

THE DISINTEGRATED 'DREAM': IMMIGRANT PLAYS AND MODERN AMERICAN
DRAMA IN THE 21st-CENTURY

BY

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DISSERTATION

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines the relationship between 21st-century American immigrant drama and modern American drama in style, characterization, theme, content, and format. I argue that American immigrant drama has adopted the style of modern American drama as a generality in content and form due to social and political concerns, in the last decades. The 21st-century American immigrant drama focuses on immigrants' views about the American Dream and how that intersects with the accessibility of liberty, civil rights, and economic stability in the United States. American immigrant drama, primarily written by first-generation or second-generation immigrants, explores an immigrant's experiences navigating his or her new life in the United States.

I did not choose the understudy plays randomly; they bring together four playwrights from the East, Europe, the Middle East, and the Arab world. Each of these playwrights has a unique experience about immigration to the United States, with various reasons for immigration. However, their perspectives on American society and the issues confronting an immigrant in this society are comparable. They represent the four nations that have been the source of the most significant number of immigrants in American history.

These selected plays and many other 21st-century immigrant plays deal with immigration, culture, family, deportation, justice, exile, and law problems. Immigrant plays are essentially a drama of ideas rather than action; they express specific statements they want to spread in American society. Immigrant playwrights examine the host community and address problematic issues in society. They use drama to demonstrate relations that prevail in the United

States, which sometimes embeds discrimination and pressure on refugees, immigrants, and asylum seekers.

20th-century drama represents actions, reactions, and dialogues that reflect Post-World War II American themes: the dissolution of the American family, exile, the American Dream's failure, and the downturn of economy in the United States. 21st-century immigrant plays are also Post-September 11 in character and reflect significant experiences of alienation in exile and the American Dream's failure. They present the loss of faith in hopes and dreams for immigrants and asylum seekers, who crave freedom and desire success.

American immigrant drama and modern American drama examine human experience where the past contrasts with the new reality of the American Dream. These genres have had constant viewpoints on society, personality, and relationships. In the United States, the country of Dreams, these topics have been a critical theatre discussion for several decades. American immigrant drama deals with the paradoxes of immigrant families' relationships, doubts, worries, and eventual collapse. Immigrant families and individuals in 21st-century plays attempt to manage the essentials of harsh new society's reality by retreating into a distant past of dead dreams.

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*This work carries the spirit of the past,
present, and the future.*

*It is dedicated to my mother, Maryam Khoie, who
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CHAPTER 1: BACKGROUND

IMMIGRATION, MODERNISM, AMERICAN DREAM, AND THE RELATED TERMS

“The American Dream is that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement.”

—James Truslow Adams, *The Epic of America*

Ten years ago, I immigrated to the United States. I was an Iranian woman with at least twenty years of experience in theatre as a director, journalist, playwright, critic, dramaturg, translator, and teacher.

Existing research shows that adapting to significant life changes and maintaining a sense of life satisfaction becomes difficult in adulthood “when one is faced with the possibility of multiple losses” (Carstensen 96). Several interrelated factors such as attitudes towards my immigration “the nature of social and emotional support, active involvement in day-to-day activities, a sense of challenge” (McConatha 21), and the emotional nature of my memories all serve to influence my adjustment to the new cultural situation.

My migration was difficult because of leaving a great deal of my life experience and sociocultural resources behind. Leaving my origin country by choice, I worked with passion to become involved with my new homeland. However, other factors, such as distinctive American characteristics, attitudes, and varying views toward immigrants and refugees, in general, influenced my adjustment to the new culture.

Even though the United States’ anti-discrimination policy ensures equal treatment and protection for all its citizens regardless of race, class, sex, and age, I had to obtain “American experience” to be qualified for jobs more suited to my abilities. As Flearas suggests, “... in a white-dominated society, the color of your skin is the single most important factor in

determining life chances, as well as your dignity, identity, and self-esteem” (Fleearas 96).

Learning this fact about the American experience after looking for jobs for several years taught me two things; first, the American Dream can be negotiable, commutable, inaccessible, and, in many cases, disappointing. Second, I needed to gain the “American experience” to move forward not as a foreigner or an outsider but as a “qualified” American.

This dissertation is a result of my decision to get a Ph.D. in theatre, to find my lost identity, and to help the immigrant community in the United States to be heard. I am looking forward to seeing a way through the dramatic literature to share immigrants’ stories, experiences, feelings, financial problems, identity issues, and cultural misunderstandings with American society. The plays depicted here help demonstrate what immigrants have expected from this hosting country, their beautiful ideal of the American Dream, and what they received upon arrival.

For centuries, immigrants have arrived on American shores with empty hands and dreams of a better life. The promise of liberty tempted them to leave home and pursue freedom. Even those familiar with American immigrant history, with its hardships and isolation, have faith in the American Dream. Having uprooted and trekked to this “land of opportunity,” however, immigrants face unexpected obstacles. Cultural isolation and otherness appear inevitable.

Monica Varsanyi, professor in political science, noted that “immigration” defines a permanent movement of non-citizens to another country (Varsanyi 114). Muzaffar Chishti, Director of the MPI office at New York University, includes that immigrants and asylum seekers have been a significant source of population growth and cultural change throughout global and U.S. history (M. C. Bolter). As a society that began with a colony of world power (i.e., Great Britain), all Americans, except Native Americans, have roots in other established regions.

According to 2017 statistics from the *United Nations Population Division*¹, the United States has a larger immigrant population than any other country. The number represents “19.1 percent of the 244 million international migrants worldwide,” which translates to “14.4 percent of the U.S. population” (United Nations Population Division). Despite all research and evidence supporting the immigrant’s status in American society, the United States has been hostile to immigrants or refugees, especially after September 11, 2001, and again after the election of Donald Trump in 2017.

Immigrants have long experience of difficulties in this country resulting from cultural differences and language diversity exacerbated by rejection from their new communities. Whether because of war, politics, poverty, or religious issues, immigrants migrated from their homelands, looking for a new life and often mourning their lost identity. Whatever the reason for immigrating, they seek the American Dream, a better life.

Here, I am compelled to explore the American Dream based on my experience as an outsider. The American Dream for those who immigrate to “America” means that you can earn your dream if you work hard to achieve it. Immigrants see the United States as a “field of dreams” where the seeds of any dream can be planted, watered, and harvested. For the immigrants, nationality and skin color may be overcome. It is enough to have big dreams and put effort into achieving them.

To achieve their dreams, many immigrants take the path of education, others try to achieve success through hard work, and artists struggle with breaking cultural boundaries through art. American immigrant drama often explores human experience where established identity clashes with the new and reality confronts the American Dream. Plays about

¹ (<https://www.un.org>).

immigration provide insight into culture, identity, and family, and they extend beyond the particular to the universal. In the United States, these subjects have been an essential theatrical conversation for decades, written by different dramatists, renowned and obscure.

These dramatists represent immigrants in opposition to the new culture of the host country as they attempt to erase borders and reach for their dream. Their works are essentially dramas of ideas; they express important sentiments they want to embed in American society. They seek to share their cultures and build community among immigrants and native Americans to support immigrant rights.

Having studied immigrant plays from recent decades, I discovered parallels between them and modern American plays, in content and form. These parallels made me wonder why they are so similar despite the difference between them. Why do the characters in modern American plays feel alienation, loneliness, and estrangement in the same way that the characters in immigrant plays do? Why does the form of immigrant plays resemble modern American plays?

I concluded that; “belonging”² and “becoming” were crucial components in both dramatic forms. By juxtaposing these plays, I intend to demonstrate that in American culture characters experience cultural isolation and otherness as they struggle with problematic societies.

Both immigrant and native modern dramatists seek to convey a sense of human isolation within society. Characters in modern plays have migrated from traditional to modern society, from the past to the present, or from one circumstance to another. Characters in immigrant plays migrated from one country to another; however, both sorts of characters confront similar issues that underpin the themes of these plays.

² A sense of belonging entails more than familiarity with others. It focuses on obtaining acceptance, attention, and support from group members while also delivering the same attention to other members.

To convey these similarities, this dissertation examines dramatic literature through the lens of the cultural, economic, and political contexts in which the plays are written or received. Drawing on dramaturgical theory and techniques of dramatic analysis, I studied the complicated issues of immigrants in the United States that fold around the American Dream in plays of 21st - century immigrant playwrights such as Martyna Majok (*Ironbound*), Naomi Iizuka (*Anon(ymous)*), Yussef El Guindi (*The Talented Ones*), and Novid Parsi (*Through the Elevated Line*).

I did not select these playwrights arbitrarily. They are immigrant writers from the East, Europe, the Middle East, and the Arab world. They represent the regions that have contributed many immigrants to the American experience. Each of these playwrights has a different experience with immigration to the United States. Their perspectives on American society; however, the issues that an immigrant faces in this society are similar.

By focusing on the relationship between the selected plays and American culture, whether the playwright affirms or criticizes its values, this research elucidates the function of drama in society. This dissertation also argues for the relationship between contemporary American immigrant drama and modern American drama in form and content.

A closer study of selected works will demonstrate these parallels. This selection of plays is representative of 21st-century American immigrant drama because it focuses on immigrants' views of the American Dream and how they intersect with accessibility to liberty, civil rights, and economic stability in the United States after September 11. These plays, written by first-generation or second-generation immigrants, explore immigrants' experiences navigating their new life in the United States. Characters in these plays deal with immigration, family, deportation, justice, exile, and law problems. These four immigrant playwrights examine the host

community and address problematic issues in American society. They use drama to demonstrate tensions that prevail in the United States, which may heighten discrimination and pressure on refugees, immigrants, and asylum seekers.

The understudy plays have aspects that are universal because they are reflections of identity, exile, and idealism. The writers explore human situation and by doing so, enhance the culture. Their works are expansive, studies of human spirit and identity, which give their audience a more comprehensive understanding of human experiences.

As I mentioned, plays about immigration in America have long-existing visions into the culture, identity, and family ties, from the late nineteenth century and mid-20th century American Theatre, until now. It is important to note that my concentration is on the playwrights who are immigrants themselves or are from the second generation of immigrants. Therefore, American plays written about immigration, including those by native Americans and African American writers, are not the study subjects in my dissertation. The playwrights in this study include the following: Ayad Akhtar, born in 1970, an American-born playwright of Pakistani heritage who received the 2013 Pulitzer Prize for Drama. His plays are about American-Muslim experience, religion and economics, immigration, and identity. Martyna Majok, born in 1985, a Polish American author who won the 2018 Pulitzer Prize for Drama. Her plays are mostly about European immigrants' experiences in the new society and their challenges with the American Dream. Yusuf El Guindi, born in 1960, an Egyptian American playwright, known as "the most talented Arab American writer of political" (Kan 20). His works are focusing on immigrant experiences, cultural and political climates, and current issues facing Arab Americans and Muslim Americans. David Henry Hwang, born 1957, American playwright whose plays are concerning the role of the Chinese American and Asian American role in the contemporary

world. As an example, *FOB* Hwang's famous play is set in a Chinese restaurant in southern California explores the conflicts between newly arrived Chinese immigrants and their ancestors by involving a combination of different types of characters, some typical Chinese American college students and some mythic Chinese warriors and gods. *Letters from Cuba* first premier in 2000, written by Maria Irene Fornés, is another successful immigrant play set in Cuba and New York that examines the cultural, spiritual, and traditional differences between a brother and sister who are living apart, one in New York, one in Cuba.

There is a long list of plays written during the last twenty years that take on themes such as cultural adaptation, generational differences, intercultural relationships, realities of life in a new land, and questions about identity, which I mention as immigrant plays in this dissertation. Immigrant playwrights—first- and second-generation immigrants—who have been exposed to a new culture, portray the efforts and conflicts of an immigrant in the new society. All these contemporary factors parallel many of the central themes and worldviews of modern American drama. An analysis of key elements of modern American drama reveals thematic similarities and dramaturgical resonances with 21st-century American immigrant drama, which highlights the socio-economic constraints of an isolated character, who often encounters violent rejection or a restrictive judicial system.

An extended analysis of American Modern Drama, its contexts, and its relationship to the American Dream offers significant comparative insights for understanding how Contemporary American Immigration Drama deeply resonates both thematically and dramaturgically with key American dramatic texts. It also enables us to see where the new genre diverges from the past. American Modern Drama developed through an economic, political, social, and cultural revolution that came about in the last half of the nineteenth century and through the twentieth.

The second Industrial Revolution failed, in the matter of human freedom, a meaningless and repetitive life. Among all benefits of industrialization, people could not keep up with rapid changes in their regular lives. The result was depersonalization in the age of mass production. Therefore, new psychological theories in response to the human situation in the new industrial society were raised and American culture began to change. The population of the United States started to grow more than ever due to a new wave of immigrants arriving, and feudalism gradually replaced with modern civic/urban life. American playwrights' reaction to these raging changes was to clarify and give meaning to the effects of the new society on Americans. In this period of history, American dramatists such as Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams, Eugene O'Neill, and, later, Edward Albee, found motivations in the European intellectual theories, specifically Charles Darwin, Karl Marx, Friedrich Nietzsche, Friedrich Hegel and especially the psychoanalytical concepts of Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung. As a result, the themes and forms of the Modern American Drama resonate with these influences. "Spiritual dislocation, loss of connections, loneliness, self-deception, and retrogression" (Southern Puritanism and Tennessee Williams 2013) were strong statements of the characters in American dramatists' works. Playwrights were writing for a world in which the individual separated from his traditional beliefs, socio-political norms, family relationship, and a defined self-image.

George Castellitto, professor of modern American literature, emphasizes that the 20th-century drama shows actions, reactions, and dialogues that reflect "Post-World War II American themes, the dissolution of the American family, the failure of the American Dream, and the collapse of capitalism in American economics" (Castellitto 21). We may consider contemporary immigrant plays as Post-September 11 in character that reflect significant 21st-century experiences of alienation in exile. They present the loss of faith in hopes and dreams for

immigrants and asylum seekers, people who crave freedom and desire success, and the reasons they confront a totalitarian system hidden as democracy.

Modern American drama deals with paradoxes of the relationships of American families, their uncertainties, and their eventual collapse. Immigrant families and individuals in contemporary plays attempt to manage the essentials of harsh new society's reality by retreating into a distant past of dead dreams. The factors such as lost identities, failure of the past and present, losing hopes and goals in the new society, dealing with the problems of marriage, justice, law, and conflict between capital and labor appear in the plays by immigrant authors. In new immigrant plays structures, characters, and plots resonance with the modern drama even though the approach employs 21st-century schemes and policies to address the latest state of marriage, justice, and law at the time.

The playwrights of two types, delve into the character's mind, revealing the inner person's dynamics through the representation of hallucinations and other subjective experiences. Playwrights blend psychological realism with the anatomy of a society's impulses and ideals. Both types of plays usually portray external reality, along with the irrational and frantic conduct of the hidden self, resulting in a drama of strange angularity and distortion. As Laura Hanson in her Ph.D. dissertation states, the central character's heroism gives way to countless and depersonalized abstractions. The dialogues become frantic and explosive as epigrammatic and sardonic language, resulting in piercing soliloquies (Hanson 29). The instability and disaster of the world for which the playwrights are writing create a suspicion of prefabricated ideas and high-sounding language in both types of plays (Hanson 29). Both sorts frequently reveal the return of the grotesque, reflecting the collapse of our times' moral and spiritual absolutes; strange visions and horrifying dreams that are far from reality.

In terms of form, 21st-century American immigrant drama and modern American drama intersect when they employ variety, hybridity, and a blending of genres. Modern and immigrant drama juxtaposes realism, naturalism, symbolism, poetic drama, expressionism, and existentialism, along with other modern genres. Threads of many distinctive styles weave in a single play in both types.

In some of these plays, the closed room's walls create the illusion of reality, and the authenticity of stage properties add to the impression of sincerity. Fragmented episodes replace the linear narrative. The concept of the stage as an environment, rather than just a platform for performance, influences fundamental developments in these two types of drama. The location of the stage is crucial to the meaning of the play.

Considering these similarities in content and form between contemporary American immigrant drama and modern American drama, I will examine specific areas in my case studies, including the political arena, popular beliefs, and cultural issues. By studying the conditions of each written play's time and closely analyzing the characters, structure, dialogues, and atmosphere, I will display immigrants' status in American society based on the American Dream's definitions.

The long-term goal of this dissertation is to develop a conversation between immigrants, asylum seekers, refugees, and American society through dramatic literature. The dramatic analysis in this research represents the process of identifying, classifying, and resolving a few artistic visions of playwrights who challenge the situation of immigrants, having the theory of the American Dream in mind.

The results of this study will be valuable to American theatre and the students, practitioners, and, most notably, the audience. Immigrant dramatic literature needs to be read, analyzed, criticized, studied, and given stage performance.

Throughout this dissertation, I will mention significant terms such as American Dream, immigration to the United States, modern American drama. To save time on term repetition, I will briefly outline the essential meanings of the terms, such as; American Dream, Immigration to the United States (Land of Dreams), Modern American Drama, and Exile and Exiles.

My dissertation explores the parallels between modern American drama and the “new” immigrant drama we see developing in the US since September 2001. In my research I read widely and deeply as I sought strong examples of the ways that the American Dream continues to inspire and frustrate those who seek their place in the mosaic of America. My text is an analysis of representative plays by Yussef El Guindi, Naomi Iizuka, Martyna Majok, and Novid Parsi. Although we might wish that studies such as mine could become obsolete, in fact, the global migration crisis continues to threaten global stability.

Definition of Terms

American Dream

Historically the Dream originated in the Frontier Thesis. The Frontier Thesis or Turner Thesis is the subject progressed by the American historian Frederick Jackson Turner in 1893. “The American frontier established liberty by releasing Americans from European policy and corrupt unfair taxes” (Turner 293). In 1849, California Gold Rush brought a hundred thousand men looking for a better future. The prototype of the American Dream was the California Dream which was born during this era of westward expansion. Historian H.W. Brands noted that in the years after the Gold Rush, the California Dream spread across the nation; “The old American Dream ... was the dream of the Puritans, of Benjamin Franklin’s ‘poor Richard’ ... of men and women content to accumulate their modest fortunes a little at a time, year by year” (Brands 67). This new dream was about instant wealth, and it was a golden dream that became a prominent part of American culture.

In his 1931 book *Epic of America*, James Truslow Adams ³ popularized the phrase American Dream. According to Truslow Adams, the American Dream is “a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man, with opportunity for each according to his ability or achievement” (H. B. Johnson 43). He believed that men and women could grow to their fullest development “unhampered by the barriers which had slowly been erected in the older civilizations...” (H. B. Johnson 43). In 1963, Martin Luther King Jr. characterized the Civil Rights Movement as a pursuit of the American Dream by the marginalized African American community:

³ James Truslow Adams (1878 – 1949) was an American writer and historian. He was a freelance author who helped to popularize the latest scholarship about American history and his three-volume history of New England is well regarded by scholars. He coined the phrase “American Dream” in his 1931 book *The Epic of America* (C. N. Wilson 8).

We will win our freedom because the sacred heritage of our nation and the eternal will of God are embodied in our echoing demands ... bringing our nation back to those great wells of democracy which were dug deep by the Founding Fathers in their formulation of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence. (Kloppenberg 147)

However, because of the stalling of the U.S. economy and people's anger against the Vietnam War, Martin Luther King demanded Americans reconsider their ambitions toward the American Dream.

The ambitions regarding the American Dream were in decline in the 1980s, before the election of Ronald Reagan as the United States President. Reagan promised to restore the American Dream. As a son of a farm family, becoming a movie star, a spokesman for General Electric, and California governor, Reagan was an undeniable example of the American Dream. He claimed that the American Dream was still alive, and his country is still a place where "everyone can rise as high and far as his ability will take him" (A Time for Choosing Speech, October 27, 1964). Reagan cut taxes and reduced government social programs to stimulate economic growth. The economy did revive, and growing fortune helped Reagan win reelection in 1984. However, critics were unsure if cutting taxes would refresh the Dream for all Americans or only a few.

Richard Bernstein, an American philosopher, states that statistics suggest that between 1979 and 2005, the income of 99% of Americans grew twenty-one percent after taxes, "a rate of less than one percent a year, not enough to keep up with inflation" (Bernstein 324). Nevertheless, arguments about how to recover the American Dream have continued. Conservatives believe in cutting taxes, while liberals debate raising taxes on the wealthy to pay for programs to help lift the rest.

John Quelch, professor of business at Harvard Business School, cautions that “too many Americans have been expressing the Dream through the acquisition of stuff” (Quelch). He encourages Americans to see the Dream as the freedom to pursue one’s career ambitions, educate their children, and, most importantly, be good citizens in their communities (Quelch). In other words, Quelch is repeating James Truslow Adams’s 1931 definition of the American Dream; “a social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain the fullest stature to which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of the birth of position” (Adams 19). It seems that during the 1980s, the Dream of success shifted from having a family, home, and job toward money, fame, and power.

Nowadays, the idea of the American Dream continues to be a subject across the nation and around the world. Most people who wish to immigrate to the United States still believe that hard work will pay off, yet many see the American Dream as hard to reach but not impossible. Systemic racism and immigration laws undermine the notion of the American Dream. In the 21st-century, it appears that the meaning of the Dream has created many expressions for Americans and immigrants. It depends on whether American laws give social and economic access to freedom and prosperity. In one sentence, the Dream addresses varied facets from financial to ideological perspectives, political invoices, and philosophical sights.

Immigration to the United States (Land of Dreams)

Concepts in immigration theories combine with meanings such as being an outsider, being on the sidelines, being a hybrid person, or having a mixed identity in a host country. An immigrant, desirable or undesirable, has been thrown into a different place from their culture and

identity. Usually, the host country's culture acts as the dominant culture and challenges the identity and culture of the immigrant.

In this dissertation, I will focus on the meaning of "immigration" as an "act" and an "immigrant" as a "person" who left his or her hometown permanently to pursue a better life in the host country. In addition, I will use the term "exile" as a verb and a noun.

The history of immigration to the United States dates to 1600, when the first Europeans arrived and settled on the East Coast. Kate Boshier, a writer and feminist activist, states that, "By the end of the 16th-century, the Spanish were established in St. Augustine, and by the early 17th-century thriving communities dotted the landscape: the British in New England and Virginia, the Dutch in New York and New Jersey, and the Swedish in Delaware" (Boshier 733). After the initial European colonization, the brutal and inhumane Atlantic Slave Trade⁴ was initiated to provide cheap labor from Africa to the flourishing plantations in the New World (Boshier 734). It was around 1815 to 1865 that another wave of immigration happened. Most of these newcomers were from Ireland, and they settled in cities along the East Coast, "Between 1820 and 1930, some 4.5 million Irish migrated to the United States" (U.S. Immigration Before 1965). In the mid-1800s, many Asian immigrants settled in the United States, attracted by the California Gold Rush news (Boshier 735). In the nineteenth century, the United States received five million German immigrants; most moved to Midwest and settled in Milwaukee, St. Louis, and Cincinnati (U.S. Immigration Before 1965).

In-rush immigration resulted in an anti-immigrant attitude amongst some groups of America's native-born such as the Anglo-Saxon Protestant community. In his book, *A*

⁴ The Atlantic slave trade, also known as the transatlantic slave trade or the Euro-American slave trade, occurred when slave dealers transported enslaved Africans from Africa to the Americas. From the 16th through the 19th centuries, there was a triangle trade route and a "Middle Passage" for slave trading (www.visionaryfoundation.com).

Diplomatic History of the American People, Thomas Bailey states that the new immigrants were suggested as unwelcome job competition, while many Catholics, especially the Irish immigrants, experienced hatred “for their religious beliefs. In the 1850s, the anti-immigrant, anti-Catholic American Party (also called the Know-Nothings) tried to curb immigration severely. It even ran a candidate, former U.S. president Millard Fillmore (1800-1874), in the presidential election of 1856” (Bailey 17). After the Civil War, the United States experienced a depression in the 1870s that resulted in a slowdown in immigration. The federal government had left immigration reform to individual states for most of the 1800s (Bailey 17-18). However, by the last decade of the century, the government felt it needed to move in to cope with the ever-increasing influx of newcomers, “In 1890, President Benjamin Harrison (1833-1901) named Ellis Island, located in New York Harbor, near the Statue of Liberty, as a federal immigration station” (Bailey 18). Over twelve million immigrants reached the United States from Ellis Island during its service from 1892 to 1954.

Jonathan Golden, professor of American Jewish studies, claims that the United States received more than twenty million refugees between 1880 and 1920, a period of accelerated industrialization and urbanization. As Jonathan Golden explains, most arrivals were from Middle Eastern and Southern Europe beginning in the 1890s. About six hundred thousand Italians came to the United States in that decade alone, and by 1920, more than four million had joined the United States. Jews fleeing religious persecution from Eastern Europe also came in vast numbers; between 1880 and 1920, over two million entered the United States (Golden). The highest year for new entrants admitted to the United States was 1907, when about one million people entered the country lawfully within a decade. World War I (1914-1918) caused a decline in immigration; as Susan Levinkind explains in her book *Legal Research: How to Find &*

Understand The Law, “Congress passed legislation in 1917 that required immigrants over 16 to pass a reading test, and immigration quotas were developed in the early 1920s” (Levinkind 22). As of the 1890 national census, the Immigration Act of 1924 established a quota scheme that limited two percent of each race’s total number in the U.S. This system favored Western European immigrants and banned Asian immigrants.

During the 1930s and World War II economic crisis, immigration decreased. According to the U.S. Office of the Census (Bureau), America’s foreign-born population fell from fourteen to ten million between 1930 and 1950, or from eleven to six percent of the total population (Bureau). As Daniel Tichenor, professor of political science, states, Congress enacted a special law to allow refugees from Europe and the Soviet Union to join the United States. “In 1965, the Immigration and Nationality Act was passed by Congress” (Tichenor), which eliminated nationality-based restrictions and allowed Americans to support families from their countries of birth. The United States has changed immigration trends because of this act and subsequent legislation.

Since then, multiple laws have concentrated on immigration, opening the way for entry in the 1970s of Indochinese refugees escaping war violence and later including relief for other nationalities, including Chinese, Nicaraguans, and Haitians. A 1990 law established the “temporary protective status” (U.S. Department of Homeland Security) that covered immigrants from expulsion to countries suffering natural disasters, armed conflicts, or other unusual situations, primarily Central Americans.

Congress passed another principal act in 1986, the “Immigration Reform and Control Act” (Block), which granted citizenship to millions of undocumented immigrants who meet specific requirements, mainly from Latin America. The laws also disciplined employers who

recruited undocumented aliens. Subsequent legislation responded to complaints about extremism and illegal immigrants in 1996, 2002, and 2006. These initiatives stressed border protection, prioritized immigrant recruiting laws, and tightened eligibility for admissions (Block).

After September 11, immigration enforcement increased significantly. As Melisa Block mentioned in her article, immigrant removals—including deportations and so-called voluntary departures—came from about two hundred thousand people in 2001 to nearly double that in 2011. One reason for the rise in deportations was the growth of the undocumented population, and the other was the increased investment in border protection. Many deportees have never been convicted of a crime, even though being charged with a crime is the ground for deportation. For those sentenced, the offense may have been minor or non-violent, such as a previous conviction for deportation or using drugs. The new Secure Communities Act program empowers local police officers to act as immigration agencies (ICE). Billions of dollars have been committed to immigration reform in the last decades. By delegating the running of detention centers to private firms, the U.S. has created a system in which more deportations and more extended detentions result in increased income (Block). New business models became another economic motivation to push for tighter immigration laws.

President Obama took executive action in 2012 to encourage undocumented young adults to register for immigration protection and a work permit. In an article, *Obamas Mixed Legacy on Immigration*, Alex Nowrasteh mentions that President Obama extended the policy in 2014 (known as Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, or DACA) and created a separate program to provide similar incentives to certain U.S.-born unauthorized-immigrant parents, “Obama ended the decades-old ‘wet feet, dry feet’ policy” (Nowrasteh) as the final immigration act of his presidency that allowed Cubans to leave the most oppressive government in the western

hemisphere to join the United States. Hundreds of thousands were spared from expulsion by Obama's executive orders. Still, he was perhaps the sternest enforcer of immigration laws in American history, gaining him the tag of "Deporter-In-Chief" (Muzaffar Chishti) from the *La Reza National Council* magazine.

President Trump's presidential campaign and his proposed changes and remarks on this topic generated a lot of attention. Trump repeatedly said that some undocumented illegal aliens are criminals. A 2015 analysis by the non-partisan Migration Policy Institute (Migration Policy) concluded that about eight hundred thousand undocumented immigrants have criminal reports; because Trump never directly discussed the connection, opponents argued that there is a growing amount of evidence that immigration does not equate with higher crime rates (Migration Policy).

Trump's campaign pledge was to build a substantial wall on the United States-Mexico border and compel Mexico to pay for the wall. Throughout his presidential campaign, Trump's policies on H-1B visas shifted, but as of late July 2016, he tended to reject the H-1B visa program. The H-1B is a visa that requires U.S. employers to temporarily hire foreign employees in specialized professions under the Immigration and Nationality Act (U.S. Citizenship and Immigration). In 2020, Trump instituted an immigration ban limiting visas to residents of seven predominantly Muslim countries; this ban extended to thirteen later (Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Yemen, Syria).

Trump sought to terminate the DACA program, but the policy has been allowed to proceed by court order as it is the subject of a legal challenge. As mentioned in *Supreme Court Blocks Trump from ending DACA* Website, Trump imposed a "zero tolerance" policy to demand the detention of those found unlawfully crossing the border, resulting in removing children from their families (Ariane de Vogue). Additionally, the government dramatically reduced the number

of immigrants eligible for asylum in the United States. These changes caused many to believe that the likelihood of getting refuge in the United States has largely vanished, “[a]t the same time, the fact that Trump’s policies did not meaningfully reduce legal immigration levels during the first three years of his presidency does not mean they will prove to be toothless in the longer run” (Bolter). Due to the slow pace of immigration, it has taken a long time to see the effects of a policy. We must wait and see how the next few years will unfold.

Modern American Drama

In their essay, *The Name and Nature of Modernism*, Malcolm Bradbury, and James McFarlane argue that ambiguity, diversity, subjectivity, duality, sophistication, technical display, and self-reflexive quality are integral elements of modernist art that reflect the fractured nature of 20th-century city life (M. Bradbury 76). Modernism deviates from tradition, presenting a “contemporary view of the world by those artists who have most successfully intuited the quality of the human experience in their day” (Lash 358). The revolutionary new science and natural laws’ ideas seemed to go against logic, with individual perception instead of precise knowledge (M. Bradbury 89). Modernism investigated the complex connection between reality and illusion. In his book, *The Dismemberment of Orpheus*, Ihab Hassan discusses the profound effect the movement had on the arts and their representation of human experience, stating:

No category of space or time, order or chaos, dream or fact, action or reflection, causality or chance, syntax or metaphor, criticism or humor remains after this upheaval of the imagination quite intact. (Hassan 87)

In fact, the modernists’ works symbolized humanity’s altered perception of the world.

In the second decade of the 20th-century, modernism flourished in the United States (M. Bradbury 26), and many Americans saw the movement as an opportunity to deviate from logical and traditional formats intentionally (E. W. White 76). In the 20th-century, modernism became the dominant style in the United States to express society's progressivism, plurality, and cultural confluence, along with societal developments such as industrialization, fast scientific and technological advancements, transportation improvements, and the catastrophic consequences of World War I. During the late nineteenth and early 20th centuries, waves of immigration exacerbated alienation, anxiety, and a communication problem; separation and loss became modernism's defining themes (Bradbury 101). In his article, "*The Poetry of the City*," G. M. Hyde argues that this is particularly true for Baudelaire, who discovered that crowds⁵ are synonymous with loneliness and that the words "multitude" and "solitude" are equivalent (Hyde 76). Modernist art results from cultural angst, a "subjective response" (Keunen 95) to the 20th-century's increasing industrialization, dehumanization, and urbanization, and an awareness of and opposition to the contemporary world.

Describing modern American drama is not succinct. It is not a dictionary word that has a fixed meaning. We can define it as an era in which American playwrights continued to excel in their writing, creating new and 'modern' dramatic works. However, once investigating this era, one can see that it is a collection of experiments in concepts such as "truth" versus "fantasy." Dialogues represent the culture in which they were written and explore social and cultural shifts. Julie Walker, in her book, *Cambridge Studies in American Theatre and Drama*, remarks that modern American drama's goal was to "speak to a world in which the individual was

⁵ "'Crowds' is a prose poem, meaning that it's a poem but it isn't written with meter or rhyming in mind, like verse is. Prose is written in the form of sentences and paragraphs, but uses other poetic features such as imagery, simile and metaphor" (Pr. Waggoner).

increasingly cut off from the traditional ‘anchor’ of religion, socio-political alignments, family relationships, and a defined self-image” (Walker 5). Modern American drama was a cannon of highly emotional and convincing work that paved the way for decades.

Modern Dramatic theatre emphasizes the text rather than the performance. Theatre significantly reduced to basic declamation and text-to-stage performance in modern times. Text, which may mean both a comprehensible story and mental universality, was essential for any performance piece. As Hans-Thies Lehman describes in his book *Post-Dramatic Theatre*, the non-verbal vocabulary of gesture, expression, and mentally symbolic mime has been vastly extended in the latter part of the 18th and 19th centuries, and it is essential to bear in mind that speeches transfer human beings’ stories (Lehman 26). To a certain degree, the text functions as a dramatic position document. To construct a dramatic universe, “the use of choruses, narrators, interludes, plays within plays, prologues, and epilogues” (Lehman 26). Dramatic theatre ends when the functions of a text are no longer fundamental but one possible alternative of theatrical art.

The move toward the development of post-dramatic theatre discourse caused a sequence of “self-reflection stages, decomposition, and differentiation of the dramatic theatre components” (Lehman 27). The grand theatre’s road leads at the end of the nineteenth century through a plurality of new theatre styles during the historical avant-garde and then the neo-garde of the 1950s and 1960s to the post-drama theatre types (Lehman 27-28), at the end of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st centuries.

The significant changes in politics, economics, cultural and social matters in the United States influenced some playwrights to write about Americans and American society throughout the 20th-century. Authors such as Eugene O’Neill, Tennessee Williams, Edward Albee, and

Arthur Miller had critical comments on the American Dream and its relationship with characters incapable of adapting themselves to the new situation. Their plays shared common themes and similarities in structure, language, characters, and style, placing them under modern American drama.

As Sanford Sternlicht stated in *Modern American Drama*, economic Darwinism, the “survival of the fittest in the world of money-making” (Sternlicht 22), profoundly offended many American dramatists, particularly in the 1930s and 1940s. The American drama was less critical of the American economic structure until the 1930s and 1940s, with the battle line drawn between conventional American respect for the individual and the right to equal opportunities and fairness for all citizens of the society (Sternlicht 23). From the beginning of the 20th-century, caring for the needy and the powerless has become a dramatic concern.

Christopher Bigsby claims that American theatre has taken two directions since the turn of the 20th-century, under the influence of Henrik Ibsen, George Bernard Shaw, and Alfred Jarry: the direction of reality and naturalism and the path of anti-realism, expressionism, and absurdism (along with overlapping approaches) (Christopher Bigsby 165). From the beginning of the 20th-century, the fundamental path of American drama was realism, “a style of writing and presenting that more values the illusion of being real” (Christopher Bigsby 165-166). Realism seeks to build the idea of what exists in real life. The themes of realism reflect the concerns of ordinary people, preventing direct interaction with the viewer, using conversational communication, and utilizing sequential storytelling as a fundamental architecture construct. At the same time, characterization takes precedence over the story. The theme “Appearance Versus Reality” (Christopher Bigsby 168), the tension is prominent in modern American drama.

Dramatists have seen the hazards of delusion, as well as the great human desire to bear the pain of life.

The American stages of the 20th-century resonate with the demand for justice, prosperity, and equality for women, minorities, and others who have not entirely shared the country's rising success. American playwrights demonstrate that even in a democracy, liberty is fragile and sometimes unattainable. Modern dramatists want to imitate a theatrical style representing a theory of existence and a vision of the unknown universe.

The modern American drama personifies modern American dramatists' focus on portraying the American experience. Modern dramatists utilize history in a familiar way, both personal and cultural, which teaches us about their attitude to heroism and tragedy. "The 'history' that modern dramatists dramatize is often a private history" (Wilmeth and Bigsby 98). As has been seen in characters such as Willy Loman (*Death of Salesman*), Blanche DuBois (*A Streetcar Named Desire*), James Tyrone (*Long Day's Journey into Night*), among others, their work has shared the consciousness of the past's life.

Some modern playwrights, such as Arthur Miller (1915-2005), highlight the problematic interaction between history and the present, between political fact and privacy, and, finally, between social and private acts. Modern plays are theoretical and traditional dramatizations of history; they are sources of knowledge of the past, present, and political realities, as Bigsby claims in *Modern American Drama*, "... in modernism, understanding of the past is moralized and mythical, rather than strictly political" (C. W. E. Bigsby 20). The emotions of the character towards the past are conflicted in many modern plays such as O'Neill's: "...the past is a place they must flee but also a haven from the present; it seems to be separate from the present and yet an inextricable part of it" (C. W. E. Bigsby 20). Instead of being a series of events that contribute

to and influence the present, events unfold simultaneously as the “present” activities and inevitably confuse them.

The dramatic view of existence for the authors is not an ideology of a specific culture that is exclusively bound to a given era, “but rather a ‘timeless’ approach to life and art” (C. W. E. Bigsby 22). Modern plays redefined Heroism to suit modern concepts. Modern drama refers to current human integrity against those of the past. Traditional meanings refer to a global socio-political sense of separate authority connection to new norms of action and theatrical portrayal (C. W. E. Bigsby 22). Modern playwrights do not have a structural philosophy of tragedy, but they also struggle to connect in a tragic practice that is readily classified. Sometimes they neglect the metaphysical and structured elements of the conventional tragedy and rely only on the reinforcing representation that is the usual hero they believe.

Modern dramatists characterize and describe tragedy with the dramatization of heroism in terms of the idealist’s contribution to a cause and the resulting misery. They redefine tragedy as practically a tragic homage to individualism and human ability. They suppose that “if traditional tragedy recognizes and celebrates human greatness and dignity, tragic drama on the modern stage has a potential for glorifying a diminished humanity and affirming an optimistic view of existence” (C. W. E. Bigsby 24). These dramatists conclude that the tragedy is evidence of a certain aspect of human decency.

Unable to attain perfection or exercise considerable influence in modern dramatic form, the best characters may expect to achieve their dignity and honor. Individualistic and non-social idealism are the motives for a modern character, “[t]he outer environment is seen in terms of experience, and extreme alienating individualism becomes problematic as it verges on solipsism” (C. W. E. Bigsby 26). The protagonists then set their acceptable principles and measure

themselves against them. Finally, modern drama centers on the minor characters' struggles to step out and protect their individuality and dignity from the generic masses of humankind.

Exile and Exiles

According to Encarta Webster's Dictionary of the English Language, there are differences between these words; "immigrant," "emigrant," and "migrant," as well as "immigration" and "emigration," and "exile."

-An immigrant is "a person who comes to a country to take up permanent residence."

-Immigration is "an act or instance of immigrating, specifically travel into a country for permanent residence there."

-An emigrant is a person who "departing or has departed from a country to settle elsewhere."

-Emigration is "an act or instance of emigrating, departure from a place of abode, natural home, or country for life or residence elsewhere."

-Migrant is "a person who regularly moves to find work, especially in harvesting crops."

-Exile: A.) the state or a period of forced absence from one's country or home. B.) the state or a period of voluntary absence from one's country or home. C- a person who is in exile. (Soukhanov, Anne)

The most common experience of exile is being evicted from one's home and compelled to seek refuge in a new place where one is a stranger, hoping to establish some connection with the new community or return to one's former home. Edward Said claims that "home" is more than a physical location. Exile also involves one's relationship with your surroundings and the things that come with living there at a certain period. It is critical to remember that "exiles are cut off

from their roots, their land, their past,” as Edward Said puts it (E. Said 51). However, this is merely the beginning of the exile experience; the desire for a potential future reconnection with one’s home is equally constitutive to the exile experience, which develops most strongly in this unexpected detachment. As a result, the exile is not just one who has lost home, but also one who has devotedly hoped for his return.

Being forced to leave one’s home is one of the most painful and tragic experiences one can have while still alive. Burr Stevens, in his Doctoral dissertation, explains that this kind of experience does not have an exclusive claim to the term “exile”; the definitions and descriptions of the literal exile are not as clear as experience applies to situations that are forcible expulsion from one’s home. Exile is a separation from a Divine Order, an innate connection with people of the universe, or the possibilities of knowledge, insight, and purpose (Steven 2). The exile experience is apparent at all levels of human life and does not confine the immediate feeling of physical travel.

Review of the Chapters

Chapter Two: False Hopes, Land of Opportunity; *Ironbound* and Martyna Majok

Martyna Majok’s play *Ironbound* is about a Polish immigrant woman named Darja who lives in Newark, New Jersey. Majok depicts Darja’s ultimate loss of faith in the American Dream. She is an immigrant who finds herself at the crossroads of two cultures. The play examines the character’s perceptions of American identities and her feelings about American culture, economy, and social issues. *Ironbound* is suitable for inclusion in this dissertation as a relevant immigrant play because it embodies common themes in modern literature, such as

American Dream, alienation, and exile while demonstrating many dramatic parallels to modern dramatic techniques.

Ironbound is a play that examines how the level of education or skill influences people's attitudes toward immigration. Low-skilled workers are incredibly hostile to low-skilled immigrants because of legitimate concerns about labor market competition. These unfavorable circumstances combine to jeopardize the human rights of many immigrants. In Newark's East Ward, the Ironbound is a working-class neighborhood. The name itself is a metaphor for "iron" and "boundaries," representing the people in this city who are bounded by iron. When they do not meet their goals, many immigrants want to flee this city, but the city acts as a shackle around their wrists. The setting of *Ironbound* in Newark emphasizes the decline of the economy and the destitute lives of many immigrants who have fled their home countries. The city exemplifies the rise and fall of US economic conditions before and following 9/11 and the post-9/11 financial crisis.

