line in the Sand* reveals a formal logic that personalizes geopolitical violence without interrogating its structural roots. Similarly, the universalist abstraction in *Aurash* and *The Death of the King* masks historical and political specificity under the guise of intercultural humanism, making certain forms of Middle Eastern masculinity visible only as allegory or aesthetic objects. These dramaturgical tendencies embody what Jameson describes as "the waning of affect" in postmodern culture, wherein political urgency is neutralized through its aesthetic logic.² By situating these aesthetic tendencies within Canada's settler-colonial multicultural regime, this dissertation reveals how the postmodern theatrical form mediates between representation and erasure.

2. Expanding Connell's relational theory of masculinity through dramaturgy: The second contribution advances Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinity by highlighting how masculinities are not only relationally constructed within social hierarchies but are also staged through spatial, performative, and

¹ Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1981), 98.

² Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), 11.

narrative techniques. Connell's work emphasizes the dynamic and contested nature of masculinities across race, class, and sexuality; this dissertation extends that analysis by showing that theatrical form plays a decisive role in constructing which masculinities are legible, sympathetic, or transgressive.

Rather than treating masculinity as an identity portrayed by characters, this study approaches it as a performative effect produced through visual, textual, and spatial arrangements. This reconceptualizes masculinity not only as socially contingent but also as dramaturgically choreographed, its status as hegemonic, marginal, or resistant shaped through staging, contrast, and rhythm. In *Ali and Ali and the Axes of Evil*, the use of satire and metatheatre destabilizes normative conceptions of Middle Eastern masculinity (e.g., stereotyped as a terrorist and oppressive patriarch) by exaggerating and parodying its claims to authority. Conversely, *Soldiers of Tomorrow* centers dissenting Israeli masculinity while relegating other masculinities to stereotypes, showing how contrast-driven dramaturgy can reproduce hierarchical visibility even within critical narratives. These examples suggest that dramaturgy functions as a formal grammar through which masculinity is not only represented but ranked, distorted, or reconfigured. This approach complements and extends Connell's relational model by locating its dynamics within aesthetic structure. It proposes that form, like social structure, is an arena of contestation through which gender hierarchies are consolidated or disrupted. Thus, the politics of masculinity representation cannot be fully understood without attention to the dramaturgical means by which these representations are constructed and circulated.

3. Bridging postcolonial and theatre studies through the concept of relational staging: The third contribution lies in bridging three disciplinary conversations (i.e., postcolonial theory, diaspora studies, and dramatic and theatrical analysis) through a focus on what this study terms relational staging. This concept refers to how dramaturgical form stages relationships not only between characters but between aesthetic codes, cultural histories, and geopolitical imaginaries. Through this lens, the dissertation

articulates how diasporic theatre negotiates identity not by asserting fixed cultural origins or appealing to universal humanism but by staging the frictions, gaps, and asymmetries that define diasporic existence. In the works examined, this relationality emerges through the form of the dissonant layering of cultural signifiers in *The Death of the King*, the ironic reframing of dominant narratives in *Ali and Ali*, or the juxtaposition of personal memory and militarized nationalism in *This is Not a Conversation* and *Soldiers of Tomorrow*. These dramaturgical approaches reflect the tension and complexity that define diasporic identity, but they also show the limits of formal choices that either disconnect the representation from its historical and political context or turn cultural trauma into abstract imagery. This kind of formal ambiguity points to the representational pressures placed on diasporic work—having to move between being recognizable and resisting fixed meanings, between coherence and fragmentation. What is negotiated through these strategies is not simply a matter of aesthetic style but the political terms under which certain masculinities are made legible or excluded. By theorizing relational staging, this dissertation contributes a framework for analyzing how diasporic performance navigates conflicting imperatives of cultural specificity, artistic innovation, and political legibility. It foregrounds the dramaturgical mechanisms through which diaspora is not simply represented but formally enacted, thus rendered legible or illegible within Canadian cultural discourse.

