

Personal Performativity as a Reflection of Social Space: A Dramaturgical Study of Heather Raffo's *Noura*

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الأداء الشخصي بوصفه انعكاساً للفضاء الاجتماعي : دراسة درامية لمسرحية "نورا" للكاتبة هيند رافو

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Abstract

The present essay investigates Heather Raffo's dramaturgical perspectives in her play *Noura* (2018), which depicts two Iraqi migrant women Mariam and Noura, who are based in the USA. The diaspora life of these two characters has been led them to break their own Iraqi social and cultural norms by pushing them to adopt certain cultural norms that can be hybrid to their indigenous culture. This shows women's tendency to reconstruct their social identity in a way that allows them to achieve their freedom of decision. By examining the dramaturgical issues of the play, I seek to show how theatrical dramaturgy can be an act of inducing women to revolutionize against their social and cultural determinations. Thus, I argue that the theatrical adaptation of Ibsen's *A Doll's House* can be defined as an act of female resistance against Iraqi social and cultural factors specifically when the play has been set up in a diaspora context. I reached to argue that gender identity is a fluid construction that can be spatially reconstructed mixed with the space where women's social and cultural performances take place. This is to say that Raffo's female characters as they live in a diaspora cultural norms, they were able to shift their gender norms in accordance with the new western environment. The essay concludes that Iraqi diaspora theater can offer a novel lens to understand the fluidity of gender performativity specifically when the playwright's hybrid identity plays a vital role in formulating his/her cultural stance. **Kew words:** Dramaturgy, Iraqi Women, Noura, Personal Performativity, and Social Space

Introduction In this essay, I explore the Iraqi diasporic feminist theatre, mainly in the USA which has been directly engaging with the identity crisis among Iraqi women migrants. Starting from the premise that gender identity in diaspora is a fluid construction that is spatially reconstructed, I argue that by depicting Iraqi women's stories on the diasporic stage, feminist theatre identifies the struggle of migrant women to integrate with the social and cultural ideals of the new land. Having this in mind, Arab diasporic literature, theatre in especial has employed to raise and celebrate the voices of Arab American playwrights whose works situate their social and cultural struggles. As Bencheikh Rim and Kafi Chaima argue that "this distinct literary tradition [of Arab diaspora literature] gives voice to the unique experiences, perspectives, and cultural negotiations of Arab communities living in transnational contexts" (39). Amid with these transnational contexts, examining gender identity becomes necessary. This topic can contribute to uncovering Arabic women's diasporic experiences and perspectives regarding how women's gender identity is theatrically represented in diaspora. It is widely argued that gender identity is a site of social construction where social and cultural norms and traditions of any society play a crucial role in constructing its threads (Butler, 1990). This suggests that gender identity can be delineated from its space. In this respect, understanding gender identity in the diaspora requires observing the shift in social and cultural contexts of diasporic women specifically through literary representation. For example, in his book *Arab American Drama, Film and Performance: A Critical Study, 1908 to the Present*, Michael M Najjar (2015) investigated the repositories of Arab American writers to pay the attentions towards these experiences that are excluded to be widely known for a number of reasons . He contends that his interest to study these genres

emanates from his belief that these genres are representations to people of diasporic backgrounds. Similarly, in her book *Arab-American Women's Writing and Performance: Orientalism, Race and the Idea of the Arabian Nights*, Somaya Sami Sabri examines how the classic image of Shahrazad has shaped the American imagination of the Arabic female heroine. Shahrazad, as Sabri argues, is the exotic storyteller that configured the western understanding of the Arabic women's representation on the American stage. Sabri contends that: The 'Oriental' woman has always represented a particularly contested terrain in relation to colonialism. She has been the space upon which many prejudices and preconceptions about the East have been mapped out; [...]. The literary writings and performances of contemporary Arab-American women have become an arena of resistance to such Orientalist discursive practices, because of the contested nature of these women's relations to affiliation and the American nation in the current political and historical moment. (1) From these points, I can argue that the importance of diasporic literature comes from its contributions in evoking the diasporic experiences of Iraqi migrants. To widen the scope of these diasporic experiences, I choose to explore Heather Raffo's *Noura* (2018) as a diasporic play that discusses the construction of women gender identity. In accordance with this point, I build my argument that gender identity as a fluid concept where its delineation depends on certain social parameters, has been used by Raffo as the basic stone to re-write Ibsen's *A Doll's House* (1997). As in her personal online website, Raffo stated that Ibsen's *A Doll's House* (1997) has been re-written from a diasporic perspective where a group of women in collaboration with her starting to write "their own personal narratives, challenge cultural taboos, and fearlessly articulating their many harrowing stories of leaving home; ...read *A Doll's House*. They then began to consider the many Nora Helmer in their own lives". According to this declaration, I weave the initial threads of this essay to explore why did Raffo re-write Ibsen's *A Doll's House* (1997) and what were her adopted concepts in her appropriated play *Noura*? Therefore, this essay comes to treat Heather Raffo's dramaturgical perspectives in *Noura* (2018) where women gender has been introduced as a fluid concept which can not be determined from a set of pre-planned cultural norms. In more details, to deconstruct the inner threads of Raffo's dramaturgical perspectives in *Noura* (2018), I will analysis Raffo's play under the lenses of dramaturgy to see in what extend Butler's (1990) concepts of performativity assist Raffo to shape the gender identity of her female characters.