Darja's version of the American Dream was to land her dream job and live the life she had always imagined. But all she achieves is loneliness, a lack of financial stability, love, and happiness. Using a close dramaturgical analysis of *Ironbound*, this chapter details the key themes and dramatic techniques that intersect in modern drama and 21st-century immigrant drama.

Chapter Three: Not A King but an American Immigrant Odysseus; *Anon(ymous)* and Naomi Iizuka

Anon(ymous), a modern adaptation of Homer's epic poem *The Odyssey* focusing on a pivotal moment in the life of a young refugee, was written by Naomi Iizuka. Naomi Iizuka is a first-generation Japanese immigrant from Tokyo who grew up in Indonesia, the Netherlands, and

the United States. Her multiethnic and global upbringing shines through in her plays, where she incorporates journey themes into the plots. As an immigrant play, *Anon(ymous)* is concerned with the social constructions that result from violence and character isolation. The social formula in which the characters' struggles occur due to economic conditions, wars, and ethnicity. The most severe social issues arise due to anti-immigrant policies, post-9/11 issues, racism, and economic conditions.

Anon(ymous) is a modern epic drama about the adventures of a refugee embarking on a mortal journey. The drama explores various themes, including homecoming, identity, exile, American society, the American Dream, and alienation. The drama addresses identity, prejudice, and humanity's commonalities and flaws along the way. Naomi Iizuka chose to adapt the *Odyssey* to a modern paradigm to illustrate contemporary discourses on exile in the face of warring nationalism. The central character, Anon, is a modern Odysseus searching for the American Dream, embarking on a long journey that highlights nostos' trials and tribulations.

This chapter will examine Naomi Iizuka's use of the American Dream concept in contemporary immigration drama. The chapter explores the play's dramaturgical exploration of exile and how adaptation functions to overlay past traces onto contemporary refugees' struggles.

Chapter Four: Thwarted Dreams of Immigrants Eager in an Adopted Country; *The Talented Ones* and Yussef El Guindi

Yussef El Guindi, an Egyptian-American dramatist, has commonly written on the immigrant experience in the United States. *The Talented One* is the story of an immigrant couple struggling with their relationship as a family. In this play, we meet characters during a period

when America's promise and optimism appear to lead to triumph for some and devastating defeat for others.

Omar and Cindy bear the burden of their parents' exile. Even though they have lived in this country for most of their lives, they have always felt like outsiders because they had been carrying the weight of being undocumented immigrants for years. Their social isolation began with their arrival in the United States, and it continued throughout their childhood.

The play alternates between flashbacks to the couple's hopeful past and their depressing present. Once again, the past figures prominently in the depiction of immigrant lives. Cindy expresses irritation by Omar's lack of emotional and financial responsibility while he is artistically blocked and sexually impotent, symbolizing stagnation and loss. Patrick, Omar's coworker, complicates matters by following Cindy and interfering in their lives. Patrick—the white American—represents the disdainful American attitude toward immigrants, claiming that the United States was a better place before immigrants arrived and complaining about social injustices.

Yussef El Guindi clarifies that he does not want to assign a specific Arab race to his characters. Cindy and Omar can be of any ethnicity; however: given the dynamics and dialogue in the play, they are people of color.

The characters in this play bear the brunt of immigrant commitment, which leaves them with a constant sense of guilt. Their parents have been unable to provide security, welfare, freedom, and a bright future for their children either in their home country or the new one. These are unhappy immigrants who had to leave their homeland and take responsibility for other people's expectations.

Like many classic modern dramas influenced by expressionism and epic theatre, *The Talented Ones* is not interested in imitating photographic realism. There are flashbacks and flashforwards interspersed with dreams and recollections. The relationships are linked by time gaps, events occurring in specific locations, and time connected by memory lapses. As a case study for the dissertation, *The Talented Ones* represents exile, its disorientation, and its relationship to the past, using dramatic techniques that parallel modernist representations of the theme.

Chapter Five: Stranger in a New Land; *Through the Elevated Line* and Novid Parsi

The play *Through the Elevated Line* is based on Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Like the other plays selected for this dissertation, *Through the Elevated Line* by Novid Parsi focuses on the alienation of exile and adapts models of modern drama in its dramaturgy. The main character (Razi), a gay Iranian tourist-refugee, arrives in Chicago to live in the apartment of his pregnant sister. The play depicts the physical, economic, and psychological distress of the immigration experience in the United States. The play incorporates realistic, anti-realistic, expressionistic, existentialist, and theatrical elements. We will look at how various characters and elements from the classic play—*A Streetcar Named Desire*—have been adapted for use on *Through the Elevation Line* in this chapter.

Both plays' main characters are physically and emotionally displaced. They are individuals who are at odds with both society and themselves. The American Dream was not inclusive for these characters in the new society. The absence of any pathway to the dream for women or gays and their exploitation, rootlessness, and loss are all characteristics of the societies

that the playwrights attempt to reveal. Societal pressure becomes a psychological concern in *A Streetcar Named Desire* and *Through the Elevated Line*. The words “success” and “American Dream,” critical in American culture, have obscene connotations. These two plays delve deeply into the characters’ psychological difficulties.

We have modern tragedy when the character shatters in the confrontation between aspiration and reality. Blanche and Razi’s situations, emotional fantasies, and societal conditioning, as they are, elicit tolerance for their flaws. Finally, they are both pushed to the absolute limits of the world, confronted with their isolation. As a case study for the dissertation, *Through the Elevated Line* represents exile, its disorientation, and its relationship to the past, using modern tragedy techniques that parallel modernist representations of the theme.

Conclusion

Many 21st-century American immigrant dramas focus on immigrants’ views about the American Dream and the accessibility of liberty, civil rights, and economic stability in the United States. These plays are written mainly by immigrant writers or second-generation immigrants. They are usually the stories of a central character expressing his or her perspective on the host country. The character deals with immigration, marriage, deportation, justice, and law problems. The immigrant playwrights examine the host community and address the problematic issues in this society. They use drama to demonstrate relations in the United States, which sometimes embeds discrimination and pressure on refugees and asylum seekers.

Finding a connection between the characteristics of immigrant drama and American modern drama was essential in my research. Through my review of many immigrant dramas of

the last decades, I discovered that immigrant theatre has intersected with the dominant styles of modern American dramaturgy.

The 20th-century drama showed actions, reactions, and dialogues that reflected the Post-World War II American themes: the dissolution of the American family, the American Dream's failure, and the collapse of capitalism in the American economy. The contemporary immigrant plays are also Post-September 11 in character and reflect significant 21st-century experiences of alienation in exile. They present the loss of faith in hopes and dreams for immigrants and asylum seekers, who crave freedom and desire success. American immigrant drama deals with the paradoxes of immigrant families' relationships, doubts, worries, and eventual collapse. In contemporary plays, immigrant families and individuals attempt to manage the essentials of harsh new society's reality by retreating into a distant past of dead dreams.

CHAPTER 2: FALSE HOPES, LAND OF OPPORTUNITY; *IRONBOUND* AND MARTYNA MAJOK

“There must be something what scares you more than leaving and so you stay.”

—Darja, *Ironbound*

Martyna Majok said about the inspiration for writing *Ironbound*, “I was reading Slavoj Žižek’s *Violence*⁶ and it made me think about the quiet systems at play in America. About the way that capitalism causes us to commodify people—about value, abusive relationships and how a life of poverty makes someone approach love” (Majok, Getting to Know Playwright Martyna Majok). *Ironbound* by Martyna Majok is a story of a Polish immigrant woman named Darja who immigrated to the United States twenty-One years ago. This play is exemplary to be viewed as a relevant immigrant play in this dissertation for significant points including that the play is a modern immigrant drama written by a first-generation immigrant who has personal experience with the challenges faced by immigrants to the United States. *Ironbound* portrays an immigrant woman’s ultimate loss of faith in the American Dream, her hopes, and desires for a better life and happiness.

Alienation and exile, resulting from the character’s ultimate loss of faith, are the play’s fundamental theme. Alienation has been the topic of numerous psychological, social, literary, and philosophical research in the last decades, specifically in modern drama.⁷ Both internally and

⁶ “In *Violence*, popular political theorist, Slavoj Žižek, develops several notions for thinking about the contemporary world. While complex philosophical discussions often appear esoteric to the general reader, Žižek’s work renders new insights into numerous global issues, from politics and trade to social movements and cross-cultural exchanges. Entire books could be written on any *one* of the plethora of themes Žižek introduces. However, his reflections on the nature of violence and tolerance are particularly thought provoking” (Weis, Slavoj Žižek and Violence).

⁷ Loss of identity leads to alienation. The dispossessed person’s struggle for identity is prominent in modern literature. Today, man fails to see the meaning of life and the significance of his presence in a hostile environment. Edmund Fuller observes that in this day and age “man suffers not only from war, persecution,

externally, alienation occurs as a natural result of an identity crisis, often addressed in modern literature and immigrant one.

In *Ironbound*, alienation reflects on the expectations and values that have changed or completely abolished from the main character's life as a first-generation immigrant. Darja represents an immigrant assimilating into American society while also learning to live with a new set of values. Darja faces a loss of social status, interpersonal connections, financial stability, and social engagement to adapt to the new country. Separation, uprooting, displacement, social relations, and language disorders are some consequences Darja challenges during her life after immigration to the United States. All these factors contribute to the development of Darja's character and the plot of *Ironbound*.

Darja perishes due to her failure to cope with an American culture that imposes its own set of standards on her. In this play, tragedy characterizes exile in American culture and Darja's psychology is central to the play; her primary motive is psychological, and her tragic worldview emerges as a result. Darja is trapped in Ironbound, a working-class neighborhood in Newark's East Ward in New Jersey, a metaphor for "iron" and "boundaries," representing the people who are bound by iron chains, both emotionally and situationally. Ironbound neighborhood highlights the decline of the economy and the despondent lives of many immigrants who fled their home countries searching for a better life in a place famed for its opportunities for immigrants.

Based on the play's themes, which emphasize the fractured life of an immigrant, the playwright has formed the play on a feature-time structure. Majok uses various time manipulation techniques to depict events selectively and indirectly in *Ironbound*: time may be halted, reversed, shortened, telescoped, or fractured. Like many other modern plays, *Ironbound*

famine and ruin, but from inner problems, a conviction of isolation, randomness, meaninglessness in his way of existence" (Mittal).

defies traditional narrative structure by personalizing the importance of sequential and linear time.

This fraction reflects in Darja's language, as well, when the playwright demonstrates how a simple and easy language may effectively convey the complexity of human emotions.

Dialogues portray Darja's personality and what she says is not as essential as how she says it.

The language barrier is the most challenging obstacle since it makes communication with others difficult, which is necessary for life. Darja is caught in interpretation, where the second language itself appears more significant than the concepts it conveys, or the words take on a life separate from the matters they represent.

Modern tragedy, urban life, language, non-linear time, the American Dream, exile, and isolation theme, are characteristics of modern drama, which I will examine concerning *Ironbound*. These factors contribute to Darja's fatal destruction by American society, which imposes its standards on her due to the character's inability to deal with them. As a result, the tragic life of a woman ascends, which does not define a specific personality or fate; instead, being an outsider in American society is the tragic subject of the play.

Background on Playwright

To better appreciate Martyna Majok, we may begin by looking at her biography related to her work as a playwright. Martyna Majok was born in Bytom, Poland, and when she was five years old, her family immigrated to the United States. She grew up mainly in Kearny, a working-class, ethnic immigrant area in New Jersey. When they arrived in the country, her mother started to learn English and work in a factory (Majok, Q. and A.: Martyna Majok, Putting Immigrant

Lives on Center Stage). Most uneducated immigrants at that time worked in factories, cleaning houses, and caring for the elderly.

Majok won a playwriting contest for students in New Jersey as the only winner who was not from a private school; it was her first excursion into the theatre (Majok). She began writing plays for an English instruction program for immigrant parents and children in high school, and her ideas became highly theatrical (Majok, An interview with Martyna Majok). Majok was inspired by Sam Mendes' staging of *Cabaret* at Studio 54⁸ when she was 17, her first experience in the theatre.

Majok received a scholarship from the University of Chicago (BA English Literature, 2007), where she studied drama. She worked as a waitress for financial support before being awarded a Merage American Dream Fellowship⁹ (Majok, Path to Pulitzer: An Interview With Playwright Martyna Majok). After graduation, she worked as an assistant to the playwright at Steppenwolf Theatre¹⁰. Yale's dramaturgy program accepted Majok on her first attempt, and she was supported by a scholarship from the immigrant children's fund (The American Dream Merage Foundation Fellowship). Majok received her degree in 2012, and her early works revealed a strong interest in serious social and economic concerns.

⁸ “*Cabaret* moved to Studio 54 on Nov. 12, 1998, after its initial run at Henry Miller’s Theatre on West 43rd was closed due to a mid-summer construction accident at Four Times Square. The accident stopped *Cabaret* performances less than six months into its run, and at a time when it was one of the hottest single tickets on Broadway. Later, separate conflicts with the venue’s management prompted the idea to move permanently” (<https://www.playbill.com>).

⁹ “The scholarship was created by Paul and Lilly Merage, U.S. immigrants who established the Merage Foundation for the American Dream to recognize and reward academically outstanding immigrant students. Winners also will secure networking and mentoring support from the foundation throughout their careers” (<https://news.stanford.edu>).

¹⁰ “Steppenwolf operates as a not-for-profit organization relying on community support to produce or present up to 16 plays and nearly 700 performances, readings and other events every year on their three stages. The theatre’s artistic and educational programs draw a multi-generational audience of nearly 200,000 from the greater metropolitan Chicago area, while their impact reaches well beyond this region with productions that tour nationally and internationally” (<https://www.steppenwolf.org>)

Her play *Rewilding*, which portrayed an excluded, disadvantaged community, was awarded the Jane Chambers Student Feminist Playwriting Prize¹¹ in 2011. In *Queens*, she addressed a topic informed by her own life story: the challenges of immigration and the fight to make a decent living. *Cost of Living* (a 2016 play by Martyna Majok) was inspired by *Queens*, and it was this piece that garnered Majok one of the most prestigious literary and creative awards in the world: the Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 2018.

Jurors praised the *Cost of Living* for being sincere and distinctive in portraying of persons with disabilities. This play represents two complicated relationships: one between an unemployed former bus driver and his disabled ex-wife and another between a young cerebral palsy patient and his nurse. The Lucille Lortel Outstanding New Play Award¹², the Edgerton New Play Award¹³, and the Women's Invitational Prize were all given to the play during the New Play Festival in Ashland¹⁴.

Majok has given many interviews and critics have reviewed her works published in newspapers, websites, anthologies, and other sources. Among the newspapers and websites I can source *American Theatre* (New York), *The Stage* (London), *Evening Standard* (London), *Variety* (Los Angeles), *Polish American Journal* (national edition), *TCA Regional News* (Chicago), *Jerusalem Post* (Jerusalem), *The Times of India* (New Delhi), *Shanghai Daily* (China), *Die*

¹¹ "The Jane Chambers Playwriting Award recognizes new feminist plays and performance texts created by women and genderqueer writers for the stage that present a feminist perspective and contain significant opportunities for female performers" (<https://www.athe.org/>).

¹² "The Lucille Lortel Awards recognize excellence in New York Off-Broadway theatre. The Awards are named for Lucille Lortel, an actress and theatre producer, and have been awarded since 1986. They are produced by the League of Off-Broadway Theatres and Producers by special arrangement with the Lucille Lortel Foundation, with additional support from the Theatre Development Fund" (<https://www.lortelaward.com>).

¹³ "Piloted in 2006 with Center Theatre Group in Los Angeles, the Edgerton Foundation New Play Awards give plays in development extended rehearsal period for the entire creative team, including the playwrights. The program launched nationally in 2007 and has awarded grants to non-profit theatres for 393 new plays to date. The Edgerton Foundation was awarded the 2011 TCG National Funder Award" (<https://circle.tcg.org>).

¹⁴ "Ashland New Plays Festival assists playwrights in the development of new works through public readings and offers an educational forum to the community through discussions, workshops, and our podcast" (<https://ashlandnewplays.org/>).

Presse (Vienna), *The Australian* (Canberra), *El Pais* (Madrid), *Gulf News* (Dubai), *Wall Street Journal* (New York), *El Universal* (Mexico City), *The Independent* (London), *EFE News Service* (Madrid), *DPA International* (Hamburg), and others.

This global list includes publications from the United States to Europe and the Middle East, indicating the importance of this writer as an international artist who has understood the significance of the immigrants' problems in the world and provides a platform for dialogue between nations. As Majok mentions in one of her interviews in *Sarasota Magazine*, the subjects of her plays are "immigrant stories, about people of low income, marginalized people, because that tends to be in my experience. Of course, in the theatre, the people I am speaking to there are largely people outside that experience" (Kipling). In her interviews, Majok explains her opinions about her identity as an immigrant playwright, her ideas of history and class struggle in the United States, and her interest in the relationship between society and politics and the destruction of human intellectual capacities. Majok discusses her process as an artist, her identity as an immigrant, and her ideas about the relationship between theatre, society, and politics.

Majok has received considerable critical attention in publications, mostly related to her play's characters being domestics with foreign accents or hard-working immigrants who "labor silently in the shadows" (McNulty). Critics mention that the characters' struggle constitute the plots of her plays, which makes it harder and sometimes impossible for characters to achieve their goals. They call her plays superbly original, honest, and cleverly funny in a way that explores people's need to connect and be loved regardless of the gaps that disability, race, class, and nationality place between them.

Among dissertations and theses in theatre in the last ten years, one specifically discusses Majok: *Avant-Garde Frontiers in the Austere City: Political Economies of Artistic Placemaking*

in the Post-Millennial United States by Jasmine Mahmoud for a 2016 Doctoral degree in Philosophy at the Northwestern University. In her dissertation, Mahmoud evaluated Majok's works as early 21st-century placemaking¹⁵. She categorizes the plays as "avant-garde performance practices in three arts-rich U.S. cities, New York, Chicago, and Seattle" (Mahmoud 2016). Besides this dissertation, which does not mention immigrants or the situation of asylum seekers in American society—basic themes of Majok's plays—there is no scholarly research or deep analysis of her most important concerns in her works.

As far as Majok is concerned, theatre is a place to search for the truth. Her greatest triumphs are a clear dramatic style and transporting pictures on stage. Her plays have been performed in numerous American theatres (including the Los Angeles Civic Light Opera, the Walnut Street Theatre in Philadelphia, and the La Jolla Playhouse in San Diego) and overseas in Melbourne, Australia. She started working on a script for HBO TV series in 2018, and she completed the screenplay in 2019. Together, Martyna Majok and Prentice Penny developed a new TV series based on her play, *Queens*. She adapted her play for the small screen, and as executive producer, she worked on all aspects of production. Majok has become an important voice on the American stage and screen and has made a significant contribution to the representation of contemporary immigrant experiences.

¹⁵ "As both an overarching idea and a hands-on approach for improving a neighborhood, city, or region, placemaking inspires people to collectively reimagine and reinvent public spaces as the heart of every community. Strengthening the connection between people and the places they share, placemaking refers to a collaborative process by which we can shape our public realm in order to maximize shared value. More than just promoting better urban design, placemaking facilitates creative patterns of use, paying particular attention to the physical, cultural, and social identities that define a place and support its ongoing evolution" (Project for Public Spaces (PPS) 2019).

Ironbound's Plot and Characters

Because few readers are familiar with the play *Ironbound*, I will provide a quick synopsis before analyzing its modern style and the components of non-linear time, the urban life, the American Dream, the modern tragedy, and language barrier. The play centers around Darja (a Polish immigrant) and Tommy (Darja's boyfriend and an American), both late 30s/early 40s, Maks (Darja's first husband and father of her son, a Polish immigrant), and Vic (an American drug dealer).

Ironbound, sets at a bus stop over twenty-two years, follows the story of a Polish immigrant cleaning lady and her economic struggles. Darja, a newlywed at twenty years old, awaits her bus, possessed by dreams, and wishes for a better future. Her husband pursued a musical career in Chicago¹⁶, while Darja planned to stay in New Jersey and support their child. Fifteen years later, divorced from her first husband and beaten by a second husband, she meets a

¹⁶ Chicago and its surrounding suburbs have had one of the country's largest metropolitan Polish American populations. Chicago is a metropolis filled with Polish culture, claiming itself as the most prominent Polish city outside Poland. It has about 185,000 Polish speakers, making Polish the city's third most spoken language (Paral 18). Historically, Chicago has had a productive connection with Poland and the Polish territories, as they are often known. From the 1830s on, Poles began to establish Chicago's frontier settlement. The main migration, though, started some twenty years later and culminated in establishing the parish of St. Stanislaus Kostka in 1867. Within 60 years, Chicago's Polish population grew exponentially, "Overall, around 2.2 million Poles and Polish subjects immigrated into the United States, between 1820 and 1914..." (Thomas and Znaniecki 1-5). The so-called new immigrants from southern and eastern Europe were first drawn to at least five Chicago districts, containing heavy industry; "Poles came in large numbers to work on factory, packinghouse, and steel mill floors during the huge economic migration they called *Za Chlebem*, or the migration 'for bread'" (D. A. Pacyga). This massive migration occurred from shortly before the Civil War to the mid-1920s. A legislative decree effectively halted migration from the "Other" European countries; however, it would not be the last influx of Poles to Chicago. Following that, at least three more migrations altered and reenergized Chicago's Polonia community. The influx of war refugees after World War II, the modest influx of immigrants during the Communist era, and the so-called Solidarity migration all contributed to the city's development. For many years, the city's Polish population returned to Poland after living in the United States, and their migration to other countries established networks of information and commercial connections. In fact, since the year 2000, many Poles have either returned to Poland or moved to other areas of the European Union, including the United Kingdom. To preserve group loyalty, the Polonia in Chicago utilized ethnicity, music, food, and famous Polish people. Some have a strong sense of their Polish heritage, while others have a weaker one. A feeling of *polskość* (i.e., 'Polishness') has survived through the generations in Chicago and other Polonia hubs. Polish culture is still alive and well, with many Poles in Chicago. This may be attributed to Chicago's unique position in the global Polish diaspora.

young boy who offers her temporary help while waiting at the same bus stop. Seven years later, still waiting for the bus, she is lectured by a cheating boyfriend. In Darja's life, there is no happy ending, no American Dream, not even a glimpse of such possibilities.

Ironbound starts and ends at a bus stop, where we see three different stages of Darja's life in 2014, 1992, and 2006. In this play, the playwright insists on the location and time: "A bus stop at night, a quarter mile from a factory in Elizabeth, NJ. Or where there used to be a factory, depending on the year" (M. Majok, *Ironbound* 4). She then remarks upon the state of New Jersey: "The Jersey I know is gravel and cattails. Empty quarter drinks and Buds litter parking lots. A marsh, a highway, bridges. Almost everyone is from somewhere else. And, yes, there's a reason they're not living in New York" (M. Majok, *Ironbound* 4). As I will explain later, this location is a metaphor for people trapped in an unhappy life.

The first scene sets in 2014. Darja and Tommy, her boyfriend, are in the bus station; their chat begins in the middle of Darja's complaint that Tommy had been unfaithful to her. Darja assures him that she will pack her belongings and leave when they return home, but she knows, and we know that she does not have any money to make such a massive change in her life. Darja understands that she is not permitted to do something for the sake of feelings that she may later regret. Darja has been aware of Tommy's infidelity for many years. But she has waited so long to tell him; at this moment she is sick of lying, even if telling the truth brings her more troubles. In this opening scene then, Majok portrays a dejected and threatened middle-aged woman, struggling to survive economic hardship and psychological abuse.

The second scene happens in 1992. Following the opening scene, the story shifts back to over two decades earlier, when Darja, a freshly arrived immigrant with her attractive husband, Maks, is still hoping to crack the code of this country of possibility. They kiss, play, and laugh.

Darja shows Maks a delicate nightgown she stole from the woman she works for, just in time for tonight. Darja achieves her ideal appearance by dressing in the attire of wealthy women. But she already knows she will never be like them, even if she dresses like them and wanders the streets in their clothes. People will notice that she is poor, an alien, and not one of them. But, unlike her, Maks has enormous dreams. He wants to move to Chicago to perform blues,¹⁷ become famous, and escape his unhappy life. He believes that if you are “beautiful,” know “English,” and are “not fat,” you will be successful in this country, and he possesses all these qualities. This scene introduces the concept of the American Dream, though we already know that Darja has not achieved it and that her life has slipped from hope and laughter into a feeling of rejection and despair.

The third scene is in 2014, Winter. It is the same year as the first scene, and despite everything that happened between Darja and Tommy, we can see that Darja is still there, living with Tommy, but a lot has changed. Tommy, who was pressing on Darja to stay, has emotionally moved on, and Darja is now much more miserable than before. She has lost her job and no longer has a plan. She talks about herself, her son, a woman in the factory, and she has no idea what she will do next. She has reached the end of the road.

¹⁷ Chicago has been home to the most significant Polish diaspora population for much of its history. Most important Polish American institutions—such as The Polish National Alliance—had their headquarters there, and they still do. Chicago’s Polish-language publications had a far-reaching effect. In Polish communities, Chicago was seen as a symbol of the United States. Much of the American Polonia’s reaction to events in Europe was influenced by the city’s Polish leaders. Although it was not technically Polish, Chicago became Poland “elsewhere” because it was seen as a possible way for the migration to help a country that had lost its independence and been fragmented. Despite its lively nature, the Polish community in Chicago continues to experience changes as it adjusts to life in a “postindustrial global city” (D. A. Pacyga 31); Chicago’s Poles have risen from the peasants to the working class to the American middle class in only 150 years. Polish immigrants from the poor inner-city relocated to pleasant suburbs in the early 21st-century, something few could have imagined in 1900. While other Polish immigration hubs, such as New York and London, begin to overshadow Chicago, the city remains the epicenter of Polish American culture.

Scene four happens in 2006, Fall. Flashback. Darja is sleeping on the street under a cardboard box after fleeing her abusive husband. Vic, a drug-dealing adolescent, approaches her. Darja is perplexed as to why Vic wants to assist her. Vic eventually gives her some money and departs. Darja contacts her son to inform him that she will not be returning home. She asks him to call her back, expresses her regret, and tells him that they will not return to that life again. She believes he will never return her call, but then her phone rings, and it is Aleks, her son. The scene depicts the utter abjection of Darja yet provides moments of hope in human connection through the young boy and her son.

Scene five sets in 2014. Winter. Early morning, when it appears to be still night. Darja is holding her phone. Tommy enters. He is carrying plastic-wrapped flowers. Darja informs him of the death of her first husband, Maks, and the presence of her son, Aleks, in Chicago. Tommy offers to buy her a ticket. She initially refuses because she despises it and does not want to owe him anything, but she has to. Tommy proposes to her marriage. She does not immediately respond. Darja has once again lost everything. There is no other way for her to save her life than to marry her unfaithful boyfriend.

When Tommy leaves to get the car, Darja stands alone hesitates to move. She turns to go, but— Maks, an illusion, enters on another part of the stage. We are in the 1990s once again. He goes to stand with Darja. Maks asks her to go to Chicago with him. But she wants to stay because she already has a job here in the factory. The bus arrives, and Maks intends to go; Darja wants to stay. They quickly and achingly say goodbye without words.

The smog falls away. Darja opens her mouth to sing. The stage returns to how we saw it in 2014. Darja begins to walk toward the car. Then, she stops a moment. Darja sings for herself. It is lovely, quite small and entirely un-virtuosic. Darja: “fuck this bus ... oh yeah ... fuck this

bus ...” (Majok, *Ironbound* 48-59). In the end, Darja leaves the bus and the bus station, and perhaps the Ironbound; however, her savior is an unfaithful and unrespectful American who will further thwart her dreams. If Darja has held out hope of getting somewhere in America, her abandonment of the bus station suggests that she has given up on this idea and resigned herself to the life of degradation, if some stability, as her last possible dream.

***Ironbound* and Modernism**

This section will examine the relationship between *Ironbound* and modern drama, examining how the author utilized modern techniques to accomplish her purpose in an immigrant play. The story of *Ironbound* is a reaction to the dramatic changes in a woman’s life as she experiences the challenges of an immigrant living in a new society. The play contains the history of the United States before and after September 11, illustrating the decline of the economy and the desperate lives of immigrants who left their countries to pursue the Dream of a better life in a city known for its opportunities.

Ironbound represents a conflict between conventional American respect for the individual and all society members’ rights— immigrants or Americans— to equal opportunity and justice. Suppose modern American drama focused on the disadvantaged and the powerless Americans who were confused and lost in the new modern society and were experiencing alienation and loneliness. In that case, *Ironbound*’s topic is about the unfortunate and helpless immigrants too; the latter migrated to the United States at a time in American history when immigrants were in the most complicated condition due to the terrorist attack in 2001.¹⁸

¹⁸ Since 1914, the United States has witnessed significant emigration from Poland and the maturation of many generations of completely integrated Polish Americans. Poland’s immigration continued throughout the early 2000s but decreased when Poland joined the European Union in 2004 because income levels rose from far below average to well above average (Bukowczyk 35). A considerable percentage of Polish immigrants in the United States settled

In the beginning, Darja and her husband assumed that the United States had opportunities that post-communist Poland did not.¹⁹ With national economic challenges, famines, and ethnic repression back home, they migrated to the United States in the hopes of achieving stability and respect. Over time, the play reveals Darja's dreams of American opportunities. She has had a plan for her life, the best motives for stability and recognition. The spark of hope in her original dream and decision to immigrate in 1992 becomes something completely different after 2001—leaving only the struggle to survive.

To express characters' dreams, hopes, struggles with their surroundings, and difficulties of their specific societal concerns, Majok uses both realistic forms and non-realistic styles to

in urban regions drawn by industrial employment. According to some estimates, less than 10 percent of the population resided in rural areas (Bukowczyk 35). Historian John Bukowczyk stated that Polish immigrants in the United States were highly migratory, with 40 to 60 percent likely to leave any metropolitan area within ten years of arriving in the country (Bukowczyk 35); some went into business and industry. The remainder established local stores such as bakeries, butcher shops, saloons, and print shops, as Bukowczyk states.

¹⁹ Most historians split Polish American immigration into three waves: the first from 1870 to 1914¹⁹, the second after World War II, and the third after Poland's liberation in 1989—which coincides with the Solidarity movement started by Lech Wałęsa¹⁹ and the fall of communism—when the country was freed from communist control, around the time Majok and her mother arrived in the United States. “The decade 1870-1880 added nearly 35,000 ethnic Poles to the population of the United States; the decade ending 1880 added nearly 99,000; and the last decade, 1890-1900, nearly 236,000. In 1900, there were 383,407 ethnic Poles in the United States” (Lucille 85-91). In the years following 1989, Polish immigration to the U.S. witnessed a huge wave. Specifically, the collapse of the Berlin Wall and the fall of the Soviet Union influenced many people's choice to emigrate from their country.

The 1990 U.S. Immigration Act accepted citizens from thirty-four countries, including Poland. After 1989, the most popular destination for Polish immigrants was Chicago and New York, Jersey, primarily because of manual labor positions for skilled workers: “jobs were available in the many factories, and there were people happy to help them find work and a place to stay” (Lawlor). The high wages and plentiful job opportunities for skilled manual labor attracted Polish immigrants to the United States. When Polish immigrants were asked to compare their social standing in 2004 with their position in 1994, 38% of respondents in a national poll felt they had dropped down the social ladder, 46% believed their status was unchanged. Only 17% believed that their position had improved. Many Poles assumed that, around the time of EU accession (White 27), migration would be a better livelihood strategy than staying at home.

The post-communist Polish government launched reform initiatives on January 1, 1990, to rapidly convert a communist economy focused on central planning and state control into an economy based on the market distribution of capital and largely private ownership (Nohlen and Stöve 14). The program's key targets, entitled “shock therapy,” were met in a matter of months. The shock therapy did not work for a long time, and eventually, it caused the country's economy to suffer, “The immediate consequence of these policies was a substantial decline in measured economic activity” (Jackson 27). Hence, the leading cause for migration was mainly economic problems which significantly impacted young Poles in their twenties and thirties. Higher pay from jobs both in more prosperous EU countries and in the United States as well as high levels of unemployment in Poland, prompted many of the new generations to choose a better life outside of Poland.

convey her aim. Majok's interpretation of this dramatic style—realistic and non-realistic form—necessitates a social connection and relatedness to American culture. Darja's immigration situation is an extension, a condition of her existence. However, immigration is not addressed explicitly as a major element in the play but rather as a tangible method of portraying Darja's psyche in confrontation with false American societal norms.

Majok rejects traditional realism in favor of an abstract approach in form. The realism in this play reflects only ordinary people's problems by using conversational language, which appears in the character's imagination, delusion, and reality. Characterization takes priority over the plot in *Ironbound*. The playwright is not interested in telling a traditional story. In the beginning, she displays a sketch of an immigrant woman who develops into a full-fledged character by the end. Using little exposition, the context, and details of Darja's character are increasingly complete as colors apply to this tableau, and her real identity forms through accretion during the play. The dialogues exchanged between her, and others advance the story and progressively complete her character's dimensions.

Dialogue is the medium through which the characters represent their culture, social and personal shifts. Like modern plays, *Ironbound* seeks to build an idea of what exists in the character's day-to-day life and its impact on their psychology. The dramatic structure Majok uses in her play develops as Darja recalls and relives the most critical events in her life. The theatrical collage developed on stage unbound by the linear constraints of past, present, and future, and it portrays the tragic life of an immigrant in the new world.

Following this broad introduction, I'll discuss a few more specific points below.

Modern Tragedy; Representation of the Character

As some pioneers of modern American drama, Miller, Williams, Anderson, and O'Neill do not provide a systematic theory of tragedy. Also, they do not participate in classifiable dramatic practice. Nonetheless, they view some of their dramatic works as modern tragedies and, as playwrights, see themselves as part of a continuous tragic tradition. As George Lukacs states in *The Sociology of Modern Drama*, those modern dramatists often disregard classic tragedy's formal elements and philosophical components; they concentrate on the genre's heightened character representation, which they think personifies the tragedy (Lukacs 154). As a result, one might argue that they associate tragedy with the dramatization of heroism, always describe tragedy in terms of the protagonist's ideological devotion to a cause and consequent suffering (Lukacs 154). Thus, they portray—or misinterpret—classic tragedy as mainly a dramatic homage to the individuality and human potential.

Ironbound also emphasizes the idealists' isolation and alienation while reaffirming the heroine's capacity to suffer and resolve to withstand misery; being an outsider in American society is the tragic task of this play. Because *Ironbound* shows the tragedy of existence in immigration, it relies on the dramatization of group interaction. This is not to say that Darja is not individualized or that her fate is subordinated to the fate of the collective. However, she is an immigrant, dramatized in terms of a society whose suffering is the subject of the play. As Tennessee Williams mentions in the stage direction of the play *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*:

The bird I hope to catch in the net of this play is not the solution of one man's psychological problem. I'm trying to catch the true quality of experience in a group of people, that cloudily, flickering, evanescent—fiercely—interplay of live human being in the thundercloud of a common crisis. (Williams, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* 98)

The “common crisis” that Williams mentions reveals in *Ironbound* as a common crisis for immigrants, especially those with few resources. *Ironbound* responses to life are accompanied by suffering because the protagonist is involved in an intense struggle with others, society, and with the self.

It soon becomes apparent that Darja’s sense of rootlessness and alienation goes beyond the relationship with her boyfriend. In fact, by hanging onto other men, she authenticates herself and tries to find something to which she can belong. As a result of having lost faith and becoming a victim of society, Darja has lost her identity. She senses the falseness of her existence when she is talking about a woman who lost her arm in the factory:

DARJA: She remember for one moment she was thinking something. She don’t tell to me what this was. But I know. She was thinking being not here. She was thinking some place, something what was not for her. Or she would see when her sleeve it’s catching and her arm it’s taking. Because that’s where she is, she is here. Like me. I am not good person. I am not good person also. I don’t know who I think I am to say to you things. I don’t know why I judge you. (Majok, *Ironbound* 33)

Loss of hope and faith has to do with falsification of the self; ironically enough, the return to what is perceived by Darja as an innocent state identifies with a complete loss of the self.

Relying on money and her relationship with different men gives her hope of regaining her fate to return “home” with her son.

The search for a home can be seen as a symbol for searching for a place within society, and even beyond that, as an existential search for meaning. Indeed, the preoccupation with finding a home or a place of refuge from the hostile world figures into this play. This quest for a home, ties to a past decision; Darja is haunted by wrongdoings and seeks oblivion in a safe

haven. To do this, Darja needs to reconstruct a previously shattered personal vision and reestablish the American social ties. Darja's self-destruction is not only a protest against the prevailing system but also and perhaps more significantly, a dedicated—if failed— attempt to reconstitute a disintegrating psyche as well as to reenter a society in which she could not adjust herself. When it comes to Darja's self-discovery and re-establishment of a connection with the outside world, it is a process of self-reflection, self-judgment, and self-justification.

The more self-reflective she becomes, the more significant her estrangement depicts in the play. Due to her alienation, Darja experiences increasing levels of spiritual agony. The more Darja feels like an alien in an increasingly hostile environment, the more she is forced to rely on the support of others. The more she relies on their support, the stranger, and the more alienated she becomes.

Darja's destiny is to stay a stranger not just because of her sensitivity to social injustices and cultural hypocrisies but also because of her innate understanding of her own moral faults. Darja's intensity stems from this inner struggle between separation and integration, which eventually entirely overwhelms and crushes her.

One of the critics who associated the tragic stature with self-consciousness is John Gassner. In his book "*Tragedy in the Modern Theatre*", Gassner notes:

The very elevation or "stature" we have considered essential to the characters of high tragedy is and elevation of intellect—that is, of spirit made supremely conscious of itself by suffering. (Gassner, *Theatre in Our Times* 54)

Gassner associates not only self-consciousness with pain but also with suffering from self-consciousness. He views this as a type of enlightenment, prompted by "some inherent,

cumulatively achieved understanding, realization, or recognition” (Gassner 52), is also the conclusion of any tragedy.

This crucial feature of tragedy, according to Gassner, has to do with the objectification of the subjective or the externalization of personal internalized feeling. Darja is unable to attain this objectification. For Darja, reconciliation is only partial and arrives far too late (which usually happens in most tragedies), after Darja has passed the point of no return. So, she decides to cling to the only hope she believes she has in her life, the unfaithful boyfriend who, at the very least, is proposing to her and helping her to see her son once more.

Because George Lukacs’ study of the interaction between alienation and inwardness is relevant to *Ironbound*, it may be helpful to recall his thoughts on the internalization of conflicts in modern drama at this point. Lukacs claims in his 1909 research on “*The Sociology of Modern Drama*,” about nineteenth-century German dramatists, and to Hebbel’s²⁰ connection of pain with action:

The heroes of the new drama—in comparison to the old—are more passive than active; they are acted upon more than they act for themselves; they defend rather than attack; their heroism is mostly a heroism of anguish, of despair, not one of bold aggressiveness. Since so much of the inner man has fallen prey to destiny, the last battle is to be enacted within. (Lukacs 140)

Darja reacts at best by refusing to act and by expressing her refusal to behave in a required way.

Her objections are frequently unintelligible and ineffective. Her passive-aggressive behavior is a

²⁰ “Friedrich Hebbel, in full Christian Friedrich Hebbel, (born March 18, 1813, Wesselburen, Schleswig-Holstein—died December 13, 1863, Vienna), poet and dramatist who added a new psychological dimension to German drama and made use of G.W.F. Hegel’s concepts of history to dramatize conflicts in his historical tragedies. He was concerned not so much with the individual aspects of the characters or events as with the historical process of change as it led to new moral values” (Encyclopedia of Britannica).

fitting metaphor for her solitary mental agony. Darja is both a fervent advocate of the system and its pitiful victim. Furthermore, since Darja is simultaneously governed by deterministic social forces and isolated from her social surroundings, she becomes self-reflective and self-enclosed.

Darja experiences an alienation/isolation dynamic, depicting a response to the societal context. Indeed, this relationship serves as the play's form and theme. As a result of Darja's estrangement, the author depicts the protagonist at a stage in her life when she internalizes the tension between individual integrity and capitalist utilitarianism and becomes entirely self-absorbed. Darja feels more at home in her fantasies than in her actual world due to the alienating socio-political system and unpredictable economic conditions.

DARJA: How? Please tell to me how. You see peoples here they go to school years, years they go, and they don't have nothing now. What I can do? Even the ugly jobs they don't have no more. Look there. Look the factory there. Just empty and glass. No factories here, nothing. No car. What I can do? (M. Majok, *Ironbound* 60)

Darja retreats into a world of her own invention where the conflicts perform. The more she withdraws into her fantasies, the less capable she is of functioning in her environment. The more objectified by the outside world, the more subjective she becomes. Her self-imposed isolation from reality resulted from her severe reaction to societal and private conditions that may impact all immigrants.

DARJA: She throw this away, same thing like if she give me. I am wearing her clothes some- times. When I push her in wheelchair, I wear her hats so if she turn around her head, I can fast take this off. When I shop for her food, I wear her scarf. When I take her bills to post office. Sometimes I even walk in Central Park— just for like, little bit—in her dress. Beautiful dress. Blue. (M. Majok, *Ironbound* 57)

As an immigrant, Darja, like most modern protagonists, represents large segments of society, but her absurd reaction to her situation distinguishes her as a modern tragic hero. Majok raises the common, the accepted, and unexamined aspects of life to a dramatic and conceptual level. They cannot but undergo close inspection via the dramatization of an amplified response of an excessive reaction to ordinary events. However, Darja, as an embodiment of the system's ideology, is eventually sacrificed to her own idealistic vision in such a way that her ultimate decision reflects the decision of immigrants, more generally, and all those who had confidence in the American Dream.

