"*Identity Issue in Contemporary Diaspora Arab Theatre*" *(Applied study of Leila Buck texts)*

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Abstract
The problem of identity is one of the issues on the world arena, as it is an essential part of the structure of political intellect. It is also considered as prerequisite for social existence, therefor, the concept of identity has received a great attention in the field of Theatre studies, especially in the Diaspora drama; most of them face a problem that is about their identity and who they are after they moved to that new social and cultural space. The paper aims for analyzing the concept of identity in Contemporary Diaspora Arab Theatre, especially in the works of the Lebanese American artist "Leila Buck"; that writer of a Lebanese mother and an American diplomat father. The concept of identity was richly introduced in her plays. Her repeated question in the "ISite" play, which is the topic of the paper: "What does it mean to be an Arab American?"; is an attempt to reveal how she shaped the concept of identity in her plays throughout a socio-cultural method. The researcher will address for the following themes:
-The concept of Diaspora Arab Theatre in its debate and overlapping with the views of the others, from the researcher's point of view.
-The reasons behind the emergence of the concept of identity for Arab Diaspora in the United States of America.
-The space that Leila Buck occupies in the field of American Theatre, and her production system.
-The voices that Buck introduces about her idea of identity in the "ISite" play.

Keywords: Identity, Diaspora Arab theatre, Leila Buck

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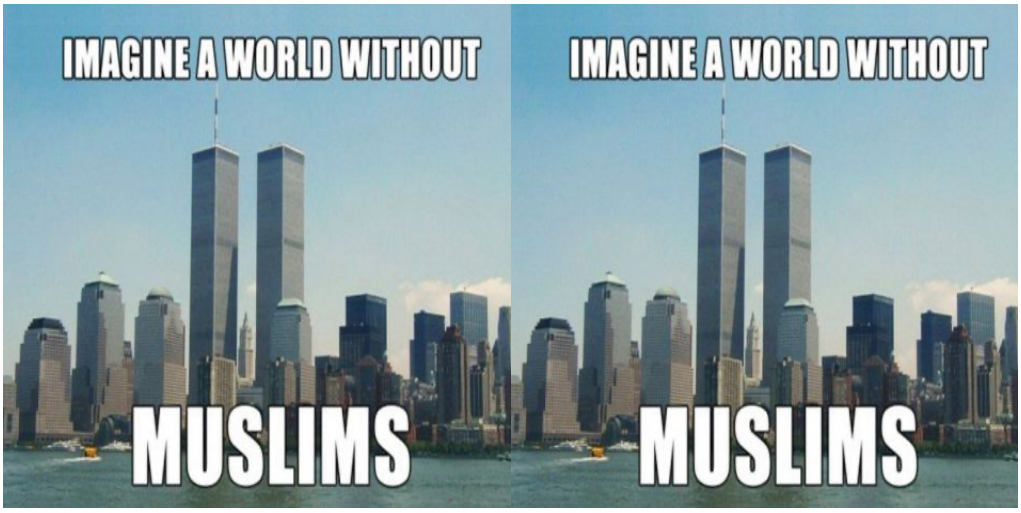
Introduction:

The Arab immigrants have started to immigrate to the United States of America since the beginnings of the nineteenth century from many regions, especially from the region called at that time "the Great Syria" (now: Syria, Jordan, Palestine, Lebanon, Iraq and Kuwait). Those immigrants formed an important structure of the general frame of the American society based mainly on the concept of immigration. In spite of that old immigration of the Arab to the United States of America, it is a paradox that the concept of "Identity" didn't have a space on the American theatre arena [1] except in the period of the sixth decade of the twentieth century and the consequent world political developments which followed that period and took part in bringing about the concept of Identity.

In his study about the Arab Identity in the American Society, "Gaby Semaan", professor of the Middle East studies in Toledo University in the United States of America, states that even during the Second World War and after that the Arab Societies were taken in inside the American Society in general. But the political events which took place in the American Arab Arena have taken part greatly in unsettling that semi stable relation (Quoted in Semaan, 2014. P.23). Since the Declaration of the Establishment of the State of Israel on the Palestinian territories was issued, it appears that as if a big stone was thrown in a pool of stagnant water to make the Arab Israeli Conflict come to light on the political arena clearly.