Methodology

To understand how Iraqi women have been represented in Iraqi diasporic theatre, I adopted qualitative research. My analysis of Iraqi women gender identity depended on a thematic analysis to ground the way for readers to know how Iraqi women gender identity has thematically represented. By analyzing the text Raffo's *Noura* (2018) from a dramaturgical lenses, I seek to explore the inner and the external threads of this play.

Data Collection

Heather Raffo is an Iraqi American playwright, who writes different plays such as *Noura* (2018), which is performed in 2018 at *Shakespeare Theatre Company* directing by of Joanna Settle. As it considers one among a few Iraqi plays performed at *Shakespeare Theatre Company*, its popularity has been increased in Milena of literary studies. Moreover, Raffo is identified as "an inspirational spirit" in which her plays tackle "our present moments" said by Kate Bergstrom, who is the director of New York's Production (as quoted in Etemad Para. 3). This introduces Raffo as a playwright attempts to convey contemporary common issues, which finally extends her reputation. Weaving with this fact, I choose to thematically analyze Raffo's play *Noura* (2018) from a dramaturgical perspectives. In attempt to support my analysis, Raffo's play as a dramatic piece has been written to discuss Iraqi women's tendencies to break Iraqi norms and emancipate themselves from the domination of men- this sign thatsign that that inspires the researcher's argument. This means that the major goal of this essay is to show Raffo's dramaturgical perspectives in making her female characters on the contrary of those who are in Ibsen's play. In attempt to support my analysis, I collected data through multiple various ways. I investigated videos recordings of the play performance, which are published in Raffo online website "Noura" accessed on 29 Apr. 2025. and I directly contacted the playwright, who provided me with the text of the play to use it as a primary source of my study.

Theoretical Framework

There is no definitive consensus on the concept of dramaturgy-that has come "from its historical and contemporary usage and practice"(Makhumula 111) that make any affairs to define it properly in the wind. In response to a question by a Nigerian scholar Taiwa Afolabi, about the meaning of dramaturgy, Funmi Adewole, who is a performer and dramaturg states that, Dramaturgy to me is the logic of a performance...where the physicality, maybe the visual, as equal important to the text, or there is no text or pre-script. And therefore the

meaning of performance through how codes, symbols, visuals, movements, the performance set is being used to convey a story or a journey through the piece, because it might not be a straightforward, linear narrative. And so performance has to be a logic that the audience following in how the symbols or props or sets or movements or performers are working together. And so, it is the narrative of the piece, how it is brought together. And that structuring what I would call the dramaturgy of a piece. ("Decolonizing Dramaturgy") However, to give an accurate definition of dramaturgy is not an easy task to do. Magda Romanska points out that, To this day, in many modern languages, including French, Spanish, and Polish, the word dramaturg also can mean playwright, adding to the confusion as the two roles continue to be conflated. As dramaturgy attempts to define itself separately from playwriting, the etymology of the word can help us illuminate its many historical and modern uses. Everyone can be a playwright (or, at least, everyone can write a bad play), but not everyone can be a dramaturg (that is, not everyone will actually know how to fix it). Dramaturgy requires the analytical skill of discerning and deconstructing all elements of drama structure.(1)In modern dramaturgical practice, dramaturg as "the book doctor" whose job is "to fix the structural errors afflicting the script of the new musical" is taken further to include "researching and clarifying" all the aspects of the play such as "political and historical as well as the aesthetic and formal" ones. This is done to meet the taste of the public (Romanska 2). This is to say that doing dramaturgy demands to know the internal and the external effects on the play From this point, dramaturgy is a complex profession in which it "functions as a sort of monitoring device meant to keep the process on course... it forms the underpinning of all intuitive or deliberate choices, thoughts, debates and nurtures the passionate search for artistic truth on stage"(as quoted in Haedicke 125). As J.L Austin remarked that "to say something is to do something" (as quoted in Wäisänen 31). Mixing this fact with Romanska's definition of dramaturgy as a "play making", it becomes clear that doing dramaturgy serves as a process of enhancing something in the mind of the playwright. This encourages to argue that dramaturgy, as it is known as a process of making play, can be an effective way to revisit certain social and cultural issues. In accordance with this point, I build my argument that gender identity as fluid concept where its classification depends on certain social parameters, has been used by Raffo's dramaturgical perspectives as the basic stone to re-write Ibsen's canonical play *A Doll's House* (1997).

