

## Betty Shamieh's *The Black Eyed*: An Arab-American Woman Playwright Inverts and Subverts Orientalism

By Nancy C. Jones \*

*Arab-American playwright Betty Shamieh emerged on the contemporary theatre scene in the early 2000s with an artistic voice and cultural perspective that broke new ground on the American stage. Her early plays were personal stories of family that studied the immigrant experience through the eyes of exclusively Arab-American characters. Shamieh's writing shifted after the events of 9/11 and resulted in her writing "The Black Eyed", a play that addresses the Middle East conflict through the stories of four Arab women. Shamieh's play adjusts the lens through which audiences witness the Arab-American experience and confront their Orientalist tendencies. Her cultural investigation rides a razor's edge of Orientalism; she positions herself as both "us" and "them" within the discourse as she flips the hegemonic power structure. In this essay I use a close reading informed by Edward Said's theories to examine the ways in which Shamieh inverts and subverts a gendered use of Orientalism in "The Black Eyed's" themes and characters, using established tropes like the harem, houris, martyrs, violence, and seduction to fuel her project.*

### Introduction

Playwright Betty Shamieh emerged on the off-Broadway theatre scene in the early 2000s with plays that drew on her experience as an Arab-American child of immigrants. Her works were personal, family narratives that avoided discussion of the Middle East conflict, but Shamieh asserts that the events of 9/11 shifted her artistic perspective and resulted in her writing *The Black Eyed*, a play she considers to be "extremely political and unabashedly radical."<sup>1</sup> The 9/11 attacks launched a nationalist movement that Shamieh shrewdly challenges throughout her play. That historical moment shifted the public ways in which the US claimed hegemony over the Middle East and allowed (even encouraged) xenophobia to flourish. Edward Said describes the complex relationship between Occident and Orient as one of "power, of domination, of varying degrees of a complex hegemony".<sup>2</sup> Writing from her unique cultural perspective as Arab and American, Shamieh challenges both Orientalism and Occidentalism in *The Black Eyed*, by confronting tropes such as the harem, houris, martyrs, violence, and seduction to fuel her project. In this essay I use a close reading informed by

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1. Betty Shamieh, *The Black Eyed & Architecture* (New York: Broadway Play Publishing, 2008), 9.

2. Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, Vintage Books Edition (New York: Random House, 1979), 5.

Edward Said's theories to examine the ways in which Shamieh inverts and subverts a gendered use of orientalism in *The Black Eyed's* themes and characters. My expository analysis adds Shamieh's important voice to the scholarly conversation regarding race and theatre, as published scholarship on the play is virtually nonexistent.<sup>3</sup>

Palestinian-American theatre artist Betty Shamieh was raised in San Francisco, California, steeped in the culture of the local Arabic community.<sup>4</sup> After graduating from Harvard, Shamieh went on to the Yale School of Drama where she earned an MFA in Playwriting, then broke into the New York theatre scene with her one-woman play *Chocolate in Heat*. This solo play was a series of monologues about a Palestinian girl growing up in Harlem, which she wrote and acted in for the 2003 New York Fringe Festival. Following that, Shamieh's play *Roar*, a semi-autobiographical story of a Palestinian family, debuted off Broadway in 2004 as a *New York Times* Critic's Pick. Her career was launched into what she describes as a "culture of tokenism", though Shamieh describes that period of her artistic life as her glory years.<sup>5</sup> Shamieh describes her plays during the period before September 11, 2001, as being safe enough to be palatable to a white audience, but in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks her writing transformed. From that liminal political and personal space (as an Arab-American living in New York City's volatile climate) she began to address overtly political and controversial themes, although she feared these new works might never be produced. Moreover, as Shamieh describes it, her play *The Black Eyed* is a work that tries "to capture the complexity of being a Palestinian-American woman living in New York in the wake of September 11."<sup>6</sup> Shamieh's concern regarding her play's public reception was prescient. New York critics found *The Black Eyed* "polemical" and a "trial to watch" during its 2007 premiere at New York Theatre Workshop.<sup>7</sup> Though Charles Isherwood reported it to be "full of angry harangues" and panned it in the *New York Times*, the play went on to be performed at the Fornos Theatre, Athens in a Greek translation, and has maintained a robust production history at colleges across the US.<sup>8</sup> Arab-American drama, in general, has been subjected to the margins of US theatre with its history of prioritizing the white, Western European canon. Michael Najjar defines Arab-

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3. There are two unpublished theses investigating Betty Shamieh and the works of other Arab-American women playwrights. While there are reviews of Shamieh's plays in production, there is no scholarly investigation, thus situating this essay at the forefront of an important conversation about diversity and inclusion in theatre.