Disillusionment; the American Dream

Truslow Adams connects the phrase "dream" with the word "hope" while defining the American Dream. Americans, he argued, had the right to a dream, and individuals had the right to hope. In his book *The American Dream of Success*, Lawrence Chenoweth uses the term "hope" in the same way as Truslow Adams did: "Hope represents recognition of tragedy and a willingness to confront problems in order to improve the condition of life for both oneself and one's own contemporaries" (Chenoweth 120). Chenoweth examines the American Dream from a socioeconomic perspective. He contends that conceptualizing the American Dream as the degree of success is a measure of the impact of its ideology rather than of people's achievement (Chenoweth 121).

In his book, *The American Dream*, Jim Cullen argues that the American Dream concept emphasizes individual effort in attaining success while downplaying the influence of the economic system on human achievement. People from different socioeconomic backgrounds have different views on the American Dream. People from low-income backgrounds are more

excited about the American Dream, while those from higher economic classes are skeptical.

According to Jim Cullen, more affluent people “see the Dream as an opiate that lulls people into ignoring the structural barriers that prevent collectively as well as personal advancement”

(Cullen 6). The dream concept’s ambiguity gives it mystique and makes it an excellent subject for immigrant plays. The American Dream in plays like *Ironbound* cannot be proven, nor can it be completely rejected. This uncertainty raises a serious concern; only a few individuals achieve the American Dream of rising from poverty to wealth, while the vast majority fail miserably.

Cullen’s depiction of the American Dream is brief yet intriguing. He says that the term American Dream: “today appears to mean that in the United States anything is possible if you want it badly enough” (Cullen 5). Barbara Ehrenreich concedes that even those with college degrees are having difficulty obtaining employment. She calls Cullen’s notion of the American Dream into doubt by pointing out that in her research she found that no matter how much thousands of people desired a job they couldn’t obtain one; “while blue-collar poverty has become numbingly routine, white-collar unemployment—and the poverty that often results—remains a rude finger in the face of the American Dream” (Ehrenreich 2). As Ehrenreich points out, education alone is not enough to attain the American Dream.

Darja is an uneducated, working-class person who is paid hourly for physical labor. No matter how hard she worked, when the factories on which her livelihood depended were closed, she had no option but to choose whatever came her way—cleaning people’s houses, for example. She could not fathom living the American Dream at this point in her life. The idea of survival, both for herself and her son, was the first thing that sprang to mind for her. Because she lacked intelligence, talent, and education, she sought refuge in various men who she thought could

protect her and her child. Yet, she discovered that living with a husband who abused her and her child or a lover who betrayed her was so far from the American Dream.

As an average citizen, she could not advance her dreams as far as she wished; her understanding of achieving her goals, having brought into a patriarchal idea embedded in it, was not in the right direction. Being successful was not an option in her life. Consequently, Darja started to focus only on the fact that she had to remain alive.

DARJA: Maybe you too you forget. You want to be big man? Have me act to you like you big man? Okay. So I want more, Maks. I need insurance. Apartment. Out of basement apartment. Car. I want car.

MAKS: Okay. One day.

DARJA: I want more than anything car.

MAKS: Then this is sad life. (M. Majok, *Ironbound* 58)

Darja's dream is rooted in a desire to be wealthy, seem rich, and command attention. However, this scenario is troublesome since, in Darja's life, success is judged by intelligence, making the correct decisions, working hard, and being honorable in the job. Darja is doomed to fail as an unclever woman with a delusory notion of the American Dream; she understands it only in a material sense and doesn't have the skills or ability to access wealth.

Her dreams centered on shallow desires such as looking like a rich person, which she thinks might somehow give her greater access to respectability and opportunity. She steals the clothing of the women she works for to appear wealthy,

DARJA: sometimes I even walk in Central Park— just for like, little bit—in her dress.

Beautiful dress. Blue. I take this off before I go inside and clean her furnitures. But

people on the street...in life...they for some reason they always know who am I. I wear her clothes but. (M. Majok, Ironbound 57)

For her, clothing allows her to portray herself to the new society. She believes that clothing and perception are linked. She supposes people evaluate each other based on their appearance; however, she cannot fight this popular opinion and win because she thinks poverty is rooted in her personality. People will notice that she is impoverished, an outsider, that she is not one of them. Darja's dream is all associated with possessions or the accumulation of capital. She yearns to be wealthy, or at least to be seen as a rich woman. If having a home, a car, and a few modern comforts signify the realization of the dream, Darja, has not achieved it.

When she cannot achieve her dreams, she takes revenge on the rich women for whom she works. She burns their expensive clothes and belongings. She causes as much damage as she can:

TOMMY: What did you do to her things?

DARJA: What you think, I burn them.

TOMMY: Like, up? You burned them up?

DARJA: Yes, up. Away. No more.

TOMMY: The woman's a damn millionaire // and you just burned her shit up?

DARJA: Her husband it's millionaire and // she it's sick nasty inside his house—

TOMMY: Jesus fuckin— Is it still burning?

DARJA: Was beautiful. And so was her clothes. You know I think first maybe I keep all this things but then I think No. I don't know what she does in this things. Dirty dirty nasty sick. She want I clean her house? I clean the bitch's house. (M. Majok, Ironbound 60)

Darja has suffered terrible disappointment in her life; now, she is trapped and cannot move forward; the only thing she can do is destroying others' belongings, which she views as their happiness. Darja denies the existence of her miserable decision to leave her life to go toward an unknown future. The pain she feels is twisted; Darja lives in a bitter place that she refuses to acknowledge. She rejects the notion that the sacrifices she has made in her life have been for nothing: no money, no future, only loneliness. She is wretched, which is why she is determined to drag so many people down with her. This is her philosophy and her psychology. Darja has no peace, no self-love, no self-respect, and self-adjustment. Her bitterness taints everything.

As a human being, Daria must take responsibility for her choices and actions. Barbara Ehrenreich wrote in *Bait and Switch* that "... The message is that you and you alone are responsible for your fate. It is a long-standing American idea, in other words, that circumstances count for nothing compared to the power of the individual will" (Ehrenreich 80). Relatively, Darja, after 1992, after her husband left her alone with a child, became responsible for her own fate. She was not relying on her husband's dream anymore, and since her dream was inaccessible, her resolve became weak and weaker till she lost her responsibility toward the dream. As a result, Darja is suffering from social alienation and psychic fragmentation simultaneously, which guides her into losing individuality and personal integrity. Along with everything else stated, we should not forget that the confrontation between her native language and the host country's language played a significant role in her loss of identity and personal dignity.

The Other Barrier; Language

Apart from what is stated above, which contributed to Darja's disappointment, alienation, and eventual demise, additional causes contribute to her estrangement similar to those observed in modern drama, language disorder or a language barrier. Let us take a brief look at this subgenre of modern drama and its influence on the immigrant character.

By the end of the nineteenth century, dramatic literature had undergone a significant transformation. Rather than being simple spectators, the audience had become active participants in the entire dramatic experience. From the beginning to the present, drama has been the most continuous form of presenting society, from the royals and privileged classes in Shakespeare's plays to the tramps in Beckett's plays. Gradually, characters embodying the modern dramatic characters, the common human, took on center stage.

Modern dramatic characters resulted from confident individuals examining anything that did not conform to their beliefs while also challenging the meaning of life. The dramatic conflict was no longer caused by an external power but by one that existed within the self; as a result, in modern drama, the language was transformed to support the characters with modern quality. Laura Hanson in *Elements of Modernism* mentions that exalted speeches and soliloquies faded away, and ordinary expressions emerged in which the characters probed their unresolved concerns (Hanson 57). The modern dramatic language was a language with concealed meaning between the words, requiring the listener to participate on several levels of cognition.

As it is stated in an article by Su-Lien Liao, a linguist from Chienkuo Technology University, one of the fundamental issues of absurdist theatre is the restriction of language as a communicating device. The absurdist playwrights seek to draw the audience's attention to the shortcomings and limitations of language (Liao 1-3). Language no longer serves as a

communicative tool for individuals to communicate their thoughts and feelings in modern plays. Language is utilized by most individuals not just to convey the truth but also to disguise it. Even the concept of reality is an absurdity for absurdist playwrights. Words for characters become clichéd and lifeless, mirroring the sterility and meaninglessness of modern existence.

For instance, In 1953, Samuel Beckett's play *Waiting for Godot* challenged both the audience and reviewers to decipher its meaning, specifically in terms of its language. The play heralded a new era in theatre — the Theatre of the Absurd. Jane Hale, in her book: *Broken Window*, examines Beckett's place in modern literature as a writer who is aware of the specificity of his period and capable of translating it into literary and theatrical forms that have an impact on the audience (Hale 87). In addition, C. R. Lyons in his book, *Samuel Beckett*, argues that Beckett's characters' difficulties are likewise those of modern people. The protagonists in Beckett's plays want total independence but are helpless to achieve it; they are ostensibly free but are bound by their terrible past. Although they are dissatisfied with their surroundings, they have no other options (Lyons 83). They try to find purpose in their lives by playing linguistic games, but it does not appear to work.

Similarly in *Ironbound*, Darja wants independency, but she cannot achieve it; she is seemingly free but is bound by her past. In this play, language is elliptical and illustrates colloquial and non-native patterns. Throughout the play, Majok utilizes the working-class language, which Tommy represents, and the language of an illiterate immigrant lady, Darja. Darja and Tommy's conversation is full of slang, grammatical errors, and wrong and misspelled words—one of the modern language's key features. No need for any explanation for any of these individuals; simply listening to them speak, converse, and utilize the English language to express themselves reveals their personalities, origins, class, and viewpoints:

TOMMY: I told you I'm not payin for some deadbeat's kid.

DARJA: No, you paying me. You paying me to make noise.

TOMMY: You know how much rehab costs? Cuz that's what that kid needs.

DARJA: I can find something for cheap. Listen, you have broke me to millions pieces.

You take my last good years I have in my life— (Majok, *Ironbound* 13)

Majok employs colloquial language to bring forth the facts of life. Modernism's advocates were faithful to their art of presentation. The era they lived in was shown with maximum authenticity, whether it was the characters' tragic situation or the outpouring of their feelings in everyday language that connected with the audience. Majok, too, reflects a realistic picture of society without resorting to anything other than the basic exaltation of human existence. Tommy and Darja's conversation best describe this quality during the play, such as:

DARJA: How? Please tell to me how. You see peoples here they go to school years, years they go, and they don't have nothing now. What can I do? Even the ugly jobs they don't have no more. Look there. Look the factory there. Just empty and glass. No factories here, nothing. No car. What I can do?

TOMMY: Maybe you shoulda sold her fuckin shit instead of burnin it.

DARJA: You know what? Yes. Yes, fuck. Yes, I should.

TOMMY: Prob'ly insured.

DARJA: Damnit fuck. These people, if they could, they would send they houses to China to be cleaned. But we work till day our body breaks. Till place close or I close, I work and I barely— (Majok, *Ironbound* 29)

Ironbound's dialogue is relevant to each character and internally consistent within the overall setting of the conversation and in the context of the discussion. The author emphasizes that her

characters are real individuals rather than stock stereotypes, so she uses colloquial language and slang throughout the script. Just like real-life conversations, the dialogues in her play are marked with a roundabout, mixed language, and incomplete sentences, which are functional, realistic, and practical:

MAKS: Really? Now? Here?

DARJA: Do you see anyone...

(He gets down on his knees. She's loving this.)

MAKS: Dobra, to dziś zrobię Ci coś²¹ // co—

DARJA: You have to practice—

MAKS: So tonight I— Roztopię Cię, kobieto²²—

DARJA: Practice— (Majok, *Ironbound* 17)

This play contains no coherence in the language. Instead, the dialogues are constructed from fragments, repetition, muttering, silence, and other techniques, the same as a modern drama that contradicts the polished and easy-flowing vocabulary of classic plays.

Majok illustrates how seemingly colloquial and uneducated language can successfully communicate the complexities of human emotions. The characters in *Ironbound* are frequently unable to convey their ideas and feelings, something we can all relate to in our daily lives, but this is more of a problem for Darja due to the second language barrier. Simple language and sloppy grammar reflect passion, anger, frustration, and confusion more effectively than hundreds of words from the most elegant vocabulary. Majok displays her power by reaching out to her audience via the reflections of imperfect individuals with their imperfect language.

²¹ Translation: Good/Ok, I will do something for you today.

²² Translation: I will make you melt.

Most importantly, Majok portrays her characters through conversation, not only what they say but also how they say it. A new life in the United States presents additional problems for Darja, including non-recognition of qualifications, a lack of American job experience, housing troubles, prejudice, and, most crucially, a language barrier. The language barrier is the most difficult challenge since it impairs communication. It might cause difficulties for immigrants in finding a job, receiving an education, obtaining medical treatment, finding housing, and just getting around.

In modern drama, “characters were losing control of language; language as a means of communication evaporated, and characters were increasingly unable to express ideas effectively or to talk to each other in meaningful ways” (Christopher Bigsby 114). In *Ironbound*, Darja is trapped in interpretation, in circumstances in which this second language itself seems more important than the ideas it conveyed, or the words take on a life independent of the objects they represent. This is what we call the language barrier, and it happens not just for an immigrant character but for most modern dramatic characters.

It is important to note that the language barrier can lead to secondary issues, such as cultural incompatibilities and the inability to communicate effectively because of differences in linguistic ability. As Ibrahim Arqoub states in his article:

They [language barriers] are obstacles or problems or challenges that breakdown the communication process because they prevent the flow of information between a sender and a receiver. There are numerous barriers to communication, and these may occur at any stage in the communication process. They can be classified into the following categories: mechanical, physical, psychological, social, noise, religious, cultural, and verbal and non-verbal language barriers. (Abu-Arqoub)

Many migrants may finally grasp the grammatical elements and fundamental vocabulary of a new language—Darja, of course, is not one of them—but fail to attain the correct accent, melody, or intonation. Their speech, which is technically accurate but lacks true passion, is frequently misinterpreted, especially when dealing with emotions. The stated feeling of an immigrant may sound excessive or uncaring. Because their emotional expression becomes a misrepresentation of their inner truth, they give the listener the impression that they are arrogant, aggressive, pushy, isolative, unpleasant, and so on. As a result, the subtle linguistic barrier of verbal intonation and accent becomes an emotional barrier.

DARJA: You would stay with me, yes sure. Yes sure, because I make easy your life. For you, I cook, I clean, I lay there for you. I make sounds. Easy life. And you can whatever you want because I will lay there. Of course you would stay with me. (M. Majok, *Ironbound* 55)

As a result, an immigrant like Darja, who is forced to forget her native tongue quickly, also loses many key memories from her previous life. As we see throughout the play, Darja never speaks of her past living in her origin country. She appears to be in the midst of nowhere in her life's history, with no past, no future, and present. Her existence is devoid of nostalgia for home, parents, or friends. Her life changed forever when she was abandoned with her baby at this same bus stop. The loss of her primary language and memory initiates regressive processes, jeopardizing her normal psychological growth and resulting in emotional blunting and intellectual disassociation.

Darja's linguistic difficulties do not end in the present and her own disabilities; instead, they are deeply rooted in this new country. Darja must contend with the historical limitations associated with the humiliating stereotype of Poles in American culture, which was based mainly

on the Polish accents and their poor language skills. In American television shows, Polish characters appeared brutal, naïve, and always the target of laughter due to their accents and grammar. Majok says:

They [Polish immigrants, shown in media] were a joke. Their English was a punch line. Or they were some magical janitors that came in for a scene to offer sage advice to the main character about how it's 'best to live a simple life' or some shit. (Majok, Playwrights of New York)

Derogatory jokes about Polish Americans have been around for decades, rooted in anti-immigrant stereotypes that originated in the United States before the 1920s. "The constant derision, often publicly disseminated through the mass media, caused serious identity crises, feeling of inadequacy, and low self-esteem for many Polish Americans" (Pulera 42). For many Polish immigrants, this kind of prejudice resulted in extreme identity catastrophe and feelings of inadequacy. In *Bieganski: The Brute Polak Stereotype* by Danusha V. Goska, the writer claims that Poles are stereotyped as "brutal, backward, primitive peasants" (Goska 230). Goska is more persuasive in evaluating the course; she argues that cruel 'Polak'²³ stereotype in Hollywood culture was common and even normal in a time of growing modern American drama. Most notably, Goska cites the position of Stanley Kowalski in Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire*, stating, "Given that the play and film are set in New Orleans, to have a central character who is Polish is odd" (Goska 230). Goska claims that this kind of character-creating may be linked to Americans' inability to acknowledge the presence of significant class distinctions in their culture—and, as a result, to frame them in ethnic and racial terms. According to Goska, Poles have animalistic characteristics; she believes that in American culture, Poles are

²³ 'polak' simply means a Polish man in Polish.

represented as dumb, aggressive, fertile, anarchic, filthy, and particularly hateful people. With a brief look at media history, American representations of Poles have traditionally been negated for a long time. Perhaps one reason that immigrant writers have considered themselves obliged to write is that they wanted to change people's perceptions of this cultural stereotype to an accurate and more nuanced image of these communities.

The Urban Life; Significance of Space

As I have stated, the playwright did not choose the Ironbound neighborhood randomly. Along with its symbolic connotations, we might study it as a city and the challenges it creates for its residents. As was the case with modern drama, urban life and urbanization were major issues, if not the primary factor, in how playwrights depicted the character's interaction with the new society.

Modernism, a style linked with increasingly crowded cities and the fragmented character of contemporary urban life, reflects the diversity of perception and human existence. According to Bradbury, it was in these congested, frantic, and fast-paced cities that modernism emerged as a "particularly urban art [...] caught up in the spirit of the modern city," and experimental modernism literature was "an art of cities" (Bradbury 96-97). These cities brought artists into touch with a diverse range of socioeconomic levels, nationalities, and populations (Lash 358).

The connection between art and the broken aspect of modern life, which is regarded as a modernist feature, is described by Bradbury. The city, too, is important to modernist themes of separation, he represents the city as "the only adequate metaphor through which relational problems can be expressed" (M. Bradbury 341). Sometimes the city itself is one of the causes for the scattered lives of modern humans, as is shown in *Ironbound*.

The name Ironbound is a metaphoric element in the play which, on the one hand, it is a direct reference to a neighborhood in Newark, and on the other hand, presents an image of human beings who—either willingly or unwillingly—are trapped behind society’s iron bars with no way to escape. Simply taking responsibility for giving life meaning and living it was not working for Darja and many other immigrants who came to New Jersey based on stories of factory jobs and earning enough money to live comfortably. Due to a downturn in the economy in this area of the nation, almost all factories were closed, and the lives of everyone who went to New Jersey as a factory worker became a catastrophe.

According to Majok in one of her interviews, *Ironbound* is based on her mother’s experiences as an immigrant in New Jersey. Darja, like Majok’s own mother, immigrated to the United States to search for a better and safer life. Majok and her mother came from Poland to New Jersey when Majok was about five years old. They lived in the Newark area, surrounded by factories. “The Ironbound soon developed into the industrial center of the city, where the poorest residents lived and toiled in factories 12 hours a day, six days a week” (Lawlor). Many of the people living in their neighborhood were also new immigrants from all over the world, working in factories or construction, Majok says:

... she’s (Majok’s mother) still cleaning the houses. She worked in a paper factory, a cookie factory, a book-liner factory in Jersey City, and worked as a caregiver for the elderly. ((Majok, Q. and A.: Martyna Majok, Putting Immigrant Lives on Center Stage)

Majok and her mother witnessed the city’s changes from an industrial town with operating factories to the decline and closure. In an interview with *The New York Times*, Majok recalls:

I grew up mostly in Kearny. It's what you see in the opening credits of "The Sopranos."²⁴

It's these bridges; it's these abandoned factories, which used to be factories that my mother worked at. Everybody that I grew up with is pretty much an immigrant, and [their parents were] mostly single moms. (Majok, Q. and A.: Martyna Majok, Putting Immigrant Lives on Center Stage)

For most of the nineteenth and early 20th-century, the Ironbound district was industrial. During that period, the Ironbound had a far worse socioeconomic status than the rest of Newark. The area's architecture bears witness to the poverty of the 19th century - there are relatively few brownstones or brick-faced buildings in the region. From the 19th century, the Ironbound had a diverse population, including Germans, Lithuanians, Italians, and Poles, as it does today. In the 1920s, Portuguese immigrants arrived in this part of the city, joining a mostly Polish, Italian, Irish, and German population. In the 1950s and 1960s, there were also many Blacks. However, many Italian and Polish immigrants have left the Ironbound in recent years as the population has grown.

Because of how the course of the Passaic River twisted, the Ironbound region was first known as "Dutch Neck" and later "Down Neck" (Lawlor). The current name of the Ironbound may be derived from the many forges and foundries that were there in the second half of the nineteenth century. However, the name may be derived from the rail lines encircled the region when the railways were constructed in the 1830s. The Ironbound quickly became the city's industrial core, where the city's poorest inhabitants resided and worked in factories 12 hours a day, six days a week, for most of their lives.

²⁴ She mentioned *The Sopranos* which is a David Chase-created American crime thriller television series. The plot follows Tony Soprano (James Gandolfini), a New Jersey-based Italian American mobster. He attempts to reconcile his family life with his position as the head of a criminal band.

Ironbound offered low-cost housing, a close-knit culture, and a convenient location; thus, it was the first stop on many immigrants' search for the American Dream. Lawlor describes this neighborhood as follows:

Often the journey ends not with a house in a leafy suburb, but on the gritty streets of the Ironbound itself. Some new arrivals may have the means to leave, but they do not have the heart to do so (Lawlor).

Kearny is another borough²⁵ and neighborhood of Newark, an industrial city with a large Polish-immigrant community and a history of racial violence and varied economic opportunity. Kearny is located in Hudson County, New Jersey, and is a suburb of Newark. Kearny's position in the northern New Jersey-New York metropolitan area offers many possibilities for economic growth and easy access to some of the world's most lucrative marketplaces for products and services.

Several important transportation routes pass through the town. Kearny has been classified as an Opportunity Zone by the *U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development*. As part of the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act of 2017, Congress created a new community development program to promote long-term investments in economically depressed urban and rural areas (Town of Kearny, New Jersey). This program offers tax incentives for investors to invest their unrealized capital gains in Opportunity Funds, which are committed to supporting in the designated Opportunity Zones by the top executives of every U.S. state and territory (Town of Kearny, New Jersey).

In his book *Inside Newark*, scholar and civil rights activist Robert Curvin claimed that "By the beginning of the 20th-century, Newark-New Jersey was one of the leading

²⁵ "A borough in the context of local government in the U.S. state of New Jersey, refers to one of five types and one of eleven forms of municipal government (in addition to those established under a Special Charter)" (*Types of New Jersey Municipal Government*; New Jersey State League of Municipalities).

manufacturing cities in the nation” (Curvin 2). The riot in July 1967, which resulted from the detention and beating of a Black taxi driver by police, caused the migration of White people to the suburbs, and the city lost more than five percent of its population according to U.S. Census Data.

The burning gasoline slid down the façade of the building. With nightsticks flailing, the police then charged toward the crowd, and one of the worst riots in American history began. ... those five days in July 1967 would deeply change city life and politics. (Curvin 2)

One of the results of this five-day protest encouraged many African Americans and some middle-class communities to replace the city’s empty spots due to decreased living costs and housing. “Portuguese immigrants started arriving in the 1920’s to join a population that was largely Polish, Italian, Irish and German. There was also a sizable number of Blacks in the 1950’s and 1960’s ... but the number has dwindled” (Lawlor). During this period of the city’s history, immigrants from countries such as Poland became more inclined to immigrate there. There were 1.3 million employees in the state in 1940. Total employment had almost tripled to almost four million workers by 2000; however, these were positions of a somewhat different type. “An ever-expanding and evolving economy and sustained decade-by-decade job growth characterized the sixty years” (Seneca 65). After 2001, however, economic growth came to a halt, and jobs in factories and other middle-class positions were eliminated; “the state’s overall workforce fell to 3.9 million employees by 2013,” (Seneca 65) twelve years later.

Newark, with all of its troubles, is a many-sided story, full of good life, bad life, fun times, painful times, opportunity, and many of the remnants and legacies of an old American industrial city as well as the intimations of a postindustrial city. Newark speaks

volumes regarding the plight of America's urban places and the enduring effects of poverty, disadvantage, and race. (Curvin 3)

The story of *Ironbound* in some sense parallels Newark history itself illustrating the decline of the economy and desperate lives of immigrants who left their countries to pursue the Dream of a better life in a city known for its opportunities. Immigrants like Darja and her husband assumed that the United States had opportunities that post-communist Poland did not.

Although some of Darja's choices are poor, other situations beyond her control affect her life, such as the factory closures, lack of decent work, homelessness, and high taxes. "Like urban places throughout the Northeast and Midwest, Newark has lost much of its manufacturing base to cheap labor in the Sunbelt or abroad. The loss has had a devastating impact on Newark's economy" (Curvin 9). Majok uses the period of Newark's heyday to the decline of factories as a time frame for her play, as she sees it as a predictor of economic growth and decline, "because I'd seen what happened to these factories in Jersey over 20 years—as a measure of what was going on economically" (Majok). In fact, this place has been employed as a plot, from the time the sun rose in the sky of immigrants to the sunset of their life, comparable to the usage of urbanization in modern plays.

The Subjective and Non-Linear Time

Ironbound does not have a conventional narrative form, and the sequential time's significance is personalized here. Time may be stopped, reversed, shortened, telescoped, or fragmented. Majok utilizes flashbacks, repetition, and interrupted time sequences to portray events selectively and indirectly. A better expression is that *Ironbound's* feature time system exists in the main character's mind, a factor that relates to time relativity in modern drama.

It is believed that Einstein's "Theory of Relativity" in 1905, which revealed that time is a subjective matter rather than an absolute concept, changed our understanding of the structure of the "time" (Spencer 17). Modernism adopted this concept, which represents "an ironic distrust of all absolutes" (Bradbury 432), which means that each person carries his or her own "time-system" inside, this idea that the unique sense of time should be treated seriously is a key feature of modernism (Mendilow 11). Modernism posits that the universe is relativistic and ambiguous and moreover rejects the existence of absolute time. As a result, a logical, linear time is challenged (Lash 359). Modernist playwrights alter time to portray their own unique vision of reality (Lodge 481). This manipulation of time is a hallmark of modernism and resulted a time perception "ethic of timelessness" (David Jr. 543) among the writers.

Modernist writers who concentrated on the inner self were inspired by Freud's psychoanalytic approach and free-associative psychology techniques. This focus on human experience and the subconscious resulted in subjectivity in art instead of the more conventional narrative framework based on external, objective occurrences (Lodge 481). Psychiatry and dream interpretation profoundly impacted the modernists' subjective management of time. They discovered that even past events might be absorbed into the unconscious present (Mendilow 5), and The Dreamer may be anywhere and anybody they desire.

Writers using the stream-of-consciousness style rejected the idea of following a linear timeline since, in the mind, thoughts and memories occur in random order. Memories of the past constantly intrude on the present due to the modernists' cracking logical tradition. Memory is, by definition, subjective and represents a personal approach to building the past into the present in the face of change. Therefore, memory reflects a highly individualized view of time, experiencing the past concurrently with the present (Terdiman 8). According to Richard

Terdiman, memory is the process through which the past infuses the present; memory is the present past.

Because “the timeline gets twisted and folds back on itself” in memory, this simultaneity of time periods lends itself to experimenting with narrative sequencing (Terdiman 8). In terms of plot, scenes may be separated, paused in time, or arranged according to a subjective viewpoint rather than a chronological order.

In the modern era, characters of dramatic literature are more conscious of time and how they relate to it, which is one of the features of the modern age. Frank Kermode admits in *The Sense of an Ending* that “a sense of time can only exist where there is submission to reality;” he adds that to be completely free of time, one would have to be unaware or indifferent to what is usually recognized as real (Kermode 57). As a matter of fact, we can see the same belief in the idea of objective reality in *Ironbound*, when it takes control of time by reordering the scenes to achieve its desired aesthetic impact. This method in *Ironbound* dissolves the boundaries between past, present, and future in dreams and stream-of-consciousness flow, allowing these different time periods to be merged or presented in reverse. Time is no longer an objective process of cause and effect, but rather “a continuum in which boundaries between past and present are wiped away” (Frank, *The Widening Gyre: Crisis and Mastery in Modern Literature* 59), a contrast that removes the sense of sequence and merges various eras into a single complete perspective.

Analysis of *Ironbound*’s scenes shows that narrative progress is paused; concurrent events are reversed. For the meaning to be understood “reflexively at the moment” (*Spatial Form in Modern Literature: An Essay in Two Parts* 221-240), the audience must link the spatialized

references. Only by examining the connection between scenes can one get a deeper understanding and appreciation of the text.

In *Ironbound*, the reader or viewer experience both the present and the past at the same time, and we can compare the impressions of characters to a painting impressionistic manner that allows the eye to do the blending between juxtaposed scenes that can only be grasped spatially at a moment of time, rather than as a sequence. Majok's narrative is fractured rather than continuous; she exposes her characters in snapshots at different times rather than in a continuous growth line. Majok breaks the time apart and rearranges it according to her perspective, with individual awareness triumphing over the chronological order of the experience.

As we have seen, the play is divided into five scenes without concern for the real-time trajectories. The first scene is set in 2014, while the second takes place in 1996. This achronality continues and is often interrupted by flashbacks. The action in *Ironbound* takes place in different years, the narrative's chronological flow is disrupted, and images are contrasted to demonstrate the simultaneity of life in Newark. The action alters between incidents that take place in the same location but at various times in Darja's life and are intended to be experienced constantly.

Ironbound's montage-like structure is chopped and edited to highlight the close-ups and fade-outs of flashing emotion, the angles of observation, and the flashbacks of recollection. In this play, the spatialization of time depends on the audience to synthesize meaning by establishing connections between the scenes. *Ironbound* reconstructs events into spatial constructions and breaks the anticipated sequential ordering of linear chronology. Time loses its continuous flow in *Ironbound*, as it is reversed in flashbacks, replayed in memory, and telescoped in glimpses of the past.

Majok stretched the narrative time to convey a deeper, more expansive story by skipping relatively long periods between episodes, looking back and displaying events from a prior time, or utilizing a double-time containing both a long and a short period. Time moves forward or backward by years in *Ironbound*, but we are not surprised; we are informed of the passage of time via differences in the appearance of characters, and the suspension of disbelief on the part of the reader or viewer is facilitated. The audience transports to different time periods, but this does not imply we lose track of time or that the narrative no longer needs action continuity. Although the time of the year calls to our attention, time in the sense of duration has no magnitude and no limits. The playwright has a long story to tell than she can fit into a mere two hours on the stage; twenty-two years. Majok allows certain breaks in the action to represent the passage of time.

The play is confined to the last day of Darja's being at the bus stop since it seems she has been waiting there for her entire life. This last day displays via specific climactic events from her twenty-two years of experience living as an immigrant in the United States. The deviations from the conventional narrative order here are justified by Darja's ongoing search for self.

Majok has united the past and the present, on the one hand hurrying us to Darja's last decision, and at the same time taking us back through her past experience to show us those moments in memory which led her to act as she does now, deciding to stay with the unfaithful boyfriend. As a result, we get both the passion for compact time and the richness of the complete, prospective narrative. This provides a plausible and informal foundation for presenting the scenes and actions as they occur in the play. Darja talks, recalls the past, then acts in the present, then lives through more of the past, all made possible by the clever manipulation of dramatic action in a dual sense of time. Darja transitions from her current state of pain to the

struggle and exhilaration of the past are happening by stepping into the appropriate time setting on stage. Majok has made it possible at any point to return to any temporal context Darja may inspire via the cautious control of time.

***Ironbound* in Performance**

Ironbound premiered at the Steppenwolf Theatre, Chicago in Aug 2014. Its premiere was part of the Three Plays Steppenwolf's Ninth Annual First Look Repertory. Each piece—*Ironbound* by Martyna Majok, *Hushabye* by Tanya Saracho and *Okay, Bye* by Joshua Conkel—gave a picture of female characters who have been uprooted from their lives and are struggling to find their way out of the unsustainable circumstances. In addition, these women must find a way to reconcile their wounded pride with their emotional and financial necessities.

In her review in *Chicago Tribune*, Kerry Reid describes *Ironbound* as a "... adroitly directed by Daniella Topol and the most structurally ambitious and successfully realized of the trio..." (Reid). Reid calls the performance as a showcase for Lusia Strus (Darja): "... and she plays every note of Darja's acidic wit and anguish with astonishing flexibility and openness" (Reid). In doing so, Reid describes that Strus paints an unforgettable vision of how easily working-class woman fall between the pauses of her life. Reid continues: "As she notes about the now-shuttered paper factory, in post-millennial the United States 'Even the ugly jobs are gone' Darja's ongoing dilemma about whether it's better to keep fighting for one's pride or settle for shreds of happiness and security comes into often-insightful focus here" (Reid). Reid admires the play in general, both for the performance and the play's concept and function of the characters.

About this repertory, Mary Shen Barnidge in *Windy City Times* explains: "Each of the three plays running in repertory under the collective banner of Steppenwolf Theater's First Look

Festival raises the question of whether suicide is the answer when you think you've hit bottom. Only one sends us home wholly convinced that it isn't" (Barnidge). About the directing, she explains: "Director Yasen Peyankov has assembled an all-star cast that keeps the humor forthcoming and the optimism unrelenting, making this the most accessible (not to mention commercially savvy) play of the 2014 line-up" (Barnidge). In general, Barnidge sees the performance as a psychological analysis of women's sacrifices and their eventual loneliness.

Ironbound also was shown in the fall of 2015 at the Round House Theatre in Bethesda, Maryland, as part of the Women's Voices Theatre Festival. In his review, Trey Graham mentions that; "Martyna Majok's rough-throated, 90-minute immigrant story is both deeply anchored in its particular place and unmistakably informed by a hard-lived understanding of struggle" (Graham); he clarifies that Majok's examination of hard times and harsher choices seems urgent and real, influenced by the playwright's own history as an immigrant daughter of a Polish mother struggling in urban-industrial New Jersey and "the rhythms of its broken English less imagined than channeled and distilled. It's a potently contemporary lament, and one very much keyed to this writer's singular voice" (Graham). Graham sees the play as a self-biography that has successfully portrayed the character's inner feelings and social conflicts.

Writing in *DC Theatre Scene*, Jayne Blanchard has an intriguing perspective on the setting of *Ironbound*'s performance, believing that even the wooden bench at the bus stop takes on numerous connotations; "In 1992, it [bench] is a place for giddy newlyweds Maks (Josiah Bania, the embodiment of youthful, crazy charisma) and Darja to canoodle and blurt out their dreams—American Dream of a better job, car, home and for the young and self-admittedly 'beautiful' Maks, playing and singing Chicago blues in Polish. Why not? At that point, anything is possible" (Blanchard). Blanchard continues that Darja uses the bench as a hiding spot after

fleeing her abusive second husband in 2006; “where she meets Vic (William Vaughan, cannily magnetic as Darja’s fellow pragmatist), a gay boy hustler and unlikely savior. In the present time, the bench is a waystation, her special place to go and think things out—as well as talk them out with her boyfriend Tommy (Jefferson A. Russell), a cheater and smooth operator” (Blanchard). She also considers that the scenes with Darja and Tommy are tense; “Majok’s battering-ram dialogue creating staccato energy and harsh poetry as the pair confront and hammer out a relationship that isn’t perfect by any means, but good enough for two people used to very little” (Blanchard). Blanchard’s analysis of the play is more about the scenery techniques in relation to the play’s subject and theme.

Ironbound went on to have an Off-Broadway run in 2016 at the Rattlestick Playwrights Theatre as a co-production with Women’s Project Theater. It began previews on March 3, debuted on March 16, and ended on April 24. *Ironbound* also performed at the Geffen Playhouse and the National Theatre of Warsaw, among other venues in the United States and internationally.

The Washington Post’s Nelson Pressley rated *Ironbound* a “knockout” and noted: “... her [Darja] roar is huge in this gripping 90-minute premiere: Darja is a feisty immigrant living in inescapable poverty and struggling to support her son, and she is not about to take defeat without a fight” (Pressley). Pressley notices under all that crushing ironwork; the location is a terrifying-looking bus stop; “which designer James Kronzer frames against a terrifying black void. The bus stop is where Darja desperately waits for a ride, aches for a decent job and slinks under a bench just for somewhere to sleep” (Pressley). Pressley went on to say that Majok seems to be familiar with the terrain, and she writes with such intensity and charm that the play’s four characters feel alive and genuine.

Jennifer Perry in *Broadway World* describes the performance as “a deceptively simple, thought-provoking, and elegant work of art” (Perry). She believes that the performance’s technical elements emphasize the concept of being stranded, “which is so significant in Majok’s play. James Kronzer’s scenic design and Brian Mac Devitt and Andrew Cissna’s lighting design highlight the unchanging and austere Ironbound area that Darja frequents. Bridges, old tires, a bench, and a streetlamp are all that we see, and they do not change. Eric Shimelonis’ sound design/compositions also provide a similar kind of ambiance” (Perry). Perry also mentions that a non-linear narrative may provide some difficulties for certain directors. Still, at Round House, all the real-time shifts are smooth while being immediately identifiable by an audience member.

Overall, performances of this play have been successful, and the majority of critics have complimented the play for its nuanced portrayal of characters and its examination of immigration in contemporary American society.

Conclusion

Recognizing prejudice, which sometimes accompany xenophobia during moments of mass migration, is a reality in many immigrants plays, and it is a major theme in *Ironbound*. The play is an exercise in unraveling identity, notably for the main character as an immigrant woman. Still, it also focuses on contemporary American opinions toward immigrants and ethnic minorities due to the main character’s background and the obstacles between her and the patriarchal culture. In this regard, immigrant drama as a genre is more than simply a fictional exercise; it represents the real immigrant experience.

The author of *Ironbound*, Martyna Majok, is a first-generation immigrant who created this play based on her experience with immigration problems. *Ironbound* depicts the isolation

and exile that many immigrants in the United States have experienced, especially after the terrorist incident on September 11, 2001, which led the government and the public to change their view on the flow of immigrants into the nation. An immigrant woman's need for a better life and happiness is shown in *Ironbound* as she begins to doubt the American Dream.

In modern drama, there is a link between the experiences of industrialized society and the potential for psychological pain. Human migration from pre-industrial to industrial society was a loss seen as the separation of the homeland, family, economic situation, unity, and social references in immigrant plays, as well. In immigrant drama, characters also experience migrating from one country to the other: displacement. Due to dislocation for the characters—both immigrants and modern—they suffer from psychological illnesses such as nostalgia, bewilderment, and alienation due to being relocated from the past to the present.

Ironbound is not chronologically organized; it has a feature-time structure. The author uses various time manipulation techniques to depict events selectively and indirectly in *Ironbound*: time may be halted, reversed, shortened, telescoped, or fractured. Like many other modern plays, *Ironbound* defies traditional narrative structures by personalizing the importance of sequential and linear time.

Ironbound links to modern tragedy since the recognition and preservation of Darja's individuality becomes a conscious life issue. External variables, such as social and political problems, which previously ruled this option out, now have more weight. The tragic core of life starts to emerge in this drama. *Ironbound*'s heroine perishes due to her failure to cope with an American culture that imposes its own set of standards on her. Darja's psychology is central to the play; her primary motive is psychological, and her tragic worldview reveals as a result.

Majok demonstrates how a simple and easy language may effectively convey the complexity of human emotions. Darja's new life in the United States offers additional challenges, such as non-recognition of abilities, a lack of American work experience, discrimination, and, most importantly, a language barrier. Language is the most challenging obstacle for her since it makes communication with others difficult. Darja is caught in interpretation, where the second language itself appears more important than the concepts it conveys, or the words take on a life separate from the things they represent.

The play's narrative is fractured rather than continuous; characters are exposed in snapshots at different times rather than in a continuous growth line. The timeline is broken and rearranged according to the character's perspective, with individual awareness triumphing over the chronological order of the experience. The character transitions from her current state of pain to the struggle and exhilaration of the past happen by stepping into the appropriate time setting on stage. the structure of the play has made it possible to return to any temporal context the character may inspire via the cautious control of time.

CHAPTER 3: NOT A KING BUT AN AMERICAN IMMIGRANT ODYSSEUS;

ANON(YMOUS) AND NAOMI IIZUKA

“I disappeared. I became invisible. I ran away. I escaped. I shed my skin. I changed my name. I became Anonymous. My name is Anonymous.”

—Chorus of Refugees, *Anon(ymous)*

“So, you ask me the name I’m known by [...] I will tell you. [...] Nobody—that’s my name.”

—Odysseus, *Odyssey*

Naomi Iizuka’s *Anon(ymous)*²⁶ is a modern adaptation of Homer’s epic poem *Odyssey*, which revises this ancient tale to a major turning point in the life of a young refugee—Anon—who encounters the life of an outsider in the United States. Naomi Iizuka is a first-generation Japanese immigrant. She was born in Tokyo and spent her childhood in other countries until she immigrated permanently to the United States. Her multiethnic and worldly background is apparent in her plays, where she uses themes of displacement and identity loss in many of her plots. *Anon(ymous)*, as an immigrant play, is concerned with the social construction²⁷ resulting from violence and character isolation. It is important to note that in this play, the social formula in which the character struggle occurs as a result of economic conditions as well as wars, xenophobia, and climate events. However, this play’s most significant social problems arise due to wars in Third World Countries and anti-immigration attitudes and roadblocks in the United States. Anon’s American dream is to make a home in the United States, a completely new place

²⁶ In Merriam Webster’s Dictionary, Anon defines as “soon” and “presently.” It is defined an abbreviation with anonymous and anonymously. Anon means “pull the horse to restrain him” in Farsi and Arabic. Alternatively, halt someone to proceed. Additionally, Anon is a Persian and Arabic given name. To my thought, Anon(ymous) is a person who has an identity, but his identity is a parenthetical one.