Literature Review

In spite of questioning gender identity in literature might be of traditional topics, it remains of interest due to various reasons. On the foremost is the premise that acknowledging gender identity as a social construction. This suggests that gender identity can not be delineated away from its space. In other words, gender identity can be identified within social and cultural norms of a given society. This concept is not new, of course, in literary studies, but at least it might for the first time be tackled within the context of Iraqi theatre especially in diaspora theatre that attaching great attention to women and their representations. Based on this fact, many propositions have recently been increased within the academic literary studies around the representations of women in the space of theatre especially Iraqi diasporic literature. Amid with the impact of immigration and diasporic immigrants on the individuals, maintaining social and the cultural heritage becomes quite difficult. As in these cases, individual engage with many social, cultural and gender identities that makes the delineation of cultural identity difficult. To legitimize this latter fact, an article entitled "Identity Issue in Contemporary Diaspora Arab Theatre" examines the concept of identity and its reflections in Contemporary Diaspora Arab Theatre. By analyzing the works of Leila Buck, who is a Lebanese American playwright and actor, Hadeer Minshawy Abdel Dayem conceptualizes identity as a microscope through which the origins of the individual can be identified. Additionally, Abdel Dayem argues that although identity might be an identification for the individual, it can also be a problematic issue in the sense that many adopted identities make one in an ongoing confusion. Living in a diaspora means that one will be in a dynamic fluctuation between two different cultures and places. This fact is signed by Brinkerhoff when she defines diasporic identity as "the result of the combination of national/cultural identity, the host culture, and lived experience of diaspora members" (as quoted in Zare 103). This illustrates how diasporic identity is ambivalent and does not have a fixed parameters In a similar context, the problem of identity continues to be one of controversial themes in diaspora theatre. In their article "The Formation of In-Betweenness: Iraqi Immigrants' Identity in Heather Raffo's *Noura*", Asmaa M. Saad and Marwa I. Khalil negotiate Iraqi immigrants' identity and their experiences of living in betweenness. They analyze Iraqi immigrants' identity from a postcolonial perspective to see how hybridity challenges the life of Iraqi immigrants putting them in a dynamic confusion where having two identity demands a balance between the two different identities. As it depicted here, Immigrants' state of in-betweenness takes two different