4. Pamela Renner, "Betty Shamieh Worlds Apart: Writing Articulate Arab Women is Her Specialty," *American Theatre* 21, no. 3 (2004): 43.

5. Victoria Myers, *Betty Shamieh on Fit for a Queen* (The Interval, 29 September 2016).

6. Shamieh, 6.

7. Martin Stasio, *The Black Eyed* (Variety, 31 July 2007).

8. Charles Isherwood, *Earthly Hurts: Yes, You Can Take Them With You* (The New York Times, 1 August 2007).

American drama “as its own genre, distinct from other ‘ethnic’ plays.”<sup>9</sup> Shamieh and other Arab-American women playwrights like Heather Raffo and Leila Buck maintain their foothold in theatre while navigating xenophobia and anti-Muslim ideologies in addition to addressing their gendered “struggle with being good Arab girls.”<sup>10</sup> Shamieh writes and creates from the margins of time, space, and cultural norms in a dance of alterity that she navigates with agility in her innovative choice of structure, character, and plot in *The Black Eyed*. It remains an important work in the dramatic canon, as Shamieh shrewdly challenges anti-Arab ideology and transgressively shifts the lens through which audiences encounter Arab-American women. Shamieh provides an original voice and narrative by which the audience must confront their Orientalist tendencies.

### Narrative Construction and Intentional Alterity

In *The Black Eyed*, four Arab women from across the ages meet at the doors of heaven and come to terms with their lives and choices as they debate and skewer conventional views on sex, family, and terrorism. Shamieh employs both experimental and conventional genres and styles as tools to fuel her project. For example, Shamieh launches the play using a traditional Arabic narrative device, as each of the four women characters take on the role of the *Hakawati*, or storytellers. This performative tradition preserves important cultural messages filled with “meaningful stories of universal wisdom.”<sup>11</sup> Shamieh creates a palimpsest that layers storytelling with contemporary themes and historical theatre techniques. Inspired by Greek Tragedy, the play opens with an overlapping chorus of voices that functions as a communicative bridge between actor and audience. *The Black Eyed* emphasizes character and language over plot and its dramatic construction incorporates free verse and poetic imagery as the four characters shift between solo speeches and unison choral odes. Shamieh writes in a style distinct from American realism by incorporating theatrical devices of abstraction and repetition to assume a narrative difference that mimics the cultural alterity of her characters.

The play’s cast is comprised of four Arab women from different historical time periods: the biblical Delilah (of Samson fame); Tamam, who lived through the Crusades; a Palestinian suicide bomber named Aiesha; and a woman who is simply called Architect, who was aboard one of the fateful 9/11 planes. They are waiting outside a doorway that leads to the afterlife, each seeking to speak to someone on the inside. This scenario immediately sets up a relationship of

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9. Leila Buck, et al., *Four Arab American Plays* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland, 2007), 2.

10. “Bio,” Betty Shamieh. Available at: <https://www.bettyshamieh.com/bio>.

11. Dima Sharif, *Al Hakawati: The Storyteller Tradition*. 26 July 2013.

interior/exterior, self/other in an Orientalist/Occidental dialectic. The women alternate between communication styles of monologue, dialogue and direct address, forcing the audience to shift their spectatorship according to Shamieh's needs. As the curtain rises, Aiesha poses the question: "Tell me who you are".<sup>12</sup> Yet Shamieh does not allow each character to offer a facile response. Instead, their stories are fragmented, and fantasy is blended with truth. There is an element of seductive power in this discourse as Shamieh claims authority over the spectator.