²⁷ Social constructionism is a sociological and communication theory of information that investigates the emergence of collectively built understandings of the world that serve as the foundation for shared beliefs about reality. The thesis is based on the idea that meanings are created in collaboration with others rather than independently within each person (Leeds-Hurwitz 891).

that is at odds with everything with which he identifies. *Anon(ymous)* deals with various themes such as homecoming, identity, exile, American society, American Dream, and alienation. Unlike *Ironbound*, which uses a single setting and small cast to reveal the protagonist's loss of identity and suffering, *Anon(ymous)* expands to include a vast landscape and many encounters to depict the exploitation, precarity, and isolation of exile.

Anon is a modern Odysseus who embarks on a long journey that emphasizes the trials and troubles of nostos in the 21st-century — or, as Anna Bonifazi, a political and philosophical scholar, refers to it, the Greek νόστος, which refers to an epic journey undertaken by a hero (Bonifazi). Iizuka's adaptation of the *Odyssey* to a modern paradigm illustrates the contemporary discourses on exile in response to an era of warring nationalism. Iizuka reimagines the *Odyssey* for the 21st-century by using exile as a condition and metaphor to exemplify refugees' cultural isolation and disappointments in the American Dream in the form of a modern epic hero. This playwright transcends national boundaries and traditional notions of form, genre, and cultural constraints for the benefit of modern character and form.

Iizuka provides a new paradigm for covering a broader swath of refugees' experiences by proposing an increased inclusion of various American perspectives. Anon's numerous problems disrupt his voyage to reach his American Dream. These obstacles are the individuals he encounters, both men and women of varied cultural and racial backgrounds. The marginalized characters in the play share a common experience of alienation. The search for identity and self-determination is another experience these characters share; the hero's journey at the center of the play is one of searching for identity and an idea of the Dream, a common theme in modern drama.

This play reinterprets the classic epic by focusing on a modern hero who is neither great nor heroic and is on the margins of American society. However, this modern hero embarks on a heroic quest for self-development, prompted by the difference between his perception of himself and how others see him. The play elucidates Anon's trip by tracking his representational characteristics, examining his journey toward identification and home, demonstrating how this journey is disrupted and controlled in capitalist, imperialist worlds. As a result of this journey, we have a fully formed modern epic hero at the play's conclusion, who may not look like traditional models, but who has succeeded in giving an alternate, though meaningful, story of a refugee in modern American society.

This chapter examines *Anon(ymous)* as a standalone work—a modern epic—and an adaptation of *Odyssey*—a classic epic. To better appreciate the playwright, I begin by looking at her biography related to her plays. The play then will be examined in terms of modern epic adaptation from the traditional *Odyssey*. Then I will present the play's narrative and characters and conduct a general analysis of each of them. Next, I will study *Anon(ymous)* based on different continents of modern epic drama and their structure. Themes of alienation, isolation, self-identity, anonymously, exile, and homecoming will be discussed as parallel arguments between *Anon(ymous)* and *Odyssey*. Finally, I will discuss how the press has reacted to this play's performance.

Background on Playwright and her Plays

Naomi Iizuka was born on April 22, 1965, to a Latina mother from the United States and a Japanese father. She was born in Tokyo and raised in Japan, Indonesia, the Netherlands, and Washington, D.C. Iizuka graduated from the National Cathedral School in 1987 received her BA in Classical Literature from Yale University in 1987. She spent one year at Yale Law School before earning her MFA in playwriting from the University of California, San Diego, in 1992.²⁸ She has since taught playwriting at the University of Iowa and the University of Texas at Austin.

In addition, she was a professor of dramatic arts and the director of the playwriting program at the University of California, Santa Barbara, until January 2008. She then took over as the director of MFA playwriting at her alma mater, the University of California, San Diego. Naomi is cited as “One of the most commissioned playwrights in contemporary American theatre,” according to the Encyclopedia of Asian-American Literature (Seiwoong 122-123). She is renowned for addressing contemporary social issues in her plays.

Iizuka was an avid literature reader, but she did not find theatre until she started focusing on classic literature at Yale. During Iizuka’s first year at Yale Law School, she decided to take a risk and enroll in the University of Southern California’s playwriting program, where she worked closely with playwright Adele Edling Shank.²⁹ Her playwriting career blossomed, and she has become one of the most prominent playwrights of the contemporary American theatre.

Given Iizuka’s personal history and professional trajectory, it is expected that her plays are so stylistically and thematically diverse. Iizuka’s plays, which straddle realism and

²⁸ <https://www.dia.ucsb.edu/>

²⁹ “Adele Edling Shank (April 9, 1940 – November 27, 2014) was a professor at UC San Diego from 1981 to 2014, up until her passing. She wrote numerous plays which have been produced throughout the United States and in England. Her full-length works include six plays in the California series—Sunrise, Winter play, Stuck: A Freeway Comedy, Sandcastles, The Grass House, and Tumbleweed (<https://theatre.ucsd.edu>).

theatricalism, often use non-linear forms (episodic) while maintaining a strong narrative core. Many of her plays are influenced by her diverse background and exposure to many performance styles, both in terms of subject and aesthetics. Noh³⁰ structure conveys a ghost tale in *The Language of Angels* (2000). Studies of immigration and refugees emerge in *Anon(ymous)* (2006) as well as *Ghostwritten* (2009, 2010). Despite her long-standing fascination with the visual permanence, Iizuka is equally dedicated to investigating elements of human experience that are far more difficult to ascertain, such as her characters' inner lives and memories. Iizuka's attraction to photography is related to her fascination with the transitory quality of memory. The author states:

I think a lot of my plays do deal with memory, the faultiness of memory, the need we feel to hold on to memories, the way in which memories shape a present. (Iizuka, Playwright Naomi Iizuka explores the human experience with an eye for the visual)

Many of Iizuka's plays have a distinct visual component, especially to make memory concrete. Some of her plays have emphasized photography and photographic imagery, Iizuka explains:

There's something very mysterious and moving to me about photographs - this effort to freeze a moment in time, the distance between what's captured in a photograph from the past and the present reality. (Iizuka, Playwright Naomi Iizuka explores the human experience with an eye for the visual)

In addition to photography, tattoos, as a visual act of memorialization, are another kind of visual reference that Iizuka often uses in her plays, as seen in *Tattoo Girl* and *Aloha, Say the Pretty Girls*:

³⁰ Noh is a significant traditional Japanese dance-drama genre that has been performed since the 14th century. It is the oldest influential theatrical art frequently performed today, developed by Kan'ami and his son Zeami (Bowers 10).

In some instances, tattoos are a very literal trace of an event or a person you want to remember, ... But I also think the act of getting a tattoo is in some ways a way of facing up to your own mortality. Their permanence in the face of your own impermanence speaks to me. (Iizuka, Playwright Naomi Iizuka explores the human experience with an eye for the visual)

Iizuka finds tattoos as mysterious as pictures. She sees tattoos as an attempt to record a moment in time, which reminds us of the position of immigrants in a new nation who strive to cling to as little recollection of their previous lives as possible to endure their strange new lives.

Iizuka often uses monologues to pursue these explorations of inner life and memory “I think monologues allow a window into a character’s inner life,” says Iizuka:

It’s as though the everyday splits open and you can see inside or underneath. What’s interesting to me is when what’s going on inside the character is at odds with what they seem to be on the outside or how others see them. (Iizuka, Playwright Naomi Iizuka explores the human experience with an eye for the visual)

For example, we have multiple monologues from Anon and other characters in *Anon(ymous)* in which they reveal their inner feelings, their background, and what they require:

ANON: You dream the face of one person you love. And that person, that person becomes like home. Their eyes. Their skins. Their voices, the sound of their voice. And so, you dream about that person. You dream about home. You dream about going home. (Iizuka, *Anon(ymous)* 65)

In this monologue, Anon clarifies to the audience that the person (his mother) he dreams about is the definition of home or American Dream for him. Monologues, photographs, and other visual

representations serve as devices that Iizuka uses to structure her work out of the minutiae of everyday feelings and experiences.

Another play of Iizuka that attracted attention was *Good Kids*. The Big Ten Theatre Consortium³¹ commissioned Iizuka to write *Good Kids*. The project's goal was to promote female writers and increase the number of female roles on stage. Iizuka explains:

I wanted to write a play that spoke to issues that were very important to university students right now. Having taught at a number of schools as a guest artist, and now teaching at University of California–San Diego, it seems like the issue of sexual assault—and more importantly, the attitudes and misconceptions that create a climate where sexual assault is prevalent—seemed timely. (Iizuka, *Naomi Iizuka's Good Kids Tackles Sexual Assault at Universities*)

The play *Good Kids* is about a high school student raped by a gang of football players after a high school party. Iizuka worked with college students on writing *Good Kids*. She was seeking students' feedback about sexual assault, finding an answer to how schools can prevent and react to this kind of crime. "You don't solve a problem like a sexual assault with anything other than a deep shift in attitude, and a deep shift in attitude happens conversation by conversation, in dorm rooms, parties and rehearsal halls" (Iizuka, *Naomi Iizuka's Good Kids Tackles Sexual Assault at Universities*). She believes conversation between different levels of any social community is a significant shift toward solving the problems.

³¹ The Big Ten Theatre Consortium is composed of the Big Ten Conference's fourteen theatre departments and colleges, including University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Indiana University, University of Iowa, University of Maryland, University of Michigan, Michigan State University, University of Minnesota, and ... (<https://theatre.uiowa.edu/production/big-ten-plays>).

While *Good Kids* is an original work, many of Iizuka's pieces are contemporary adaptations. She freely adapts source material to create new works that resonate with contemporary Americans, particularly younger audiences. Iizuka's *Hamlet: Blood on the Brain* (2006), set in Oakland in the 1980s, centers on a young man who is released from jail to discover his father was murdered and his uncle took control of his mother's house. The drama examines the subject of rage and violence in current times via the history of Oakland, CA, with significant similarities to Shakespeare's *Hamlet*.

Polaroid Stories (1997) by Iizuka is a contemporary retelling of the Greek story of *Eurydice* and *Orpheus* in which Minneapolis Street kids are the primary protagonists of the play rather than mythological gods. In this play (similarly to *Anon(ymous)*), Iizuka fuses ancient Greek literature with contemporary life.³² Drug dealers, prostitutes, and the homeless recount their tales, some of which are true, and some are pure fiction and combine to form a harsh mash-up of the urban environment in which they seek shelter.

Iizuka demonstrates Western culture's orientalism and the exoticization of Eastern art in *36 Views*—a play she wrote in 2002. The title alludes to the painting *Thirty-six Views of Mount Fuji*, a work by Japanese artist Hokusai³³ from the nineteenth century. Some of the 36 scenarios take place in modern-day America, while others occur in Japan hundreds of years ago (Weber). The author reflects on her cultural background and professional career in this play. Here, Iizuka

³² (Iizuka, *Naomi Iizuka's Good Kids Tackles Sexual Assault at Universities*)

³³ "Katsushika Hokusai, (31 October 1760 – 10 May 1849) known simply as Hokusai, was a Japanese artist, ukiyo-e painter and printmaker of the Edo period. Hokusai is best known for the woodblock print series *Thirty-Six Views of Mount Fuji* which includes the internationally iconic print *The Great Wave off Kanagawa*. Hokusai created the monumental *Thirty-Six Views of Mount Fuji* both as a response to a domestic travel boom in Japan and as part of a personal obsession with Mount Fuji. It was this series, specifically *The Great Wave off Kanagawa* and *Fine Wind, Clear Morning*, that secured his fame both in Japan and overseas. While Hokusai's work prior to this series is certainly important, it was not until this series that he gained broad recognition" (Kleiner 11).

creates a universal play using dramatic methods from Kabuki's³⁴ traditional Japanese performing art and themes about the validity of art and culture. In *36 Views*, the author utilizes multicultural techniques to construct a play that focuses on the search for truth and the value of cultural memory. Bruce Weber, *The New York Times*' critic, acclaims, "Among Ms. Iizuka's well-demonstrated ideas is that human wishes persistently obscure the truth. All by ourselves, we make it tougher to know what's what" (Weber). The play *36 Views* is an unexpected discovery of an eleventh-century Japanese pillow book and the battle to create reality in the face of doubts regarding the book's provenance and validity.

Recent scholarly literature on the works of Iizuka is numerous. Among ninety-five academic journals that I could locate are articles from well-known theatre critics and theorists, such as Jonathan Chambers, Danielle Amato, Lisa Jackson, Hank Willenbrink, DJ Hopkins, and Samuel Park. In his article, Chambers seeks to identify and map the author's concerns about oppressive social systems that deny supporting citizens, especially in *Polaroid Stories* "[t]rough silencing, isolation, and alienation" (J. Chambers). Lisa Jackson claims that Iizuka's plays, particularly *Good Kids*, develop through several pedagogical systems such as "pedagogy of care, ... feminist pedagogy, vocal pedagogy..." (Jackson-Schebetta 295). Danielle Amato examines Iizuka's works as a combination of modern and traditional storytelling that characters share a common cultural memory. Amato analyzes the complexity of their visual nature and the difficulties in undertaking productions of several of Iizuka's plays, including *Carthage* and *Polaroid Stories*.

³⁴ Kabuki is a traditional Japanese dance-drama style. Kabuki theatre is recognized for its highly stylized performances, often-glamorous clothes, and intricate Kumadori makeup used by some actors (Japan Encyclopedia | *Kabuki*).

In his article, Hank Willenbrink argues that Iizuka provides a subtle difference to interact with the industrial heritage of developed nations. He mentions that, rather than clouding the past and the future, in *At the Vanishing Point*, “Iizuka dramatizes a community’s beginning and possible and through space, time and interpersonal relationships” (Willenbrink). D.J. Hopkins borrows *Skin*—Iizuka’s 1995 play— as a case study to verify the process by which “a dramaturg develops a counter-text and how it relates to a pre-existing script” (Hopkins). Samuel Park mentions that in her play *Ghostwritten*, Iizuka “dramatizes the emotional costs and consequences of America’s involvement in Vietnam” (Park). Park believes that Iizuka’s play hides its political analysis beneath a cover of self-identification.

Unfortunately, there has been little scholarly attention to *Anon(ymous)*. The play was initially printed in 2007 by Playscript Publications, although most of its performances have occurred in the last five years. Apart from interviews and reviews in newspapers and websites, *Anon(ymous)* is still (literally) anonymous in academic fields.

From 2000 to 2018, Naomi Iizuka’s works have been the subject of eleven M.F.A. and Ph.D. theses and dissertations. Carol A. Fischer, in her Ph.D. dissertation, presented in 2010 at the University of California, explains the relationship between dramatic and scientific circles. She explores “...transdisciplinary between quantum physics and critical dramatic theory and practice” (Fischer 7). Fischer develops a methodology that fits for analysis of contemporary plays, such as Naomi Iizuka’s works, which are out of sync with traditional methods. In the other Ph.D. dissertation, by Sarah Elizabeth Johnson presented in 2018 at the University of Colorado, the Japanese traditional performing arts elements are explored in American plays. Johnson has used Homi Bhabha’s theory of Third Space to claim that some plays of Iizuka and Tennessee Williams represent cultural and traditional resources of countries like Japan (Johnson 15).

Yining Liu, in his doctoral dissertation, presented in 2017 at the Ohio State University, investigates “the aesthetic and ideological function of onstage transformations” as engaged in contemporary plays written by Asian American playwrights (Liu 17). She explores the questions of “... the device of transformation functions to embody ethnic and cultural identities” that connect to gender and sexuality (Liu 17). She believes that identities interfere with discourses of “racialization and identity politics” (Liu 18). Antonio Nakano Glenn is another Ph.D. student who focuses on contemporary mixed-race theatre artists such as Iizuka, who write their narratives. Glenn claims that “Representation of the mixed-race subject has long been used to investigate cultural and social performance” (Glenn 24). This dissertation, presented in 2004 at the University of California Berkeley, addresses some authors’ transgressive theatrical strategies to create a mixed-race play.

Other than Glenn’s dissertation, most research on Naomi Iizuka’s plays investigates the use of structural and aesthetic concepts rather than immigration themes that underlines Iizuka’s works. Similarly, reviews in trade journals mainly focus on her classical narratives through modern language. Critics find Iizuka’s characters and plots beautiful dramaturgy of source material, adapted for contemporary audiences. Iizuka is known chiefly for her dramaturgical plays in journals, and critics admire the “blending of voices and physicality” (Glenn 11) in her stories.

Out of many rewards that she has received, we can mention; 1995 Jerome Fellowship, 1996 McKnight Advancement Grant, 1998 PEN Center USA West Award for Drama, 1998 Princeton University’s Hodder Fellowship, 1999 Whiting Award, 2001 NEA/TCG Artist-in-Residence Grant, 2001 Stavis Award from the National Theatre Conference, 2001 Rockefeller Foundation MAP grant, 2005 Alpert Award in the Arts, 2006 Joyce Award winner, 2007

PEN/Laura Pels International Foundation for Theatre Award winner for a playwright in mid-career, and Globe Foundation Fellowship.³⁵ Iizuka has certainly become a leading writer in the American theatre, and scholarly attention to her development of themes of immigration and exile are impressive.

***Anon(ymous)*'s Plot and Characters**

Because few readers are familiar with the play *Anon(ymous)*, I will provide a quick synopsis before analyzing its modern epic style and its themes such as alienation, isolation, exile, and homecoming. The play centers around a young refugee character, Anon, from a country far away, who traverses the United States in quest of his mother (representing home and the American Dream) from whom he has been long separated. Nemasani—Anon's mother—a grieving mother with little hope, sews her son's shroud³⁶, unraveling at night and stitching again during the day, postponing marriage to the sleazy sweatshop owner.

Anon(ymous)'s characters are from different eras and locations, but their roles in the play's dramatic structure are the same as *Odyssey*. For example, Anon is inspired by Homer's character Odysseus. Nemasani, Anon's mother, is based on Penelope, and her name "derives from 'Mnemosyne,' the goddess of memory and mother of muses" (Iizuka, *Anon(ymous)* 64). Naja is a girl who is also a goddess; she appears as a young woman and glides easily through the world. Naja is based on Homer's Goddess Athena, and her name is "a Sanskrit word referring to the spirit of the earth who protected Buddha during a terrible storm" (Iizuka, *Anon(ymous)* 64).

³⁵ Hammerich, Jenna (2013-12-19). "Writing new roles, righting old wrongs: Big Ten Theatre Consortium establishes New Play Initiative to combat gender inequity in the theater" (Iowa Now. University of Iowa. Retrieved 2018-04-27).

³⁶Several different religions and civilizations have employed shrouds as part of their funeral ceremonies. After preparing the body for burial, they use a shroud to cover it. It is common practice to bury the covered body without a coffin.

Mr. Yuri Mackus runs a sewing factory. He employs female refugees and immigrants. Contrary to his workers' beliefs, he claims that his factory is the first stop on the road to the American Dream. He is violent and abusive, with no regard for others. His character is based on the suitors of Penelope in Homer's *Odyssey*.

Nasreen is the daughter of Ali and Ritu, Indian refugees. She works at her parent's restaurant and has a bold, curious, yet kind demeanor. She is friendly to Anon, and her character is based on Nausicaa, Princess of Phaeacia. Pascal is a West African refugee who traveled to the United States in search of safety after his family was killed in his country. He assists Anon and serves as a friend and mentor. His character is based on Odysseus's loyal soldiers. Other sub-characters include Ali and Ritu (Arete and Alcinous, King and Queen of Phaeacia), Senator Laius and Helen (Menelaus, King of Sparta, and Helen of Troy), and Calista (Calypso).

The play begins with singing of the Chorus of Refugees, sharing their story, but Anon cannot seem to remember his. In next episode, Senator Laius and his wife Helen are taken on a tour of Mr. Mackus' factory. Nemasani, one of Mr. Mackus' employees, shares a portion of her story with Helen Laius, and then the scene switches to Anon, who is on an American beach with a young lady named Calista. Anon wishes he could sail away from this place, but Calista tries to convince him to stay. Calista and Anon fight until Naja arrives and invites him into the water, leaving Calista. Naja advises Anon to concentrate on survival as rising waters separate them.

The play covers a vast expanse of space as Anon seeks to find his mother. The scenes often alternate between Anon's voyage and adventures and his mother's life in the factory. Just as the play expands to cover a cosmic territory to capture Anon's journey, the play leaps forward and backward in time to take the present and Anon's fragmented memory and visions.

In one episode, Anon returns to the past, where he recalls the details and turmoil of what he had forgotten, including the storm and his mother. Then he backs to the present where he makes a new friend, Pascal, who tries to help him and the two boys begin working for Mr. Zyclo, but Mr. Zyclo kills Pascal, and Anon flees. Violence and hardship propel Anon's journey. Next, he gets a ride with Strygal, a truck driver who turns out to be carrying refugees in the back of his vehicle. While fighting Strygal, Anon transforms the Chorus of Refugees into ghosts, as if in a dream.

Then we have a flash-forward to the Indian restaurant. Anon concludes his story, and Ritu remembers a sweatshop where she used to work and believes Anon's mother may be there. Anon finds the factory at the end, fights with Mr. Mackus "like old warriors in the factory." Anon triumphs by burying Mr. Mackus in a mountain of clothes. The play ends with Nemasani and Anon eating takeout on the factory's roof as Anon tells his mother the long story of his journey.

***Anon(ymous)* as a Modern Epic**

Odyssey—an epic poem composed in twenty-four books attributed to the Greek poet Homer— is the story of Odysseus, King of Ithaca, traveling ten years after his shipwreck, trying to get home after the Trojan War. *Anon(ymous)*— written in twenty-four Acts— is Anon's story, a young refugee traveling ten years, through the United States, after his shipwreck, trying to find his mother, after scaping his country destroyed by war. On his return, Odysseus, with his son's assistance, Telemachus, defeats the indignant suitors of his faithful queen, Penelope, and many of her maidens who had a relationship with the suitors. Anon also finds his mother, Nemasani, with a friendly immigrant family's assistance and destroys her mother's abuser/suitor.

In these two texts, Homer and Iizuka take the audience on a long journey that marks the passage of time. During this time, the characters (Anon and Odysseus) encounter different people and communities. They must use their wit to deal with each situation and to further their quest to return to their home—the Dream. Each of the obstacles and people these characters encounter also reflects an aspect of society. Anon is a modern Odysseus who embarks on extended adventures that highlight issues of nostos (homecoming) in the 21st-century; Iizuka created a modern *Odyssey* to construct languages of exile, confronting a period of warring nationalism that spawned wars in our time—in line with themes commonly present in modern and immigrant drama. Iizuka contributes to the process of adapting *Odyssey* for the 21st-century by utilizing exile as a condition and metaphor to confront and transform refugees' cultural, mental, and physical isolation.

By this adaptation, Iizuka's work extends across national borders while also reaching beyond form, genre, tradition, and language restrictions. Iizuka takes some of the modern epic genre's characteristics and creates a suitable atmosphere that questions the modern world's feasibility of standard forms and values. Here I will review some of the epic components related to *Anon(ymous)*.

What is the modern epic genre? The characterization of the classic epic was defined by lengthy narrative poems or prose works with a set of standard features, such as grand style, massive action, a hero, an exposition, a muse invocation, and so on. While this notion of epic remains today, and the genre is still at the core of western literary heritage, the public understanding of the term has grown far more ambiguous.

The epic genre is not outdated; however, it is alive and well in various modern forms. The epic genre survives in modern literature without attachment to established cultural

contexts.³⁷ As Masaki Mori in his book *Epic Grandeur* explains, more ambitiously, the modern epic (especially in modernist literature between 1900 and 1930) illustrates everyday concepts of human existence and history, this would include an effort to look at the parts of the label “epic” as a whole and not just as a group of writings that share a strict literary genealogy or kinship. The concept of modernizing epics, applying it to current events rather than a Hesiodic Golden Age³⁸ or a Homeric Bronze Age³⁹, harkens back to the battle between the classicists and modernists (Mori 97).

The epic genre has a unique function among literary works that tells a group a grand story about themselves, a story that is crucial to the group’s identity. Writers utilize an epic piece of work for “choric voice” or collective point of newness as Paul Merchant describes it in his book *The Epic* (Merchant 6). Merchant further states that the epic has always been “a chronicle, a hook of the tribe, a vital record of custom and tradition, and at the same time a story-book for general entertainment” (Merchant 6). In line with Merchant, E. M. W. Tillyard concludes that a defining feature of epic literature is a communal or choric quality. The epic writer must describe the sentiments of a broad group of people who live in or around his period (Tillyard 15). Typically, the narrative is based on a historical episode in the community’s collective memory. Still, even an entirely fictitious work—one that is about a culture’s recorded history—can sustain the chronicled tradition by upholding that culture’s set of values. Despite their historical setting,

³⁷ The transition from a broad usage of the word epic to an adjectival phrase that characterizes current events seems to have begun around the turn of the 20th-century. According to a Google NGram (<https://books.google.com>), concepts like “epic battle,” “epic struggle,” “epic journey,” “epic novel,” and —for obvious reasons “epic theatre” and “epic film” entered English vocabulary between 1900 and 1950.

³⁸ The phrase Golden Age originates in Greek mythology, namely Hesiod’s *Works and Days*, and refers to the temporal fall of peoples through five Ages, the first of which was Gold, during which the Golden Race of humanity lived. (<https://www.britannica.com>).

³⁹ The Bronze Age lasted for 2,000 years, from 1200 to 1100 BC. Mycenae’s palace empire dominated the late Bronze Age. This civilization, the most evolved of the early Greek cultures, was centered on a monarch who was supported by a network of lower-level nobles. (<https://www.britannica.com/art>).

the audience derives conceptual pleasure from such epics; they may speak to them metaphorically or explicitly.

The modern epic drama borrows some aspects from historical drama, but it also manipulates and rearranges historical facts to suit its own purposes. The modern epic is not based on the facts of a historical person's life or the documentation of a historical event. Still, it does employ historical figures and facts as touchstones for its audience. Kermit Hunter, the author of many outdoor epic dramas, once said, "I am not writing history," saying instead that his goal is "enriching the story beyond actual history" (Hayes 87-88). An epic dramatist could utilize gods or other supernatural beings, lyrical language, or other aspects to stretch the drama beyond the scope of a history lesson for this purpose.

The community feature of an epic is crucial in understanding why epic poems were written and how they were accepted in their own time. A poem that is not based on the historical events of a certain race or country lacks much of the original purpose of the epic.

When the audience recognizes the narrative as their own, the epic fulfills its customary function. Even with that collective aim in mind, an epic is recognizable to people outside the group. An epic may be a declaration of identity aimed at the group inside the epic and those outside looking in. For instance, aside from the fact that they were orally delivered stories, the early Homeric epics had several characteristics that made it familiar for outsiders and insiders. As Kermit Hunter mentioned, they were about characters whose personal traits were "exemplary" in their society, civilization, or country: heroes such as Achilles or Odysseus. They took place in locations that were "universal in some way: either the story takes place across a wide variety of places and periods, includes a lot of travel, or uses a specific location" (Hayes

88), such as the Walls of Troy, to explore concepts and themes that span the breadth of human experience or Odysseus' ten-year journey over the Mediterranean Sea.

These early epics also included references to deities or the supernatural, such as Athena, Zeus, Ares, and others which were familiar at the time. Finally, epics were frequently employed or read as fundamental cultural texts. The *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, which were long poems about heroes undertaking heroic actions and being assisted or impeded by the gods, eventually came to “symbolize” (Bude) something about humanity: they were ideals people desired to live for their dreams.

As we analyze how individual plays function as epics, we might speculate on what choices a writer like Naomi Iizuka would make to construct an epic work in our day. Given the definition of epic that we have identified, what can we anticipate *Anon(ymous)* to contain?

McCalmon and Moe's *Creating Historical Drama* (George McCalmon) is one effort to guide the epic writer through the process of modern epic creation. Aside from providing an overview of several American historical dramas, the book also serves as a practical guide on creating and performing plays with the specific civic aim of re-enacting a community's history. The writers' perspective on epic drama stands in stark contrast to the patterns of modern epic drama. The concentration on a person or event, according to McCalmon and Moe, is a primary aspect of the mode:

For the most part, epic-dramas deal importantly if not principally with heroes . . . , or with national struggles epitomized by a regional community like that of the Cherokee Indian; and it is the loftiness of theme or character that justifies the use of “epic” to describe them. (George McCalmon 7)

Suppose the characters are fictional or represent a community, such as Anon, representing refugees from Middle Eastern countries. In that case, the author places them in wholly fictitious scenarios, with the background of history well upstage.

Anon(ymous) is not based on a specific historical occurrence, but the central theme of warfare, abandoning one's nation, and becoming nobody is its enduring tale of history. By respecting the ideals of other civilizations, the play's audience experiences a conceptual pleasure since the play is communicating to them figuratively.

Given the United States' social standing in the years following 9/11 and other war-torn countries, one might surmise that the character originated in one of the countries hardest hit at the time—countries such as Afghanistan, Libya, Egypt, Yemen, or Syria. However, the author makes no reference in this play to a particular nationality, historical event, or even a well-known hero. What is critical is that Iizuka does not provide a distinct sense of national identity for this war refugee. Anon is from a country that “smells of orchid and mango and ripe papaya” (Iizuka, *Anon(ymous)* 64), smells like Anon's mother's fried bread, and it smells like home. Anon's country, wherever it is, it is his “home.”

McCalmon and Moe noted that for epic drama, the subject restricts “the deeds and personages the community—whether it be national, regional, or local— considers worthy of celebration” (George McCalmon 281). In the traditional epic like the *Odyssey*, the audience would expect to see an already-celebrated character at the heart of the plot, but in a modern epic such as *Anon(ymous)*, the focus is on an average individual (i.e., Anon, who is an ordinary refugee). Modern heroes of the modern epic are often celebrated towards the end of the play, and the audience acknowledges their suffering as symbolic of the hardship that all members of the

community experience. Some epic playwrights, such as Bertolt Brecht⁴⁰, Luigi Pirandello⁴¹, or Paul Claudel⁴² have been cautious about providing recognized historical backgrounds for their works, and classic storylines or well-known heroes appear irrelevant for their epic genre.

War is a common background for a classical epic. On the other hand, Masaki Mori observes that war is not necessary for all epic drama. She claims that the relevance of the warfare epic has lessened in the modern epic:

As to the question of crisis, the epic indeed requires a certain critical situation around which the plot evolves toward a final resolution. Evidently, besides the destruction of war, there are many serious, nonmartial threats to humanity, in physical reality as well as on cultural, spiritual or philosophical levels. (Mori 11)

Anon(ymous) not only has utilized the backdrop of a war but there is also physical violence (A butcher murdered Anon's friend), racism (The way the Happy American Family sees Anon), and spiritual challenges (Anon's relationship with his mother and Naja the angel).

Other than subjects like war, humanity, violence, and spiritual challenges, epic literature often depicts both the supernatural and the physical worlds. Louise Cowan claims that "epic's sense of motion, its linking of human action to a divine destiny, toward which it senses history moves" (Louise 11). The spirit, angels, and ghosts seen in *Anon(ymous)* have a purpose other than recalling prior epics or eliciting a sensation of strangeness, because they demonstrate that

⁴⁰ Bertolt Brecht is best known for his plays and poems, in which he embraced anti-bourgeois themes and being forced from his native Germany. He departed from the conventions of theatrical illusion and developed drama as a social and ideological forum (Epic Theatre).

⁴¹ Luigi Pirandello was an Italian dramatist, novelist, poet and short story writer. He was awarded the 1934 Nobel Prize in Literature for his "bold and brilliant renovation of the drama and the stage" (Epic Theatre).

⁴² Paul Claudel was a French poet, dramatist and diplomat who lived through both world wars and died 1955. He was influenced heavily by poetry and symbolism and like many influential people in epic theatre; he found modern materialistic societal values abhorrent (Epic Theatre).

there are powers concerned about the destiny of a specific group, such as refugees in American society.

These elements contribute to the fundamentally group-unifying objective of epic literature, which is to bring people together. Cowan also points to the expansion of the divine realm and the epic's scale: "[a] primary feature of the epic cosmos is its penetration of the veil separating material and immaterial existence, allowing an intimate relation between gods and men and a resultant metaphysical extension of space" (Cowan 11). The supernatural extension frequently happens at the end of a play, when the playwright seeks to emphasize the cosmic significance of all that has unfolded. *Anon(ymous)*'s ending, in which all aspects, includes metaphysical, imaginative, ironic, and physical, work together to underscore the cosmic importance of everything that has transpired during Anon's voyage:

Naja (the angel) appears. She throws a sword to Anon...

Anon and Mr. Yuri Mackus battle like ancient warriors. An aerial, acrobatic battle. They twist and tumble and kick. They use pieces of the sewing factory—spindles and scissors and bolts of cloth and spools of colored thread. The sound of slashing. A tangle of thread. Anon cuts a single thread with his sword. A ton of clothes rains down from the ceiling. Mr. Yuri Mackus is buried in an avalanche of clothes. Naja pushes open and exit door. A wind blows in from the outdoor. The sound of voices carried on the wind, echoes. The Chorus of Refugees echoes their opening ode... (Iizuka, *Anon(ymous)* 76)

Towards the end of the play, Anon's journey is celebrated, and the audience recognizes that his suffering is symbol of the difficulties that all members of the community (represented by the Chorus of Refugees) are forced to endure.

Although the subject is the primary characteristic of an epic, its definition involves a form, as is common in every literary genre. Aristotle, first explained the epic form, describing it as having a “multiplicity of narrative threads” (Aristotle 61) and classifying it as such. According to Aristotle, the primary structural characteristic of an epic is that it uses episodes beyond the storyline, typically situations taking place simultaneously in various locations. He believes that epic has an advantage over tragedy in that it may show several events concurrently. A structure of this type contributes to the production of a “grandeur of effect, [...] diverting the mind of the hearer, and relieving the story with varying episodes” (Aristotle XXIV). Aristotle defines the term “episode” in three different ways. Typically, it refers to the portion of a tragedy that occurs between two choral sections, and it also refers to “incident” and, less frequently, “digressive material” in the context of the related topic (Hardison 174). The term “episodic” used by Aristotle to describe work is sometimes descriptive and sometimes critical. He has little positive about dramas that emphasize episodes over a coherent storyline since he perceives extensive digressions as disadvantageous to tragedy’s unity. However, Homer maintained a strong storyline while employing episodes to offer the diversity of his work. Being episodic is a characteristic of classic epic that has persisted in modern epic to the present day. Due to the episodic nature of *Anon(ymous)*, each episode diverts time away from the central action.

A classic epic’s episodic structure has a long duration. It would be impossible to maintain a single continuous narrative thread across a poem that spans twenty-four books, as the *Odyssey* does. As with Iizuka, a modern epic dramatist must figure out how to present a long, complicated story within the limits of the stage. Iizuka has divided the story into episodes related to the storyline to address this issue. We witness two parallel stories: one about Anon seeking his mother and another about Nemasani working in the factory, coping with harassment while

mourning her son's death and making his shroud. Iizuka uses various tools to connect the episodes, including the Chorus of Refugees, which tells the tale of the past and future. The repetition of characters between episodes is analogous to the cinematic montage match cut technique.

Cutting from one scene to the next is a basic cinematic technique, but in using a match cut, the images and sounds contain a subtext; "The same goes for the transitions, and each of them is a chance to make relations, reinforce the theme, raise the tempo, and more" (Prunes, Raine and Litch 36). Transitions, such as graphic matching, blending motion, and sound, are ideal approaches to achieve these advantages. Iizuka uses sounds to move from one episode to the other:

... The sound of war grows. It gets so loud. It sounds like the end of the world. The whistling sound of bomb falling from the sky. The whistling grows louder, closer. Naja emerges from the darkness. She pulls Anon out of the path of the bomb. They leap into a vast, uncharted darkness. An explosion. Blinding white light. The sound of war transforms into the sound of sewing machines. (Iizuka, *Anon(ymous)* 65)

Iizuka finds an aesthetic way of moving from one location to another and symbolizes different resonances echoing the same condition. The sound of war transforms into the sound of sewing machines which for Nemasani are highly associated in her mind. If she had experienced war, insecurity, and oppression in her country, she would have suffered the same insecurity and confusion here in a sewing factory with a manager harassing her. By employing these methods, Iizuka overcomes the complexity and incoherence of a long-time journey. This method is derived from the epic's capacity to show a great deal, not only Anon's feelings but also those of the entire community of refugees; not just the present struggle but also the conflicts that preceded it.

As an additional point on episode and epic can be seen in Bertolt Brecht's theatre. Brecht considered the episodic form as an alternative to bourgeois drama's hypnotic nature, in which viewers may lose knowledge of themselves by becoming immersed in a linear storyline. Bertolt Brecht described epic as "one could take a pair of scissors and cut it into individual pieces, which remain fully capable of life" (Brecht 70). Brecht's transition to the pedagogical theatre is predicated on proper respect for the separate and dynamic elements of epic. Brecht believes that an equal weighting of episodes is critical; the dramatic end of a Brechtian play should urge the audience to engage with the world.

Although the epic drama covered in this research differs from "*episches Theatre*," Brecht's opposition to previous plays' single-thread narrative has led many modern playwrights to write in an episodic form. However, the same episodic nature is ultimately obtained from the classic epic poetry approach.

Historically, epic has been an unsuitable vehicle for tragedy, since an epic hero is fundamentally different from a tragic hero, as Dean A. Miller points out:

The tragic protagonist agonizes over acts and choices, is torn between alternatives, recognizes the potent workings of a pollution-creating act, of the fact and pain of tearing guilt, and of the grimmer purposes of the ultimately unknowable gods. All this is utterly foreign on the epic hero (Miller 7)

The epic is often centered on the hero as an outward manifestation of a culture's beliefs. Mori asserts that a hero cannot be a "figure who is bound to a specific moment without a clear vision of past and future, or who roams within a small circle no farther than his native town or village" (Mori 50). Hero's dedication and sacrifice are essential in resolving a social dilemma.

This is where we witness the most significant difference between a traditional and modern epic: the hero's image. Modern epic is part of a broader cultural tendency that emphasizes an ordinary person, a development defined by the advent of new history. While a modern hero like Anon does more than lead refugees to victory, he still needs some of the characteristics of Odysseus if he is to be associated with the epic heritage of Greek mythology. Because of this, Anon is consumed by a single purpose—his homecoming—which comes at a cost to the richness of character that we have come to anticipate in modern drama. As Mori has observed, epic has demonstrated an increasing capacity throughout history to make the community itself the prominent figure (although for McCalmon and Moe, this is a sign of “pageant-drama” (S. J. Christian H. Moe 7). It would follow from this trend that Anon's heroic deeds need not all be his work, and *Anon(ymous)* need not have a single individual as the story's unifying figure. Based on this theory, every character in *Anon(ymous)* contributes to the story's depiction of a refugee situation in the US, from the Chorus of Refugees to Nemasani and Naja, as well as Mr. Yuri and Helen, who serve as antagonistic characters.

Anon(ymous)'s characters are not based on a single, well-defined persona; instead, the play approaches the characters due to narrative flow; a character not based on psychological aspects but as an example of others like themselves. Each of these characters represents a group of society. The author does not intend to go into the details of their psychology and personality; she creates an example of a human being in a specific situation that resolves to the character's alienation and isolation.

Numerous warlike heroic characteristics are ingrained in Western culture through Greek mythology's heroes. Hercules, Prometheus, Achilles, Perseus, and Hector, to name a few, all have a fatal fault or hamartia in common with other classical heroes, and they are all immortal.

However, because immortality cannot define a modern hero, a playwright like Iizuka must look to mortal heroes like Odysseus. Odysseus is an ideal archetype of the epic hero because he is mortal and a war hero, who has concerns about social issues. This concept of the societal hero also serves as an outline for future civilizations' heroes, both real and imaginary. Odysseus is a hero we can identify with since he is a mortal human like us.

Audiences identify the hero based on what the hero represents, what the hero performs, and what personal weaknesses and external barriers the hero must overcome to achieve his goals. Addressing an inherent weakness is the most complex challenge for the hero to overcome. However, one facet of the hero that is often overlooked or inadequately addressed is the notion that in order to achieve his objectives and overcome his flaw, he must do it in isolation.

Iizuka depicts this isolation by placing her character in the shoes of a young refugee who has fled his homeland and lost everything and everyone. His flaws are not born with him. Instead, they are forced on him by the injustice of the world's laws. He is enraged by this world. He opens his eyes to a new place about which he knows very little. He does not look like an American, he does not sound like one, and he knows nothing about their culture.

With all these flaws of circumstance, Anon still shows nobility; he is bold, sacrificing his life for his aim, fighting with antagonists, and saving the good ones. Anon undergoes ten years of suffering at the hands of many dangerous people before returning home, and he shows tremendous physical and mental ability to bear such agony. However, behind it all, Anon is a lonely hero until the end of his adventure when he must confront his loneliness if he wants to return home.

Even though ancient and modern characters encounter very different challenges, we may discern commonalities in their journeys. But, in the end, each character's isolation is the same.

While Odysseus is forced to go alone on the sea and become a prisoner, we should notice that Anon demonstrates a similar sense of isolation by exploring the new country in confronting different strangers and feeling like a prisoner in this new world.

Iizuka embarks on a decade-long Homeric journey to depict a critical ten years in the life of a simple young refugee growing into a young man. She tends to show that the concept of an isolated hero is not limited to demigods or ancient heroes, but that a simple young refugee who is searching for his home—somewhere that he can feel safe again—can be a hero of our time. *Anon(ymous)* is not merely a retelling of the events and episodes of the *Odyssey*; it is a study of the family and societal ties of the hero and the ways these interactions both define Anon and represent the traits of his society.

Immigrants must make decisions in the face of threat and dynamic uncertainty. Immigrants like Anon are often at the hands of criminal gangs and police, who constantly manipulate the rules like the old Greek gods. In Act 13, Anon and his new friend Pascal are hiding in a tunnel underground:

PASCAL: They won't come after us here.

ANON: Who were they?

PASCAL: Police. INS. Rent-a-cop. Who knows?

ANON: Where are we?

PASCAL: Tunnel.