While these contributions speak to broader scholarly debates in performance, gender, and postcolonial studies, they are grounded in the context of Canadian theatre. This research demonstrates how Canada's institutional embrace of multiculturalism, often lauded for its inclusionary ethos, produces aesthetic norms that shape how cultural difference is staged and received. The ideological work of form must, therefore, be understood in relation to the structures of cultural funding, audience expectation, and representational politics unique to the Canadian settler-colonial context. In this way, the dissertation offers a critical vocabulary for analyzing the aesthetics of multicultural representation, not merely in

terms of content or inclusion, but through the formal logics that structure theatrical production. It also invites reconsideration of dramaturgy as a political practice—one that shapes the conditions under which marginalized identities become visible, audible, and thinkable within dominant cultural regimes.

This dissertation employed a composite methodological approach rooted in dialectical criticism, discourse analysis, and semiotic interpretation, with a central emphasis on Jameson's concept of the ideology of form. These approaches enabled a layered reading of how theatrical representations of Middle Eastern masculinities are produced, not only through character and dialogue but through dramaturgical structure, aesthetic decisions, and staging practices. At the heart of the methodological framework was the conviction that dramaturgy is not a neutral vessel but an ideological apparatus. Following Jameson's dialectical method, the case studies were situated within their historical, political, and institutional contexts. This repositioned the analysis beyond thematic interpretation, enabling a critique of how theatrical form reproduces or resists dominant ideologies.

The use of discourse analysis, particularly attentive to how masculinity is narratively and performatively constructed, enabled close readings of textual, visual, and performative elements. These readings interrogated how masculinity is positioned in relation to colonial legacies, geopolitical violence, and diasporic identity. Through semiotic analysis, the research tracked how specific signifiers (e.g., costumes, language choices, character positioning, and staging conventions) carried cultural meanings that were sometimes disrupted and other times reinforced through their formal arrangement. This interdisciplinary method demanded careful negotiation of theoretical tensions. On one hand, postcolonial theory foregrounds historical specificity and the politics of representation, while theatre studies often emphasize embodiment and affect. On the other hand, masculinity studies interrogate the hierarchies and fluidities within gender systems. Balancing these traditions required a flexible analytical model that could attend to both the discursive and material aspects of performance. In particular, the

challenge lay in integrating the ideological critique of masculinity with formalist attention to how that critique is staged and made legible.

Crucially, this methodology foregrounded a distinction between content and form. Rather than simply analyzing what kinds of masculinities appeared on stage, the study investigated how dramaturgical decisions made those masculinities appear coherent, sympathetic, threatening, or fragmented. These decisions are also embedded within broader production contexts, including institutional constraints, funding priorities, and cultural discourse. The formal lens made it possible to ask not only what is represented but also how representation happens and how aesthetic choices structure perception, empathy, and ideological framing. Yet, while this methodological framework enabled significant insights, it also introduced certain constraints. The following discussion addresses these limitations not as flaws but as useful boundaries that shape the scope of this study and open directions for future research.

While this dissertation advances a formal framework for analyzing representations of Middle Eastern masculinities in Canadian theatre, it is essential to acknowledge its limitations. These constraints arise both from the scope of the study and the methodological choices that shaped its analytic priorities. Firstly, the case studies analyzed predominantly feature cisgender male and often heteronormative subjects, structured through dramaturgical tropes that foreground ethnic, racialized, or geopolitical scripts of Middle Eastern masculinity. This focus reflects dominant casting and production patterns, but it limits the study's ability to engage with masculinities that emerge from more fluid, intersectional, or non-normative identity formations. In particular, the analysis does not address how gender might intersect with additional identity categories (such as queerness, disability, class, or generational difference) that exceed or destabilize ethnic, geopolitical, or racial frameworks. By centring on masculinities already circumscribed by narrow representational logics, the study risks reproducing a

limited model of Middle Eastern identity and foreclosing more heterogeneous and relational understandings. Future scholarship must consider how these more complex and hybrid identities are staged, rendered legible, or erased through dramatic and theatrical forms.