To fuel her project, Shamieh writes (as Edward Said defines it) as an Orientalist: "anyone who teaches, writes, about, or researches the Orient...either in its specific or its general aspects, is an Orientalist, and what he or she does is Orientalism."<sup>13</sup> But Shamieh's goal in *The Black Eyed* is anti-Orientalist, in that she first reveals and then indicts a position of alterity. Architect declares that "He passed me and knew I was an Arab", aligning with Frantz Fanon's premise that "the Other fixes me with his gaze, his gestures and attitude."<sup>14</sup> In the same way, Architect's identity has been constructed through the white gaze, woven "out of a thousand details, anecdotes, and stories."<sup>15</sup> But Architect rejects the colonial oppression and psychologically unshackles herself with self-recognition: "I knew I had to synthesize all the signals about who I was in a way that made me not want to be anything else. I knew if I was not proud to be a Palestinian, I could not live a life with dignity."<sup>16</sup> Shamieh empowers her four women characters to confront and dismantle racist ideology.

Shamieh lures the spectator into the clandestine world of the Arab-American: a post-9/11 world where "Arabness" is dangerous, suspect, and other. In the opening scene of the play, Aiesha is alone on stage, and confronts the audience with the following lines:

Unanswered questions,  
Unquestioned answers.  
I do someone good dead.  
I do someone dead good.  
What is the point of the revolution that begins with the little hand?  
Any little hand?  
This little hand?  
Unanswered questions,  
Unquestioned answers –<sup>17</sup>

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12. Shamieh, 14.

13. Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Random House), 2.

14. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 1952) 89, and Shamieh, 15.

15. Fanon, 91.

16. Shamieh, 66.

17. Shamieh, 13.

The playwright provides no context for Aiesha's monologue, thereby plunging the spectator into a world of poetic difference. Shamieh controls the way in which her characters produce meaning, positioning her work within literary theorist Pierre Macherey's contention that "in order to say anything, there are other things which must not be said."<sup>18</sup> She investigates this literary silence early in the play, with Architect's exclamation of the phrase, "Hands change!"<sup>19</sup> Architect's outcry abandons the spectator to construct their own signification. Macherey alludes to this interplay between speech and silence, seen and unseen as "the visible that is merely the hidden in a different guise."<sup>20</sup> Shamieh rejects the view that her text has a single meaning but instead see it as a complex construction of signifiers. For example, the image of "hands" conjures a multiplicity of signs and cultural memories: hands can be used to cradle a child, to cook a meal, to provide solace, to gesture, to hold a gun, to perform a violent act, etc. At a midpoint in the play Architect says, "A hand. Who does it belong to?" and again, "Hands, movement, change" on the 9/11 plane just moments before her death.<sup>21</sup> The audience must wait until the final lines of the play for the Chorus to provide a framework for Shamieh's recurring message that functions like a bookend to the opening monologue:

What is the point of the revolution that begins with the little hand?  
 Any little hand?  
 This little hand?  
 The point is it pushes, forces, the big hand forward!  
 With enough movement, the times will change.  
 Little hands, enough movement, times change.  
 Hands, movement, change.<sup>22</sup>

Shamieh employs narrative repetition to develop meaning as she embeds word constructions on the audience's memory with the insistence of echo, in a dispatch of warning, retribution, revolution, and personal responsibility.

### **Orientalist Tropes: Harem and Seduction**

Edward Said asserts that Flaubert's Orientalist experiences are woven through with "an almost uniform association with the Orient and sex."<sup>23</sup> Shamieh

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18. Pierre Macherey, *A Theory of Literary Production*, trans. Geoffrey Wall (London: Routledge, 1978), 85.

19. Shamieh, 18.

20. Macherey, 86.

21. Shamieh 82.

22. Ibid, 86.

23. Said, 188.

lures the reader toward the character of Delilah through the legend of her sexual power, aligning with Said's steadfast Orientalist trope. In the first scene of the play, Delilah tells the audience that she is well aware of her seductive powers: "you knew the only power you had over men was sexual."<sup>24</sup> Delilah recognizes the ways in which she can use her sexuality to gain access to power. When asked by the others, "So they made you seduce Samson? They forced you into it?"<sup>25</sup> Delilah describes being approached by the male, tribal elders as a young woman and illustrates the sexism, deception, and manipulation she encountered:

Worse.  
They made me think it was my idea.  
They asked me to take my father's place at their meetings,  
Even though I was a girl,  
Because my only brother was dead.  
We talked of many things.  
They listened as if my opinions mattered,  
As if I mattered.<sup>26</sup>

Like the cunning powers of Shabriyar and Shahzaman in *Thousand and One Nights*, Delilah (like Scheherazade) employs treachery for self-preservation.<sup>27</sup> Shamieh consciously addresses this Orientalist vantage point, agreeing with Meyda Yeğenoğlu who asserts that "the Orient, seen as embodiment of sensuality, is always understood in feminine terms and accordingly its place in Western imagery has been constructed through the simultaneous gesture of racialization and feminization."<sup>28</sup> Shamieh capitalizes on this trope with a promise of an expected Orientalist narrative, but, at the moment of seduction, she flips the script. Delilah describes how the men in her village flattered her into believing that her seductive powers could be used to help them: "I should have known by the way they were talking that they wanted something from me. And they sure knew how to get it."<sup>29</sup> Delilah winks at the audience, acknowledging her powers of seduction, and how she used them to access power and gain information: "I just stood around and said, (*Flirty*) 'I need a little information. Does anyone want to help me out?'"<sup>30</sup> Through manipulation and coercion Delilah embodies the Orientalist notion of the seductress, as Delilah describes how she got Samson

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24. Shamieh, 15.

25. Ibid, 16.

26. Ibid.

27. *Tales from the Thousand and One Nights*, translated by N.J. Dawood (Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1973), 15.

28. Meyda Yeğenoğlu, *Colonial Fantasies: Towards a Feminist Reading of Orientalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 73.

29. Shamieh, 17.

30. Ibid, 28.

drunk on banana wine as a ploy to seduce him. She instructs the others on how easily one can enact this trope: "Dress well, in a way that makes it obvious you are a woman."<sup>31</sup> Breaking the fourth wall, Shamieh then inserts a humorous aside to the audience: "Men can never tell the difference between a beautiful woman and a person dressed like one."<sup>32</sup> In this duality, Shamieh informs the reader that in her worldview Arab women claim power and control through their sexuality, allure, and seductions. Shamieh's characters subvert the trope and use it to manipulate the Orientalist view for their own benefit. They use it willingly and knowingly, as a means of access to power, although Shamieh admits that they pay an emotional and psychological price for this when Delilah asks: "What's the difference between a thing that feels like it kills you and the one that actually does?"<sup>33</sup> Shamieh's subtle dismantling of Orientalism leans into its sexist tendencies:

The process of Orientalization of the Orient is one that intermingles with its feminization. The interlocking of the representation of cultural and sexual difference is secured through mapping the discourse of Orientalism onto the phallogocentric discourse of femininity. Consequently, one can not only find sections consistently devoted to women, the harem, and the veil in most texts on the Orient, but also on various spheres of Oriental life that are comprehended through feminine iconographies.<sup>34</sup>

Like a skilled cicerone, Shamieh provides access to a hidden space and guides the spectator into the private sphere. Shamieh appears to follow Théophile Gautier's Orientalist instructions that "the only method to employ, in order to really obtain any authentic information, is to request some European lady, who is well introduced and has access to harems, to recount to you faithfully that which she has seen."<sup>35</sup> Shamieh takes on the role of Gautier's "European lady", who leads the viewer into the forbidden world, thereby subverting the role of the Orientalist.

As an Arab-American, Shamieh is both Western (Orientalist) and Palestinian (Occidental), giving her entrée into the private space of the Harem a bilateral perspective. Yeğenoğlu asserts that the "western subject's desire for its Oriental other is always mediated by a desire to have access to the space of its women, to the body of its women and to the truth of its women."<sup>36</sup> Shamieh empowers Delilah to disperse the smoky, seductive, atmosphere of the harem, and describes how she tallied her grievances in secret, "you will pay for every pleasure you

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31. Ibid, 20.