formations through Raffo's characters. The first form is represented a resistant and an assimilated self which is found in Noura's character. Noura rejects the idea of assimilation and tries to maintain her own Iraqi identity, but unconsciously she embraces the language and norms of American culture. Although migration to the USA was her own choice, she becomes caught between the two cultures of her own Iraqi homeland and of her host country. Noura involves a confused manner concerning both places[sick] and how to identify herself with each one of them.[On other hand] The second form is the hybrid one through which the other characters of the play come to maintain a good relationship with their home, but at the same time have a complete indulgence and assimilation with the host society with a sense of responsibility towards it.(Saad and Khalil 287)Accordingly, it seems that Raffo's *Noura* (2018) is written to document the experience of Iraqi immigrants where these diasporic immigrants were facing difficulty in maintaining the purity of their cultural identity. To enforce this fact, Suzanne M. Elnaggar contextualizes Heather Raffo's plays within a documentary theatre in which these plays can help the audience to witness the experiences of the diasporic people. Therefore, in her thesis *Carry it With You: Trauma and Identity in Heather Raffo's 9 Parts of Desires and Noura*, Elnaggar opines that these plays celebrate the traumatic and identity issues of those who are living in the Middle East and North Africa. As she mentioned that "Raffo's plays, as a whole, can be read as a commentary on Middle Eastern, North African, and specially, Iraqi identity and representing, on both stage and page, of the trauma associated with those lived experiences" (as quoted in her abstract). Thus, it is believable to say that Raffo dedicates a special attention to her diasporic experiences in which these experiences were the threads of her play *Noura* (2018). In the same vein, Khaled Saad Sirwah classified Heather Raffo's play *Noura* (2018) as "an instantiation of the Iraqi-American theatre representing postcolonial diaspora"(46). In his article "Unravelling Diaspora in Heather Raffo's *Noura*: A Postcolonial Perspective", Sirwah seeks to show in what ways Raffo's play can be classified as "an instantiation of the postcolonial diasporic Iraqi-American theatre". To fill this endeavor, he investigated it with a postcolonial framework reaching to various conclusions mentioned in the following lines, First, cultural diaspora is argued to have led to utilizing a great deal of Arabic words/expressions that may be entextualized with the passage of time. Second, Raffo was demonstrated to have reconfigured Ibsen's view of marriage and motherhood by posing her own novel one for discussion through the open-end technique. Third, it was revealed that the playwright has managed to upend the dramatic conventions of gender roles by expanding the role of the wife and marginalizing that of the husband.(46)From these perspectives, it becomes clear how diasporic experience helps Raffo to add new modes of representations to women's gender identity. Accordingly, in her article "The Renovation of She-tragedy in Heather Raffo's Nine Parts of Desire", Basma Abdulhasan Ali classifies Heather Raffo's play *Nine Parts of Desire* (2004) as a 'she-tragedy' genre. She contends that Raffo has succeeded in turning the connotations of the term upside down to communicate metaphorically with the audience on how women have been treated within the context of the play. As she mentioned that "in this play, Raffo conveys the veiled truth of war that damaged the Iraqi women, yet showing their reality as being strong and not submissive women. She dramatizes the consciousness of her protagonists' pursuit to liberty, confrontation, besides how these women verbalized their experiences"(Basma 42). This clarifies Raffo's tendencies in raising the collective consciousness of women toward liberty and freedom. In different lenses, I seek to manipulate Heather Raffo's *Noura* (2018). Raffo whose her hybrid identity contributes in giving her new experiences and theatrical techniques, seeks to make an equal balance between men and women detaching from the patriarchal domination. I examine this play under the lens of dramaturgy in which this frame work can help in delving into the inner and external realities of the play. Moreover, I seek to show how dramaturgy as a process of "play making" promotes in developing the delineation of women's gender identity. Thus, I argue that the theatrical appropriation of Ibsen's *A Doll's House* (1997) is an act of re-constructing women's gender identity from the marginalization to domination. Like other Arabic diasporic theatre in the USA, Iraqi diasporic theatre adapts a multilayered function that goes beyond aesthetic representation of the Iraqi community. By centralizing Iraqi women's stories, Iraqi theatre in the USA probes the politics of representation, not only by offering the 'space' for their self- representation. Rather, as I argue here, theatre adapts an informative role, as well as aesthetic, to uncloak the orientalist narrative that dominates the American public rhetoric about Iraqi women migrants. Heather Raffo's renewed perspectives of women's gender identity to put her female characters in a strong status where they can do what they like.

Heather Raffo's Dramaturgical Perspectives of Women Gender Identity

Heather Raffo is an Iraqi-American playwright whose works deal with marriage, transcultural identity, gender, motherhood and homeland. In all her plays such as *9 Parts of Desire* (2004), *Fallujah* (2016) and *Noura*

(2018) addresses the cultural struggles that exist within the diasporic migrants, who have two different cultures. Sirwah (2023) mentioned that “her plays include *9 Parts of Desire* (2004), which won many awards; *Fallujah* (2016), a libretto for the opera about the Iraq War; and *Noura* (2019) [sick] , her most recent and personal play are well known for bridging the gap between her Iraqi and American identities/roots” (49). This promotes the pivotal essence of all Raffo’s plays which is the crisis of identity.