Secondly, the study privileges close reading and dramaturgical analysis over audience reception or performance ethnography. While textual and semiotic interpretation can reveal the ideological logic embedded in form, it cannot fully account for how diverse audiences engage with these performances. Reception, context, and affect may shift the meaning of representation in unpredictable ways. As a result, the findings speak more confidently to the politics of staging than to the politics of spectating. Due to limited access to specific productions and audience data, the analysis has been cautious not to generalize about audience response or speak on behalf of demographic groups.

Finally, the dissertation focuses exclusively on English Canadian productions and does not undertake a transnational comparative analysis. While this national focus allows for deep engagement with the specific cultural and policy contexts of Canadian multiculturalism, it also narrows the ability to generalize findings across other diasporic or theatrical landscapes. At the same time, it opens the possibility of expanding this inquiry in future research to explore how masculinities are staged across different national and transnational contexts, especially in a globalized world where performances increasingly move across borders and circulate beyond the specific regions in which they are produced.

Each of these limitations, however, opens productive questions and pathways for future research. What follows identifies how these constraints can become starting points for future inquiry, pushing the conversation forward across theatre studies, critical studies of men and masculinity and cultural studies.

1. Expanding Masculinity Beyond Fixed Identity Categories: One important direction for future research is to examine masculinities that fall outside dominant cis-heteronormative, racialized, or ethnonational scripts. This includes not only queer masculinities but also those shaped by disability, working-class

precarity, religious heterodoxy, migration status, or mixed-race heritage. Exploring how theatrical form engages with these less-visible positions could challenge the reductive coherence often attached to the label “Middle Eastern masculinity” and foreground the layered, unstable, and intersectional ways masculinity is lived and staged in diasporic contexts. This leads to a central research question: How can theatrical form register masculinities that do not fit into fixed categories, and what new representational possibilities emerge through such complexity?

2. Audience Reception and Affect Theory: While this scholarship analyzed how dramaturgy encodes ideology, future work could investigate how audiences receive, interpret, or resist these representations. Incorporating methods from reception studies, ethnography, and affect theory could illuminate how meaning emerges through the interpretive interaction between theatrical form and audience experience. The key research question is: How do audiences from different cultural backgrounds interpret representations of Middle Eastern masculinities in Canadian theatre?

3. Comparative Transnational Studies: A comparative study examining similar plays or productions in the UK, Europe, or the United States would help situate Canadian theatre within a broader diasporic field. Such a study could clarify how multicultural policy, funding structures, and public discourse shape representational possibilities. The key research question is: How does the representation of Middle Eastern masculinities in Canadian theatre compared to those in other multicultural national contexts?

4. Beyond Theatre: The typology developed in this dissertation could be applied to other artistic forms such as film, digital media, or visual installation. This would test the portability of the formal categories and assess their utility across aesthetic domains. The key research question is: Can the typology of dramaturgical forms proposed here be adapted to analyze representations of masculinity in other media?

5. Institutional Structures and Cultural Policy: Further research could explore how arts funding, commissioning practices, and institutional curation influence which representations of masculinity are

supported or suppressed. The research question is: What role do arts institutions and funding bodies play in shaping the dramaturgical strategies of racialized theatre practitioners?

By extending the framework developed in this dissertation, future scholars can build on its parameters and test the scope of its theoretical applicability in new contexts. Together, these research directions affirm that the politics of form and representation remain a dynamic, contested, and generative terrain (one where aesthetics and ideology are deeply entwined.). Beyond its theoretical contributions, this dissertation offers practical tools for theatre artists and educators who are invested in creating more nuanced representations of Middle Eastern masculinities on Canadian stages. The formal-ideological typology developed in this study functions not only as an analytic framework but also as a diagnostic tool that can inform creative and pedagogical practices.

For theatre practitioners, the typology provides a lens through which to critically assess the dramaturgical forms they employ, encouraging greater awareness of how formal choices such as narrative structure, casting, costuming, and translation strategies shape ideological outcomes. Recognizing how ambiguity, pastiche, or melodrama might inadvertently reinforce stereotypes enables practitioners to make more deliberate and ethically informed aesthetic choices. This requires practitioners to recognize that seemingly neutral choices (e.g., omitting cultural markers or universalizing character traits) may reinforce dominant frames of legibility and erase specific masculinities from view.