ANON: What's that sound?

PASCAL: Rats, Giant rats. Five foot long, nose to tail. They live down here. They eat human flesh. They got a taste for it. They hunt for humans in the night. They go in packs.

And if they find you alone and sleeping, they attack. They rip you to shreds. They tear out your insides. They rip out your still-beating heart. (Iizuka, Anon(ymous) 70)

There are giant rats everywhere to rip out lonely strangers. Strangers like Anon must react with adaptable ways and persistent determination to make their way. To live, they must overcome adversity and depend on the same set of abilities that Odysseus possessed: “flair, wisdom, the subtlety of mind, deception, resourcefulness, vigilance, opportunism, various skills and experience acquired over the years” (Segal 3). Moreover, traveling itself affects individuals, and the constant presence of travelers affects society. Sarah Mahler (Mahler 75-81) noted the often-painful shift that the travel requires in her research of migrant disillusionment in receiving communities on Long Island:

The individual who emerges from a tunnel or trailer or trunk of a car and steps onto U.S. soil is not the person who left Peru or El Salvador or Colombia. Her identity has become the near antithesis of the woman left behind. She has gone from citizen to foreigner, law abider to law breaker, legal to illegal, independent to dependent, social member to social outcast; and her personhood is degraded. Fragments of her previous self-remain, but they lie scattered like shards of broken glass. The trip strips her naked, and from her nakedness she is expected to clothe herself in the American Dream.... (Mahler 75)

Undocumented immigrants’ trip to the United States is a cultural change and a physical one. Immigrants sell their properties to fund the journey and distance themselves from their families and relationships. They are subjected to abuses that disgrace them, and as a result, these immigrants must relinquish much of their previous identities to adopt new ones. Mahler depicts the most severe aspects of undocumented migration, but even less spectacular and traumatic trips

can dramatically reconfigure identity. Each voyage around the world parallels an inner journey; as the old saying goes, we travel to know ourselves.

Heroes embark on journeys into the unknown to discover and test their inner strength. This realization process transforms Anon's self-awareness, generating new needs, altering his tastes, and widening his imagination. This dual process of internal and exterior discovery changes him. As Anon travels through various lands in America, his sense of self gets more confusing, leading him toward deeper and deeper isolation. As his friend tells him everybody has a scar:

PASCAL: Where I come from, they cut your face when you turn thirteen. Like a warrior. You got any scars?

ANON: No.

PASCAL: Everybody got scars. Maybe yours you just can't see.

As Mahler notes, isolation also becomes more intense when individuals come face to face with violence. Just as new experiences and travel may alter one's personality, closeness to violence does as well. Violence reconstitutes identities, motivations, social positions, and social norms; in the words of Michael Taussig, violence creates a "space of death" that:

... is preeminently a space of transformation: through the experience of death, life; through fear, loss of self and conformity to a new reality; or through evil, good. Lost in the dark woods, then journeying through the underworld with his guide, Dante achieves paradise only after he has mounted Satan's back. (Taussig 468)

As Anon travels a challenging route, he encounters people and forms unexpected friendships. When faced with violence, however, friends may become strangers to him; the boundaries between friend, enemy, and stranger alter.

As Anon travels around the United States and encounters violence, he discovers more about himself, his ambitions, anxieties, and aspirations. In this sense, the process of mobile knowledge turns the trip into a pilgrimage; it becomes an adventure in which identity is reformulated along the way. Anon conceals his identity, transforms the social roles accessible to him, and seeks new routes using his creativity and improvisation. He changes his name to Koo Ri, Monkey, Nobody, and Lan when he feels it is necessary to be anyone else except himself. He uses performance expectations to his advantage. As a result, he creates a new world in his wake, a world of isolation.

MR. YURI MACKUS: Is someone talking? I think it must be a little fly is buzzing around my head. Oh it's not a fly. It's you. And who are you again? I'll tell you who you are. You're nobody. You're a tiny cockroach I squash with my hand. You're a piece of lint I flick off my jacket. You're chewing gum on the bottom of my shoe. You're faceless and nameless. You're a dime a dozen, people like you.

Mr. Yuri draws a sword. ... Naja appears. She throws a sword to Anon. Anon and Mr. Yuri battle like ancient warriors.

MR. YURI MACKUS: Oh please don't kill me, don't kill me, ..., what was your name, stranger? Friend? I don't think I caught it.

Anon: Call me Anonymous. (Iizuka, Anon(ymous) 74)

The people and strangers who Anon meets on the way to this violent terrain constantly change their appearances. Learning about this dynamic path is an essential part of his journey, as Frank. H. Knight notes, in unknown circumstances, "knowledge is more a matter of learning than the exercise of absolute judgment. Learning requires time, and in time the situation dealt with, as well as the learner, undergoes change" (Knight 154). After years of searching, Anon acquires

metamorphic abilities when confronted with violence, much like Greek epics' deceptive and crafty gods. This dual capacity for change and adaptation to others' transformations is the area of metis-like knowledge (U. A. Segal 21). Finally, this constant learning process blurs the distinctions between foreigners and residents, migrants, and settlers, altering the route's social terrain in ways that complicate transnational flow regulation⁴³. After such a lengthy journey, migrants, such as Anon, still do not feel at home in their host nation, and they show acute emotions of social isolation and dislocation with a new and mixed identity.

ANON: You have a son.

NEMASANI: My son died. He died a long time ago. He was just a little boy and he died.

ANON: What if he didn't? ... Please listen to me.... What do you remember? Because what I remember, what I remember is you. How you used to hold me. You held me and you sang to me. I remember the song you sang to me.

NEMASANI: How can I know you are who you say you are?

ANON: I'll tell you the story of my life and then you can decide. (Iizuka, Anon(ymous)

77)

Anon's heroic purpose centers on his sense of anonymity, his feeling that others around him do not know him or, worse, refuse to know him as he is. As a result, Anon's heroic quest involves the search for self-identity. This identification is a necessary precursor to developing a sense of

⁴³ "...Metis imitates those elusive beings which baffle men with their constant transformations and thus escape from their planned hold over them and slip through their fingers. The many-colored, shimmering nature of metis is a mark of its kinship with the divided, shifting world of multiplicity in the midst of which it operates. It is this way of conniving with reality which ensures its efficacy. Its suppleness and malleability give it the victory in domains where there are no ready-made rules for success, no established methods, but where each new trial demands the invention of new ploys, the discovery of a way out that is hidden. Conversely, the ambiguous, disparate, unstable realities with which men attempt to come to grips may, in myth, take on the appearance of polymorphic monsters, powers of metamorphosis which delight, in their cunning, to disappoint all expectations and constantly to baffle the minds of men" (Segal 21).

personality. To become a hero, which implies that his story is typical of all immigrant experiences, he must first know himself before knowing his new country.

Identity shall define for the sake of this dissertation as self-constructed knowledge about oneself, the “I,” and how that identity communicates to others. However, identity has a secondary level—how others see one. This affiliation might complement one’s self-perception or, as is often the case with the play’s hero, it is conflicting. Additionally, since Anon intends to symbolize the broader communities through his journey, his search for self-identity may be seen as a universal experience.

As a norm of epic, identification establishes the hero’s significance. The hero’s family name or tribal name is strongly intertwined with his predecessors, many of whom were also national heroes. Two of the most eloquent examples come from Homer: the *Odyssey* and the *Iliad* concentrate on heroic figures whose names and identities are nearly as essential as their heroic deeds. Iizuka subverts this epic tradition by creating an anonymous epic hero. Therefore, Anon’s weight lies not in his name and ancestors but in their absence, which aids in the creation of comparisons between him and other characters in the play.

Anon’s identity is multifaceted, and the play’s tension stems from the conflict between how Anon views himself and how others see him. For example, the rich American girl, who wants to keep Anon just because she sees her different from others:

CALISTA: ... And I thought you were so handsome and exotic and not like any of the

boys from around here. (Iizuka, Anon(ymous): An Adaptation of The Odyssey 66)

Although not all immigrants or white Americans see Anon in the same way, some views advocated by members of each race align with the other members of that race. Thus, the racial

conflict between native-born Americans and immigrants influences Anon via his contacts with different ethnicities.

PASCAL: You know, you kinda look like monkey.

ANON: I don't look like a monkey.

PASCAL: Monkeys are good luck. Relax, monkey. (Iizuka, *Anon(ymous)* 72)

White Americans are the only ones who work against him. They objectify him, striving to mold him into the person they want. However, strangely, neither side—nor native Americans or immigrants—appropriately recognizes him since neither side considers him as anything other than an outsider. Whether the objectification is negative, as Calista (a rich girl) does, or positive, Serza (a bartender) does, he is still anonymous who sets expectations or preconceptions.

However, instead of being limited by society's expectations, Anon grows in resistance to them, and his acceptance of his anonymity must be seen as an opportunity in his growth. He has peeled back the layers of identity to see how fragile it is:

CHORUS OF REFUGEES: I disappeared. I became invisible. I ran away. I escaped. I shed my skin. I changed my name. I became Anonymous. My name is Anonymous...
(Iizuka, *Anon(ymous)* 75)

Anon's ultimate heroism is that he provides a third option—he does not have to be what he wants or what others desire; he may be a hybrid of what others believe about him and what he knows about himself.

While Anon is trying to figure out who he is and how to identify himself, others try to project identities onto him depending on how they believe him or what they want him to become. Finally, none of these designations apply since, by the end of the play, he is comparable in anonymity to the first episode, which occurred at least ten years ago:

Act 5:

CALISTA: I saved your life and you're so ungrateful! You won't even tell me your real name!

Anon: I told you my real name.

CALISTA: Your real name is not Nobody...

Act 24:

MR. YURI MACKUS: Oh, please don't kill me, don't kill me, please don't kill me—
what was your name, stranger? Friend? I don't think I caught it.

ANON: Call me Anonymous. (Iizuka, *Anon(ymous)* 66 & 76)

The distinction between the characters is based on Anon's perspective regarding identity.

Whereas in the first episodes, he is consumed by his need to be recognized by others, by the end of the play, he has realized the value of not being known. He must give up his need to be recognized by his actual name by others in order to be successful, which we might describe as being free of forced identities.

Anon discovers that identity is never a stable aspect of oneself. Using the alias 'Nobody', he finds that genuine identity is derived from a type of performance and that a human may become anybody merely by adopting the characteristics of that identity.

As with Judith Butler's *Exploration Of Regulative Discourses In Negotiating Gender* displays, similar cultural factors also exert influence over racial behavior: "To what extent is 'identity' a normative ideal rather than a descriptive feature of experience? And how do the regulatory practices...also govern culturally intelligible notions of identity?" (Butler 16). The greater importance of this insight is that Anon had been precisely involved in this sort of

connection with American culture; he had played his way into and out of identification throughout the play.

The issue for Anon is not so much that people have assigned him labels but that he enthusiastically adopts them, acting them for his benefit and approbation. As the play begins, the second page reveals Anon's primary mission and his identity crisis:

... The Chorus of Refugees disperses in all different directions. Naja remains. The sound of war grows closer.

NAJA: Do you remember?

ANON: No—

NAJA: All those memories—

ANON: I don't remember—

NAJA: Can you hear them—

ANON: No—

NAJA: You can't hear them, all those memories inside of you? You've locked them inside for so long and now they're pounding against your rib cage, against the walls of your heart. ... (Iizuka, *Anon(ymous)* 65)

Anon has no idea who he is because he has no memory, but he is still himself somewhere inside, and he needs to find a way to reveal his identity. He cannot identify himself because he becomes consumed by the task of finding fulfillment in this new country. Until now, he has delegated authority to those—“Nice American Family”—members rather than to himself, believing that they are superior to him because they are Americans and wealthy. This delay in a movement toward finding his identity is troublesome for the protagonist, who devotes his narrative resources to self-fulfillment and progress.

Before the hero can become a symbol for the world, he must first identify his position in it. However, the issue is Anon's stalled path toward self-identification. Whether this movement is individualistic or derives from a community yearning for a non-stereotypical identity remains unknown. It can only be understood via a detailed analysis of Anon's acts and character. His identity links to the opposed values of autonomy and American cultural importance.

Because of Anon's racial identification, this question of identity becomes even more problematic. Anon is a product of double consciousness. First, he lives with the knowledge of what others (primarily white Americans) expect of him and how he must act to meet those expectations while also having a subjective understanding of self. He sees himself through his own eyes and through the eyes of those who perceive him as a racialized body. This dual knowledge echoes in the first conversation of Anon and Calista (the rich American girl):

ANON: I gotta go. I'm going to lose my mind if I have to stay here one more day.

CALISTA: Where would you go?

ANON: Home.

CALISTA: But this is your home.

ANON: My real home.

CALISTA: Your "real home"? That's crazy. Your "real home" is a dirty little third-world shack with no running water. It's raw sewage in the streets and malaria and cholera and all kinds of disgusting parasites I don't even want to think about. ... (Iizuka,

Anon(ymous) 66)

Anon is now aware of how the average American perceives his race and how he must behave to be accepted by this majority while simultaneously being conscious of his own personality and desires for freedom and self-hood. While the fundamental concept of double consciousness is

related to negative racial expectations, he is also aware of the pressures placed on him by his community to improve the future and serve as a good example of what an anonymous can do. This is an almost inconceivable contradiction for Anon and contributes to his sense of anonymity.

He has no recollection of his past; he can only view himself through the eyes of others, which influences Anon's judgments. On the one hand, to get active in his society; on the other side, to rebel against these expectations of certain racial stereotypes, such as being the refugee brute or violent reactionary. These are simple positions for Anon to fall into since he cannot look beyond the moment; he is now living to see his decisions' more significant consequences or repercussions. Anon can only depend on who he is at any given time, and this identity defines through society's lens. Thus, the play's tensions generate when Anon's inner world (his self-identification) pairs with the outer world (how others identify him). This dilemma between the inner and outer world creates the basic contradicted themes of *Anon(ymous)*: exile and homecoming.

Exile and homecoming are fundamentally opposed ideas as exile entails removal from one's home, and homecoming is the willingness to return home. Indeed, the significance of this contradiction has been recognized in academic debates about exile as a historical and literary phenomenon. For instance, Edward Said, a pivotal figure in the academic study of exile, defines exile as an "unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home" (Said 173). As such, Said maintains that exile is "always out of place" (Said 180), and then he raises the question; "What is it like to be born in a place, to stay and live there, to know that you are of it, more or less forever?" (Said 181). This sensation of alienation felt by the exile in another community, this sense of not being at home "a phenomenon that occupies an

important place in modernist aesthetics” (Boym 511), is influenced by a vision of the community who have left behind their “true” home, those whom we call immigrants.

In a similar spirit, it has long been recognized that the memory of home and yearning for home, or nostalgia, shape the exilic experience. For our purposes, the most significant challenge to the traditional understanding of home and the link between home and exile is the idea that everywhere—not just the hometown—can be home.

SERZA: You’re just a kid. You should go home. just go on home.

ANON: I don’t have a home. I don’t have a family. I don’t have that. I don’t have anyone. (Iizuka, Anon(ymous) 75)

The significance of the notion of home for comprehending the concept of exile brings up the issue of homecoming. Interestingly, although interpretations of the connection between exile and home vary, some scholars acknowledged that homecoming is impossible for exile. Said refers to exile as an “unhealable rift” and continues, “The pathos of exile is the loss of contact with the solidity and satisfaction of earth: homecoming is out of the question” (Said 179). Said never explains why he believes that homecoming is impossible—he seems to accept this as a defining aspect of exile. On the other hand, Ian Buruma contends that the exile’s native home becomes a site of alienation. Yet, this estrangement occurs after the exile has left: “After a life in exile, it is often too late to go back. Too much had happened while you were away. You have become a stranger. The country that you remember is no longer the country that you left” (Buruma 31). As a result, homecoming in the traditional sense is impossible if the home is no longer home.

How do these theoretical considerations of exile, home, and homecoming connect to exile and home in Homeric epic and subsequently in *Anon(ymous)*? Given the *Odyssey*’s focus on journeying, these theoretical considerations of exile have the potential to add to our

understanding of exile in several ways concerning this poem. Exile in the *Odyssey* is depicted as something always in fluidity. Consequently, the *Odyssey* emphasizes the classical idea that a native land is a person's real home. In the absence of a new town and with it a new home, the *Odyssey's* exiles continue to look back and define in terms of the hero's previous home. For example, as part of his false claim to be in exile, Odysseus mentions that he still has children and property in Crete⁴⁴, implying that he still considers it his true home, but returning to his former home is "out of the question" for Odysseus as it is for Anon when he describes home as a dead zone:

ANON: Where I come from mines are planted in the roads like deadly flowers, and the air smells like death, and sticky... (Iizuka, *Anon(ymous)* 65)

In most instances, Anon's journey illustrates this classical notion of exile as he is alienated from his previous home, yet he can establish a new home elsewhere. *Anon(ymous)* does not emphasize estrangement from the refugee's native country, but the exiled (i.e., Anon) is nevertheless driven to flee from his country due to war. However, Anon is not destined to be homeless. After his original homeland has been entirely devastated by the enemy, Anon has the potential to make his home practically anywhere. For Anon, home is wherever his mother is. However, it is crucial to note that Anon does not entirely accept the notion of the host nation as the true home. In a strange country, he seeks his home but cannot return to it. Anon continues to be an outsider in America, but that does not imply he has no home. He finds his mother, which means having a home, safety, and ending all his pain and journeys.

⁴⁴ "... Odysseus' claim of Cretan origin; his description of the island; and his supposed relationship to Idomeneus, the Iliadic king of Crete. In his Lie to Athena, whom Odysseus fails to recognize because of her disguise as a shepherd boy, the hero claims to be a wealthy Cretan, voluntarily exiled for murdering Idomeneus's son..." (Haft 289).

Anon's nation has been ravaged by war. Even though the writer does not expressly specify a single nation's designation, such places are described thusly by Anon and the chorus:

CHORUS OF REFUGEES: Where I come from is oxen in rice fields and hills the color of green tea.

Where I come from is jungles filled with jaguars and pythons thick as a grown man's thigh. ...

Where I come from is waterfalls taller than the tallest skyscraper

Is olive trees and ancient desert... (Iizuka, *Anon(ymous)* 64)

But his lovely country is not a place to return to, since:

ANON: Where I come from there was a war that so long people forgot what they were fighting for.

Where I come from bombs rained down from the sky night after night and boys wandered the streets with M16s.

Where I come from mines are planted in the roads like deadly flowers, and the air smells like death, ... (Iizuka, *Anon(ymous)* 65)

His country now smells like death and living people do not return to the place of death, the country he left is not the country he remembers.

Exile is often regarded in theoretical discussions as a loss. But what exactly is loss? Is "loss" more than merely a place, as Edward Said highlighted, "left behind forever" (Said 173)? In addition to geographical loss, theoretical debates have focused on the loss associated with exile, linked to conceptions of culture, language, and identity. Of these three conceptions, neither *Odyssey* nor *Anon(ymous)* addresses the loss of culture and language as a consequence of exile.

It is, in general, “doubtful that most people’s social universe stops abruptly at the border of their own country” (Malkki 509); this is factual for the main characters in the *Anon(ymous)* and the *Odyssey*. There is no mention of a cultural or linguistic divide between an exile and the society in which he finds himself. He has become a part of the community or is just traveling through. However, loss of identity, in the sense of losing personality, is a dilemma for the Homeric exile in *Anon(ymous)* and *Odyssey*.

According to Julia Kristeva, this loss of identity, or loss of self, presents itself as a confidence crisis:

This means that, settled within himself, the foreigner has no self. Barely an empty confidence, valueless, which focuses his possibilities of being constantly other, according to others’ wishes and to circumstances. I do what they want me to, but it is not “me”—“me” is elsewhere, “me” belongs to no one, “me” does not belong to “me,” ...does “me” exist? (Kristeva 8)

Many other scholars agree with Kristeva that exile entails such a severe loss of identity.

According to Iain Chambers, exile takes many characteristics of immigrants’ old life with them, including a sense of identity, but we can reevaluate them.

Our previous sense of knowledge, language and identity, our peculiar inheritance, cannot be simply rubbed out of the story, cancelled. What we have inherited—as culture, as history, as language, as tradition, as a sense of identity—is not destroyed but taken apart, opened to questioning, rewriting and re-routing. (I. Chambers 24)

However, there is a distinction between the exiles as presented in *Odyssey* and *Anon(ymous)*; the *Odyssey* exile is patronizing. He belongs to the class of classical heroes, while the *Anon(ymous)* exile is proletariat; he belongs to the class of modern heroes. However, in both texts, heroic

identity is tightly linked to social standing, particularly an individual's capacity to establish his claim to honor or dignity, which is the most crucial indicator of a hero's status while he is alive, as well as his potential to win many battles.

Because they have not (yet), found permanent hospitality, the exiles of the *Odyssey* and *Anon(ymous)* are in a much more dangerous situation regarding loss of status—and hence loss of heroic identity. There is no reason to believe that the *Odyssey's* exiles and *Anon(ymous)* will not adjust to the new community.

For Odysseus and Anon, the Homeric exile is far from 'worthless,' to borrow Kristeva's word; their claim to honor and ability to acquire honor is no longer independent but somewhat reliant on their connection with their host society (Kristeva 60). Their identity, particularly their heroic identity, must be evaluated, but the outcome is a downward reevaluation rather than utter loss.

***Anon(ymous)* in Performance**

Anon(ymous) has performed on various stages around the United States, mainly in the academic arena. Among them is the University of Texas at Austin's College of Fine Arts, directed in 2017 by Sam Provenzano. In 2018, Karin Magaldi directed the play at Portland State University. Randy Reinholz led *Anon(ymous)* at SDSU School of Theatre, Television, and Film in 2017. Allen Grimm directed this play at the Steinbach Theatre in 2021, and Jon Jon-Johnson directed *Anon(ymous)* at Silver Spring Black Box Theatre. About the performance, director Jon Jon-Johnson states: "For as long as there have been borders, there have been immigrants. For as long as there has been war, there have been refugees" (Sophie Herreid), as it is related to Anon and his mother fleeing violence.

As stated in Sophie Herreid's interview, the classical text at the core of *Anon(ymous)* is not limited to the characters and story themes. Herreid felt that Iizuka's work strikes an exquisite balance between the source material and its adaptation for modern viewers. The reviewer noted that Iizuka combines a narrative Greek chorus from ancient times; however, she noted that Iizuka's is a chorus of contemporary immigrants. Herreid captured Johnson's balanced approach to the play's interaction with its source material (Sophie Herreid). "We looked for the parallels, but I really didn't try to impose them on the piece too much," Johnson told the reviewer (Sophie Herreid). The review gives a clear sense that Johnson's direction followed the text closely without imposing a strong directorial statement.

Johnson's staging, according to Herreid, created a fluid ensemble. The ensemble served as narrator, audience, and crowd at times; at others, as when they represent employees in a sewing factory or refugees on a boat, they are personalized, albeit anonymous people. At times, the chorus also functioned as landscape and architecture, physically creating the drama's setting. "I love ensembles, the blending of voices and physicality, and the merging of individual voices into a collective whole more powerful than the singular" (Sophie Herreid), recalls Johnson. He emphasized the importance of the ensemble in his approach to the production.

On October 12, 2019, *Anon(ymous)* took the stage at Fresno State. In his review of this performance, Donald Munro writes that Iizuka created the play in 2006, only a few years after the millennium's ending, and we are now a few years over that point in 2019. However, in what he called a genuine and passionate production, everything seemed immediate. With anti-immigrant sentiment at an all-time high, "president scorching Somali refugees at rowdy campaign rallies and a federal government intent on turning the southern border into one big human-rights violation, director Gina Sandi-Diaz puts a present-day spin on the subject matter"

(Munro). He continues that the production often seems didactic and a bit uncomfortable, like someone wearing clothing that is a couple of sizes too large. The goal was magical realism, but the result seldom has the uplifting aspect that can carry an audience away from the real world:

Part of this strained, dissonant feel comes from the playwright herself, who turns to the classic story of Homer's "*Odyssey*," the epic poem, and its tale of a wandering hero to frame the story from a refugee's perspective. Yang's character is separated as a child from his mother, Nemasani (played by a stirring Teya Juarez), during a storm on their ocean voyage as they flee the country of his birth. Years later, she is laboring in a factory and being sexually harassed by her boss, all the while wondering what became of her son.

(Munro)

Munro believed that the storyline might be complicated for those unfamiliar with Greek mythology. The *Odysseys*' story is so particular that it seems to need some explanation (Munro). Munro ended his review by claiming that the Chorus of Voices serves as a reminder of the valuable contribution that refugees and immigrants make to our nation.

Another production of *Anon(ymous)* went on stage at the Performing Arts Department (PAD) in Arts and Sciences at Washington University in St. Louis in 2014, directed by William Whitaker. According to a *Washington University Press* review, *Anon(ymous)* has people and events derived from *Odyssey*, but its ideas and language are uniquely modern. "*Anon(ymous)* is inspired by *Odyssey* but it's also specifically American," Whitaker said. This review concludes with this phrase that this play is about the traditional hero's journey, where you experience the greatness of the United States as well as its dark beneath (PAD. Naomi Iizuka's '*Anonymous*'). This review represents a far more hopeful approach to the play than the dystopian vision at Fresno State.

By and large, most of the reviews have hailed this piece as a play of protest. They interpret the play as a disapproval to the war, discrimination, politics, and the culture of racism. They see this play as a reality of the society and life of a refugee as an anonymous in a stranger world that reveals to us through Anon's experience in his journey. Regarding the design and the set, most of the reviews agree that the scene is very simple but has captured all the facets that the author required, using light, music, and sound. Generally, the productions seemed to amplify Iizuka's vision of the world of the play without producing further explicit commentary.

Conclusion

Anon(ymous) is about a refugee's journey through America; it is an effort to define a hero by alluding to modern concepts of hero and present limits of a refugee's life in America.

Anon(ymous) practices an epic structure, although it does not directly replicate the classical form. Instead, it is a contemporary adaption that is in line with the cultural values of the American immigrant community. Iizuka speaks for a group—immigrants and refugees—and does it in a dramatic, poetic way.

The Odyssey and *Anon(ymous)* are not centered on a single, well-defined character. Instead, they approach the character based on narrative flow; they present a character not based on psychological traits but as an example of others like themselves. Each of these characters indicates a social group. The writers do not seek to delve into their psychology and personality; instead, they provide a human example and set a larger purpose for the spectator.

Iizuka's characters do not have formal and metaphysical aspects as classic epic heroes. The playwright dramatizes and defines the hero in the protagonist's idealistic dedication to a cause and the resulting pain. Iizuka gives her character a worldwide identity. She does not depict

Anon in the framework of a single identity. The author represents a young war-refugee who is obliged to seek sanctuary in a nation that, regrettably, does not embrace him due to politics and cultural matters.

Anon(ymous) is a play of protest. Iizuka disapproves of the war, discrimination, politics, and the culture of racism. In constructing a social protest drama, Iizuka communicates her thoughts through modern epic instead of classic epic. Her work is concerned with fundamental realities rather than with specific situations. The focus is on the outside world, which is sketched and described in place or time on the individual's mental state.

New experiences profoundly and dramatically change Anon like many other immigrants. His relationship to the concept of home seems to mirror Odysseus's feelings of disorientation. Anon's identity as a refugee in a strange country is symbolized in his mother. He cannot be whole again, or be himself, until he finds his mother which resonates the Dream to him. The play highlights Anon's responsiveness, intelligence, and consciousness.

Iizuka's play is a modern reimagining of the epic genre. Whereas epic has virtually always been defined via form, Iizuka permits us to redefine it through purpose—the immigrant and refugee's dilemma. Iizuka's play should be viewed as a modern American epic built on classical elements.

CHAPTER 4: THWARTED DREAMS OF IMMIGRANTS EAGER IN AN ADOPTED COUNTRY; *THE TALENTED ONES* AND YUSSEF EL GUINDI

“If thou hast nature in thee, bear it not.
Let not the royal bed of Denmark be
A couch for luxury and damned incest....
Adieu, adieu, adieu! Remember me.”

—Father’s Ghost, *Hamlet*

“Do not follow in my footsteps. You must study more hard than anyone. You must not fail in front of these people. When someone who leaves his country doesn’t make it in his new home, if we don’t make it, then the ground we stand on, it is not there anymore. You succeeding in their world will give meaning to my eating shit today.

—Father’s Ghost, *The Talented Ones*

El Guindi, an Egyptian American immigrant dramatist, writes from the margins of society, giving a voice to a multi—and intracultural minority. He began his important work as a playwright, like many Arab American dramatists,⁴⁵ after the events of 9/11 in 2001. In El Guindi’s play, *The Talented Ones*, we meet characters living in the United States during a period⁴⁶ when America’s promise and optimism appear to lead to triumph for some and devastating defeat for others. *The Talented Ones*, portrays the life of an immigrant couple, who struggle with their family bond, immigration issues, lost dreams, disappointments, and hopes.

⁴⁵ See the article by Dalia Basiouny and Marvin Carlson: “*Current Trends in Arab-American Performance*” (D. B. Carlson 209).

⁴⁶ Twenty years have passed since the terrorist events on September 11, 2001. With all of the U.S. troops out of Afghanistan, the policies and programs put in place in the wake of the attacks still have a significant impact on how immigrants get into the United States, how they live, and how the United States as a whole works today. Two decades later, national security is still the main way all immigration policy is looked at. The result is a highly securitized immigration system with huge budgets. It results in a significant increase in non-citizen arrests, detentions, and removals based on increased data sharing between federal, state, and local law enforcement agencies.

This chapter will analyze the play as an immigrant drama in the modern style, focusing on the struggles of the second generations of immigrants caught between family expectations, their own American Dream aspirations, and their relationship with American society as exiles. In this chapter, I will examine that in addition to the style of modern plays, the author has used a form of adaptation of the character of Hamlet in Shakespeare's play to create his male character, Omar. In addition, I will describe that the author has exploited the stereotypical pattern of immigrant women in presenting the female character, Cindy.

It is also important to mention that although El Guindi is a prominent Arab/Egyptian American playwright, the deliberate ethnic, racial ambiguity of the characters in *The Talented Ones* has made his entry into the canon of Arab/Egyptian American dramas ambivalent. The playwright does not identify characters' heritage directly, but key elements of the play's form, action, and content situate them into the genre of immigrant characters. Therefore, I am not arguing these characters as Arab American immigrants, specifically. As the playwright mentions, they are just "people of color."⁴⁷

These characters struggle with the term "dream big" and its limitation or accessibility. For many who have immigrated to the United States, the idea of "dreaming big" is critically important. The opportunity to "dream big"⁴⁸ is what the United States promises immigrants, yet the means to achieving this dream remains elusive. *The Talented Ones* represents those who emigrate to the United States, pursuing their dreams; however, they always have mixed feelings

⁴⁷ "Though given the dynamics, and what is said in the play, it is more than implied that they are people of color" (El Guindi 7).

⁴⁸ Referring to: "OMAR'S FATHER: (Accent) Let me tell you something, Omar. ... the people here: they have more love for their dogs than for people like you and me. ... Do not follow in my footsteps. You must study more hard than anyone. You must not fail in front of these people. When someone who leaves his country doesn't make it in his new home, if we don't make it, then the ground we stand on, it is not there anymore. Your succeeding in their world will give meaning to my eating shit today. Even if this country screws you, it lets you dream big. This is the first and only law of this place. So dream, my son. Dream as big as those motherfuckers who spit on us" (El Guindi 19).

about abandoning their homeland and carry the guilt of being responsible for others.⁴⁹ Some first-generation immigrants (like Omar's father) put the burden of leaving their homeland on their children. As a result, children are confused between their own dreams and their parents' high aspirations. The more they try, the more the second-generation children are alienated from their desires, and society offers no assistance to their dilemma.

Based on this idea presented in this play, El Guindi argues that in an idealistic country like the United States, the winner is the one whose goals are as good as his ability. However, the play suggests that single-minded people, blinded by a singular goal of success, cannot succeed in all dimensions of American society. Ultimately, we see the characters build their entire lives upon an illusionary dream that is slowly destroying them.

On the other hand, the play illustrates the optimism of immigrants toward their life in the U.S., despite negative attitudes on the part of Americans. This optimism is best shown in a flashback episode, showing a Naturalization ceremony when characters share hopes for a brighter future. The prospect of a fresh beginning as legal citizens gives confidence in them to foresee a more promising future, an idea that will change in the succeeding years.

When the characters get their citizenship, after a long period of feeling like exiles whose fate had been pre-written for them by their parents and society, they assume that they have the opportunity to take their destiny and write their own stories. They lived under the weight of being undocumented for years; they were not a part of society; they were abandoned. Due to their social isolation, they could not distinguish between their individual aspirations and societal isolation.

⁴⁹ From a multidimensional standpoint, guilt comprises an emotional component and a set of related ideas about one's participation in a tragic occurrence. As a result, phenomenologically, guilt is described as an unpleasant sensation with concomitant beliefs that one would have thought, felt, or acted on, with the connotation of responsibility, wrongdoing, and inadequate explanation (C. A. Bowers).

Themes of isolation, guilt and aspirations demonstrate in the form of modern plays, with the concerns of being a genuine imitation of reality. The characters' relationships with each other, their families, and society are disjointed and non-linear, shaped by memories, hallucinations, and lapses, which reflect in the play's structure, like many in this study. Even though the play opens with a linear chronology in Act One, it uses flashbacks and flashforwards intermingled with dreams and recollections in Act Two, divided into three parts. Such as many other modern plays, El Guindi's creation of *The Talented Ones* reflects his idea that, although the past and present are inextricably connected, they are often co-existing realities that affect one another.⁵⁰ In this chapter, I will analyze *The Talented Ones* as a standalone play and an adaptation of one character in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (Hamlet as a character who had many aspects of a modern character) with elements of realism and expressionism.

The play demonstrates the social breakdown of people with talents lost in their personal and social problems. El Guindi explores characters' inner frustrations and tensions and conflicts with unjust society rules that push away people with talents and do not allow them to show their real identity. As a result, these characters become victims of society's rules and their family expectations, and their own flaws. As a result of these conflicts, the characters get entangled in a life mixed with illusion and reality.

To better understand the playwright, we may begin by looking at his biography connected to his work as a dramatist. Then I will present the play's narrative and characters and conduct a general analysis of each character and the plot. Then I will examine the play in terms of modern structure. I shall relate Omar's character to Hamlet (as a pioneer of modern characters) and study

⁵⁰ According to Heidegger, the German philosopher, without the language that preserves a link with the past, without the capacity to name, the past ceases to exist or have any reality for a person (Heidegger 17). And without any form of cultural norm, it is impossible to think or communicate. Belief in the concept of development has led to the foolish notion that individuals can break away from their history (C. A. Bowers 84).

Cindy's presentation as a representative of immigrant women in the United States. Finally, I will discuss how the press has reacted to this play's performance.

Background on Playwright

El Guindi was born in Egypt in 1960. His grandparents, and some other members of his family were all theatre artists. He migrated to Europe with his parents when he was three years old and attended school in England and then in France. He graduated from the American University in Cairo with a degree in English literature in 1982. He moved to the United States in 1983 to attend Carnegie Mellon University, where he earned an MFA in playwriting. He subsequently moved to Seattle, Washington, where he became a US citizen in 1996 (Haskins).

In his first major accomplishments as a playwright, El Guindi engaged with Chicago's Silk Road Theatre Project (now Silk Road Rising), which staged three of his pieces in a row. Following this important collaboration, he was a playwright-in-residence at Duke University for seven years, where he also taught playwriting (Kan). I provide an overview of El Guindi's work here because it demonstrates how important his work has been for representing Arab American and immigrant experiences on the American stage, though few are familiar with his vast body of work.

His play *Back of the Throat* "first performed by San Francisco's Thick Description and Golden Thread Productions in April 2005,"⁵¹ challenging anti-Arab attitudes in the United States, and won praise from critics, the press, and academics (Stack). Arab Americans' confusion, fear, and uncertainty in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks on American soil were echoed in this play. *Back of the Throat*, is a frightening, disorienting story of an Arab American

⁵¹ For more information look at the: BroadwayWorld.com.

writer visited by two threatening government agents on the hunt for suspects after an act of urban terrorism. El Guindi remembers wondering how audiences might react to the play in the wake of 9/11:

As I submitted the play to theatres, I thought, oh, my God, I don't like this play... The tone felt very harsh. And when I heard it read on stage for the first time, I noticed how uncomfortable the audience was. I worried that regional theatres wouldn't want to do it because it wasn't a sentimental and uplifting play about 9/11. It has no comfort zone.

(Guindi)

This play, however, was a triumph for the author, and it has since been presented at Theatre Schmeater in Seattle (where it earned first place in the company's Northwest Playwright Competition) and Manbites Dog Theatre in Durham, North Carolina. It has also appeared on the stages of the Eccentric Theatre in Anchorage of Alaska, the Flea Theatre in New York City, and the Silk Road Theatre Project in Chicago. *Back of the Throat* was nominated for an American Theatre Critics Association award in 2006 (Berson). El Guindi has been one of the most prolific writers to represent Arab American characters on U.S. stages. He offers a wide variety of theatrical styles and thematic approaches to create his plays.

El Guindi's next play, a comedy-drama *Ten Acrobats in an Amazing Leap of Faith*, produced at Chicago's Silk Road Theatre in 2005. This play, according to the author, is "... a big old soap opera of a family play. This is my sentimental American drama" (Guindi). This play was commissioned by the L.A. based Cornerstone Theatre Company. Malik Gillani, Silk Road Theatre's executive director described this play for a non-Muslim audience as:

... an inside peek at a Muslim-American family and a chance to see them as real people facing real challenges. They are not angels. They're not demons. What they are is enormously likable. (Berson)

El Guindi further elaborates, stating:

Because there are so few depictions of Arab-American life in our theatre, people have wanted me to just give a very, very affirmative view of who we are. Some have asked me, why are you depicting a gay person and homophobia? There are so many other issues to deal with. But in order to humanize a people, you need to show them warts and all. Our humanity lives in our cracks and wounds. How can you affirm something, without talking about everything. (Guindi)

El Guindi's other work was a two lyric one-act plays—a collection under the title of *Acts of Desire*—that received respectable acclaim in their Los Angeles debut at the Fountain Theatre. El Guindi expanded this collection with two adaptations based on short stories by Egyptian writer Salwa Bakr: *Such a Beautiful Voice is Sayeda's* and *Karima's City* (Berson).

Such a Beautiful Voice is Sayeda's is a story of a housewife, Sayeda, who discovers one day that she has been gifted with a great singing voice. But no one wants to hear it—not her cold-hearted husband, nor the doctor that Sayeda sees, who believes she has gone insane. According to El Guindi's description of the play: "... it's about facing something new within oneself, having a new mode of expression. And it's about how threatening a new talent or ability can be, how it can change the equilibrium" (Guindi). In a culture that considers talented ones to be disgraceful, dangerous and a threat, it becomes clear that Sayeda's tragic fate has already been written.

Our Enemies: Lively Scenes of Love and Combat (2008) is another El Guindi's play which has three main characters with Arab origins. All three central characters are immigrants attempting to adjust to life in the West. As authors, they all deal with issues of race and representation in the media, and each is under pressure to advocate for something culturally significant. This play, in particular, reveals the constraints and pressure of being identified and constricted as an Arab American writer.

Pilgrims Musa and Sheri in the New World (2011) is a two-act drama released by *Dramatists Play Service Inc* in 2014. It opens with an Egyptian cab driver as the protagonist, who joins up with an American waitress, Sheri, in his apartment, where they discuss numerous Muslim topics such as the Hajj (the holy pilgrimage Mecca) and passages from the Quran. The play deconstructs what it means to be a Muslim by portraying a range of Muslim characters who are humanly imperfect and interact with regular American characters (Ibrahim).

In his next play, *Threesome* (2015) El Guindi continues to expose western stereotypes through the encounters of white Americans with Arab American characters. *Threesome* is a two-act play published by Broadway Play Publishing and released in 2016. The protagonists, try to make their relationship work by seeking the help of a third person. This drama begins humorously and cheerfully, then confronts several taboos (especially for Muslims) such as theatrical nudity and sexual desire. It eventually transforms into a boldly feminist piece supporting Arab women against Eastern paternalism and Western fantasy (Ibrahim).

Signaling the importance of his voice, the anthology, *Selected Works of Yussef El Guindi* edited by Michael Malek Najjar was published in 2019 by the Martin E. Segal Theatre Center. In a description of this book Areeg Ibrahim claims that: "Nothing is more expressive of the nature of this new anthology, titled *The Selected Works of Yussef El Guindi*, than the cover art,

which is of Lady Liberty's shape created by Arabic calligraphy" (Ibrahim). Ibrahim believes that the cover of the book is symbolic of the unavoidable intermixing of Arab and American identities in Arab American theatre. In the foreword, Jamil Khoury praises El Guindi as a distinctive and striking portrayal of the Arab American experience. As a result, El Guindi's work speaks to the hybrid character of the times and Arab American life: "Like many 21st-century 'hybrid' Americans, Yussef embodies the spirit of hailing from both 'here' and 'there,' of belonging to both 'us' and 'them'" (Ibrahim). El Guindi's plays, according to Khoury, aims to "disrupt complacency" rather than to adhere to the dichotomy of choosing sides of a conflict. And that his "storytelling" is a means for all of us to find ourselves.

It is noteworthy that El Guindi's plays are reviewed and critiqued as representation of experimental journeys about Arab American immigrants in the United States. He is known as a public theatrical voice supporting the genre of immigrant theatre as a valid American theatre style. One area that has been particularly important for him in the second decade of the 21st-century is the response to the Arab Spring. Scholarly and trade journals characterize him as one of the few authors who has drawn consistent attention to the Arab Spring that spread across the Middle East in 2011 and caused many people to immigrate.