The political tension and the military struggles between a number of Arab countries and Israel and the United States participation in that conflict as a party is another point to be added. This was a start for introducing the concept of Identity on the theatre arena as it is considered as a good paradox also in the American Arab Theatre History. The literary and cultural arena at that time witnessed the start of basic changes especially with arrival of a generation of educated immigrants to the United States of America and appearance of independence movements in the Arab World and "civil rights movements" and Identity wakefulness of the third generation of the immigrants. This led to appearance of a new generation of the Arab Americans and writers who were interested in the politics and relations with the Arab World more than before (Selim, 2014. P. 81). Most academic studies confirm that appearance of the concept of Identity is still a reaction to the 1967 events and the consequent world events which affected greatly the political process after that, the most important one in "11 September2001" attacks.

As the Arab Israeli Conflict led to the appearance of the concept of Identity, the 11 September 2001 attacks is as a borderline in the world history in general and the Arab history in special. Of course all of us know the terroristic attacks of 11 September2001 in which two planes crashed intentionally into the twin towers of the World Trade Center as these attacks formed a symbolic sign after that because these events brought into being an enormous wave of feelings of hate and aversion against the Muslims and the Arabs and strict discrimination against them. These attacks also firmed the stereotypical image about the Arabs that they are terrorists and longs to killing and linked the name of the Arab and the Muslims to the permanent danger.



(Figure1: Some newspapers news about "11 September 2001 attacks")

These events formed a motive to the American Arab writers because these events brought into being American Arab voices and brought into view many theater troupes for the purpose of changing that stereotypical bad image formed recently about the Arab, as there was an urgent need to Arab Artistic Voices more than any other time. This became clear at that time through appearance of a new wave of fruitful artistic change in the American theatrical space in both the form and the content which looked like a stage of prosperity for Diaspora Arab Theatre[2]. As a result, a number of American Arab theatre troupes interested in the Arab issues and affairs in general became into view trying to change the stereotypical image about the Arab.

One of the most important theatre troupes was "Silk Road Rising" which came to light on the theatrical arena as a reaction to 11 September2001 Events. Nibras Troupe, which means lantern in classical Arabic, also occupied a big place as Silk Road Rising in the theatrical field of the United States. It is a fruit of cooperation among number of American Arab dramatists including Yusuf Al Gendy, Naglaa Edward Said, Leila Buck and others. These dramatists were able also to occupy an important place in the main stream of the theatrical process of the American theatrical space especially after the premier of "Sajjil" in2002 which depended on the idea of the documentary theatre, as the show was based on a number of records based on the question saying "what come into your mind when you hear the word "Arab"?"!

The theatrical arena was not limited to the Middle East issues or political issues only, rather some of them discussed the problems of the immigrants concerning the concept of Identity, the problem of dual identity and belonging to two cultures such as the dramatist Leila Buck.

As for the problem of Identity, The Lebanese American dramatist Leila Buck[3] occupied a big place. The concept of Identity came into light richly in her plays such as "HKelee" and "American Dreams", "In The Crossing" Texts and of course "ISite", the subject of research[4] in her repeated question:

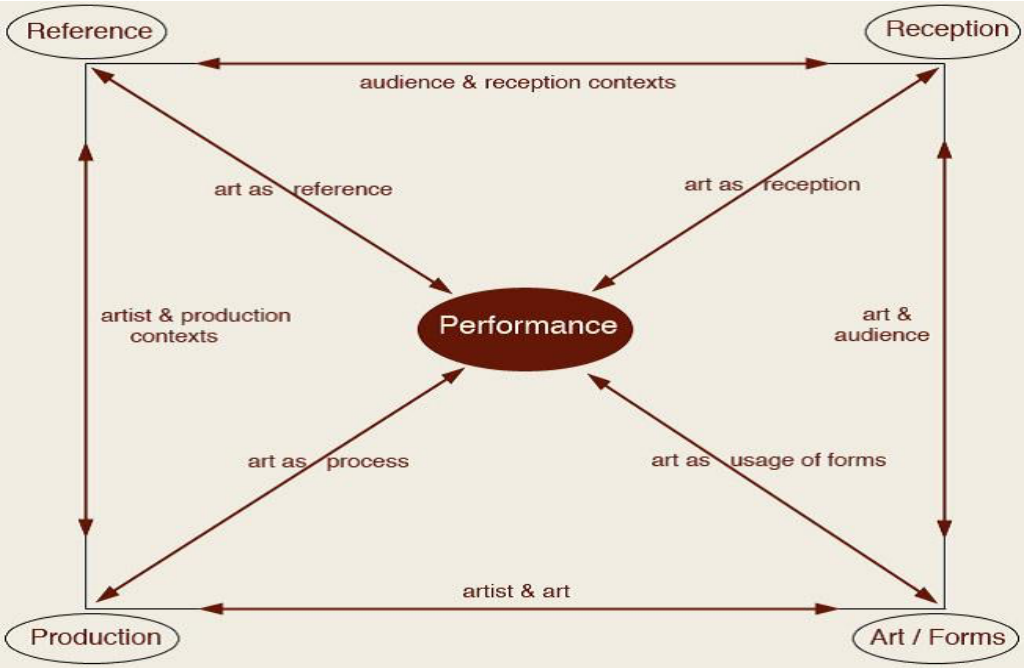
"What does it mean to be an American Arab?"

