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Art that Dictates Rather than Imitates: An Analysis of *Keffiyeh/Made in China*

The keffiyeh, a checkered black and white scarf worn about the head or neck, is a symbol of Palestinian resistance that dates back to the 1930's Arab Revolution against British occupation, and it represents the current struggle of Palestinians to control their identity and future in the face of Israeli occupation of their lands (Kreibaum). Dalia Taha, a Palestinian playwright who grew up in Ramallah, a city in the Palestinian West Bank (Moss) uses this powerful symbol in the title of her experimental play *Keffiyeh/Made in China*. Taha notes, "Art always challenges power structures" (Moss), and she does precisely this in her play. Palestine has had a tumultuous history of occupation and conflict. During the Arab-Israeli War in 1948, Nakba occurred, where thousands of Palestinians were displaced to create Israel. Nakba is the Arabic word for catastrophe, and that is how it is remembered by Palestinians. Thousands of Palestinians continue to die in the Israel-Palestine conflict, and many fight for the right to assert their identity (B'Tselem). In her play *Keffiyeh/Made in China*, Taha captures this on-going tumultuous struggle by combining historical events with experimental literary structure in order to humanize and educate the world about the Palestinian suffering in the wake of their occupation and to create awareness and support for them lest they be forgotten entirely.

In one of the play's acts called "60 Seconds," Taha presents a character about to die as the result of a gunshot wound to the face, and she uses the technique of blending fiction

with reality to connect the audience more directly to the plight of the Palestinians. The scene is set as a dialogue between two nameless Palestinian characters, a man and a woman, during the last sixty seconds of the man's life, as he will die from a bullet "that entered [his] right eye" (Taha 81). The characters discuss YouTube videos recording incidents of violence against Palestinians, and then they break the fourth wall as they mention the playwright, the person crafting their own fictional story, and this causes a cross-over from fiction to reality. The fourth wall is the theoretical border that separates a work from its audience. This is broken when a character speaks directly to the audience or recognizes that it is a creation, and this reminds the audience that the subject matter is not just a dramatic work, but is also grounded in reality. Taha breaks the fourth wall when the nameless woman orders her companion to "tell the playwright" about a small error in the script (Taha 79), and then again when the woman tells the man:

S: She [referring to the playwright] made a documentary about you.

H: About me?

S: A documentary of twenty minutes (Taha 80)

This connection to the real-life writer as well as to actual recorded incidences of violence against Palestinians that can be easily found on YouTube makes the fictional real. This verifiable real-life connection makes the story more immediate, tangible and relatable for the audience allowing us to sympathize with the actual, rather than fictional, struggles of Palestinians. The violence of an occupation in a distant land would be very abstract for many audiences, but Taha's approach here humanizes the Palestinian struggle, brings that struggle into a real-world context, and asks the audience to be witnesses to actual Palestinian suffering that does not end when the play ends.

In the third act, "The Camera Doesn't Love Anyone," Taha uses additional techniques to make her audience members active witnesses and thereby participants in the on-going Palestinian struggle. In 2010, the Human Rights Watch called the Israeli-Palestinian crisis "a human rights crisis," and yet this bloody conflict has raged on unchecked for decades with no resolution. By pulling in her audience, Taha asks us all to desire that resolution. In the third act, the characters discuss recent missile strikes as daily occurrences that they no longer have strong reactions to or even question. This acceptance of tragedy as commonplace emphasizes the emotional numbing that has occurred which is one of the true horrors of this conflict: "because everyone has stories about bags / and shoes / and rooms / and kitchens / and pots...and dead children / who haven't been buried" (Taha 90). At the end of the act, in the stage description, we find there is a tape recorder that was recording this conversation. The tape recorder functions as a symbolic witness recording and preserving the stories of the Palestinians. The women say, "everybody should have a chance to talk" (Taha 90). This draws attention to the fact that the Israeli perspective is often the one given voice and legitimized on the world stage while the Palestinian voice is often silenced, and this one-sidedness is not just unjust but also dangerous. This recording symbolizes how the Palestinian experience may be recorded and witnessed by some, but is at the same time tenuous and often-erased. Taha appeals to the humanity of her audience to not allow this eradication to continue.