32. Ibid.

33. Ibid, 21.

34. Yeğenoğlu, 73.

35. Théophile Gautier, *Constantinople* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1875), 192.

36. Yeğenoğlu, 72.

exact from my pain."<sup>37</sup> Much like the Harem, the veil is an enclosed private space that "signifies an injunction of no trespassing upon this space, and it extends it to another space...the public space."<sup>38</sup> Shamieh upends the Orientalist notion of the harem by lifting the veil on its private sphere, thereby rejecting the Orientalist act of voyeurism. She inverts the Orientalist perspective wherein the "Western subject is frustrated by the closure of the space of the Oriental woman; he had no option but to speculate on the details of harem life, its mysteries, and the lascivious sexuality the other-sex enjoys behind that closed curtain."<sup>39</sup> By leading the reader into this forbidden zone, Shamieh subverts Orientalism by dismantling its exoticism and taboos.

Employing a different temporal lens, Shamieh explores the theme of seduction and sexuality through Architect's story, a self-described 30-year-old virgin who lacks the confidence to clearly articulate her thoughts and feelings. Her nascent sexuality is repressed but surfaces in descriptions of her rich fantasy life. As a naïve young woman, Architect has flown to New York for a career opportunity, and arrives at Half Breed's office to apply for an internship. She admits to the audience that she is still a virgin and is intimidated by and attracted to Half Breed, a successful architect who has a Christian-Palestinian father and a white mother. Architect sits in a room full of arrogant, white men, while fantasizing about a sexual encounter: "If you were to touch me, Half-Breed, I would pull out handfuls of your hair...I can already feel how your hands will work."<sup>40</sup> Through this erotic fantasy, Shamieh embraces the Orientalist trope of seduction while inverting an Occidentalist one that Buruma and Margalit describe as a "loathing of everything people associate with the Western world, exemplified by America...a politicized Islamic ideology in which the United States features as the devil incarnate."<sup>41</sup> Shamieh brings Architect to a Western, capitalist, male space where she encounters Half Breed, who embodies an Orientalist view of women as sexual playthings. Half Breed presumes that he will easily secure a sexual conquest with Architect, and appears to collude with his male colleagues, "Everyone in the room knew it...sidelong glances, and smirks from your minions, he's at it again, their eyes say."<sup>42</sup> Edward Said affirms Half Breed's assumption that "the Orient seems to suggest not only fecundity but sexual promise (and threat), untiring sensuality, unlimited desire."<sup>43</sup> Said elaborates on this when describing Flaubert's encounter with the ripe exoticism of the Orient in "Soirée chez la Triestine" and sets the stage for the promise of

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37. Shamieh, 22.

38. Malek Alloula, *Colonial Harem* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 13.

39. Yeğenoğlu, 74.

40. Shamieh, 52.

41. Ian Buruma, and Avishi Margalit, *Occidentalism: The West in the Eyes of Its Enemies* (New York: Penguin Books, 2004), 5.

42. Shamieh, 51.

43. Said, 188.



voyeuristic titillation: "I performed on a mat that a family of cats had to be shooed off – a strange coitus, looking at each other without being able to exchange a word, and the exchange of looks is all the deeper for the curiosity and surprise."<sup>44</sup> For Said and Flaubert, the lens through which they witness these seductions is inexorably male, yet Shamieh inverts the voyeuristic lens (and subverts their Orientalism in the process) by giving Architect her own power of seduction and unapologetic sexuality.

Although she never accommodates Half Breed's desires during her summer internship, Architect reveals that she called him on her thirty-fifth birthday. She had promised herself that she would willingly and purposefully sleep with a man if she was still a virgin in her mid-thirties because "It's no longer cute if you're a virgin at thirty-five."<sup>45</sup> Surprised by her own audacity, Architect calls Half Breed and tells him, "I want to come see you. I want to come stay with you." to which he responds, "Get on the next flight."<sup>46</sup> While taking ownership of her sexual power, Architect unwittingly boards one of the terrorist flights of 9/11. As she comes to realize what is happening on that fateful flight, Architect articulates her inner monologue: "I somehow figure out that this plane is going to crash. And I realize I'm going to die a virgin."<sup>47</sup> Yet the playwright will not allow this Orientalist trope to be her character's dying wish. She inverts the statement by giving Architect a new fantasy that is based on her self-recognition and empowerment: "I'd stomp up to the cockpit and get on that loudspeaker and say – 'Unfasten your seatbelts, Motherfuckers! If this plane is going down, someone is going down on me!'"<sup>48</sup> Shamieh acknowledges the difficulty of her wish that would invert the white, male gaze, as the chorus responds to her outburst with a caveat: "But one rarely has the guts to act out fantasies."<sup>49</sup> Said avers that "Flaubert associates the Orient with the escapism of sexual fantasy" and its "Oriental clichés: harems, princesses, princes, slaves, veils, dancing girls and boys, sherbets, ointments, and so on."<sup>50</sup> Shamieh inverts this Orientalist trope by giving Architect, albeit in the hereafter, agency to form and define her own fantasy.