The protests associated with the Arab Spring promoted a sense of hope for citizens of Arab countries in that "democracy might replace the autocratic regimes" (Najjar 2015). However, that optimism collapsed into depression after the inhumane civil war in Syria, the rise of ISIS, and other humanitarian catastrophes that occurred in the Middle East. El Guindi is one of the writers who gives voice to immigrants in the United States who suffer from "Arabophobia, Islamophobia, and the complicated realities of living with conflicted allegiances between one's adopted homeland and one's land of birth" (Najjar 2015).

There are several dissertations and theses about El Guindi and his works, especially after the 9/11 terrorist attack against the United States in 2001, which he described as the “Age of falling buildings.” El Guindi’s name appears in academic research concerned with immigrants, the Arab Spring, the world of post-9/11, and Arab-American artists. For instance, in his Ph.D. dissertation in English Studies, Ahmad Hassan Mahmoud focused on the “trans-historical nature of the abuse of power, violence, and specifically the production of terror in western culture” (A. H. A. Mahmoud 2013). By comparing some of Shakespeare’s plays with El Guindi’s works, Mahmoud indicates the difference in terrorism, violence, and religious influence described in these works. Mahmoud desires to illustrate the continuous adaptation of different forms of terrorism in two historical eras: The Renaissance and 21st-century.

Michael Jim Najjar’s 2011 doctoral dissertation is a response to the popular reaction against Arab Americans following the tragedy of September 11. His dissertation analyzes the theories of “ethnicization, cultural exclusion ..., and pan-identities in regard to Arab American identity formation and Arab American performance” (M. J. Najjar 2011). Najjar attempts to explain how Arab-American playwrights like El Guindi tried to change the Arab American image in the popular national believes by restaging and recasting their plays.

In addition to being the subject of academic research, El Guindi has been the recipient of many prestigious playwriting awards including the Steinberg/American Theatre Critics Association’s New Play Award, Gregory Award, Edgerton Foundation New Play Award, ACT New Play Award, Seattle Times’ “Footlight Award”, the M. Elizabeth Osborn Award, L.A. Weekly’s Excellence in Playwriting Award, Chicago’s After Dark/John W. Schmid Award for Best New Play, and the Middle East America Distinguished Playwright Award (Yussef El Guindi).

Other than articles and critics about El Guindi's plays, there is a notable body of interviews and reviews about his works in trade journals, websites, and magazines such as *Theatre Journal* (Johns Hopkins UP), *American Theatre* (New York), and the *New York Times*, and *The Stranger* (Seattle). In his interviews, as well as his plays, El Guindi provides a fair and even positive assessment of American society. In one interview, El Guindi states, "in spite of the anti-immigrant flair-ups that periodically course through this country, the key ingredient in the U.S. is its self-renewal through the continuous blood transfusion of new immigrants" (El Guindi 2017). El Guindi believes that being an immigrant does not only refer to foreigners or people who are displaced; it is about those who try to fit into new surroundings; people who feel alien and separated from their environment. He explains that starting any new communication is a sort of immigration journey from us to someone we do not know yet. El Guindi describes human relations as "*terra incognita* with unexpected borders" (El Guindi, *In Yussef El Guindi's Plays, Personal and Political Are in Bed Together*. 2015). In his works the term "immigrant" does not just refer to persons from other countries or those who have been uprooted; it also describes those attempting to integrate into a new environment and experiencing a sense of alienation and dislocation.

The Talented Ones' Plot and Characters

Because few readers are familiar with the play, *The Talented Ones*, I will provide a quick synopsis of the play before providing an analysis of its expressionistic elements, echoes of Hamlet, representation of the dual oppression of immigrant women, and its modern format and content. The play centers around the immigrant characters Cindy and Omar in their 30s and their younger selves. Patrick is a white American in his late 30s; and two symbolic figures: Dancer

Cindy and Omar's Father are other figurative characters. The play stylistically shifts from simplified realism in present and flashback scenes to moments of expressionism, highlighting the nightmarish impact of the rupture of immigration on the character's psyche.

The Talented Ones centers on the story of an immigrant couple who are struggling with their family relationships as well as their financial and social situation in the United States while pursuing their disparate dreams. Cindy always wanted to pursue a dancing career, but she believes she should keep her job as a nurse as it provides a steady flow of income for her family. Her husband Omar has been fired from his job working for a moving company, and Cindy worries about how they will be able to support themselves financially.

Omar and Cindy are emotionally, psychologically, and economically in trouble. In addition to these causes for failure, the play demonstrates the anti-immigrant mentality that pervades American culture⁵² that limits the success of immigrants. We see this attitude personified by Patrick (white American), the nativist intruder keen on disrupting his friends' already fragile marriage. After overdosing on Omar's drugged beer at one striking moment in the play, Patrick shares his real view:

PATRICK: ... you are a plague, buddy. This country used to be something before they opened the floodgates to people like you, who just take and take and then cry about how they're treated." (El Guindi 75)

⁵² Beginning in the mid-1990s, and with a second wave in the mid-2000s, the xenophobia rooted in policy and everyday life from the eighteenth to the early 20th-century, has risen throughout the United States (Pfaelzer 80). Influential voices in the national media and citizen and state legislative campaigns openly express open hate against immigrants in the United States, seemingly without fear of societal consequences (Torre). Aggressive enforcement of federal rules governing the employment of illegal employees in the United States has also increased the number of public, dramatic, and scary detentions, and deportations of immigrants (Argueta).

He believes the US was better before deadbeat immigrants arrived and complained about social injustices. He depicts white Americans' hostility toward immigrants as cultivated by American leaders who blame immigration for the country's economic stagnation.

Unlike Cindy and Omar, Patrick is willing to cheat to achieve his dream and work in earnest to gain access. He hopes to undermine Omar and co-opt the life he has been making with Cindy. Patrick seduces Cindy and weaponizes their sexual relationship against Omar. If Patrick is married to Cindy, he will have a wife, a house, probably children, even a "pool:"

PATRICK: "...what I've always admired about you is how much you give yourself to others. Like my mom. –You're a lot sexier than my mom. But you're the same in the way you sacrifice yourself for other people." (El Guindi 8)

His goal is to have a wife like his mother, who sacrifices herself for others, a woman who has passed the test as an ideal wife. He is looking for a woman who is always sexy and beautiful, takes care of the home and her husband, and makes a fair amount of money.

However, for the couple, the Dream has another less cynical meaning than it has for Patrick. After they became legal citizens, they believed that they had overcome all the problems and that the future was full of excellent opportunities. They thought the hard days would be over, and happiness waited for them. They believed they could "claim their share of the American Dream." Receiving citizenship was like a reset or a starting point with a clean slate. As Omar said, "they had full ownership of their lives." The only problem in their way, they assumed, was how big they could dream.

Many years have passed since that hopeful time, and their lives have taken unexpected turns. Cindy flirts with her husband's best friend—frustrated by her dreams and her husband's lack of success— becomes trapped by Patrick, whom she unintentionally welcomes. After

witnessing a long conversation between Cindy and Patrick with a bit of intimacy, Omar walks in on them. He begins speaking, hurling out words and muttering about everything and nothing: he saw it all, but he pretends he did not:

OMAR: (He starts unpacking the grocery bag) Well—on my way to the store—up on the corner of Jackson and King—did you see the sky about an hour ago? After the rain? The way that low sun was hitting the clouds? Lighting up the wet streets? You couldn't imagine a more beautiful scene if you tried. So—writer that I am, I took that as a challenge. I went to that coffee place nearby thinking I had plenty of time to get home before you got here, and I—tried to write down what I'd seen. That amazing mix of colors; the light bouncing off of windows. And I sat there— (El Guindi 22)

Omar delivers a lengthy monologue; there is no narrative, no thread, only the feelings. His long monologue is reminiscent of some modern characters stacking words against the silence they fear, erecting a language wall. Omar is terrified of silence, too; if he stops his insane talking, they must talk about the real things, those he does not want to hear. What he witnessed and heard is frightening because it undermines his entire sense of purpose and meaning. The nonlinear monologue captures this sense of loss.

Following Omar's lengthy monologue, the three of them begin a heated conversation about Cindy and Patrick's affair, their relationship, their lost dreams, and their families; Cindy says to Omar, "You're like my family: the more I give, the more they expect of me... that is my job: to be a provider, a cook, a translator, and a general doormat..." (El Guindi 25). Cindy is not just an immigrant; she is also a woman subjected to patriarchal society's pressures. The expectations of her own family, her husband, and American society keep her from attaining true freedom and dignity. She is like Ibsen's Nora but in place of an immigrant woman. Cindy is

constantly stressed and forced to make sacrifices for the wishes and desires of others. However, unlike Nora, she does not leave the house in the end; there is no other way for her to live.

Whereas Ibsen's play concluded with emigration, this play concludes with a stay, a continuation. After all, where else could she go? If the United States, the land of opportunity, fails to provide her with what she deserves, where else will she find it? El Guindi, similar to Martyna Majok's *Ironbound*, captures the especially difficult role immigrant wives experience.

Cindy was always responsible for keeping her family together while they ignored her needs. Her husband is preoccupied with his dreams and life challenges, and her family has unrealistic expectations from her. She is under the internal and external pressures of family and society. Once full of hope and companionship, her marriage is a tragedy; she and Omar stopped to communicate with one another, expressing their feelings and thoughts. She remains haunted by the memory of their love.

In addition to their failed relationship, they encounter barriers due to cultural differences, strengthening their alienation. Cindy and Omar face isolation and frustration due to language and communication difficulties. Sometimes, modern dramatic language uses as a barrier for characters to achieve their dreams, identity, and freedom. Omar, like many other modern characters trapped in between their past and present, faces a language barrier:

OMAR: I've stopped writing. I don't know how to get anything down on paper anymore. I feel so separated from the words I'm using they sometimes feel like a foreign language. I have to keep telling myself it's my language. I have a right to it. I'm not a guest here. Then I tell myself, lighten up. Everyone has their struggle. But I can't figure out what mine is. Not the precise nature of it. I know what my father had to struggle against. (El Guindi 28)

There is no greater impediment to a writer than language; linguistic alienation leads him as far away from writing as he wishes. He feels no roots in the English language; words are strange to him. He is unable to reconcile his culture and vocabulary.

All these issues coalesce and progressively sap his desire to live. Omar discusses his decision to commit suicide. He claims that he wants Cindy to be free of him to pursue her dream of dancing. She and Patrick can have a future together.

OMAR: I'm trying to free you. You do need to settle down and start your life with a stable, straight-arrow kind of guy like Rick. Now there's a man with a plan. There's something very masculine, and salt-of-the-earth about Rick. And he's management now. He could provide you with the kind of stability you need. And with me out of the way—

CINDY: You're sick. You're turning everything good into something calculating, and evil. (El Guindi 33)

During this conversation, Omar pours tranquilizers into a beer bottle while Cindy is trying to prepare salad and dinner. Patrick, who was in the other room, enters and drinks Omar's pill-filled beer. The play becomes increasingly threatening and violent as the three struggle. Patrick reveals that Omar has visited a prostitute to try to affirm his sexual prowess. When Cindy learns about her husband's secret, a mirage, the Dancer Cindy, appears behind the wall, while she has a knife in her hand:

OMAR: I was trying to get out of my fucking head!

CINDY: I bend over backwards to try and make things work for you, for us—

OMAR: I wish I could take it back, I'm sorry. (El Guindi 44-45)

Cindy mistakenly stabs Omar in the hand when he approaches the chopping block. Omar notices his bloody hand and tries to hold on to a chair, but it tilts, and he falls. Meanwhile, they realize

that Patrick is poisoned with the beer, and he is dying. Cindy takes Patrick to the hospital, and Omar stays home wondering if Cindy will come back or not. The ending comes abruptly, but the closure is not surprising. Cindy returns home from the hospital, Patrick will survive, and Cindy and Omar continue to live the life they always had.

The play concludes with the elder Omar and Cindy realizing that they must rekindle the optimism and promise they once felt in their youth. They reunite and move on after going through the day's events, including revealing secrets, venting emotions, expressing regrets, deciding to commit suicide, reviewing the bitter past, and confronting the painful truth of their lives. We do not know whether their lives will be different in the future or if they find a new meaning for the American Dream, but what we know is that they are both in harmony, just as their beautiful dance and melody are.

Omar and Cindy are multifaceted characters; they have various aspects of stereotypical and psychological types and studying them is essential for understanding their personality. Therefore, in the following sections, I will first discuss the play's central characters in the structure and content of the play. Then I will describe Omar as a representative of the displaced modern characters whose foundations lay in Shakespeare's time, most notably in Hamlet. Finally, I will study Cindy as representative of the typical immigrant wife/female companion.

The Talented Ones and the Modern Dramatic Form and Content

El Guindi dramatizes the day-dreaming and disordered functioning of his main characters' minds in *The Talented Ones*. He creates realistic scenes in terms of subject and dramatic style and other scenes that are utterly unrealistic to track Cindy and Omar's mind's fantasies, which keep alternating between past and present. These unrealistic moments are

dramatic situations in which the playwright employs a range of expressionistic tactics⁵³ to track Cindy and Omar's thoughts as they shift between the past and the present. The playwright has tastefully combined realistic dramatic approaches with anti-realistic theatrical devices to produce a play with well-balanced dramaturgical styles, blending visions and memories with the bleak present.

El Guindi wraps the realistic dramatic form of the play with a variety of modern theatrical techniques to portray the journey of these character's life as they go through a shattering social, psychological, and emotional experience. Among the different approaches, expressionism⁵⁴ is the most prevalent in this play. It would have been impossible to express Cindy and Omar's inner thoughts and emotions without utilizing expressionistic tactics. In a play like *The Talented Ones* that walks a fine line between reality and illusion, only a balanced blend of realistic and anti-realistic theatrical approaches, such as expressionism, can make the play theatrically appealing to viewers while still conveying the story.

⁵³ El Guindi's tactics are similar to Miller's *Death of a Salesman*. Miller was concerned not just in the physical qualities of his characters but also in their mental and emotional states. A connection with German expressionism is more crucial for comprehending the form of *Death of a Salesman* as well as El Guindi's play. Miller strayed from the realism of *All My Sons* to convey the complexity of what was going on in Willy's psyche; time is disordered, linear cause and effect are rearranged, the sets are reduced - a table and chairs become the kitchen, a window frame hangs in the air. Miller stated that; "There is no limit to the expansion of the audience's imagination so long as the play's internal logic is kept inviolate. It is not true that conventionalism is demanded. They will move with you anywhere; they will believe right into the moon so long as you believe right into the moon so long as you believe who tell them this tale. We are at the beginning of many explosions of form. They are waiting for wonders" (Marino 16).

⁵⁴ The playwright's subjective perspective of reality is expressed in expressionistic plays. The goal of expressionism is to show the interior lives of characters. It moved beyond realism or naturalism, which followed the linear development via external environmental aspects. Because expressionist plays employed symbols to represent the unseen and unconscious, objective, stylized, and impersonal. Miller transformed the form into something humanistic. Miller wrote of *Death of a Salesman*: "From the theatrical viewpoint that play..... broke the bounds, I believe, of a long convention of realism..... I had willingly employed expressionism but always to create a subjective truth..... I had always been attracted and repelled by the brilliance of German expressionism after World War I, and one aim in *salesman* was to employ its quite marvelous shorthand for humane, 'felt' characterization rather than for purposes of demonstration for which the Germans had used it" (Marino 17).

The dramatic style of the play becomes entirely expressionistic⁵⁵ in moments in which Cindy and Omar either recall their past experiences or bring back the hallucination images of their younger selves as happy, successful people. The illumination of the area behind the kitchen/living room wall lets us see Dancer Cindy and sometimes young Omar/Cindy and Omar's father's ghost. This expressive stage arrangement allows the audience to observe many aspects of the characters' past lives while doing something else in the present.

El Guindi exemplifies the human mind's power, transcending time and space. He theatricalizes the relationship between changing time and broken space by employing expressionistic techniques to depict the character's disturbed minds. This drama's fusion of realism and expressionism also demonstrates the relativity of time and the destruction of space:

(With a light change, the kitchen wall becomes see-through again. DANCER CINDY is seen engaging in a graceful dance—perhaps accompanied by music, or some sort of sound. CINDY, with her arms, sketches in a few of the moves DANCER CINDY is making. Her arm movements will mirror the dancer's) (El Guindi 7).

CINDY: (As in "shut up" :) Rick?

(Lights up on DANCER CINDY standing behind the wall, knife in hand. The humming sound starts to increase as the scene goes on). (El Guindi 44)

As a realistic setting, the play takes place entirely in the kitchen or living room, while as an expressionistic setting, it takes place on the fluid wall behind the kitchen. Characters go from the unbearable truth of their current failure to a brighter, more hopeful past. They strive to escape their present problems, to return to a time when life was full of hopes and dreams. Dramatic

⁵⁵When I mention expressionistic elements, I refer to an artistic style and tools or elements, in which the artist strives to convey subjective feelings and reactions that things and events evoke inside a person rather than objective reality. The artist achieves this goal by using distortion, exaggeration, primitivism, imagination, and the vivid, startling, violent, or dynamic use of formal elements (Encyclopedia of Britannica).

action takes place over a few hours, from late afternoon to late night, yet it deals with material dating back to when these characters immigrated to the United States. Memory scenes are not flashbacks; instead, they overlap with the present, they are expressionistic in nature⁵⁶. The memory and ghost episodes are not chronologically organized but somewhat warped, accelerated, and heightened by repeats and selected to heighten the contrasting perspectives on Omar and Cindy's current feelings of hopelessness.

The play's ongoing action is present, although it is constantly interrupted by the recreation of occurrences that initially happened in the past before the play began. At other times, past and present acts occur together. And, as the action goes back and forth in time, so do the characters' points of view. The scenes in the present portray characters and situations that we consider to be real because we accept the standards of realistic drama. However, when prior scenes appear, the point of view becomes subjective since the past scenes are Omar and Cindy's memories of earlier happenings. Finally, scenes with parallel past and present activities provide a mixed objective-subjective point of view. At the same time, we watch real actions; we can also perceive Omar and Cindy's emotional connection with the past.

Cindy and Omar begin to crack under the pressures of their lives, and they get trapped in a stream of daydreams and chaotic memories from which they cannot escape. They are victims of an unjust society as well as their own flaws, and they must accept responsibility for their acts. Cindy and Omar are unhappy as a result of the pursuit of their version of the American Dream.

⁵⁶ According to Tennessee Williams, "Expressionism and all other unconventional techniques in drama have only one valid aim, and that is a closer approach to the truth" Expressionist theater depicts intense emotions by portraying the characters' spiritual growth and psychological pain. Its primary purpose is to communicate the vision and reality of mind, emotion, and dream that exist inside them. Expressionism portrays modern society's incapacity to meet people's spiritual demands. As a result, the modern urban social setup produces dehumanization, resulting in great psychological agony that individuals can scarcely bear. An expressionist play is a mind-reading and thought-reading play in which characters' inner souls are revealed more than their outward and verbal behavior. Although physical pain may be short-lived and easily healed, psychological suffering is, in most situations, long-lasting (Gamage).

CINDY: I'm not explaining it right. It's a—it's an immigrant thing.

PATRICK: A what?

CINDY: It's like all of it's been this relay race, and it's our turn to carry the baton. We're the ones who have to prove it was all worth it. Leaving home. Living among strangers who don't give a damn about you. It's not all fun and games. It's more a—yeah, it is a responsibility. An obligation. I'm not sure for Omar it's even about being creative anymore. (El Guindi 14)

Material wealth is not the solution Omar and Cindy want (like many others who see American Dream as fame, prosperity, and wealth). Still, they work towards such materialism as if they would be able to achieve their true, more creative dreams of being a dancer and a writer.

Trapped and blinded by their society which includes not just the country in which they live, but also their past, history, and parents—neither of them can think beyond the principles that have been ingrained in them. Yet, they did not achieve the popular American Dream, nor their own version of it.

CINDY: ...with his father—even after he passed away—I remember him telling me once that every time he writes...he feels this—presence. Even after all these years—he feels his father behind him. His hands on his back as he writes. His breath on his neck. And it's not a good feeling. He'll start hyperventilating, because he feels the pressure to... (El Guindi 13)

Omar resolves to commit suicide because he can never satisfy father's ghostly presence: he is unable to fulfill his dreams. He considers the possibility that his death may offer Cindy her only path to freedom and security as a way of honoring the dream of his father. Omar is aware of the falsity of the beliefs instilled in him by his father—as an immigrant— yet he must adhere to

them since he has nothing else. They ultimately realize the futile charade they are playing and the burden Omar's father has placed on him:

CINDY: You have to stop with your dad. He keeps screwing with your head. You don't have to fight his battles anymore. Just the way I refuse to answer to my family the way I used to.

OMAR: (He takes a few steps towards this memory of his father.) None of us walk away that easy.

CINDY: But we don't have to be in that head space in the first place. (El Guindi 45)

They both acknowledge the psychological pressure placed on them by their parents, but they cannot overcome them. So, they each take destructive steps in order to try to satisfy their parents' dreams or be rid of them altogether.

Not all the blame is on Cindy and Omar and their parents; society also sabotages their hopes and aspirations. El Guindi criticizes both the unreasonable expectations of immigrants themselves and the society that restricts them in this play. Nevertheless, El Guindi suggests that Cindy and Omar have some control over their situation and how they decide to interpret and understand what has value in this materialistic culture. They resonate characters of modern tragic protagonists since they suffer both due to their circumstances and their own actions.

Omar After Hamlet, and the Evolution of Modern Tragic Hero

When reading *The Talented Ones*, one cannot help but notice parallels between Omar and Hamlet in Shakespeare's play. Although this dissertation's discussion recovers modern dramatic technique in relation to 21st-century immigrant characters and its departure from Shakespeare's classic strategies, I could not resist addressing this play's strong adaptation of Hamlet. After

studying and analyzing Hamlet's character, I discovered that various scholars, critics, and theorists in literature had compared Hamlet's personality to modern dramatic characters, which I will explain in this section. On the other hand, Omar and Hamlet have a very close bond regarding the type of obligation forced on them by their fathers, which dominates their entire lives.

Hamlet exhibits characteristics of a modern hero in terms of his self-conscious thoughts and concerns about the social system that compels him to action. In his book *Hamlet and the Philosophy of Literary Criticism*, Morris Weitz states that Hamlet is the developing modern man who finds himself in a tragic dilemma that is more mental than physical⁵⁷. One constant in the development of modern tragic drama is that a protagonist is very much a man of his time, representing the dominant worldview; this is the stark contrast between classic and modern tragic plays (Weitz 64). The human is subject to a metaphysical order in the realm of classical tragedy, which was ruled by gods and goddesses whose motives were unknown to people. External, supernatural powers intervene in human existence to decide their fate and punish them for their

⁵⁷ Hamlet has never lost its theatrical attraction in the four centuries since it was first staged, and it is still the most often performed of Shakespeare's tragedies today. At the same time, it has earned a reputation as his most intellectually perplexing play, with more discussion than any other work in English—save the Bible. Even now, when criticism emphasizes the significance of the reader's role in "constructing" the texts of the past, Hamlet's ability to tolerate the most mystifyingly varied interpretations is astounding (Weitz). For example, in the early nineteenth century, Romantic critics saw it as a psychological study of a prince who was too delicate and sensitive for his public purpose. The hero's suffering and self-reproach spoke so vividly of the disappointment of revolutionary failure to late-nineteenth-century European intellectuals that "Hamletism" became the accepted name for political vacillation and disengagement in czarist Russia. Unsurprisingly, the 20th-century found it a more violent and unsettling kind of play. The tragedy appeared to encapsulate the European death wish exposed in the bloodshed and desolation of the First World War, according to the French poet Paul Valéry. It was presented in the mid-1960s by English director Peter Hall as a production depicting the political dread of the nuclear era. The play became "a drama of a political crime" in a regime similar to Stalin's Soviet empire, according to Polish critic Jan Kott and Russian director Gregori Kozintsev. Seamus Heaney, a contemporary Irish poet, saw it as a metaphor for the terrible politics of vengeance (Kott 64).

sins (Weitz 65). On the other hand, Shakespeare highlighted the importance of character in the metaphysical system whose decisions directly impact humanity.⁵⁸

The burden of responsibility that such choices entail weighs heavily on Shakespeare's hero, influencing his every move. As a result, Hamlet's knowledge of the truth and its possible consequences for revenge complicated any action he may take. Our present protagonist, Omar's image of himself and his situation, is profoundly altered due to the burden of responsibility and knowledge of the truth. In both plays—*Hamlet* and *The Talented Ones*—the protagonists are obsessed with their thoughts, doubts, anxieties, and changes between positive and negative perceptions of reality.

In the modern world, such uncertainty is understandable. In his article *Hamlet's Modernity*, Isadore Traschen claims that Hamlet confirms our modern sense "that nothing is certain. He is a victim of the modern disease that life is problematic" (Traschen 517). While the values of the classic tragic hero tend to be normative, and the play supports the existing moral code of society as a whole (Langbaum 163), the values of modern tragic drama are not as firmly defined. They are self-determined by a remarkable protagonist in his sensitivity to and perception of life.

Shakespeare immersed us so thoroughly in a character's mind, a tactic that permanently transformed the notion of the tragic hero while undercutting the tradition of pulling heroes down from the highest levels of society. Hamlet's dilemma is characteristic of the classical

⁵⁸ This distinction between Greek and Shakespearean worldviews has been debated. Hegel noted that Shakespeare's heroes do not battle ethical forces in the same way that Greek heroes do. Shakespeare never gives us the impression that his protagonists are the arbitrary victims of a god or a familial curse. According to A. C. Bradley, who was heavily inspired by Hegel, the central issue in their universe is human wickedness (Bradley 39). In *Shakespearean Tragedy*, Lionel Trilling eloquently defined the importance of man above metaphysical order when he remarked that King Lear needs us to realize that the primary source of any man's misery is his fellow man: flawed individuals carry out the terrible will of inhuman forces. Look at *Prefaces to the Experience of Literature* (Trilling 79).

protagonist, but how he handles it is modern⁵⁹. Both Omar and Hamlet bear the weight of a state of well-being. Omar must achieve success in this society. He comes from a generation of immigrants who gave up their lives so that their children may grow up in a free country with equal opportunities for everybody. If Omar fails, it is as if all immigrants' sufferings are meaningless. As a symbol for all immigrants, he must shoulder this great weight.

In addition to the heavy responsibility on their shoulders, Omar and Hamlet are both passionate men. Hamlet demonstrates exceptional talents seldom seen in a character by devoting his whole self to a single purpose. He reaches new heights of passion and delves into the self, and the meaning of life in ways seldom witnessed in dramatic literature before Shakespeare. Their passions enslave Omar and Hamlet. They are searching for the meaning of their existence, one as an immigrant lost in the world of his dreams and the other as a prince lost in the world of falsehoods.

This weakness causes the protagonists to behave in ways that finally bring them down. In the case of Omar, his loss of motivation to write, failure in marital relations, the weight of not being successful, failing the dreams of immigrants, and seeing his wife cheating on him with his

⁵⁹ Hamlet is subjected to a sequence of punishments for crimes he did not commit at all. The study of Hamlet demonstrates that Shakespeare was fully aware of a melancholic individual's outward and inward characteristics. Through Hamlet's character, Shakespeare addresses the dilemma that every contemporary man faces. To some degree, we are all Hamlet in one way or another. His mother Gertrude's sudden marriage to Claudius has wrecked his idealistic moral world. This event pushes him into an ethical dilemma. He seeks to remain in the realm of moral idealism, which he does by creating a make-believe environment around himself. This universe has no resemblance to the real world of action. Ghost's revelation transforms him into someone else entirely. He has the sensitivity of a modern character. The world has lost all its enchantment. It is not worth living. He feels smothered, like a prisoner who has been imprisoned in solitary confinement. He is often seen analyzing himself. This much self-analysis changes him into someone who has purposefully dried up all streams of action. Only his mind is active. "To be or not to be that is the question" (act III, Sc I, 1-56); Hamlet's broken way of thinking reflects modern man's ways of thinking. Modern man, like Hamlet, is confused. The opening lines of Hamlet's soliloquy alluded to the dilemma experienced by Hamlet and modern intelligent characters at various eras of human history. As a result, the dilemma has become a widespread phenomenon in modern times. The modern era is characterized by indecision. Hamlet's character exemplifies this mood of uncertainty. When he adds, "To be or not to be, that is the question," he seems to be referring to the presence or nonexistence of a variety of things. He, like the modern man, is susceptible to doubt. He is skeptical about the existence of ghosts. "The spirit I have seen maybe the Devil," he thinks (act II, Sc II, 1-59) (Mehrotra).

closest friend led to his initial crime of murdering himself or somebody else. Many circumstances contribute to Hamlet's weakness as a reflective burden of the following obstacles: his father's death, his mother's sudden marriage, and the behavior of a whole court that had also quickly stopped to grieve. The burden drives both Hamlet and Omar insane, even to the point of suicide.

The sensibility, therefore, exposes the heroes to immense vulnerability, but we watch them battle to overcome, even rise above their weakness. In this light, the sensibility causes the hero's biggest flaw: Omar sleeps with a hooker, fights with his supervisor at work and loses his job, buys death insurance, and chooses to kill himself. Hamlet and Omar eventually overcome their flaws; however, we are more inclined to think of their grandeur of the mind and the profundity of their thinking than their misery when we think about them.

In addition to sensibility, devotion to good and morality differentiates these tragic protagonists from many others. According to Max Scheler in his article, *On The Tragic*, tragedy can exist only in a world with values (Stabler 30). Hamlet and Omar are examples of value; they demonstrate communities that would be morally corrupt if not for their passion and dedication to the good—even if in their own beliefs. Regardless of their pain, their moral example acts as a role model for their communities. As Weitz claims, moral integrity develops due to the protagonist's reaction to his catastrophe. Catastrophe usually describes a change in fortune from happiness to sadness, it forces the hero to face possible tragedy; and is a critical part of the crisis (Weitz 68). Catastrophe challenges character strength in unforeseen ways, particularly in Hamlet, who had never been called upon to act before his father's death (Weitz 68). That "murder" for Hamlet and "failure in success" for Omar, as well as their father's spirits' exhortation to "revenge" or "success," forces these tragic characters to reconsider their beliefs in life.

Catastrophe shakes the hero out of his safe place and forces him to confront life's dark possibilities (Weitz 69). One way to assess a character's heroism is to study his reaction to tragic events. Omar accepts the dreadful reality of his failure as a successful writer, and so as a son and an immigrant. Awareness of this state is troublesome in and of itself, as it may throw Omar's world into chaos and make him feel insignificant. Consequently, he feels unheroic, unable to act in a manner that would bring order back into existence; so, he will find the answer in death.

Thus, many of Omar's attributes contribute to the pattern of the modern hero, who is not a man who answers to a crisis swiftly with tremendous deeds and victories, but one who is passive, self-reflective, and frequently, in his views, humiliating and weak. What we witness in his crisis is a struggle faced by immigrants, albeit with an extraordinary grandeur in how he confronts his difficulties. As a reaction to the situation, Omar contemplates various forms of escape, including suicide.

Paradoxically, anxiety and uncertainty may be the modern tragic protagonist's best ally since they prevent the character from choosing an easy way out of his problem by killing himself (Weitz 70). As we can see, after everything that happened to Omar, Cindy, and Patrick, after all those heated disagreements and fights, Omar says:

OMAR: ... I saw a help-wanted sign at the coffee shop. —I'll check it out today. —

There's another moving company that's hiring, in case. I'm feeling pretty motivated. —I guess I— I needed to get it out of my system. Vomit out whatever it was I needed to vomit.... I'll get it together... (El Guindi 77-78)

Omar refrains from committing suicide not because he believes he would burn in hell but because of the uncertainty, like Hamlet when he says:

Hamlet: The undiscovered country from whose bourn
No traveler returns, puzzles the will
And makes us rather bear those ills we have
Than fly to others that we know not of? (*Hamlet*, Act 3, Scene 1)

Hamlet wants to believe but does not; life and death are both in front of him, both fraught with dreadful uncertainty and unreality. In the end, both Omar and Hamlet reject suicide due to their grit and commitment to confront their problems, overcome them, and make life worthwhile.

Cindy: Representing Immigrant Women in America's History

If Omar portrayed an immigrant through a meaningful discussion of doubt and the dread of insecurity, Cindy's tale is much different. Cindy symbolizes women who toiled alongside men cultivating America's land to sustain their families. She speaks for many American women (immigrant or not) who were not self-sufficient and bore a heavy responsibility for their families' survival in the New World. Her dreams are about self-actualization, freedom, and fulfillment upon achieving it. To fully appreciate Cindy's role as a female representation, a brief discussion of the historical significance of immigrant and non-immigrant women in American history feels necessary here.

Many immigrants' hopes were sparked by expanding America's metropolitan regions during the nineteenth century. Roger Minshull, in his book *The American City and its Citizens: The Dream on the Move*, points out that living in major cities like New York "was not the achievement of the American Dream that the immigrants were seeking, but the location and the system worked well enough for each successive wave of immigrants at least to make a start in America and in the city" (Minshull 121). Like America's rural citizens, many immigrants in the

cities discovered that the American Dream did not always become a reality; their lives were a succession of urban catastrophes. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, most immigrants who lived in cities had difficult lives. They worked long hours for minimal pay and in intolerable circumstances. Immigrant families lived in crowded tenements in filthy neighborhoods. Minshull notes:

There are horror stories, and horrifying pictures, of immigrant experiences and of immigrant quarters from the nineteenth century. With so many people from such diverse backgrounds arriving in their millions in the raw new cities not designed or organized to receive them, it would be surprising indeed if there were not. (Minshull 124)

Many immigrants in America's poor neighborhoods saw the American Dream as just an inaccessible dream.⁶⁰

Immigrant women did not have a better situation than men, especially those female immigrants who could not travel to the United States independently and migrate with their families. William L. Andrews, in his book *Journey in New Worlds: Early American Women's Narratives*, describes women's situation who migrated internally or from abroad in the United States:

Although life on the frontier offered women a degree of freedom that many of their Old-World sisters did not enjoy, the ultimate purpose and value of woman—and mate and mother—was as much assumed in the United States as in Europe. Marriage liberated a woman from the power of her father but consigned her to an equally subservient status with regard to her husband. (Andrews 4)

⁶⁰ The great comedian George Carlin said it's called the American Dream because you have to be asleep to believe it!

According to Andrews, even though most early American women did not live independently, they had a tremendous deal of responsibility for their families' survival in the New World. Women worked alongside male immigrants to cultivate America's land and as laborers during Industrial Revolution to help support their families. They also worked in industries exposed to harsh working conditions and were paid minimum wage. Immigrant women were responsible for maintaining the house, caring for their families, and working in fields or industries. Life was not simple for the women of the New World (Andrews 5-6).

Women were an essential part of the United States' early history, but society's patriarchy limited their prospects. However, women have persisted in overcoming the boundaries imposed by their male equivalents for ages. In her book, *From the Other Side: Women, Gender, and Immigrant Life in the U.S., 1820-1990*, Donna Gabaccia points out that women fought hard in the nineteenth century to raise their voices to be heard by the male bosses, co-workers, and husbands, who told them they had to stay in subordinate roles (Gabaccia 84). Women joined labor unions to better working conditions. As Gabaccia states, "Immigrant women participated in some of the largest and most militant strikes in U.S. history, in the garment and textile industries" (Gabaccia 85). Fight for the right to vote, nineteenth-century women were vocal advocates for other causes to improve their prospects and society. Maxine S. Seller lists the many contributions made by immigrant women to American society:

Immigrant women built social, charitable, and educational institutions that spanned the neighborhood and the nation. They established day care centers, restaurants, hotels, employment agencies, and legal aid bureaus. They wrote novels, plays, and poetry. They campaigned for a variety of causes, from factory legislation to birth control, from cleaner streets to cleaner government. (Seller 59)

Immigrant women were essential to the development of the United States, and their efforts enabled modern women to continue to redefine and achieve the American Dream.

These female immigrants interpreted the American Dream in their unique way. However, most of them saw the United States as a place where women, like men, could pursue and succeed in their dreams because the United States is a land that fulfills the dreams. Those women primarily emigrated from their home nations searching for human liberty. Cindy is one of these women; she embodies the many women who are still discouraged from pursuing their version of the dream. Cindy's status is determined by her husband, father, and masculine culture; therefore, she remains a sex object and domestic support system.

Cindy confronts this system in several ways; before marriage, she worked and supported her parents, who were undocumented with no permit to work. After marriage, she worked even harder to help her husband pursue his personal dream, or else they would be without a home and food. And neither displacement nor hunger has ever brought anyone closer to their dreams. Cindy gives up her dream of becoming a professional dancer to help stabilize her parents and her husband's lives.

As a modern woman, Cindy faces many challenges as she chases her version of the dream. El Guindi demonstrates that women may pursue careers and live independently of males. However, he also shows that, despite modern women's advancement, they must face their own discontent as well as the unchangeable sentiments of a patriarchal society. The men in the play continue to expect women to meet their desires rather than women's own needs. Patrick, as an example, demonstrates that even the younger generation of American males wants a woman to sacrifice herself for the good of everyone:

PATRICK: ... You're a lot sexier than my mom. But you're the same in the way you sacrifice yourself for other people. I used to get so mad at her for not standing up for herself. Her heart was like this big—top-of-the-line Ferrari engine. But it wasn't taking her anywhere because she was too busy helping other people. (El Guindi 8)

And at the end of the play, he says:

PATRICK: I just want you to stop hurting. This dream of dancing, it's just one of the many things that's like waiting to explode out of you. That needs to explode out of you. (El Guindi 61)

While Patrick acknowledges Cindy's freedom to follow her ambitions, he equally confesses that he prefers a woman to meet his needs. Patrick depicts the persistent patriarchal desire for women to be traditional wives and mothers.

Achieving a dream remains a challenging process due to patriarchal society's expectations. Cindy's main desire was to be a dancer, but now she works as a nurse, taking care of the house and mortgage, bills, and food. During her conversation with Patrick in Act One, she says:

CINDY: I can be making dinner like now, and where I really am—it's like there's another me shadowing my movements. But the moves are like choreographed. And beautiful. And lately, this other me? This dancer? She feels more real than the daily me doing all my boring routine stuff. The other day, the doctor was giving instructions on a patient and I was miles away.

PATRICK: So, do something about it.

CINDY: Well I can't, can I. You of all people know how much Omar brings in. We do have something called a mortgage. We can't all be pursuing our dreams. (El Guindi 2)

Cindy exemplifies how patriarchal ideas still have a harmful influence on women. Cindy is unsatisfied, and much of her dissatisfaction stems from her husband's failure to fulfill his own dreams and provide a better life for both of them.

Being a talented woman Cindy, could have it all, but she could not attain the modern women's version of succession, and she was unable to live the life she sought. Cindy's notion of her dream is founded on more than simply inner contentment. She prioritized her family over her talent. However, society, the history of immigrant women, family traditions, and the selfish husband she chose one day as a person with whom she may fulfill her dreams are all just barriers.

As a member of an immigrant group, Cindy lacks the power to make decisions that will shape her destiny. She is a victim of racism, and as a result, she is denied equal opportunity. As evidence of this continuing racism, Cindy tells Patrick:

CINDY: In spite of still being considered a second-class citizen by some people. I had a patient tell the doctor the other day that he didn't want someone like me touching him.

You want to know why I haven't pursued my dancing? Because the thought of it, which is so alive in me, the dream of it keeps me going. Maybe I have been afraid to drag it out into the real world because it's the only pure thing I can hang onto, and I don't want it soaking up the toxic fumes you live off. (El Guindi 38)

If she cannot live her dream, she dreams it, which is the only thing that makes her go on in this miserable life.

Cindy works hard; still, she cannot have enough money and freedom to pursue her dancing career. We see allusions to the concept that hard labor is required to attain a dream again and over. Still, an underlying issue in this play—as in many other modern and immigrant

plays—is that hard work does not deliver the dream to everyone equitably. Sometimes the path to prosperity is just under the feet of Americans, not foreigners. In the United States, hard work is not necessarily a guarantee of success, and many individuals are not rewarded for their efforts. As a result, many people, specifically women, look for other ways to be rewarded for their work, even if they are like Cindy who only fantasizes about her dream.

The Talented Ones in Performance

The Talented Ones, directed by Jane Unger, premiered at Morrison Stage in Portland from April 25 to May 22, 2017. *The Talented Ones* was the first new play development commission for *Table|Room|Stage* from Artists Rep as part of the Oregon Community Foundation’s “Creative Heights Initiative.”⁶¹

Shannon Gormley reviewed this performance as a complicated work which moves from realism to non-realism genres unexpectedly:

“A new work by Seattle playwright Yussef El Guindi, *The Talented Ones* deals with subject matter that could potentially seem pretty heavy. Both first-generation U.S. citizens, Cindy and Omar feel an immense pressure to make up for their immigrant parents’ sacrifices with their success. “‘We’re the ones who have to prove that it was all worth it,’ Cindy tells Rick.” (Gormley)

Gormley sees the play more like an unsettling parody than a realist drama. He believes that the play’s political conflicts never achieve a satisfactory conclusion. However, he says despite its honesty and un-romanticism, *The Talented Ones*’ worldview manages to be lovely (Gormley).

⁶¹ (<https://artistsrep.org/location/morrison-stage/>).