For educators and scholars, the typology and its underpinning methodology offer a teachable model for analyzing form, representation, and identity. Such an approach fosters critical literacy in how dramaturgical form shapes reception and socio-political implications, especially when identity is staged through visual and symbolic shorthand. It encourages researchers to move beyond content-based

critique, focused on what characters say or do, and toward analysis of the structural devices through which meaning is generated (e.g., staging, pacing, visual composition).

At the heart of this dissertation lies a central claim: that form is political, it carries meanings and ideologies shaped by specific historical conditions. Theatrical representation is never neutral, nor is it solely the product of individual creativity or artistic genius. What this research emphasizes is that the significance of a work of art, especially in the context of representation, is not defined by individual creativity alone but by how the artwork engages with historical and ideological forces. From the standpoint of this study, what matters is how theatrical works interact with history, both reflecting dominant structures and acting within them.³ In Canadian theatre, where multicultural discourse intersects with enduring Orientalist tropes, the dramaturgical strategies used to represent Middle Eastern masculinities bear high stakes. They shape not only what is seen on stage but also the interpretive frameworks through which Othered identities are rendered visible. This research demonstrated that dramaturgy (understood here as the interweaving of text, structure, image, and performance) functions as a site of ideological negotiation. Different formal choices create different conditions of empathy, recognition, and critique. Melodramatic elements might invite emotional identification while reinforcing reductive binaries; satirical disruption might subvert ideology through rupture and play; universalist abstraction might elevate but also erase. These are not merely stylistic choices; they are ideological acts that structure how power is seen, felt, and normalized on stage.

³ This study is grounded in a critical tradition that defines history not as a sequence of empirical facts or isolated events, but as a totality of material and ideological forces. From this perspective, history is inseparable from the mode of production: it shapes the social relations, symbolic forms, and structures of feeling through which meaning is made. History is not simply what happened, but the conditions that determine what can be imagined, represented, and understood. In the context of cultural production, including theatre, history is not just what is depicted—it is what makes depiction possible. A theatrical work emerges from history, registers its contradictions and tensions, and operates within its limits. A theatrical work reflects dominant cultural narratives while also participating in their reproduction or disruption. The artwork becomes a site where historical forces are condensed, where ideology is made visible, where possibilities for resistance, critique, or transformation may (or may not) be staged.

The findings also suggest that theatrical form conditions the political potential of performance. When form reproduces familiar structures of consumption (i.e., flattening complexity for clarity or substituting ambiguity for critique), it limits the capacity of theatre to challenge dominant narratives. In settler-colonial contexts like Canada, this limitation is not just aesthetic but political; it constrains how diaspora and identity contestation can be staged within publicly funded institutions. Conversely, when form resists the demand for legibility (by foregrounding contradiction or historical depth), it creates space for alternative ways of imagining identity and power. In this way, formal analysis becomes a political intervention: it reveals how representation works, how ideology travels, and how aesthetic decisions shape the terms of inclusion and exclusion.

Revisiting the dissertation's opening questions (i.e., what masculinities are visible on stage and how), they must now be answered with attention to the layered mechanics of representation. The analysis has shown that representation is not only about content (who is represented) but also about structure (how they are represented). This insight has implications far beyond Middle Eastern masculinities: it opens a broader agenda for rethinking race, gender, and cultural production in multicultural contexts. This work contributes to the project of reimagining diasporic masculinities as complex, situated, and dynamically staged. It urges theatre makers, scholars, and institutions to treat form not as neutral scaffolding but as an ideological terrain. Dramaturgy is where cultural narratives are encoded, contested, and transformed. This dissertation closes not with finality but with a critical invitation: to continue reflecting on, staging, and challenging the theatrical forms and aesthetic decisions through which masculinities are represented, marginalized, or reimagined on stage and beyond.

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