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44. Gustave Flaubert, *Flaubert in Egypt* (New York: Penguin, 1979), 44.

45. Shamieh, 66.

46. *Ibid*, 64.

47. *Ibid*, 70.

48. *Ibid*, 71.

49. *Ibid*.

50. Said, 190.

### Orientalist Tropes: Martyrs and Houris

Shamieh introduces the notion of martyrs and afterlife in the opening scene of *The Black Eyed*: "We heard that all the martyrs were sitting in the one room in the afterlife...the room no one knows anything about, the room no one but martyrs have dared to go in."<sup>51</sup> Buruma and Margalit define the Muslim martyr in *Occidentalism*, where they rationalize that "the Muslim martyr is an active warrior...whose motives must be pure."<sup>52</sup> Shamieh sets her play outside the door in which these martyrs await their fate in the afterlife and illustrates the theme through the stories of Tamam and Aiesha.

Tamam's story elucidates the ways in which oppression leads to martyrs' acts of violence. Tamam reveals that her brother's rage was fueled through the senseless violence he witnessed in prison, including being forced to watch her being raped by the guards when she tried to bring him food. Instead of breaking his spirit, he joined a rebel group that was organized in jail. When released, he planned and performed a violent act of retribution - killing civilians in the marketplace - knowing that it would lead to his own death. Shamieh justifies this violence by explaining the factors that lead to it:

Oppression is like a coin maker.  
You put in human beings, press the right buttons and  
watch them get squeezed, shrunk, flattened  
till they take the slim shape of a two-face coin  
One side a martyr – the other a traitor.<sup>53</sup>

Shamieh appears to align with the belief that martyrdom is linked to the character of a "homicidal terrorist" who stalks the "Western social imaginary" as argued by Sophia Rose Shafi in *Muslims in the Western Imagination*.<sup>54</sup> But, in a sleight of hand, Shamieh inverts that stereotype through Tamam who states, "Listen, I don't agree with killing innocent people under any circumstances, ever. I am the kind of human being who refuses to get addicted to the intoxication of hate."<sup>55</sup> Shamieh addresses the notion of revenge when Tamam explains that she was the first person to greet the guards (who had raped her in view of her brother) in the after-life. According to religious law, Tamam was permitted to cut off their genitals for their crime but said, "I'll be back to do it later. I didn't want to hurt them once and be done with it. I wanted them to fear me forever."<sup>56</sup> Tamam

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51. Shamieh, 13.

52. Buruma and Margalit, 68.

53. Shamieh, 42.

54. Sophia Rose Shafi, *Muslims in the Western Imagination* (New York: Oxford Press, 2015), 2.

55. Shamieh, 43.

56. *Ibid*, 48.

speaks of the legacy of revenge that runs through the Palestinian people. The women, like participants in a group therapy session, ask her “wouldn’t you rather let it go? It would be a sign that you have grown, healed.”<sup>57</sup> Tamam is unapologetically unforgiving and answers unequivocally “Hell no” while reflecting on the source of her anger:

Most of my people looked at the Crusaders  
With every ounce of hatred a human heart can hold,  
Their faces twisted not like they tasted something bitter,  
Something bitter was being forced down their throats.<sup>58</sup>

Tamam’s rage is linked to the “chain of hostility” that, according to Buruma and Margalit is “fired by ideas that have a history.”<sup>59</sup> Shamieh cunningly reverses this premise a few lines later when Tamam finishes her story by inverting the trope:

I am the kind of human being  
Who refuses to get addicted to the intoxication of hate.  
In other words, no one is going to reduce me to a coin.  
There are absolutes,  
It’s wrong to kill, period.<sup>60</sup>