In her review on *Oregon Artswatch Archive*, Hailey Bachrach discusses the issue of “universality” in art and in this performance, which she believes has been generally acknowledged:

... what people generally mean by it [universality] is something that is written by and about straight white men. They are the generic, universal mode of drama—everyone else is embellishment, specificity. (Bachrach)

Bachrach assumes that *The Talented Ones*, directed by Jane Unger, is a dark comedy on the most universal of subjects, immigration. She indicates that El Guindi’s concerns of nationhood, creative inspiration, and the distinctive shades of immigrant existential distress sit uncomfortably within this framework:

His hyper-articulate characters deliver eloquent explanations of their states of mind and heart, so while much is said, little can be meaningfully challenged by the other characters. (Bachrach)

She continues by stating that while the characters argue and make their points, their arguments do not always seem to be moving the play forward. Their use of texture and tone does not constantly assist the relative value of information and exchanges (Bachrach). Bachrach quotes El Guindi’s interview on immigration issues. El Guindi mentioned: “the immigrant state of mind can be glimpsed by anyone who feels displaced, foreign, or at odds with—and trying to fit into—new surroundings. Which covers everyone” (Bachrach). According to this reviewer, Omar and Cindy’s portrayal of their sentiments and experiences as immigrants are hollow. They are viewed as second-class citizens. Their parents went through so much difficulty for them, and they must live up to that:

Acquiring citizenship felt like joining something bigger than themselves. We don't even learn where they are from, though references to their home countries' conflicts with America suggest Omar is from the Middle East and Cindy is Vietnamese. (Bachrach)

Bachrach adds that when we say we seek "universality," we do not genuinely mean individuals who appear, speak, think, and feel exactly like us, with no characteristics that set us apart:

... we want a writer to demonstrate the theater's power to engender radical empathy. To make us feel connections where we thought none could exist. This is why generalities don't really work. It's the careful crafting of the world and perspective of a full human being (or the theatrical illusion of one) that pulls us close and opens us up. (Bachrach)

Concerning these characters, according to Bachrach, Omar and Cindy's first connection as teens was via Cindy's dancing and the implicit understanding that witnessing someone's work reveals something about them as a person. Omar is a writer, although we never learn anything about the manuscript he is writing. On the other hand, Cindy seems the most genuine and closest to us when we get to witness her dance (Bachrach):

Brief forays into a more surreal aesthetic are intriguing, but don't feel fully integrated. And there is the excitement of the premise itself: the picture of an all-American house mortgage and open-plan living room and lasagna in the oven and dreams pushed aside, but all underpinned by a journey, by a struggle to claim what their peers and coworkers were born to. (Bachrach)

Bachrach concludes her assessment by expressing her concerns about the portrayal of the all-American characters and their way of life.

Maggie Yates from *Broadway World* explains that *The Talented Ones* combines the political with the personal in a dramatic portrayal of the immigrant experience in the United States, as symbolized by a failing marriage:

This piece presents an important (and timely) equilibrium of issues both general to the human experience and specific to the immigrant experience. Finding a balance between professional or artistic aspirations and a satisfying personal life is a universal struggle; *The Talented Ones* places this concept in the framework of finding one's stride within a new culture. (Yates)

Yates writes, the young couple's unfulfilled artistic ambitions exemplify disillusionment with the American Dream and the pressures imposed on the young generation of fresh American citizens:

Does your family lay all of their future at your door and expect you to carry it for them?"

Cindy asks an American friend in explanation of her frustration. We're supposed to be *the talented ones*. We're the reason they came. Our futures. (Yates)

About this performance, Justine Sutton claims that *The Talented Ones* combines reality, memory, and dance with dark humor to explore themes of immigrants' shattered dreams and perceptions of success. *The Talented Ones* highlights Omar's career problems and Cindy's growing displeasure as she adjusts to life in a new country. Patrick, Omar's American friend, supports Cindy, and as their relationship develops, her marriage may fall more apart (Sutton).

In conclusion, most critics and journalists who have written about this play agree that *The Talented Ones* is a dark comedy that analyzes the unfulfilled dreams of immigrants wanting to establish a name for themselves in their adopted nation. As converts to the American Dream, conventional concepts of success and failure become risky. By fusing reality with memory and dance, *The Talented Ones* deconstructs this couple's marriage and dreams with growing

violence. While the performance received mixed reviews, most critics agreed that the style was defined by strong acting, stunning stage design, and competent directing.

Conclusion

Yussef El Guindi's *The Talented One*, portrays the life of an immigrant couple who struggle with their family expectations, their own American Dream aspirations, and their relationship with American society as exiles. Their story is about immigrants and their children who encounter challenges and trials that other Americans do not. Cindy and Omar's characters reveal the relationship between illusions and their efforts to overcome their dreams and aspirations. In this play, the line between realism and expressionism is indistinct.

We can compare Omar's personality with Hamlet in terms of his self-consciousness, his concerns about the social system, his burden of responsibility, his view on the issue of life and death, his psychological issues, and his eventual decision for his life as a warrior. Omar is a modern individual in a catastrophic mental conflict, and he is subject to a metaphysical value of humanity. Omar's awareness of his acts and their consequences complicates any course of action he may follow. In the case of Omar, his lack of ambition to write, marriage failure, the weight of failure immigrants' goals, and seeing his wife cheat on him with his best friend all contributed to his original crime of killing himself or the other one.

Omar embraces the horrible truth of his failure as a successful writer and his failure as a son and an immigrant. In this view, the hero's most significant flaw may be his weakness. Catastrophe takes the hero from his secure haven and forces him to face the harsh possibilities of existence. He feels unheroic and seeks solace in death. Omar's colorful characteristics contribute to the modern hero's pattern, who is not a character who responds to a crisis with heroic exploits

and achievements, but one who is self-reflective and sometimes humiliated and weak in his estimation. Omar illustrates the modern hero's need to believe that life has value when faced with his fear of death. He refrains from suicide not because he thinks he will perish in hell but because of uncertainty.

As the play demonstrates, women continue to shoulder most family duties and are financially accountable for the family. Cindy's destiny as an immigrant woman is decided by her husband, father, and male society. El Guindi demonstrates that, despite modern women's advancement, they must confront their dissatisfaction and the immutable feelings of a patriarchal society. Men continue to expect women to prioritize men's needs before their own.

Cindy is an example of a woman who, despite her talent, was unable to achieve the modern woman's version of the American Dream. Her frustration arises from her husband's inability to follow his aspirations, therefore, providing a better life for them. Cindy's life demonstrates how patriarchal ideologies continue to have a detrimental effect on women.

As a matter of form, the author creates very realistic scenes in terms of content and dramatic technique and others that are entirely unrealistic in addition to examining Cindy and Omar's mental illusions. He employs a variety of expressionistic techniques to follow the thoughts of his central characters as they move between the past and the present. *The Talented Ones* is a drama that verges on the edge between truth and delusion. It employs a range of modern theatrical approaches to depict the characters' life journeys. Among the several techniques used in the play, expressionism is the most frequent.

El Guindi dramatizes the relationship between shifting time and shattered space by using various expressionistic dramatic techniques to demonstrate how his characters' troubled minds blur time-based and geographic boundaries. The episodic and fractured structure of the play

highlights the relative nature of time and seems to correspond to the character's destruction of space. Memory sequences are not flashbacks but a moveable fusion of the past and present. In this play, American civilization is a force that wears down immigrants. El Guindi strives to establish a balance between power and liberty to further the cause of immigrant justice.

CHAPTER 5: STRANGER IN A NEW LAND; *THROUGH THE ELEVATED LINE* AND

NOVID PARSI

“They told me to take a street-car named Desire, and then transfer to one called Cemeteries and ride six blocks and get off at-Elysian Fields.”

—Blanche, *A Streetcar Named Desire*

“I follow the signs. “Trains to city.” And I see the city gets bigger, bigger. “This is Chicago! This is Grand!” Boom, crash.”

—Razi, *Through the Elevated Line*

Through the Elevated Line by Novid Parsi, an adaptation of Tennessee Williams’ *A Streetcar Named Desire*, delves into American racism, the Iranian Islamic regime’s homophobia, and one damaged man’s attempt to deal with both issues, as well as his personal problems. The main character Razi is a gay Iranian tourist-refugee. After arriving from Iran, he lives in the apartment of his pregnant sister in Chicago. During the play, we learn about his failed relationship with his sister and her husband, and his difficulties in assimilating into American society. This play examines the immigrant experience and invites the audience to see how ignorance and narrow-thinking trap us in inhumanity.

As the second generation of immigrants, Novid Parsi— who has personal experience with the challenges faced by immigrants to the United States—depicts the life of a gay Iranian young man and his ultimate loss of faith in the American Dream. Parsi examines the hopes and desires of an immigrant for a better life and happiness. This play has historical and political references concerning both Iran and the United States. Novid Parsi is familiar with Iranian and American cultures as an American with Iranian roots. Throughout the play, the reader witnesses how an Iranian identifies the United States and its portrayal as a land of liberty and opportunity.

Readers also witness the experiences of a gay man within the Iranian politico-religious system and the reasons for his immigration to the United States.

As we will see in this chapter, both the *Elevated Line* and *A Streetcar*'s main characters (Razi and Blanche, respectively) are people in distress. They are isolated, forgotten, misunderstood, and despised, with no hope of help and support. Williams and Parsi assert in their plays that an individual follows the correct or incorrect path, out of necessity. The playwrights expose their characters' psychic intensity by delving into the problems of their alienated and frustrated personalities (Neimneh 75). Both Razi and Blanche—one gay and an outsider, and the other a woman and outsider—are physically and emotionally displaced. They are individuals who struggle with society and themselves, and they have difficulty adjusting to their environment.

These two plays illuminate the anti-heroic aspects of humans, which was one of the main topics of modern plays: their lack of compassion, their responsibility for self-suffering, their struggle for identity, and their potential redemption through compassion and love (Neimneh 76). The plays demonstrate social breakdown and moral decay. They both indicate that the American Dream was not inclusive in the new society. In these plays, the absence of any norms of behavior for women or gays; exploitation, rootlessness, and lostness are all characteristics of the societies the playwrights try to reveal to us.

The society of Parsi's play still grapples with some of the same characteristics and challenges in the 20th-century, more than seven decades after the publication of *A Streetcar*. Both plays explore their characters' inner frustrations and their tensions and conflicts with unjust society rules which are pushing away people like Blanche and Razi. As Francis Donahue states in his book *The Dramatic World of Tennessee Williams*, characters become victims of mental

tensions, suicidal ideation, and insanity, as well as mental and moral disintegration. These two plays delve deeply into the psychological difficulties of the characters and conflicts generated by societal forces (Donahue 63). As a result of these conflicts, characters get entangled with a life mixed with illusion and reality. About the illusion and reality in William's works, Francis Donahue explains:

... between reality and illusions; behind William's outer dramatic world of sex, violence, neuroticism, homosexuality, and personal frustration lie such basic themes as the conflict between reality and illusion, the destruction of the sensitive by the insensitive and the human corrosion wrought by time. (Donahue 63)

Sensitive Blanche and her adapted version—Razi's circumstances, emotional fantasies, and societal conditioning, as they are, elicit tolerance of their flaws and comprehension of their hopes and aspirations. Therefore, Razi and Blanche face the choice of remaining in this despised world or dying alone. The conflict between belonging and being separate is central to both characters' development and appears to be universal. In the end, they both are driven to the absolute limits of the world, confronted with their own isolation.

In this chapter, *Through the Elevated Line* will be analyzed as a standalone play and by way of an adaptation of *A Streetcar Named Desire* as a modern play with elements of expressionism and existentialism. To illustrate this, we should consider how Parsi adapts content and form from *A Streetcar Named Desire* for use in *Through the Elevated Line*.

The purpose of this section is to compare a drama from the 21st-century to one from the 20th. The chapter argues that the social factors contributing to characters' isolation and alienation remain relatively constant over time and are a recurring theme in 21st-century plays.

As demonstrated in this chapter, Novid Parsi employs Tennessee Williams' modern dramatic form to examine the issues confronting a (gay) refugee in contemporary American society.

To better appreciate this writer, we may begin by looking at his biography related to his work as a playwright. Then I will present the play's narrative and characters and conduct a general analysis of each character and story. In the next part, I shall relate existentialist philosophy to the characters' traits in both plays. Finally, I will discuss how the press has reacted to this play's performance.

Background on Playwright

Novid Parsi is a son of immigrant Iranians, born in New York and raised primarily in East Texas. He received his undergraduate degree in English at Swarthmore College and his Ph.D. in English, focusing on 20th-century American literature, at Duke University. His plays have been developed or produced by Golden Thread Productions (San Francisco), The New Group (New York), Paines Plough (London), Playwrights Foundation (San Francisco), Queens Theatre (New York), and Silk Road Rising (Chicago), among others.⁶²

His works have been recognized in multiple years by the Eugene O'Neill Theatre Center's National Playwrights Conference and the Bay Area Playwrights Festival. Silk Road Rising produced the premiere of *Through the Elevated Line*, which received a Jeff Award nomination for Best New Work. Currently, Novid Parsi lives in St. Louis with his husband. He is a self-employed freelance writer and editor in arts, business, consumer, and nonprofit media.

The sources available on Novid Parsi mainly exist in the form of interviews and reviews of his plays. Parsi gives a perspective to immigrants as individual characters, not as labeled

⁶² Parsi, Novid. Biography provided by playwright to author.

aliens; “I was thinking about how we group immigrants into one of two categories: the good or bad immigrant, the hard worker or freeloader” (Parsi 2018). Regarding *Through the Elevated Line*, Parsi says he wanted to challenge our simple categorization of right and wrong immigrants by evaluating two immigrant siblings as individuals rather than stereotypes:

Razi Gol, like Blanche DuBois, is an unwanted traveler caught between two worlds, accepted by neither. Attitudes toward our own Blanches, our own others, have progressed ... and haven't. *Through the Elevated Line* looks at our idea of ourselves as inherently different from others, and above them. It considers the effects of believing ourselves not only exceptional but superior-elevated. In the end, it poses this question: Who do we count among our own? (Musbach)

Novid Parsi takes a close look at the characters in his plays and uses a modern theatrical structure to convey their various facets without passing judgment. He analyzes the society in which the protagonists live in detail and demonstrates the conflict between society and personality.

Other than trade journals such as *Theatre in Chicago*, *Silk Road Rising*, *Berkshire Fine Arts*, and *Chicago Reader*, there are a few critical engagements with Parsi's theatrical works in academic presses and theses. I read this lack of secondary sources not as a sign of weakness or lack of quality in Parsi's work, but as a sign of how easily artists like him, who are committed to their work as immigrant writers, can escape critical attention.

Through the Elevated Line's Plot and Characters

Here I will present a synopsis of the play based on the position and function of the key characters in the play. Then I will examine the play's modern dramatic form and content, as well as the play's existentialism threads.

Through the Elevated Line is set in Chicago's Uptown neighborhood, takes place over the course of six months from April to October 2016, which is the most extended amount of time a visitor's visa to the United States may be valid. In the first Act the house is in the midst of reconstruction and appears to be like a war zone, with little room or privacy for Razi.

Razi Gol—the main character, Iranian— moved in with his pregnant sister—Soraya. After losing the family property, Razi has burnt his bridges, wasting the family fortune, and gaining a reputation as a sexual outlaw. Razi faced discrimination in Iran because of his activities against the homophobic regime. He fled the country after being imprisoned alongside his lover—Omeed, who was executed in prison—for LGTB-political activity.

Razi is a figure imprisoned in unjust societies, partially due to his personality and partly due to his unfortunate position in his motherland and the adopted country. He uses his sophistication as a mask to conceal his shame and iniquity from the past. He has an ego issue, and to cover it, he behaves like a superior being, ending in his doom. His elitism and sensuality serve as a form of escape for him. As with Blanche, from which Razi's character is adapted, he wishes to avoid or forget the truth of his situation; the past is rife with guilt. Razi and Blanche both steered their lovers straight to the grave. They both lost family heirlooms and whatever remained from legacies of their bourgeoisie background. They both lost their jobs, became homeless, and made money from their sexual encounters.

Long before getting to all those troubles, Razi entered politics to protect LGBT rights against the Iranian Islamic dictatorship, which has prohibited all forms of individual and non-individual freedom—sexuality and non-sexuality—since the revolution in 1979.⁶³ During his military time, Razi meets a young man named Omeed, who becomes his first and only love. They both start their political activities together till the government arrests them. Razi unwittingly contributes to his boyfriend's execution by disclosing details about the party they organized.

RAZI: Because ... I ... *tell!* These animals striking. Barking. “You or him. You or him!” Words from their stinking (Razi's melody plays faintly.) mouths. So strange. Words. No weight, no shape. And yet they harm, they kill. Hours, days. The night room. No window, no light. The cries from deep inside the black. The lashings. They take me. Blindfold, blind, I hear ... A bell. A man. He comes. (The vendor's bell rings, ominously. In the distant shadows, the vendor crosses with his cart.) He says: ‘Tell us what he did, and you go free. We do not hurt you, we do not hurt him. We hurt no one.’ He takes away the blind. (An interrogation light falls on Razi.) Veil of blood in my eyes, I see ... he is only a man. His mouth smiles. I tell his mouth, I say ... Omeed gathers people to meet. To organize. To protest. ... I ... *tell.* (The vendor disappears.) And Omeed ... I never see again. (Parsi 84)

Razi's mind is filled with anguish, guilt, and misery, causing him to have neurotic outbursts. He becomes a prostitute due to unfulfilled objectives, a lack of money, and hope. Finally, he flees to the United States, which he imagines is a country of liberty and dreams.

⁶³ The Iranian Revolution, also known as the Islamic Revolution, resulted in the fall of the Pahlavi dynasty led by Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi and the establishment of an Islamic republic led by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, a leader of one of the revolt's groups (Brumberg, Daniel. [2004] 2009. *Islamic Revolution of Iran*. MSN Encarta. Archived on 31 October 2009).

At the beginning of the play Razi starts blaming his sister for marrying an “American bully” (Parsi 49), he considers Chuck “a man who barks like wild dog, he is to be kept outside on a chain” (Parsi 49):

RAZI: I understand, of course. You see big, muscular Ahmrikahyee⁶⁴ with his arms like this and his breasts bigger than woman’s. And your head, it turns. But such a man who barks like wild dog, he is to be kept outside on a chain. Not run loose inside your home.

You cannot raise child with such a man. Make life with such a man. (Parsi 49)

Razi hates Chuck and Chuck despises Razi’s arrogant poses. One day by accident, Chuck overhears from behind the curtain Razi’s circling words against him when Razi was trying to convince Soraya to get from the prison that this beast has built for her:

RAZI: We go, we find apartment. Soon you will make good income, you do not need this man, Soraya. You and I, we will live together, raise your baby together You cannot raise child with such a man. Make life with such a man....

SORAYA: Chuck *is* my life.

RAZI: Soraya, you have forgotten *everything*. Baba⁶⁵ taught us poetry. Beauty. Not one book in this Ahmrikahyee house. You are not the woman our parents wanted you to be. (Parsi 49)

After hearing this conversation, Chuck becomes vengeful and waits for an opportunity to punish Razi. He hires one of his employees—Cesar— to have sexual relation with Razi at home, take pictures of them, and then follows Razi to Boystown,⁶⁶ where Razi is working. Chuck gathers all

⁶⁴ American

⁶⁵ Dad

⁶⁶ “Northalsted (also known as Boystown) is one of the most country’s inclusive LGBTQ+ communities and the oldest officially recognized gay neighborhood in the United States. It’s known for its welcoming vibe, nonstop nightlife, LGBTQ-owned businesses, and excellent dining options. It’s also the center of some of Chicago’s most popular events and festivals” (<https://www.choosechicago.com/>).

this information—connects them to Razi’s past— and attempts to discourage his new boyfriend, Sean, from marrying Razi.

Razi’s past is always a source of anxiety for him. However, by going to the new world and supporting the torch of rich culture, works hard to find a way to remain and live again. He is concerned on the inside but attempts to look pleased and arrogant on the outside. In the end, he sacrifices himself in his quest for freedom. Partly due to his disposition and partly due to external conditions, he cannot succeed or make any progress toward realizing his dreams. His personality is a mash-up of numerous opposing drives. He has been a political activist, a lover, and a prostitute all at once.

Razi is a man without protection who must rely on his sister and her nasty husband. His narrative exemplifies the paradox of a nation with rich culture overshadowed by an authoritarian regime (i.e., Iran) in the face of a country with the slogan of the right to freedom for all (i.e., the United States). The first is in the past, and the second is not his future.

This play offers the reader a glimpse into Razi’s past—the disappointments and traumatic events such as his boyfriend’s execution and the loss of parents and properties. In doing so, Parsi creates a pitiable man. Despite his annoying self-absorption, Razi is endowed with qualities such as his permanent sadness and wistfulness, making him a sympathetic character to the audience. For Razi, only escaping from reality provided his comfort and solace.

Razi comes from a city known for beauty, poetry, wine, and love—Shiraz.⁶⁷ His roots grow out of such an environment. When he is uprooted and thrown into the harshness of a reality

⁶⁷ History of South and roots of Blanche has been discussed a lot. The truth that the society was highly structured, and Blanche was both comfort and stultification in that society. Now it is important to know about Shiraz, Razi’s hometown. Why Novid Parsi has chosen this town not any other places in Iran.

Shiraz is the fifth most populous city of Iran⁶⁷ and the capital of Fars Province, which is also known as Pars and Persis⁶⁷. This city has a moderate climate and has been a regional trade center for over a thousand years. Shiraz is one of the oldest cities of ancient Persia⁶⁷. Shiraz is known as the city of poets, literature, and flowers.⁶⁷ It is also considered by many Iranians to be the city of gardens, due to the many gardens, and fruit trees that can be seen in

in the new land, where he lost his sense of place in life, he must cope as best he can. For him, it is a combination of illusion, fantasy, and a reflection of Shiraz that sustains him. Razi's entire being is Iranian. His speaking, dressing, and thinking are permeated with echoes of Iran. But it is not merely geographical displacement from which Razi suffers. He is displaced in every facet of his being. Razi has lost the comfort, status, and security to which he is accustomed, first by the Iranian government that abandoned every LGBT activity and second by seeking asylum in a country that was not like its promised dreams about freedom and equity.

Razi is a character who falls from the splendor of Shiraz, his family house, and is forced to live with his sister and brother-in-law in Uptown Chicago, in an unfinished apartment with no privacy. His dreams are shattered, and he turns from a spirited Iranian to an exiled and doomed creature. The exile, along with other traumas (his boyfriend's death, his parent's death, and losing every opportunity in his hometown), is a cause of his desperation and eventual doom.

In Razi's mind, the loss of his hometown Shiraz links to the loss of his boyfriend, Omeed. His execution deals a blow to Razi's sanity, contributing to his emotional breakdown. After losing his parents and Omeed, he resorts to prostitution, another regressive step that drives him inexorably into collapse. His sister Soraya, who is the only one left for him, cannot assist him in escaping destruction.

Soraya, Razi's sister, is also an immigrant. She has been in the United States for eleven years, sent here by her upper-class family to attend medical school and make a decent living. She is almost finished with her dermatology school, and if everything goes well, she will have her

the city, such as Eram Garden⁶⁷. Shiraz "disputes with Xeres [or Jerez] in Spain the honor of being the birthplace of sherry."⁶⁷

Shiraz wine originates from the city; however, under the current Islamic regime, liquor cannot be consumed except by religious minorities.⁶⁷ Shiraz is a center for Iranian culture and has produced a number of famous poets. Saadi, a 12th- and 13th-century poet was born in Shiraz. Hafiz, another famous poet, and mystic was also born in Shiraz. Several scientists also originate from Shiraz.

own practice next year. As the play begins, Soraya is in the early months of her pregnancy, continuing throughout the play's two acts.

Soraya and Razi were raised in the same environment and are representatives of the same Iranian culture. However, Soraya is very different from Razi in nature and characterization. Both come from an aristocratic Iranian background of elegance and grace; nevertheless, Soraya adjusted to her new country after migrating to the United States, but Razi failed this ability. Soraya is a doctor who married a non-educated American white man from a very different culture than hers. Chuck is made entirely of flesh and sensuality. Soraya, too, enjoys bodily pleasures. She places a higher value on what happens between a man and a woman in bed. She values security as much as sex, and she has both because of her adaptability.

RAZI: You become doctor for the surface. You and this man. All self and surface! ...

Pretty houses, pretty skin. But what is there beneath? Look around you, Soraya. The disrepair. The despair! Holes, papered over. Emptiness, papered over. Your eyes are open but you sleep. And I see my poor sister walk into dark hole and I scream, Wake up, Soraya! Before it is too late!

SORAYA: Razi, life is not a Hafez poem. This is reality, what Chuck and I have built.

This house. These walls. It's money in the bank, it doesn't get more real. (Parsi 50)

Chuck and Soraya share an undeniable sexual attraction. The connection is physical, not familial. Romantic words come second, if only because they appear to be shouting in a house filled with sex, alcohol, violence, and sports.

For the most part, Soraya is an untroubled person living everyday life. She is kind, wise, compassionate, and lovely. She lives in her own beautiful world of adjustment. She is concerned with material luxuries, and her history is not a source of nostalgia for her; she lives in the

present. Living in the present moment, unattached to an old culture and nation that have lingered in her previous history, transforms her into a charismatic personality. Her rationality and savviness rule everything, and she remains a loving and lively figure with sanity and normalcy. Perhaps Soraya has the same strong sexual instinct as her brother. But unlike her brother, she has been able to exploit this instinct to her advantage and an idealized American life. Despite all the class differences between Soraya and her husband, sex has connected them well. In fact, Soraya and Chuck are not bound by intellect, but they are adapted to each other through sexual desire.

Chuck is a white American who embodies a white working-class mentality and brutishness that views his status as an American with entitlement and dominance over immigrants. He is all flesh and blood, devoid of any higher sentiments or graces, representing white trash society. Two outsiders, immigrants, or foreigners invade Chuck's world of hedonistic materialism, sordidness, and ugliness. Soraya tempers her fantasies and adjusts to his reality, but Razi arrives to conquer his world.

As a counterpoint to Razi, Chuck is unconcerned with anything connected to the soul and mind. He walks and speaks like trash, displaying his commonness, insensitivity, and harshness. As a result, he has no grander dreams, no higher ambitions, and so no pain. When he feels Razi's presence in his house is interfering with his freedom and enjoyment, he develops a very harsh attitude toward him, even though his own superior and critical attitude toward him is partially to blame for his disrespectful behavior against him.

CHUCK: That's right, Razz. Me and mine come first. That's human nature, bro.

RAZI: What do you know of human nature, Chuck? "You who do not feel —"

CHUCK: Another poetry lesson.

RAZI: Yes, poetry. From the great Saadi⁶⁸, his tomb in our hometown. You remember, Soraya, or have you forgotten this too? “You who do not feel another’s pain, you forfeit the right to be called human.”

CHUCK: So I’m not human now, is that what you’re saying? It is what you say.

(Chuck advances on him, and Razi backs away. Soraya goes to Chuck, putting a hand on his face). (Parsi 59)

This conversation establishes the distinction between the two. The one finds humanity in preferring oneself to others, whereas the other sees humanity as prioritizing the pain of others to his own.

Chuck is to blame for bringing Razi to his doom. While Soraya was in the hospital delivering her baby, he raped Razi. Chuck also discredits Razi and ruins his blossoming relationship with Sean, which may have led to marriage and, as a result, living in the States rather than being deported to Iran, where Razi faces execution. Because of his hatred and contempt for Razi, he rapes him and therefore drives him insane. As a result, a man with extremely sensitive and powerful nerves is crushed by the rock of Chuck’s brutality. The play concludes with Chuck’s triumph. Chuck arranges for Razi’s transfer to the asylum center after driving him to the verge of instability.

Chuck is frustrated at Razi for pretending to follow the rules of the Iranian aristocracy, in contrast to his immoral and unrefined actions. Chuck despises Razi’s arrogant demeanor and the phony formality of his fictitious existence. From the start of the play, Chuck sees through Razi’s

⁶⁸ “Saadi Shīrāzī, born 1210; died 1291 or 1292. He was a major Persian poet and prose writer of the medieval period. He is recognized for the quality of his writings and for the depth of his social and moral thoughts. Saadi is widely recognized as one of the greatest poets of the classical literary tradition, earning him the nickname “The Master of Speech” or “The Wordsmith” or simply “Master” among Persian scholars. He has been quoted in the Western traditions as well” (<https://iranicaonline.org/articles/sadi-sirazi/>).

falsehoods and pretensions and embarks on his wicked mission to expose Razi's actual identity and destroy him. Chuck also sabotages Razi's connection with Sean, jeopardizing his only hope of salvation and rehabilitation via marriage to a respectable man.

Chuck pursues his interpretations of the American Dream, including owning a wonderful house, a gorgeous wife, and children, watching football, drinking beer, and grilling on weekends. But when Razi enters their life, his kingdom of a narrow fantasy is shattered for a little while.

By virtue of being an American, he considers his wife, and everything associated with her as his personal property. Chuck adores Soraya as long as she is obedient and humble. However, Chuck believes that Soraya has changed significantly since Razi moved into his house. She appears to have absorbed some of Razi's anti-American and Iranian sentiments:

CHUCK: You wanna know why? I never heard you say "American" like that. Spit it out like some curse word. Never once! Till he showed up. You used to love this American man, my "stink." Couldn't get enough of the two of us goin' at it. (Parsi, *Through the Elevated Line* 79)

Chuck feels that Soraya is emancipating herself from his patriarchal rule, and her brother is dominating her. Chuck, seeing his peaceful and pleasant life threatened by the entrance of this alien invader, resolves to remove Razi from his life permanently. As a final option, he uses Razi's new lover—Sean.

Sean is a lawyer from a different world than Chuck. He is a little older than everybody and is capable of love and compassion as well. Sean has affection for Razi and wishes to assist and marry him. He portrays a successful gay man in American culture, with better education and manners. He has accomplished his goals and is now seeking love in his life; someone he can rely on, someone who is not after his money but somewhat his true personality:

SEAN: I don't think friends telling the truth is ever a problem. But you're right. What is wrong with me. You meet guys, sure. By the fifth date you realize you've picked up every tab. Not that I mind, y'know. But then they're saying their car needs repairs, could I help out this one time. But someone with substance? I've looked! I've looked. (Parsi, Through the Elevated Line 90)

At first, Sean finds Razi different from others. He admires Razi's character and spirit, and he wonders how someone (like Chuck) could be so cruel to him. Sean awakens Razi's final flicker of hope. He makes genuine motions. He is friendly and caring. But he is too American and too reliant on the law to love and live with Razi, an Iranian prostitute with a troubled background.

SEAN: They warned me, you know. All my friends, they warned me. Told me you were just looking for a sugar daddy, a green card. I told them they were wrong, they didn't know you. Do you understand how that makes me look?! And then this?.... You acting like you're pure as holy water and all the while you're giving it up to some cheap construction guy? What're you — living some porn movie here?! And that's not even all of it. Chuck tells me (Parsi, Through the Elevated Line 83)

Sean can feel and be sympathetic, but he cannot put his sentiments into action. Ultimately, the dominant attitudes toward immigrants in the United States shape his relationship with Razi, which can only end disastrously. Thereupon, Sean breaks up with Razi.

After breaking up with Sean and being raped by Chuck, everything goes down rapidly. The couple eventually reports Razi as an illegal immigrant and places him in a refugee center. When the immigrant officer arrives to take Razi, he initially resists, but then he—struggling with hallucination and reality—reaches this awareness that there is no one and no place for him in this world anymore. He joins the officer and allows him to take him anywhere but here:

RAZI to the OFFICER: "I will go with you. To this home you call asylum."

OFFICER: "Yeah, we've got a process for that. Though... you're no longer valid here.

But you knew that. You got family, friends? You can say goodbye".

RAZI: "family? Friends? (He looks once at Soraya, then turns away.) No. No one.

OFFICER: "Come along, sir. (Parsi, *Through the Elevated Line* 98-99)

The officer leads Razi out and closes the door behind them. Soraya tries to go after Razi, but Chuck holds her back. Soraya sinks onto the floor, sobbing. Chuck puts his arms around her. "Oh babe we're good now, we're good..." (Parsi, *Through the Elevated Line* 100). The return of a happy family to their normal life is pictured in this scene. It is as if a parasite had infiltrated their home for a while, and they have now thrown it out in order to rebuild a beautiful picture of the successful family they had once. American life resumes normalcy as if no one named Razi had ever visited this house.

***Through the Elevated Line* and the Modern Dramatic Form and Content**

The study of a play completes when, in addition to the characters and their function in the play, we analyze the structure to find the link between characters and form, which further elucidates the content. In the case of *Through the Elevated Line*, which is an adaptation of the *Streetcar Named Desire*, having relevant information about William's dramaturgy will be necessary for understanding it. In this section, I will first go over some of Williams' dramaturgy to better understand the form, structure, and content of *Through the Elevated Line* and demonstrate how immigrant drama draws on and extends elements of modern drama.

Tennessee Williams' (1911-1983) is known for experimental dramaturgy, an artistic synthesis of realistic and anti-realistic dramatic forms. This propelled him to the forefront of

American dramatists and established his plays as modern international classics. Williams' theatricalism is among America's most significant and most aesthetic dramaturgical contributions, with diverse non-realistic dramatic approaches and expressionistic theatrical devices that are well infused in dramatic forms (Vishwavidyalaya 1). Williams coats his realistic drama method with a range of anti-realistic dramatic tactics derived from global modernist theatrical movements such as expressionism, existentialism, impressionism, symbolism, surrealism, and theatre of the absurd in most of his plays (Vishwavidyalaya 1-3).

As a pioneer experimental dramatist, Williams rejected the traditional forms of dramatic expression, stressing the need for transcending photographic realism, as it is ineffective in portraying human's inner life. According to Colin Douglas, subjective realism and the portrayal of the individual's mental states, fluctuating moods, and lacerated feelings comprise the real makeup of the individual (Douglas). For Williams, the surface reality is both deceptive and hypocritical because it does not faithfully reveal a person's feelings, inner thoughts, and the workings of his mind. To depict the modern human's stream of consciousness, the wanderings of his mind, and the fluctuations of his mood, realistic dramatic techniques are insufficient on their own. They, therefore, must be blended with nonrealistic expressionistic modes of drama capable of depicting such inner realism (Vishwavidyalaya 3-4). Williams' theory of drama assumes that the goal of dramatizing the characters' subjective feelings is to create a new reality for art on stage that is more objective and authentic than the surface reality captured from the actual world (Haley 45).

William's drama captures the beauty and romanticism of the faded rural American South with its characters' aspirations of aristocracy, gentility, and proper etiquette. Many reviewers proclaimed his plays to be the most lyrical and theatrical on the modern American theatrical

scene because of his vivid and lyrical picture of the American South (Vishwavidyalaya 9), the sympathetic characters he developed on stage, the lyrical and poetic language he employed on stage, and his open experimentation with modernist theatrical forms.

Williams has earned the distinction of being a proponent of plastic⁶⁹ theatre and sculptural drama due to his frequent use of plastic and sculptural components in the theatricalization of his plays (Kramer 2). To expose the poetic atmosphere of the drama and represent the characters' inner thoughts and emotions, Williams accomplishes these techniques with the creative mixing of all realistic and expressionistic stage components, including lighting, music, sound effects, costume, and stage atmospherics. According to Esther Jackson, Williams resorted to using plastic and sculptural theatrical devices such as painted and sculptural settings and cinematic dramaturgy. Using these techniques, Williams sought to achieve theatrical tasks because he believed that realistic dramaturgy could not portray the character's subjective states (Jackson 96-97).

William's plastic theatre, according to Roger Boxill, is also cinematic, using all the modern theatre's technicalities and stage techniques. Boxill explains:

The new plastic theatre must make full use of all the resources of the contemporary stage—language, action, scenery, music, costume, sound, lighting—and bind them into artistic unity conceived by the playwright. (Boxill 23-24)

All of the playwright's extra verbal elements or stage directions, explanatory notes, the visual objects on stage primarily, the symbolical colors of the characters' costumes, the stage atmospherics, the nonrealistic lighting effects, the soft music, and the stage sound effects are all

⁶⁹ "Williams describes this plastic theatre that would use stage design, lighting, mime, dance and music in a symbolic way to reinforce the meaning of the play. Through his 'Plastic symbols' Williams attempts to create a theatre language of profound emotional intensity. This emotional intensity leads him to employ poetic images and symbols in the dramatic text and drama leads towards plastic theatre through technical sides" (Philips).

plastic elements in Williams' sculptural theatre (Kramer 7). These non-textual components are just as important as the drama's dramatic dialogue in portraying the characters' line of thought, sentiments, and even mood swings. The play's dramatic dialogue words will be rendered expressive and lifeless without such plastic non-textual features (Jackson 97).

We see the same sculptural and plastic drama in *Through the Elevated Line*. This play is one of the valuable adaptations of Williams' plays due to the artistic merger of realistic and anti-realistic theatrical approaches used to dramatize the key characters' inner thoughts and torn sentiments. To depict the characters' internal reality, Parsi borrowed the modern theatrical elements of Williams' play. Isolation, social estrangement, and psychological disintegration are themes in Parsi's, and Williams' plays.

The main factor in each play to express these themes is language. Language is the key element the characters deploy to understand and manipulate their environments (Pickering 4). Blanche's language poetry, self-conscious idiomatic phrases, and lyricism were at the core of her effort to construct a place she could occupy without fear (Juan 255-263), and social estrangement:

BLANCHE: What is straight? A line can be straight, or a street, but the human heart, oh, no, it's curved like a road through mountains. (Williams, *A Streetcar Named Desire*. The Theatre of Tennessee Williams 36)

Like Williams, Parsi uses lyrical language to highlight the contrast between the character and his environment, emphasizing his isolation:

RAZI: Drink now and do not wait. For Death, Death will not wait. (Parsi 66)

Razi's association with Hafez's poetry⁷⁰ and his reading of them in proper settings substantiates this allegation. His poetic language is an extension of his poetic thought. According to this poetic criterion, he perceives healthy relationships.

Language in these plays results from individual experience, and their way of expressing themselves depicts how they view and try to create their realities (Kimppa). Razi builds on his country's literary works reveals how he views his identity. For most immigrants, the language change entails a cultural shift and a loss of connection to one's history, home, and family. Razi has lost everything: his wealth, his love, his country, his house, and his identity. Language and poetry are the only qualities he has kept from his past. Language is the only object he can hang on to, to keep a portion of his lost identity. His poetic language is like a slender thread tying him to his new life in this strange society. Razi will collapse if this thread is torn.

Like his use of poetic language to define his key character, Parsi, like Williams, uses a variety of impressionistic sound effects in *Through the Elevated Line* to help build the play's dismal tone and poetic ambiance. The anti-realistic dramatic tactics used by Parsi in the play enable the audience to delve deeply into Razi's inner mind and portray his disturbed soul, failing mental condition, and ruptured sentiments. A Persian melody haunts Razi's mind. He is left weak and defenseless every time the vision of his boyfriend's tragic execution brutally hits his mind. This memory combines with disorienting sound effects from outside. For example, in one scene, "Razi looks around, uncertain, as his plaintive melody plays faintly. With the Setar⁷¹,

⁷⁰ Hafez was a Persian lyric poet whose collected works are often considered the zenith of Persian literature by many Iranians. His poems are usually found in the houses of people who speak Persian. They have memorized his poetry and used it as daily proverbs and sayings. His life and poetry have prompted much investigation, criticism, and interpretation, and he has had a more significant influence on post-14th-century Persian writing than any other Persian author (Aga Khan III, *Hafiz and the Place of Iranian Culture in the World*, November 9, 1936 London).

⁷¹ Setar is originally a three-stringed instrument; a fourth string was added by the mid 19th century. It is played with the index finger of the right hand. It is a member of the tanbur family of long-necked lutes with a range of more than two and a half octaves (Jean During; Alastair Dick (1984). "Setār". In Stanley Sadie (ed.). *The New Grove Dictionary of Musical Instruments*. London: MacMillan Press Limited. pp. 353–354).

Santur⁷², and Kamancheh⁷³ instruments, Razi's melody draws on both Persian and Western sounds. (Parsi 5)" In Razi's state of mind, the blend of Eastern and Western music depicts the dilemma he is experiencing; he leaves his beloved culture; and cannot embrace the new one.

Parsi uses a variety of expressionistic elements to illustrate Razi's mental and emotional agony. Music is the most expressive of them. He employs melodies and songs, each with a specific expressionistic role. Two songs stalk and occupy Razi's mind in this play: "Persian and Western" or ancient Iranian music and "loud, thumping rock music" (Parsi, Through the Elevated Line 5). The Persian melody is highly subjective because it is played within Razi's imagination anytime his guilty mind wanders back into the past as he looks back in sorrow at his boyfriend's terrible death. On the other hand, rock music highlights Razi's loneliness and solitude in his social neighborhood. Rock music is frequently played by Chuck and is symbolic of the social forces crushing Razi.

In addition to the external representation of Razi's state of mind through music, Parsi employs sashes of conversations and outside voices that drift into the apartment from the street through acoustic expressionism to further present the chaos and disruption Razi experiences. For example, in one moment, "The vendor shrugs and pushes his cart offstage, the tinkling bell fading away" (Parsi 5). Later,

⁷² The *sanjūr* consists of a flat trapezoidal wooden frame or box, across which are stretched metal strings that are beaten with small wooden hammers or mallets (Encyclopedia Britannica, 20 Jul. 2017, <https://www.britannica.com/art/santur>. Accessed 24 January 2022).

⁷³ A Persian bowed string instrument is used in Persian, Azerbaijani, Armenian, and Kurdish music. It is widely used in the classical music of Iran, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Kurdistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan, with slight variations in the instrument's structure. The kamancheh is related to the rebab, the historical ancestor of the kamancheh, and the bowed Byzantine Lyra. The strings are played with a variable-tension bow (*World Digital Library*. Retrieved 14 May2014).

A police siren can be heard, then a distant scream followed by laughter: the sounds of the city on a warm evening. A close bang: It could be a gunshot or fireworks.

Another shot-like sound. (Parsi 5)

Indeed, such aggressive expressionistic sound effects depict the vulgar social setting, in contrast to the soothing lyrical music of his memory, when the sophisticated Razi finds himself imprisoned again. It also sharpens the representation of Razi's unstable mental condition through sharp contrast. We can hear a violent city outside in the scene where Chuck rapes Razi: "the sound of a gunshot. Razi shrinks back, as shots, sirens, and other city sounds—the deafening noises inside his head—fill the room" (Parsi 90). This is an acoustic and expressionistic prediction of Razi's broken dreams for a new respectable existence in this new country and utter psychological destruction.