"A Man with a Gun," the fourth act of Taha's play, uses stream of consciousness but also integrates an actual historical event to make the audience understand that resolution and peace are attainable possibilities. In 2011, a Picasso painting went on exhibit in Ramallah in the West Bank, "It seemed a ridiculous and impossible idea: Bringing a US \$7.1

million Picasso into occupied Palestine. (Tolan). Taha's fourth act includes this bringing over of Picasso's portrait "Buste de Femme" which actually was exhibited at the International Academy of Art-Palestine after a long two-year approval process: "Because of the occupation and inherent limitations on Palestinian sovereignty, what is ordinarily a straightforward loan from one museum to another suddenly took on a political, diplomatic and military character. Every step in the journey was tinged with Palestinian statelessness..." (Tolan). Picasso is not only noteworthy for his artistic skill, but also for his anti-war opinions, demonstrated in works like "Guernica," which depicts the horror of fascist bombings in Spain. The inclusion of the painting in the play provides an anti-war perspective as well as an example of what can be accomplished when people work together and set aside differences. Also integrated in this act is the idea of raising awareness and bridging divides through art which is what Taha is also undertaking in constructing the play itself.

The fifth act, "Business," contains the symbol of the keffiyeh and makes the meaning of the play's title clear, to show the audience the absurdity of life under occupation. This act features a young woman attempting to purchase a keffiyeh from a shopkeeper. The proud man informs her "Mine aren't cheap imports from China" (Taha 97). This is the line that lends the title to the play: *Keffiyeh/Made in China* and serves as a metaphor for the occupation. The keffiyeh head scarf is a Palestinian national symbol that almost became extinct in domestic production due to two forces, legal and military, that stifle the Palestinian's ability to produce their own goods:

...destruction of [Palestinian] industrial infrastructure continues to this day.

The most evident episode was the bombing of over 250 factories in Gaza in the

2014 war. And the policy of refusing construction permits is also continuing, a practice that is of particular concern to Area C, the 60 percent of the West Bank still under full Israeli control. (Boarini)

Financial independence is key to a country's stability and Taha through the keffiyeh shows how Palestine is being systematically destabilized and forced into dependence. The rest of act 5, employs the experimental elements that Taha uses throughout the play, such as no unifying plot, fragmentary dialogue and action, intense repetition, no character names or development, in order to have the audience viscerally experience the tumultuous and confusing life under occupation. The play's form as well as symbols convey the contradictory and wrenching effects of a people who live in the land of their ancestors but are at the same time displaced. Taha's play has her audience experience this lack of stability, security, and clarity to educate about this conflict and demonstrate the damage to the humanity behind the struggle.

Many are rightfully skeptical about ever achieving peace in this war-torn region, but government leaders cannot be the only ones put in charge of the effort. Taha's play widens the scope of who should be leading efforts for peace and the answer is everyone:

W1: there is always a translation

W2: so that everybody understands

W1: so that everybody hears

W2: so that everybody sees

W1: so that everybody pays attention

W2: because it's important that everyone is aware

W1: it's important that everyone hears (Taha 85)

Suffering and injustice persist when people feel disempowered, disconnected, or are simply unaware. *Keffiyeh/Made in China* gives voice to the often marginalized viewpoint of the Palestinians and draws us in, its wide-ranging audience, to remind us that even if this is a conflict far from us, between cultures we might not know, speaking a language we might not speak that “there is always a translation / so that everybody understands” (Taha 85). The play in its fragmented structure does not imitate or simply reflect life, but translates it in a way that provides a new and better understanding that invites change.

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