(Figure2: Leila Buck)

We can understand why she is interested greatly in the concept of Identity in her theatrical works when we refer to her social and cultural background. She is a daughter of a Lebanese mother and an American diplomatic father. She has lived in many Arab countries, and then she went to the United States of America. This transfer among the Arab Countries then going to the United States of America as well as her cultural and social background participated in forming her own awareness about the concept of Identity in her theatrical texts and performances[5].

Before dealing with the analysis of the narrative structure of the theatrical text, and whereas the show is not an independent thing but it is a part of the theatrical system, and based on the following diagram as for that dynamic process between the theatrical

performance as the last product and its settings either in the production process or receiving the performance or the theatrical form, the researcher will deal with the production system of Buck for understanding the place occupied by Buck in the American Arab Theatrical space as a whole.



(Figure3: Diagram presented by Prof. Yong Li Lan during his study to the theatrical performances and their integrated system as a whole in 2007)

In the beginning, the most theatrical works of the dramatist Leila Buck were made in cooperation with Mosaic Theatre Company of dc[6]. This company is an independent nonprofit and non-censored theatrical company based in Washington and aims at integrating in the society and introducing the urgent issues at the present time. She also cooperated with "The African Continuum Theatre Company", a company with special cultural feature which focuses on the American African experiences and sufferings of the immigrants.

(Figure4: Mosaic Theatre Company Logo)

The theatrical space of Buck is not limited to that only previous production system which makes her looks as if she occupies a marginal space. She was appointed as a cultural delegate of the U.S Department of State for cultural exchange between America and a number of countries such as Denmark and Spain for intercultural facilitation. Buck also occupies an important place in the Arabic theatrical space such as Tunisia, Beirut, Saudi Arabia, where she introduced many theatrical performances, such as the most popular and widespread "HKelee" show.

ARAB NEWS

Leila Buck regales Jeddah audience

(Figure5: Report from Arab News Journal dated (7/10/2015) saying that Leila Buck regains Jeddah audience after introducing "HKelee" show)

After introducing the production system of Buck and understanding the space which she occupies, it is worth mentioning to ask the remaining question about how the concept of Identity was formed in "ISite" text, what are the discourses presented by Buck in the text about her concept about the Identity?!

(Figure6: The official poster of "ISite" show in SETAR Europe Festival in 2005)

The text discusses mainly the problem of dual identity or living in two worlds through a mono-dramatic show in which the different characters and discourses about the concept of Identity, whether the character of grandmother, grandfather or mother and other characters, are integrated. The show has 16 scenes with different lengths from many lines to many pages which deal together with the problem of identity disturbance resulting from the immigration. The play starts with the takeoff scene and ends with the landing scene. Between the life and landing, Buck[7] or the immigrant in

general lives a metaphoric life in which the immigrant suffer from a problem of forming an acknowledged and accepted identity which goes along with the lifestyle of the cultural and social space to which the immigrant transfers.
The Playwright starts the play by lines of poetry written by the Lebanese poet Gibran Khalil Gibran(1883/1931):

"The soul is our house
Our eyes its windows
And our words its messengers"(ISite, Unpublished Text.P:3)

(Figure7: Gibran Khalil Gibran(1883/1931)

It was not a chance that the Playwright starts her play by line of verses written by Gibran, as she confirm two points by that start. The first point is the similarity and contact between the Playwright and Gibran introduced by the Playwright. Gibran had a Lebanese origin and was proud of his Lebanese Identity. He travelled to the United States of America and after that he wrote many poems which introduced his love to his homeland and his desire to come back to it. Consequently, the Playwright is similar somewhat to Gibran in that she is very fond of the homeland although she is far from it. As for the second point, it is centered on its pride of her Arab Lebanese Identity from the beginning of the theatrical text although the negotiation about the Arab identity at that time in the American society especially after the political events mentioned before by the researcher was not an easy matter specially in that environment which brings about the struggle and in which the Arab are described as terrorists and inferiors as presented in the beginning of the text:

"And suddenly I find myself wondering if they would smile that way if my skin were darker, or my accent from somewhere farther away".(ISite, Unpublished Text.P:9)

This was not an obstacle against the Playwright to acknowledge and be proud of her Arab Identity. This bride of her Arab Identity becomes clear also in the opening scenes of the theatrical text. The Playwright also puts a condition in the introduction

of the text that who acts the play should be an American- Arab performer and should have knowledge of the Arabic language. The language here represents one of the most important signs of the Identity and the symbol of the cultural belonging, or as the critic "Boucher" states:

"The language is largely the most prominent element of racism as it includes the past and expresses the present and the future ambitions and trends"(Quoted in Amara 2010, P.26).

Author's Note:

To be performed by one Arab American actress (or multiple actors if necessary, provided the protagonist is Arab American) without intermission. The

(Figure8: "ISite, Unpublished Text P.2")

When we refer to the lines of poetry written by Gibran and chosen by the Playwright, we will find that the basic element upon which the text is based is the idea of "home" or "what is the home?" This is the central idea which comes to light in the whole of the theatrical text.
In his definition to the concept of "Travelling Cultures" and his indication to the concept of "home", James Clifford (1945/….); one of the most important professors interested in the concept of cultures, immigrants and diaspora, says:

"Home is not a place that one leaves behind, but a geographical point of reference, a sense of place that serves as an anchor for the travel" (Georgiana Voicu, Identity in the Postcolonial Paradigm, P.25).

The concept of "home" in the text as for the Woman is represented by the house of her grandfather from her Lebanese mother and her grandfather from her American father:
Quotation from the play about house of her American grandfather and grandmother:

… "it feels strangely comforting to be here—
(She begins to take in the stage as if it were her grandmother's house)
—in this house where we've shared so many memories". (ISite, Unpublished Text.P.13)

Quotation from the play about love of the Woman to the house of her Lebanese grandmother:

That's my favorite dream is that I can fly.
Cause flying makes you go home faster.
An'maybe, if I could fly, then Teta and Jeddo and Mummy and Daddy
and me could all live in the same place!. (ISite, Unpublished Text.P.24)

Whereas the plane and flying form certainly significant standing in the life of the Woman as for the concept of immigration and leaving the homeland and the dual concept of the plane as it brings us near to the family and it also brings us far from them, this point is the basic point from which the problem of the Woman comes into

being in her continuous negotiation between those two cultures and her permanent struggle as for her belonging to the two cultures. Thus, the problem of dual awareness appears in that she is such American girl in the Arab society and the Arab girl in the American society. This problem comes with problems related to the symbolic violence practiced against her and her mother because they are described as less civilized. Consequently, the problem that the Arab immigrants can't acknowledge their Arab identity appears because of that inferior view given by the other. So, the Arab immigrants can't adapt to that society or the social space which reject the immigrant just because that immigrant belongs to another culture. Perhaps this is what makes Buck for example host the children friends in the house to prove to them that she lives like them exactly and that she doesn't live in a tent or has smell like the smell of the camels. The problem of symbolic violence, either against the Woman or against her mother, is clear in the text in many scenes:

"if she lived in a tent! How
she dressed!
…
Well we were living in what they called a flat and we had three cups, three plates, and three forks".(ISite, Unpublished Text.P.16:17)

When acknowledging his Arab identity, the immigrant doesn't suffer from the symbolic violence only but also from the stereotypical image formed because of the 11 September 2001 events and the previous terroristic aggressions carried out under the name of the "Muslim Arabs". These events had a role in shaking stability of those immigrants and in their inability to uncover their religious identity or reveal it. Buck narrates that in the following scene:

"And one of the things I miss most from my childhood is the call to prayer.
It's a beautiful sound.
But here in the U.S. we only hear it as background to news clips of bombings or "The Threat from Within".
Allah hu akbar allah hu akbar…
Suddenly, the sound of gunfire interrupts her ritual. She looks around in fear, removes the abaya from her head, runs behind the chair and hurriedly puts her shoes back on, then rises, as she speaks to the audience".(ISite, Unpublished Text.P.34:35)

The Woman didn't only negotiate continuously as for her American Arab Identity and the resulting split in her identity, but she also introduced to us another dimension represented by the problem of dissimilarity in the Arab identities themselves and that Arab are not that one structure or one cultural mass because there are many differences between us. This is clear in her childhood as she is an American diplomatic child who lived her life in many Arab countries including Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and other Arab countries….