Shamieh contextualizes this ideology of violence using contemporary analogies as Tamam explains, “In fact, the Crusades were nothing compared to the Palestinian and Israeli wars.”<sup>61</sup> Shamieh cynically derides the ongoing Middle East Peace Process when Delilah states naively, “the Palestinian-Israeli problem was solved ages ago.”<sup>62</sup> In unison the three other women amend her false belief: “One state called the United States of Israel and Palestine.”<sup>63</sup> Shamieh acknowledges with derision that the “solution” is a political-marketing ploy by the United States to serve their capitalist needs:

Delilah: Pal-rael for short.  
Tamam: The posters for travel agents everywhere boast first-class packages to Pal-rael that say  
Tamam, Delilah, Architect: Come to Pal-rael. It’s safe because the Palestinians and Israelis are now real pals.<sup>64</sup>

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57. Ibid, 48.

58. Ibid, 38.

59. Buruma and Margalit, 11-12.

60. Ibid, 44.

61. Ibid, 46.

62. Ibid.

63. Ibid.

64. Ibid.

Shamieh chastises the US position, embedding her cynical views in the words of the chorus, "So what if the American government supports corrupt leaders in our countries and then kills hundreds of thousands of Arabs when those leaders don't do what they say when they say it?"<sup>65</sup> She rationalizes terrorists' instincts with their success stories: violence helped to bring down apartheid in South Africa and the Black Panther Movement sped up the civil rights workers. Shamieh also confronts the hypocrisy of American government, who "support corrupt leaders in our countries and then kill hundreds of thousands of Arabs when those leaders don't do what they say when they say it?"<sup>66</sup> With Occidentalism empathy, Shamieh implies that there was a reciprocal motivation behind the 9/11 terrorist acts, "the American government has been doing just as violent, cruel things too in its people's name for generations."<sup>67</sup> Without authorizing the violence, Shamieh seems to, at least partially, absolve it.

The audience learns of Aiesha's tragedy in the last story of the play, when she reveals that she ended her life as a Palestinian suicide bomber. Aiesha feels deluded by her religion that promised:

...if I blew myself up and took others with me...  
I would have a hundred men of every hue,  
Who were lined up like fruits at the market.<sup>68</sup>

Islamic extremists believe that their martyrdom will lead to rewards in the afterlife, where they will be met by seventy-two virgins as a reward for their sacrifice.<sup>69</sup> Tamam challenges Aiesha's assumption that there will be a hundred beautiful virgins waiting in heaven for a Muslim martyr. She questions Aiesha's suicidal mission with humor, wondering why she would choose to blow herself up for a hundred male virgins in heaven, "when any girl could have twice that number on earth if she wanted to."<sup>70</sup> The audience learns that Aiesha was a young Palestinian woman whose rage grew amidst the displacement of the Israeli occupation. Thought what, precisely, led to her violent act remains vague: "You can't look at the specifics of my particular life in order to understand why I did it. Others around me had lived more terrible lives. All I knew was that I couldn't breathe."<sup>71</sup> Shamieh describes the domino effect of violence: Aiesha, in a turn of events filled with tragic irony, detonates her bomb and kills only herself and a fellow Palestinian, a beautiful and smart seven-year-old girl named Amal, whose name means hope. Due to a series of random events, Amal is in the marketplace

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65. Ibid, 65.