The constant sound of the train—or EL—is heard throughout the play, which also employs an expressionistic element that foreshadows an impending threat. While Razi admits to Sean that he drove his lover to be killed by the Iranian regime, the EL⁷⁴ passes with a loud noise. When he finishes his story, the EL's noise fades. We hear the EL arriving in the scene when Chuck is hidden behind the door overhearing Razi's attempt to persuade Soraya to leave her husband. When Chuck viciously rapes Razi while Soraya is still in the hospital after giving birth to their first child, the rush of the incoming train, a metaphor of destruction, turns savage.

As sound amplifies Razi's internal and external distress, darkness and light depict Razi's complicated character. When talking to Sean about returning to Iran, Razi states, "And soon, after the six months of my visa expire, I return to the dark" (Parsi 37). Or when he is trying to

⁷⁴ The Chicago "L" or "EL" (short for "elevated") is a rapid transit system in the United States that serves the city of Chicago and some of its surrounding suburbs (Chicago Transit Authority. Archived from the original on August 12, 2011).

convince his sister to get rid of his cruel, abusive husband, he says: “Your eyes are open but you sleep. And I see my poor sister walk into dark hole and I scream, Wake up, Soraya! Before it is too late” (Parsi 50). Or when he recalls an unpleasant experience in the past: “That I forget. The past. The dark. Pulling down ... down ...” (Parsi 52). However, he also takes refuge in the dark and in shadows: “August, late at night. Sean walks Razi home. The house’s renovation has progressed. It sits dark and silent” (Parsi 64). When he wants to convince Sean that going to Boystown and gay clubs for money helps him to survive and forget: “please try to understand. Those dark rooms, it is the only place I can go to — how do I say this in your language — to wipe away” (Parsi 83). In fact, Razi seeks sanctuary in the same darkness that is his greatest dread to avoid the harsh reality of his promiscuous life and the terrible realization that he has purposefully killed his lover. He fears confronting reality, and the truth destroys him.

As with the symbolic use of light in the play, other symbols portray characters’ inner thoughts, feelings, and intentions. The location of the drama, “Chicago’s Uptown neighborhood,” conjures images of broken dreams and shattered hopes which are crucial for a comprehensive understanding of the play’s dramatic action and its primary themes. As Parsi points out, the town is full of contrasts:

A warm April evening in Chicago. Uptown has been transitioning, unsteadily, from lower income and racially diverse to higher income and mostly white. Chuck and Soraya’s two-flat, in the midst of renovation, embodies the neighborhood’s striving ambition. It is still only a promise of the luxury home it aspires to be. The highly gestural set features frames rather than solid walls, and both interior and exterior playing spaces. (Parsi 1)

Uptown Chicago has long served as a crossroads for immigrants and refugees, many of whom had to flee their home nations or regions where systematic brutality harmed the poor and people of color (Reporter):

Residents of Uptown who wished to distance themselves from its image of poverty and blight discovered a new way to protect their interests; they changed the public identification of their neighborhoods. Residents of the northern half of Uptown rediscovered the name “Edgewater” and in 1980 achieved recognition as a distinct community area, halving Uptown’s population. (The Electronic Encyclopedia of Chicago © 2005 Chicago Historical Society)

Residents of Uptown who wanted to distance themselves from the region’s image of poverty and decay devised a new method to protect their interests: they changed their neighborhoods’ public identity to a growing affluent area.⁷⁵ For Razi, an outsider, this portion of the United States is harsh, aggressive, loud, and dangerous, devoid of beauty or elegance. His hopes of the United States as a romantic, lovely, and secure paradise changed from the moment he sets foot in the country.

On the other hand, Soraya and Chuck live in an exceedingly cramped and restrictive, unfinished apartment. Because there is no bedroom, Razi has to sleep in the living room with Soraya and her husband. The bedrooms are on the second floor and are currently under construction. The harsh world pressing in on Razi is represented by the ugliness of the area, the sound of El passing over their heads, gunshots heard from their surroundings, the street vendors with shattering voices, the dirt of the alley, and the confined space of the apartment.

⁷⁵ Noted in: (The Electronic Encyclopedia of Chicago © 2005 Chicago Historical Society).

To reach this unpleasant neighborhood, Razi had to use the train, calls El: “follow the signs. ‘Trains to city.’ And I see the city gets bigger, bigger. ‘This is Chicago! This is Grand!’ Boom, crash. The noise” (Parsi 7). For Razi, the train symbolizes fate, a path that has taken him to this harsh civilization, which will finally fail him as an outsider, driving him to destruction. For people who live in this area, though, the train means moving up to the sky: “El for elevated. The tracks. They’re elevated. In the sky” (Parsi 7). It entails transformation, growth, a better life, and achieving the American Dream. The elevated line has two meanings for those who come from the outside—Razi— and those who are accepted as insiders—Soraya. The location is the same, but everyone perceives it depending on their personality, background, and social circumstance.

We can examine the relationship between the characters and their environment in various modern theatre schools. Among them, which has been less discussed in academic studies, is the existential analysis, which I will discuss below.

Trails of Existentialism Via the Main Characters of *Through the Elevated Line*

While Parsi draws on Williams’s use of simplified realism and expressionism to portray the harsh environment and alienation of his main character, he also employs aspects of Williams’s existentialism in depicting Razi’s crisis. Existentialism refers to ideas prevalent in numerous sectors of intellectual, theological, and artistic thought during and after World War II (Harmon and C Hugh Holman 185). In his research, *Irrational Man*, William Barrett presents the following immediate context and specific traits concerning the school of thought:

After the Second World War, the news of existentialism arrived. ... existentialism was a literary movement ..., and its leaders—Jean Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, Simone de

Beauvoir—were brilliant and engaging writers. ... The American public was curious about the philosophy Perhaps the curiosity consisted in large part of wanting to know what the name, the big word, meant; nothing stirs up popular interest so much as a slogan. But there was also a genuine philosophic curiosity, however intricate, in all this, for here was a movement that seemed to convey a message and a meaning to a good many people abroad, and American wanted to know about it. (Barrette 8)

Although Barret's *Irrational Man* was written (first published in 1958) after Tennessee Williams' *Glass Menagerie*, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, the theories offered throughout the work capture the notions regarding the fields of research that appear to have influenced Williams. Barret investigates 20th-century existentialism—its beginnings, effect on literature, art, music, and philosophy—as well as the most important existentialists: Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Sartre. These philosophers, as well as the primary characteristics of existentialism, had a significant influence on Williams' works, and while the author is not commonly classified as an existentialist, the similarities between his works and the theories of the existentialists described in Barret's writing should not be overlooked.

Through the Elevated Line, as an adaptation of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, shares the same structure, philosophy, storyline, characterization, and topic as the original. This chapter will discuss why and how existentialism, one of the 20th-century's modern styles, influenced *A Streetcar Named Desire* and how playwright Novid Parsi borrowed the same philosophy for his immigrant drama: *Through the Elevated Line*.

Williams was certainly interested in the topic of existentialism, as evidenced by his acknowledged influences on Jean-Paul Sartre, "I was most interested in meeting Jean-Paul Sartre, whose existential philosophy appealed to me strongly, as did his play *Huit [sic] Clos*"

(Colanzi 451-465). Williams lived and wrote when existentialism was gaining traction and influencing American thought. Some of his best works were written after WWII, and several plays show the influence of existentialism on Williams, such as: *The Glass Menagerie* premiered in 1944, *A Streetcar Named Desire* in 1947, and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* premiered in 1955 at the Morosco Theatre in New York City.

Existentialism is a broad philosophical school that is difficult to define. However, some aspects of existential philosophy are distinctive, despite the fact that the field is made up of a varied set of philosophers with differing ideas, certain common assumptions are shared among them:

[Existentialism] emphasizes existence rather than essence and sees the inadequacy of human reason to explain the enigma of the universe as the basic philosophical question. ... The existentialist assumes that existence precedes essence, that the significant fact is that we and thing in general exist, but that these things have no meaning for us except as we can create meaning by acting upon them. ... The existential philosophy is concerned with the personal commitment of this unique existing individual in the human situation. It attempts to codify the irrational aspect of human nature, to objectify nonbeing or nothingness and see it as a universal source of fear, to distrust concepts, and to emphasize experiential concreteness. (Harmon and C Hugh Holman 185-186)

Existentialism stresses human choices in life and their potential to change their position or give meaning to their lives by acting on their environment. We exist, and the result of our existence is determined by the decisions we make as individuals or, in certain situations, how we react to our own fears or emptiness. The emptiness that Barret calls “void” threaten human insanity, as he explains as follows:

When, by chance or fate, we fall into an extreme situation—one, that is, on the far side of what is normal, routine, accepted, traditional, safeguarded—we are threatened by the void. The solidity of the so-called real world evaporates under the pressure of our situation. Our being reveals itself as much more porous, much less substantial than we had thought it—it is like those cryptic human figures in modern sculpture that are full of holes and gaps. (Barrette 62)

The void is emptiness and nothingness that causes ambiguity and doubt. We do not have a straightforward solution to the concerns of purpose in our lives, and this uncertainty drives our anxiety and a lack of peace of mind. We mistrust our own values, which leads to a lack of stability and hope for a happy conclusion.

The existentialist is concerned with the sufferings of the human doubt, in addition to seeming meaninglessness of human existence. Humans can be aware of their own dilemmas, and their conditions frequently entail a sense of emptiness in the outer world. According to Barret, we are frequently “beyond the boundary of what is secure, stable, meaningful, ordained” (Barrette 62), a position that contributes to this sense of meaninglessness. We can try to make our lives more meaningful, but sometimes we must bow to a world of hardship in which we are in a situation that results in this sensation of meaninglessness “at the end of his tether, cut off from the consolations of all that seems so solid and earthly in the daily round of life” (Barrette 62), Barret noted. Nobody can dispute that meaninglessness does, at times, infiltrate our existence.

Harmon describes his sensation of meaninglessness as: “[t]his meaninglessness produces discomfort, anxiety, loneliness in the face of limitations, and desire to invest experience with meaning by acting upon the world” (Harmon and C Hugh Holman 186). However, when

individuals react to their conditions by trying to find meaning in an often-meaningless world, they are frequently disappointed because efforts to act in this ludicrous reality sometimes fail and cause “anguish, greater loneliness, and despair” (Harmon and C Hugh Holman 186). Finding meaning in a meaningless world is the theme of many modern dramas, which usually end in loneliness and despair.

This notion of meaninglessness in the world saturates Williams’ writings. His characters are frequently locked in a world or environment that they cannot change. Likewise, in Parsi’s play, Razi, for example, is effectively caught in two worthless worlds—the physical outer world (the contrast between a Western and an Eastern world) and his inner, psychological world. Outside, there is the totalitarian government in Iran and the Capitalist America, with its false promises of freedom and dreams. The clash of the outside worlds leads to a succession of conflicts (homophobia, immigration, the loss of loved ones, and loss of all sources of financial support, etc.). Yet no matter how Razi tries to escape his world of worries, a solution seems unattainable. Razi’s options are restricted; no matter where he goes, he will experience conflict and anxiety—the latter being an essential phrase in existentialist Heidegger’s philosophy.

Anxiety, according to Heidegger, is a component of human life, along with other qualities such as death, cautiousness, and guilt (Barrette 211). Anxiety, according to Heidegger, is one of the major concerns with existence, and he defines the phrase as the “fundamental mood of man” (Barrette 221). “Anxiety is not fear, being afraid of this or that definite object, but the uncanny feeling of being afraid of nothing at all. It is precisely Nothingness that makes itself present and felt as the object of our dread,” Heidegger says (Barrette 226). Similarly, Razi has no attachment to anything anymore; his life has been left in the past. His existence is what frightens him the most. His life signifies nothing, and his presence means nothing except that he exists. Anxiety is

common in our lives, as it is in Razi's, and existentialists say that it stems from the decisions one must make throughout life:

Human beings are totally free but also wholly responsible for what they make of themselves. This freedom and responsibility are the sources for their most intense anxiety. Such a philosophical attitude can result in nihilism and hopelessness, as, indeed, it has with many of the literary existentialists. (Harmon and C Hugh Holman 186)

Decision brings responsibility, and responsibility that has gone wrong brings guilt. Heidegger also identifies guilt as a key part of human existence. As William Barrette claims according to existential philosophy, we are likely to feel this guilt after dealing with limited options and the obligations that result from these choices (Barrette 211). Even if we appear to have discovered a solution to either the outer or inner meaningless worlds, the answer may be as nonsensical as the world in which we live. As the existentialists assert, attempting to instill meaning in our lives may result in additional destruction; we may choose to infuse our lives with excitement or significance, but our choices are not simple, and no happy ending is guaranteed.

The issue of choice is an important element in Jean-Paul Sartre's conception of existentiality. Sartre writes: "[t]he essence of man lies rather in the radical liberty of man's existence by which he chooses himself and so makes himself what he is. Man is not to be seen as a passive plaything of unconscious forces, which determine what he is to be" (Barrette 255). According to Sartre, humanity is not to be described as some imaginary unconscious working behind the scenes. The identity of humanity is instead found in the radical autonomy of human life, through which they choose themselves, and so create their destiny. Humans are nothing more or less than the sum of their actions that comprise their lives. Summarizing statement in relation to the play (Barrette 255).

Blanche faces such a “choice” in *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Blanche is confronted with a dilemma following her discovery of her husband’s homosexuality. She may either remain with her spouse despite knowing the truth about him, or she can oppose the situation. Blanche, however, is doomed regardless of her choice, reflecting Sartre’s statement that “choice must be hard either way; for man, a problematic being to his depths, cannot lay hold of his ultimate commitments with smug and easy security” (Barrette 263). Blanche either can live with someone who prefers another sex, or she can leave him. Both decisions are hard, and the ultimate outcome is doomed anyway.

Razi confronts a similar choice in *Through the Elevated Line*. This choice will also define his future life. He is faced with a dilemma following being arrested. He has the option of serving the remainder of his life in jail or disclosing information about his boyfriend’s political activity. Razi is, however, doomed in either case. As with Blanche, Razi makes a deliberate choice—he chooses physical freedom, but nevertheless he must face consequences, albeit in a different set. In this regard, Razi declares:

Hours, days. The night room. No window, no light. The cries from deep inside the black. The lashings. They take me. Blindfold, blind, I hear ... A bell. A man. He comes. (The vendor’s bell rings, ominously. In the distant shadows, the vendor crosses with his cart.) He says: “Tell us what he did, and you go free. We do not hurt you, we do not hurt him. We hurt no one.” He takes away the blind. (An interrogation light falls on Razi.) Veil of blood in my eyes, I see ... he is only a man. His mouth smiles. I tell his mouth, I say ... Omeed gathers people to meet. To organize. To protest. ... I ... *tell*. (The vendor disappears.) And Omeed ... I never see again. (Parsi 84)

Razi was unaware that his decision would have resulted in Omeed's death and contribute to the deterioration of Razi's happiness and physical and mental health for the remainder of his life. His decision results in the execution of Omeed, an act from which Razi will never recover. Razi must now wait for some normalcy in his life—for a moment when a candle in his heart would once again shine, but it will never happen.

Razi's misery follows immediately after Omeed's death, and he will never reclaim his innocence about his young lover or a guilt-free mind about his execution. He blames himself and acknowledges that tragedy has haunted him ever since. Furthermore, the terrible existence that Razi has sunk into due to his boyfriend's death progressively worsens with time. Like Blanche, he is condemned by the past and cannot escape it in exile.

As Razi is forced to make a decision that would change his life, his sister also faces a similar dilemma. Soraya must choose between satisfying her husband and pleasing her brother from the start of the play. Still, her final option comes at the end of the play, when she must choose between accepting her brother's accusation that Chuck raped him or taking her husband's words that he is innocent and trying to live her life as normally as possible.

Soraya chooses to trust her husband's story (indicating Barrett's observation that a man's "love of comfort" prevents him from realizing devastating reality (Barrette 34-35)), and she must live with the consequences. The immigration officer arrest Razi and send him to a refugee facility to be deported to Iran or to seek asylum, forcing Soraya to live with this reality:

SORAYA: Chuck. Stop them. I didn't want this. Chuck! Sean!

SEAN: You asked me to call. Soraya, what did you think would happen?

SORAYA: But I didn't want this. Not this! (She runs to the door and opens it.)

Manoh behbaksh, barahdareh azeezam, manoh behbaksh! [*Forgive me, my dear brother, forgive me!*] (Soraya sinks onto the floor, sobbing. Chuck puts his arms around her).

(Parsi 100)

As Barret writes, “even the most ordinary people are required from time to time to make decisions crucial for their own lives” (Barrette 167). Considering Razi and Soraya’s choices, this theory holds true for them. Razi’s life is changed as he aids his lover’s death. Soraya, meanwhile, denies her brothers’ claim, refuses to trust his story, and therefore adds to Razi’s deterioration.

As I said above, apart from the issue of the decision and its consequences, nothingness is also one of the critical factors in the definition of existentialism. Blanche is frail and depressed in *A Streetcar Named Desire* after her husband commits suicide, and she turns to an unavoidable descent into nothingness. In *Through the Elevated Line*, too, after losing his partner, Razi becomes helpless and disappointed. After being imprisoned and tormented, Razi’s existence loses importance over time, and what we witness in him is an inevitable descent into nothingness. Barrett’s portrayal of human nothingness exemplifies the sensation of inevitable doom that this existential aspect evokes. Barret claims, “when, by chance of fate, we fall into an extreme situation—one, that is, on the far side of what is normal, routine, accepted, traditional, safeguard—we are threatened by the void” (Barrette 62). In other words, if we find ourselves in an out-of-the-ordinary, broken routine, unacceptable, and opposing conventional situation by chance, we risk sinking into nothingness.

Razi sinks in this nothingness, his life has been devastated by the fact that he was the cause of his boyfriend’s death. The concepts he formerly relied on—romance, poetry, and hope—must now give way to the facts of his existence—pain, worry, and guilt (some elements that Heidegger names as an integral part of human existence). Razi’s existence is no longer safe.

He would be imprisoned in Iran and deported to that country from the United States if his visa expires in six months, this reality proves to be catastrophic for his life and foreshadow a painful future for Razi.

After a lengthy fight with his parents' sickness and death, being jobless, and ultimately jailed, Razi loses all family possessions, money, and savings. His parents' terrible illness and death of Omeed, as well as his helplessness, profoundly worry him and contribute to his sense of nothingness. For various reasons, the continuance of nothingness in his life after the death of his partner is certain. He states:

Now you ask what happened? Why you do not ask then? When our parents get sick and I take care of them. Our house is hospital ward, Soraya. Death our cruel doctor, me his servant nurse. And you here becoming doctor for other people. For Ahmrikahyeehah⁷⁶.

(Parsi 11)

As with memories of the past, the external pressures of immigration and American attitudes toward the Middle Easterns, further compound his loss of identity. Throughout the play, we see Razi express his displeasure with the American government and the way it treats other nations, such as Iran, with sanctions that have a greater impact on ordinary people than the Islamic regime:

RAZI: This country of yours, its foot squeezing the air from our lungs with its sanctions, sanctions. You think a job is sitting there like lost little puppy? There they are *wolves*.

What job, Soraya? What life? (Parsi)

No job for him in Iran and no future in the host country. The anti-immigrant culture, which is represented by the character Chuck and his attitude toward Razi, places him in a precarious

⁷⁶ Americans.

situation. Razi is already on the verge of a mental breakdown, and Chuck lacks concern about Razi maintaining what little sanity he has left. Soraya admits, “Why did you do this to that poor man? Alone in this country, in the world. Why do you act like a mean American bully” (Parsi 79). Worse than his brutality to Razi is, of course, his raping him. If there were any hope for Razi’s rehabilitation after coming to this country and having a new life, they were dashed by this horrific crime. Though Razi was already emotionally ruined, Chuck’s rape ensures that Razi will never be free of his own nothingness.

The feeling of nothingness is also forced by society not only by anti-immigrant beliefs but by the shape of homophobia. Social attitudes toward homosexuality further isolate Razi. As Jean-Paul Sartre has noted, “homosexuality, “[t]he ban that is cast on certain men by society has destroyed all possibility of reciprocity among them. shame isolates” (Barrette 257). There are numerous explanations for Razi’s miserable existence and life of nothingness. One explanation involves Razi being gay and being born in Iran where homosexuality is considered a crime.⁷⁷

RAZI: Always hide, always fear. Of police. Of light. But my friends, we come together inside our apartments. And then we open, open up ...

SEAN: Like secret flowers.

RAZI: And soon, after the six months of my visa expire, I return to the dark. (Parsi 37)

We may presume that after revealing his sexuality, he was aware of the ramifications (mainly society’s rejection of homosexuality) that come with revealing one’s sexuality, especially to disapproving family and friends. Razi had to deal with the repercussions of being in a gay

⁷⁷ It is important to note that lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) rights have progressed dramatically in the United States throughout time. Until 1962, all 50 states criminalized same-sex sexual behavior, but by 2003, all remaining prohibitions were declared unconstitutional. Beginning with Massachusetts in 2004, LGBT Americans gained the freedom to marry in all 50 states by 2015. Furthermore, LGBT Americans are specifically protected from discrimination in work, housing, and access to public places in many states and cities (National Center for Transgender Equality).

relationship, such as the attitudes of others and the mental suffering produced by gay inclinations. His sexuality plagues him and disclosing his sexual orientation would generate uproar in society and among his family members.

We may also assume that, in addition to his fear over his family's and society's disapproval of his sexuality, Razi suffered from mental distress as a result of all pressures invading him from outside and inside. Everyone assumed he had a mental health condition, and they were concerned that Razi would have a complete mental breakdown. But Razi was neither unwell nor insane until his boyfriend was executed. He longed to be able to appreciate the beauty of the universe without being distracted by his troubled thoughts. But his life seemed to be riddled with issues, and he sought a way out of his dilemmas, but he could not find one. Unfortunately, his gay romance brought him more pain than joy. As a result, he spent a life with few options and little prospect for a livable future.

Despite all the issues that society has created for him, Razi efforts to give his life purpose. Though Razi's existence offers little hope of happiness, he attempts to give purpose to it, exhibiting the existential principle that only "we" can change our own destiny. Razi has been thrown into a world of misery and dissatisfaction; consequently, he seeks to improve his situations by acting in two ways on his world of a bad life. First, after Omeed's death, he attempts to erase the memory of his true love through prostitution; second, Razi emigrated to the United States, where he thought sexual orientation is not judged by society, family, and friends. But unfortunately, as we know by coming to this country his final efforts to produce some sense of normalcy in his life were destroyed forever.

RAZI: Omeed is gone, my parents gone, the money flying away ... still, I have to live. I go to the park. Men ... give me money. Return to their wives. You see what monster is Razi Gol?

To make money, he worked as a covert prostitute. Razi plays coy (particularly with Sean) and seems as though he is concerned about his sexual life and will never have sex with someone, he is not sure he loves.

SEAN: You sure you don't want to come back to my place?

RAZI: I adore your place. The windows of lights. But I feel, in your home, that I disappoint you.

SEAN: You don't disappoint me.

RAZI: I do. Because you persist and ... I resist.

SEAN: I know you want to go slow, I love that about you. But don't you want ...

RAZI: To be with you? Yes. ... Why do I resist? When the way that I want wine and poetry, this is the way I want you. (Parsi 64)

But he is going to Boystown and gay clubs, he sleeps with Chuck's employee and many others:

RAZI: ... please try to understand. Those dark rooms, it is the only place I can go to — how do I say this in your language — to wipe away. (Parsi 83)

Razi is confronted with the realities of his life and the world from this point. Razi's tries to escape his sense of nothingness through his sexual pursuits. Although he is unsure of his motivations; he utilizes prostitution as a form of self-defense. His loneliness and passionate personality drive him to seek happiness in places where it could never be found.

Razi's last effort to improve his circumstances is to develop a romantic relationship with Sean. However, while Razi manages to capture Sean's interest—enough so that Sean talks about

marrying Razi—he makes the fatal error of lying to him, and when Sean finds the truth about him, it is too late to save their romance. Razi admits, “I want to look ravishing! Like sharab⁷⁸. Too tempting to resist” (Parsi 53). He lies about the real reason that Omeed was executed, about going to Boystown, and about having sex with Cesar (Chuck’s employee). Despite all the lies, one hidden motive remains—Razi still wishes to improve his circumstances despite the many catastrophes he has experienced.

Razi’s acts do not bring him to the end of his poor fortune. Razi, on the other hand, is condemned for his actions. Razi desires a romantic existence, but his ultimate chances for happiness are dashed when Sean discovers his actual personality. Sean says:

SEAN: They warned me, you know. All my friends, they warned me. Told me you were just looking for a sugar daddy, a green card. I told them they were wrong, they didn’t know you. *Do you understand how that makes me look?! And then this?! (Brandishing his phone.)* You acting like you’re pure as holy water and all the while you’re giving it up to some cheap construction guy? What’re you — living some porn movie here?! And that’s not even all of it... (Parsi 83)

Romance is swiftly evaporating from his world, and Razi recognizes the circumstances—guilt, fear, and despair—to which he must surrender. This is the ultimate punishment, according to Razi. Razi must confront reality and realize that his environment has resulted in nihilism and misery in the absence of poetry, romance, and love:

RAZI: Chuck does not know what is wine. “Let wine drown in your heart the roots of despair.”⁷⁹

SEAN: Stop with the poetry. Stop with the pretending!

⁷⁸ The Farsi word for wine.

⁷⁹ A translated poem from Hafez.

RAZI: It is not pretend. The fiction of poetry is more true. I say always what is true.

(Parsi)

Pervasive feelings of nothingness add to Razi's mental breakdown. Razi has a gentle spirit and is quickly influenced by passion and other emotions. Any negative occurrences cause more harm to Razi than other people who are not as easily influenced by emotions. Omeed's death has broken Razi's capacity to recuperate. His fate is sealed, and in existential terms, the circumstances surrounding every part of his existence will now be altered "beyond the boundary of what is secure, stable, meaningful, and ordained" (Barrette 61-62). And so, Razi is left with a catastrophic mental breakdown in the end.

Here, I want to emphasize that there have been several interpretations and analyses of both Parsi's, and Williams' plays. I have attempted to provide a less disputed analysis of these plays by offering an alternative aspect, such as existentialism's philosophy. This schism exists not just between theorists and critics but also between directors and dramaturgs. Below, I review one of the *Through the Elevated Line's* performances and give the perspectives of several publications and websites.

***Through the Elevated Line* in Performance**

Through the Elevated Line premiered in 2018 at Silk Road Rising⁸⁰ and reviewers highlighted the alienation of immigration as its focus. Sarah Bowden says of this performance that we—non-immigrants—take immigrants hardships and sacrifices for granted, and we do

⁸⁰ "Silk Road Rising is a community-centered artmaking and arts service organization rooted in Pan-Asian, North African, and Muslim experiences. Through live theatre, digital media, and arts education, we challenge disinformation, cultivate new narratives, and promote a culture of continuous learning. Founded in 2002 by husbands Malik Gillani and Jamil Khoury, Silk Road Rising (originally Silk Road Theatre Project) began as an intentional and creative response to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001" (<https://www.silkroadrising.org>).

little to reach out and assist them, especially when things turn sour. She believes that Novid Parsi's investigation of the immigrant experience, which shares a narrative with *A Streetcar Named Desire*, encourages the audience to take a closer look and see how ignorance locks us in inhumanity and insular thinking (Bowden).

About the play Bowden believes that Parsi did not mean to include Tennessee Williams' plot into his own story, but he saw connections between the original story and his characters' struggle to identify what makes someone a good or bad immigrant. Instead of duplicating a prior writer's set of strategies and choices, Bowden indicated, Parsi might have produced greater suspense by spending more time fleshing out an immigrant character. The reviewer thought this forced the audience to confront their own prejudices and expectations about the situation of an un-wanted outsider in a society like America (Bowden).

Bowden admired the actors of this performance and the set design. Regarding the latter she says, the play's set designer, Joe Schermoly, and props designer, Abigail Cain, created a fittingly yuppified theatrical minefield. About props and set design she believes that the character Razi tries to add personality to the area by adding lamps, books, and souvenirs from his birthplace while Chuck's renovations sand off the edges of the kitchen, bedroom, and living room (Bowden). Also, Bowden agrees that Lindsey Lyddan, the lighting designer, embraced the wonder of Razi's lighting, allowing the audience into his world through rainbow hues. The reviewer says, this allowed audiences to experience Razi's fantasy which was far less violent than what Chuck conjures up (Bowden).

Collin Douglas, from *Chicago Theatre Review* admired Carin Silkaitis's directing. Douglas saw a persistent sense of danger flooding in this drama, and the director permitted the menace to always linger in the shadows (Douglas). Douglas believes that the expressionistic

elements of the play were overtly highlighted in the production. She noted the plays is a portrayal of a fragile LGBT immigrant, a foreigner in a strange world, seeking to fit in and comprehend American conventions while keeping faithful to his own Iranian culture. Douglas says that the production highlighted the fact that Razi must contend with Iranian homophobia as well as American xenophobia. On the other hand, the production captured the desire for love and familial devotion; she says that the director emphasized these aspects in her “stunning production.”

By and large, the majority of the reviews have hailed this piece as a revelation. They concur that its echoes of *Streetcar* create a timeless foundation for this starkly contemporary story of immigration, assimilation, and trauma. They see that fear, injustice, wrath, and the scars left by the characters’ secrets, both revealed and hidden, have all wreaked havoc on a soul. They saw this play as an incredible opportunity for diverse casting and those interested in investigating the intersection of cultures, community, and the world. Although the performance received mixed reviews, most critics agreed that the performance’s style was distinguished by strong acting, stunning stage design, and competent directing.

Conclusion

Through the Elevated Line is a tragedy illustrating the battle between fantasy and reality. This battle destroys the sympathetic at the hands of the unsympathetic, the good at the hands of evil, and beauty at the hands of the ugly. The compassionate in this play is Razi Gol, a gay Iranian man who embarks on a journey to fulfill his aspirations and needs. When confronted with the reality of an apathetic and harsh society—both in his home country and in the new land—he is ruthlessly crushed and destroyed by evil forces. As an example of immigration drama, this

play expresses the American Dream through modern dramatic techniques, portrays alienation, and investigates how the past haunts the character.

As with other plays in this dissertation, Parsi's play adopts elements of modern drama to present the experience of alienation and loss through exile. Parsi uses Williams's modern theatrical elements in *Through the Elevated Line* to show the characters' interior reality and their situation in the 21st-century's world. This play describes themes of loneliness, social isolation, and psychological disintegration. Novid Parsi, like Williams, employs several genres to portray his main character in the middle of the harsh world the different political regimes have created for him. These approaches involve realistic and expressionistic elements to reveal the drama's lyrical mood and characters' inner thoughts and feelings.

Razi is a compelling and complex representation of exiled people. The exilic experience, portrayed through stylistic reference to modern theatricalism, gives both depth and validity to his complicated patterns of characterization. Razi lives in a fantasy world of poetry, wine, and love. Razi's perception of sordid reality reflects the internal turmoil he is experiencing. He has lost paradise and is frantically searching for it in a chaotic world. He also seeks solace in sex with strangers and alcohol, which numbs his senses and softens the perception of harshness and insensitivity of his deplorable surroundings.

A sense of existentialism permeates the play. Its central character cannot leave his current situation and struggles with the main subject of existentialism: meaninglessness and nothingness. Razi is imprisoned between two meaningless realms—the physical exterior world (a Western and an Eastern world) and his inner, psychological world. No matter how hard Razi tries, he cannot seem to find a way out of his dilemma. No matter where Razi travels, he will run into conflict and anxiety, keywords from existentialist philosopher Martin Heidegger.

In conclusion, it must be said that by developing content representing the American Dream, exile, displacement, clashes between society and personality, justice and family, and form of modern drama, Parsi has examined the political arena, popular political beliefs, and cultural issues in the United States as a host society. Through this play, Parsi has helped to display the position of immigrants who are in opposition to the new culture of the host country. This play's characters, structure, dialogues, and atmosphere indicate immigrants' status in American society based on the American Dream's definitions. The significance of this play represents the complexity of the experience of exile. It builds on modern dramatic forms and character portrayals to signal the loss of faith in hopes and dreams for immigrants and asylum seekers, who crave freedom and desire success.

CONCLUSION

My focus in this study of immigrant drama concerning modern American drama, for the most part, been narrow; I have tried to show how the characteristic of modern drama function in immigrant plays of my case studies; *Ironbound*, *Anon(ymous)*, *The Talented Ones*, and *Through the Elevated Line*. I wish to conclude by commenting briefly on the place of these plays and modernism, more generally, in the broader narrative and thematic structures.

In analyzing Martyna Majok's play, *Ironbound*, I have used immigrant drama as a genre that is more than simply a fictional exercise; it represents the real immigrant experience. In this regard, the play is analyzed to unravel identity, notably for immigrants. Also, contemporary American opinions toward immigrants and ethnic minorities have been studied about this play. *Ironbound* depicts the isolation and exile of immigrants in the United States and their doubts toward the American Dream.

Separation and displacement are some of the mutual themes in *Ironbound* and modern plays. If in modern drama, human migration from pre-industrial to industrial society was the reason for modern writers to psychoanalyze the characters, in *Ironbound*, physical migration from one country to another, displacement, and dislocation are the reasons for the playwright to study her characters. Both *Ironbound*'s and modern characters suffer from psychological illnesses such as bewilderment, and alienation due to being relocated from the past to the present.

Ironbound does not follow a chronological timeline; instead, it follows a feature-time structure. *Ironbound* employs various time manipulation techniques to depict events selectively and indirectly: time can be reversed, shortened, telescoped, or fractured. Like some other modern plays, *Ironbound* subverts traditional narrative structures by emphasizing the importance of sequential and linear time.

Ironbound links to modern tragedy since the recognition and preservation of Darja's individuality becomes a conscious life issue. External variables, such as social and political problems, which previously ruled this option out, now have more weight. The tragic core of life starts to emerge in this drama. *Ironbound*'s heroine perishes due to her failure to cope with an American culture that imposes its own set of standards on her. In this play, tragedy characterizes by being an outsider in American culture rather than a particular personality or destiny. Darja's psychology is central to the play; her primary motive is psychological, and her tragic worldview reveals as a result.

Majok also demonstrates how a simple and easy language may effectively convey the complexity of human emotions. Sloppy syntax and simple language convey a character more effectively than hundreds of words from the most beautiful vocabulary. Darja's new life in the United States presents additional obstacles, including discrimination and a language barrier. Language presents the most challenging obstacle for her, as it impairs her ability to communicate with others. Darja is caught in an interpretation trap, where the second language takes precedence over the concepts it conveys or where the words take on a life separate from the things they represent.

In analyzing Naomi Iizuka's play, *Anon(ymous)*, I have used this immigrant drama as an adaptation of Homer's *Odyssey* as a classic epic masterpiece to analyze a modern epic drama. *Anon(ymous)* is about a refugee's journey through the United States; it is an effort to define a hero by alluding to modern concepts of hero and present limits of a refugee's life in the new country.

Anon(ymous) employs a modern epic structure; it is a modern adaptation that adheres to the cultural values of the American immigrant community. Iizuka speaks for a group of people—immigrants and refugees—in a dramatic, poetic style.

The Odyssey and *Anon(ymous)* are not character-driven works. Rather than that, they approach the character through narrative flow; they present a character not based on psychological characteristics but as an example of others similar to them. Each of these characters refers to a distinct social group. The writers do not seek to delve into their psychology or personalities; instead, they provide a human example and orient the spectator to a larger purpose. Iizuka's play is a contemporary reimagining of the epic genre. Whereas epic has virtually always been defined via form, Iizuka permits us to redefine it through purpose—the immigrant and refugee's dilemma. Iizuka's play should be viewed as a modern American epic built on classical elements.

Anon(ymous) is a protest play. Iizuka is opposed to war, discrimination, politics, and racist culture. Iizuka expresses her thoughts through a new form by constructing a social protest drama. Her work is more concerned with fundamental realities than with particular circumstances. The emphasis is on the external world, describing the relation of the individual's mental state to the terms of place or time.

Yussef El Guindi's *The Talented One*, is a dream play where the line between realism and expressionism is indistinct. The play is a comparison between the main character's personality with Hamlet in terms of his self-consciousness, his concerns about the social system, his burden of responsibility, his view on the issue of life and death, his psychological issues, and his eventual decision for his life as a warrior.

Omar, the protagonist of *The Talented Ones*, is a modern individual caught in a catastrophic mental conflict bound by an intangible value of humanity. Catastrophe forces the hero to confront the harsh realities of existence. Omar is aware of his actions, and their consequences complicate any course of the deed he may take. Omar accepts the brutal reality of his failure as a successful immigrant. He believes himself to be unheroic and seeks solace in death.

As demonstrated in the play, women continue to bear most family responsibilities and are financially responsible for the family. Cindy's identity as an immigrant woman is determined by her husband, father, and male society, relegating her to the role of a sex object. El Guindi demonstrates that, despite modern women's advancements, they must confront both their own dissatisfaction and the immutable feelings of a patriarchal society. Men continue to expect women to put the needs of men ahead of their own.

The author creates scenes that are entirely realistic in terms of content and dramatic technique while also examining Cindy and Omar's mental illusions. He employs various expressionistic methods to depict his central characters' thoughts transitioning between past and present. *The Talented Ones* is a psychological drama that toes the line between reality and delusion. It represents the characters' life journeys through various modern theatrical techniques. Expressionism is the most frequently used technique in the play. El Guindi dramatizes the relationship between shifting time and shattered space through different expressionistic methods that demonstrate how his characters' troubled minds blur time- and geographical-based boundaries. Memory sequences are not flashbacks but rather a movable synthesis of the past and present.

American civilization is portrayed in this play as a force that wears down immigrants. El Guindi attempts to achieve a balance of power and liberty in order to advance the cause of immigrant justice.

In analyzing Novid Parsi's play, *Through the Elevated Line*, I have understood and evaluated this immigrant drama as an adaptation of Tennessee Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire*, as a classic modern masterpiece, to analyze a modern immigrant drama.

Through the Elevated Line is a tragedy that depicts the clash of fantasy and reality. Razi Gol is an Iranian gay man embarking on a journey to fulfill his aspirations and needs. When confronted with the reality of an apathetic and harsh society – both in his homeland and in his new land – he is ruthlessly crushed and destroyed by evil forces. As an example of immigration drama, this play uses modern drama techniques to express the American Dream, portrays alienation, and investigates how the character's past haunts him.

As with the other plays in this dissertation, Parsi's play employs elements of modern drama to depict the alienation and loss, associated with exile. *Through the Elevated Line* utilizes Williams' modern theatrical elements to describe the characters' interior reality and situation in the 21st-century. This play explores themes of isolation, social exclusion, and psychological disintegration. Novid Parsi, like Williams, employs a variety of modern genres to portray his protagonist in the harsh world created for him by various political regimes. These approaches combine realistic and expressionistic elements to convey the drama's lyrical mood and the inner thoughts and feelings of the characters.

Razi is an evocative and nuanced portrait of exiled people. The exilic experience, as portrayed stylistically through modern theatricalism, provides both depth and legitimacy to his intricate patterns of characterization. Razi inhabits a fantastical realm of poetry, wine, and love.

Razi's perception of sordid reality reflects his internal turmoil. He has misplaced paradise and is desperately seeking it in a chaotic world. He also seeks solace in sex with strangers and alcohol, which dulls his senses and softens his perception of his deplorable surroundings' harshness and insensitivity.

This play is infused with an existentialist sensibility. Its central character cannot escape his present situation and grapples with existentialism's central theme of meaninglessness and nothingness. Razi is trapped in two meaningless realms: the physical world (a Western and an Eastern world) and his inner, psychological world. No matter how hard Razi tries, he cannot escape his predicament. Wherever Razi travels, he will encounter conflict and anxiety, to use existential philosopher Martin Heidegger's terms.

Parsi has examined the political arena, popular political beliefs, and cultural issues in the United States as a host society through the development of content representing the American Dream, exile, displacement, clashes between society and personality, justice and family, and a form of modern drama. Parsi has aided in illustrating the position of immigrants who are opposed to the host country's new culture through this play. The characters, structure, dialogue, and atmosphere of this play all reflect immigrants' status in American society according to the definitions of the American Dream. This play's significance reflects the complexities of the exile experience. It employs contemporary dramatic forms and character portrayals to convey the immigrants' and asylum seekers' loss of faith in their hopes and dreams.

In a conclusion, needed to mention that many recent immigrant American dramas focus on immigrants' views about the American Dream and the accessibility of liberty, civil rights, and economic stability in the United States. These plays are written mainly by immigrant writers or second-generation immigrants. They are usually the stories of a central character who is an

immigrant expressing his perspective on the host country. These characters are dealing with immigration, marriage, deportation, justice, and law problems. Their works are essentially dramas of ideas rather than action; they express specific statements they want to spread in American society.

The immigrant playwrights examine the host community, and they address the problematic issues in this society. They use drama to demonstrate relations that prevail in the United States, which sometimes embeds discrimination and pressure on refugees and asylum seekers.

Finding a connection between the characteristics of immigrant dramas and American theatre was essential in my research. I found out that immigrant theatre in the last decades has borrowed the style of modern American theatre, a format that has a long history in the United States' stages.

The drama of the twentieth century showed actions, reactions, and dialogues that reflected the Post-World War II American themes: the dissolution of the American family, the American Dream's failure, and the collapse of capitalism in the American economy. The contemporary immigrant plays as well are Post-September 11 in character and reflect significant twenty-first-century experiences of alienation in exile. They present the loss of faith in hopes and dreams for immigrants and asylum seekers, who crave freedom and desire success.

Immigrant dramatic literature and modern theatre examine human experience where the past contrasts with the new and reality of the American Dream. Immigrant plays have had constant viewpoints on society, personality, and relationships. In America, the country of Dreams, these topics have been a critical theatre discussion for several decades.

Immigrant American drama deals with the paradoxes of immigrant families' relationships, doubts, worries, and eventual collapse. Immigrant families and individuals in contemporary plays attempt to manage the essentials of harsh new society's reality by retreating into a distant past of dead dreams.

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