"Covered women's children recognize them by their shoes, or their smell. But there is something beautiful in discovering what really makes you who you are.
If everyone looks the same, you find another way to know them.
So what makes me who I am?
Is it my style? My hair? My shoes? Or my smell?"(ISite, Unpublished Text.P.9)

Perhaps the travel of the Playwright to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was a change point in her life, especially when she was compelled to wear the veil. After that incident, she started to ask herself which part of her is Arab and which part is American?!

Consequently, during her transfer among different countries she introduces many questions about the two worlds and the life of the immigrants. These struggles in herself among all such countries in which she lived and the concept of the being as for her are the most central issues in her life.

"The question of how we hold onto a sense of self while being shaped by the places we live in and the people with whom we interact has been central to my life and work. (Hkelee Full press, 2013. P:5)

So, the idea of being infatuated by the origins to which the Woman referred in the beginning of the text[8] makes the researcher introduce the character in the text as a middle region who stands on the same footing among all cultures and identities, in what so called "In between identity" or the identity as a middle region between her bride of her Arab identity and her love and belonging also to the American culture, where the play text ends while the Woman stands on the borders of the ocean and says:

"Sometimes I feel like the ocean.
It's touching so many shores at once that forms the shape of who I am.
We all take our shape from the lands that we touch.
That's what home is I guess—where you make contact with the earth.
And every time I touch down in new soil –I see myself -- for the first time".*(ISite, Unpublished Text.P.43).*

We can add to that the symbolic sign introduced in "the concept of ocean" as it is a vast entity which gathers many countries and identities at the same time although it adheres to its being or to its features. This idea introduced by the Playwright is in mutual contact with the concept introduced by "Stewart Haul" when he defined the concept of the cultural identity as:

"It belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture"(Georgiana Voicu, Identity in the Postcolonial Paradigm: Key Concepts. P.17), the process of continuous development which corresponds to the life of the Woman in the theatrical text. She still acquires a new form whenever she touches and foots on new land

When speaking about the Identity, of course we don't speak about one voice or one discourse but we speak about many discourses which may clash with each other in some cases. While the Playwright in the text takes sides with the Identity in its dynamic concept, or as described by the researcher "Saad Mohammed Rahim": "it is an outcome of coordinates in space of changing socio cultural map", there is also another discourse which we can't describe as static or inflexible but it expresses within it about a firm attitude adopted by someone towards the Identity. The later discourse is expressed by the voice introduced by the character of the "Lebanese grandmother" who is always proud of her Arab Identity[9] so much to the extent that she tries willfully to do mistakes in pronouncing the English language letters and

replace them with Arabic letters. The grandmother refuses to leave Lebanon except the civil war which drives her husband to compel her to leave Lebanon. The grandfather also introduces another voice opposing discourse adopted by the grandmother. From the beginning he has a keen desire to travel to the United States of America and establish his own house. But after establishing the house, his dreams collapse in front of the solid or unconscious reality as he describes:

Jeddo's stubbornness and respect for the United States led him to transplant my grandmother here.
(With Lebanese accent)
"You're crazy, it will last six months at the most!"
Jeddo had loved and admired the United States for as long as he could remember.
But when he came here, it wasn't home"."(ISite, Unpublished Text.P.26).

Accordingly, the Playwright introduces in her play many voices and discourses. Each discourse has a different point of view as for the concept of identity where that point of view is based largely on the social and cultural background of those who adopt that point of view. While the concept of Identity as for the Woman in the play was formed as a dynamic concept, the identity is formed as for the grandmother as a firm static concept or thing as the grandmother is very fond and proud of her Arab identity.

Results:

At last, the identity problem is one of the most important problems introduced now in the field of humanities because it represents an obstacle which faces the immigrants when they adapt inside the cultural and social space to which they transfer. Although adaptation and acclimatization is not an easy matter as for all immigrants from all over the world, the matter is increasingly complicated as for the Arabs because of the world political events which supported the stereotypical image about the Arab that they are uncivilized and long for shedding blood. This problem is introduced in Buck's play, as she is interested in her variety of texts in the concept of Identity and the obstacles which face the Arab immigrants in their adaptation in the American theatrical space such as symbolic violence and inferior look by some people in the American society to their self-struggle concerning their belonging to one of the two cultures. In this play, buck introduces many discourses such as integration and openness with the other or the firm concept of the identity or the weak dreams in the dream of travelling and living abroad.