66. Ibid.

67. Ibid, 66.

68. Ibid, 35.

69. Marianne Bray, *Why Young Muslims Line up to Die* (CNN Online, 18, August 2003).

70. Shamieh, 36.

71. Ibid, 75.

when Aiesha arrives wearing her bomb. Others, more experienced in the practices of violence, knew to run, but Amal, in her innocence, didn't understand the impending danger represented by Aiesha, and sweetly smiled at her just before the device detonated. Shamieh questions this act by giving voice to those who vilify the Palestinian-Israeli struggle, "Finally, they are killing one another."<sup>72</sup> The reader discovers that Aiesha will not be allowed into the martyr's afterlife because she failed in her quest to take out the enemy. Aiesha questions her own motives pondering, "How do you survive in a violent world and not be violent?"<sup>73</sup> The other women problematize her act through the lens of gender and wonder how she could do something so angry, so violent, so male. Aiesha reminds them that there are female martyrs too, "because oppression is like a coin maker", echoing a thought that Tamam planted earlier in the play. Shamieh debates the notion that anger is an essentially male characteristic, making an act of revenge impossible for women. This is a moment of Shamieh's Orientalist reversal, giving the passive, sexualized woman agency over her anger and equipping her with the potential for violent acts. Shamieh speaks of women's anger as a "uniquely female fury" that is the pent-up rage of those who watch their sons and husbands die in incessant wars, of sexual repression, of male hegemony.<sup>74</sup>

Shamieh sets up her relationship to *Houris* in the play's title and mentions these beautiful dark-eyed virgins numerous times in various contexts. Tamam uses the term first, while describing her brother, "My brother! Have you seen him? He looks like me, black hair, black eyes."<sup>75</sup> Then, Architect, as she fantasizes about an imagined future with Half Breed ruminates, "Will our children have your doe eyes or my black ones?"<sup>76</sup> Aiesha describes the victim of her attack as "this little girl with big black eyes" who was doted on by her neighbors, "look at those big black eyes".<sup>77</sup> Shamieh narrates the indescribable delights of the afterlife where men are "hanging out with a bunch of houris, who were hot virgins whose virginity is continually renewed, also known as the Black Eyed."<sup>78</sup> Shamieh incorporates eyes as a sensory element to illuminate the relationship of sight and visibility to her project identity. But, once again, Shamieh inverts the ideology in this construct through a deft reversal: "they don't actually get to have a bunch of sexy, dark-eyed women, but they have pleasures that will feel like it".<sup>79</sup> She concludes with a joke, taking the air out of an entire belief system, "We all know that religions are wacky. . . everyone picks and chooses what's convenient about

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72. Ibid, 80.

73. Ibid, 82.

74. Ibid, 18.

75. Ibid, 19.

76. Ibid, 55.

77. Ibid, 76-79.

78. Ibid, 35.

79. Ibid.

their own religion."<sup>80</sup> Shamieh does not question the mythic nature of the houris, yet she weights her women with a cultural burden they must carry while trying to live out this unattainable myth.

## Conclusion

Shamieh situates her play at the locus of contrast and intersectionality. She is both Arab and American, at the axis of economic privilege and the margin of racist stereotypes. She welcomes her alterity with a positionality that is both insider and outsider. Through her representation of Arab women, she resists an Orientalist notion: "It is the nostalgia for the 'real' Orient that motivates the Western subject's irresistible urge to enter this forbidden space."<sup>81</sup> For Shamieh, it is not a forbidden space, yet it is not wholly her own either. She is allowed admission into physical and psychological places that a mere tourist or a visitor could not access. She has an insider's window into Arab culture, yet (as an American and a woman playwright) she remains foreign. Her cultural investigation rides a razor's edge of Orientalism, yet she positions herself as both "us" and "them" within the discourse as she flips the hegemonic power structure. Shamieh addresses Orientalist beliefs by slyly informing her reader: your ideas about "us" are wrong, and here is how and this is why. In doing so, she creates a bridge of understanding between cultures. Shamieh challenges the Orientalist notion that Arabs are seen as either victims or perpetrators of violence and subverts that premise by leading the reader backstage and lifting the curtain on her characters' motivations.<sup>82</sup> She acknowledges that she has created an imaginary world for her four, female, Palestinian characters, where they can safely reveal their biases and subaltern perspectives. Tamam describes the feeling of relief that Shamieh provides by bringing the four women characters together: "Even in heaven, you can breathe more easily with your own people."<sup>83</sup> In a nod to their Occidental perspective, the four women reveal that it is easier to understand the world through this separatist vantage point. Though it may, ultimately, be unsatisfying and unsettling, Shamieh, in the end, leaves the reader with questions still unanswered, answers still unquestioned, mirroring an uncertain world that remains precariously xenophobic.

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80. Ibid, 34.

81. Yeğenoğlu, 73.

82. *Segal Talks: Betty Shamieh* (YouTube, 23 July 2020). Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q8D2FqfLzOo>.

83. Shamieh, 31.

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