In the conclusion, and in spite of the variety of voices introduced by the Playwright in the text about the form of Identity, the end of the play by the voice of the Playwright represent from the point of view of the researcher as a bias from the Playwright in the text to the idea of the dynamic identity. We can say that her voice and ideology becomes preponderant over other voices of the characters in the play. We can say that the reason of that is the work of the Playwright as a cultural delegate in the U.S Department of State to the United Nations for intercultural facilitation. The other reason is that she established many cultural workshops which aims at making the immigrants overcome the problems of immigration and integration inside the society. Accordingly, she also confirms and enhances her professional ideology in the concept of openness and integration in her theatrical works.

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[1] Although there is inheritance of the American Arabic poetry, represented in the essays dated to the nineteenth century for diaspora poets about their love to the homeland, these written works aims increasingly at gaining acceptance inside the American society for resisting the stereotypical Arab image about the Arab.(Selim.2014. P: 81)

[2] "Diaspora Arab Theatre" is a dialectical term as it has many definitions based on the point of view adopted by each researcher specially that the term has no specific definition until now. Is the term classified according to the author or according to the issue introduced in the play or according to both of them?!

In an interview with the Professor Marvin Carsoln(1935/…..) on25/4/2018 in the lobby of Hilton Ramses Hotel, Cairo, Egypt _in preparation of a symposium presented by the professor immediately after the interview in Jesuit theatre in Ramses under title "Contemporary Arab Diasporic Plays and productions in Europe and the United States",_ The professor explained his conception about the term as "*a theatrical performance which discusses the issues of the Arab immigrants or the Arab issues in general provided that the play should be performed on minority theatre. But if the play is performed on famous American theatres such as Broadway for example, then it is classified as an American theatre*" this is the matter about which the researcher argued, especially the last part about the theatres on which the play is performed. So, the researcher is driven to introduce her own definition about "Diaspora Arab Theatre" term, In her definition:

a- **Playwright**:
The theatrical system is not limited to the theatrical performance as the last fruit of the theatrical process, but it contains many elements which happen before the performance such as authoring, direction, production, target audience of the performance and other elements. The researcher thinks that the playwright in the Diaspora Arab Theatre is the main pillar in that process because of the contemporary issues which the playwright introduces where these issues take the attention of the Arab in general or the immigrants in special. Whereas the important aspect is the responsibility of the playwright for conveying the general idea of the text, the researcher thinks that the playwright should has Arab origins as this is a main and essential condition in classifying the immigrant Arab writers.
In our discussion about the importance that the writer should have Arab origins, the researcher in this paper and as for the definition of the concept of "Arab" takes sides with the "linguistic term" which defines the Arab in the immigrant society as "any person whose country people speak the Arabic language as a native language

notwithstanding the religion and race" as she thinks that this definition is comprehensive.

b- The issues which the writer introduce in theatrical texts and performances:
When speaking about the problem of classifying Diaspora Arab Theatre, it is a must to mention that the issues introduced by the writer as for his/ her interests even in some of his/ her texts or theatrical performances should handle clearly the issues of the Arab in general and problems of the Arab immigrants in special. This will lead us to the way by which the writer introduces the being inside the American Arab theatrical space because there are many writers with Arab origins but they don't introduce in their texts or performances subjects related to the issues of the immigrants or the Arab. Consequently, the writer here is far from introducing the being as an American Arabic writer

[3] She is a performer, director and writer. She performed in many of her plays such as "HKilli", "ISite" and other theatrical performances.

[4] The concept of "Identity" was mentioned in these texts either as a central issue in the text or as a secondary issue.

[5] This is in addition to her study in "Wesleyan" University which helped her to develop her theatrical writing. "ISite" text, subject of research, was written during her study in the university in1998 as a thesis for high studies and the text was redeveloped again after the 11 September2001 events.

[6] http://www.mosaictheater.org/15-16-hkeelee

[7] Note: when analyzing the text, the researcher will differentiate between Buck as a playwright and as a character in the play. When the researcher speaks about Buck as a playwright, she will call her "the Playwright". When the researcher speaks about her as a character in the text, she will call her "the Woman" as the character in the text".

[8] The researcher means here the idea of confirming the importance of the Arabic Language and starting the text and the performance by lines from poetry of Gibran Khalil Gibran.

[9] In most scenes of the play, she speaks Arabic language with Lebanese accent, except in some scenes in which she speaks English language.

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