Although all her plays are prestigious and interesting, her recent play *Noura* (2018) is extensively examined within literary studies. *Noura* is a play written in diaspora to trace the conflict of diasporic people, who can not delineate their cultural identity. In his article, Sirwah (2023) argued that “Noura, inspired by the stories and lives of Arab-American women about identity and belonging, is created as a response to Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House*. It has to do with postcolonial diaspora, the quest for identity, nostalgia, and hybridity(49). Based on this point, the argument of this essay has been foregrounded. In addition to that, this play also discusses the representations of women and how women’s gender identity has been constructed. In tandem with the fact that Raffo’s *Noura* is an appropriated text of Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House*(1997), the main purpose of this essay is to show how Raffo has updated her theatrical perspectives to treat one of the most debatable issues which is gender identity in new lens within the Iraqi diasporic theatre. Gender identity considers a nurturing environment in which it encourages various seeds to rise within its space. This fact is proved by Brah when she classified identity as “... culture, is difficult to pin down .We often refer to different identities, acknowledging that our sense of self can vary in different situations and change over time” (20). Building on this notion, Raffo weaves the threads of her perspectives towards women’s gender identity in which she puts her female characters in more liberated roles and self-determination. This can be recognized from the very beginning of the play when Noura protests against his husband’s naming her as “ Nora”. As in the following lines,

TAREQ: Are you awake?

Nora?

He teases her, over pronouncing her name.Darling Nora. . As in the following lines, NOURA: You’re hoping I answer to that name, so you put a darling with it.TAREQ: Habibti (Hah’bibt), your passport now says Nora.

NOURA: You changed my name against my will, call me by my real name.(Raffo 4)Here, it becomes clear that Raffo attempts to raise the voice of her female characters against the male ones. This opportunity has never been seen in Ibsen’s play *A Doll’s House*(1997) where women in Norwegian’s context were submissive and subjected to the authority of men. In contrast to Ibsen’s perspectives, Raffo re-writes her play from a dramaturgical point of views that can find an existence of equality and respect. As Raffo stated in her own online website that “I was as tired of watching Nora Helmer be the beacon of feminist thought as I was watching Torvald stand in for a husband. The women I know don’t run around acting smaller than they are, sneaking chocolates and barely parenting their children. Yet women all around me, in strong marriages, with truly great husbands, were drowning”. In tandem with this attitude, Raffo continues to show how her female characters are liberated and have a self-decision through adapting the cultural norms of the host country. As remarked in these lines NOURA: It happened in Mosul? MARYAM: I’m only six months. Maybe I should have mentioned it first. NOURA: It happened here? Did you tell the police?They arrest people here/ take their DNAMARYAM: Noura, I’m just pregnant, I wanted the baby.NOURA: You got married?MARYAM: I chose to have a baby, not a husband, a babyNOURA: I’ve been talking to Iraqis, engineers, men with citizenship. They won’t marry/you nowMARYAM: I don’t want to get married. I have school, my whole life.NOURA: How? You can’t just do that.Beat. (Raffo 16)Raffo’s characters differ from Ibsenian ones in terms of their constant attitude against male domination and dismissing of being controlled by imposed norms and social rules. This seems very clear in Maryam’s speech when she said “I don’t want to get married. I have school, my whole life” (Raffo 16). Here, Raffo makes her female character as if she were in an equal position with men. In addition to that, Maryam’s statement “I chose to have a baby, not a husband, a baby” (Raffo 16) clarifies the influence of the cultural norms of the diaspora life on the Raffo’s female character where having a baby without getting married is allowed in Western culture but not allowed in the indigenous country (Iraq). This answers the question that revolves around influence of the diaspora on the playwrights perspectives in which it offers a great evidence on how diaspora has affected Raffo to encourage her making her character Maryam deviates from her cultural identity to engage with the culture of the host land. This fact acknowledged Stuart Hall’s suggestion of writing that “[w]e all write and speak from a particular place and time, from a history and a culture which is specific. What we say is always ‘in context’, positioned” (as quoted in AlTalafeeh and Abu Amrieh 4). Under diaspora

experiences, it becomes clear how American norms have impacted Raffo's characters. As noted in Mariam's dialogue with Tariq, Maryam: Okay. I'm pregnant, six months. I don't know the sex. I wanted it to be a surprise. Tareq: I'm surprised. Maryam: I'm not married. I'm still in school. I wanted the baby. I was not coerced or raped. I am really excited about being a mom and having this child. I don't need you to find me a husband. Hope that addresses all your questions. I already have a job offer so I will be able to support the child during and after my schooling. (Raffo 40-41) The above lines illustrate how Mariam's personality is strong in which she tries to choose her life away from the influence of male domination. In this play, Raffo de-stereotyped the traditional image of women by giving new shining images where women have been depicted as being strong with self-confident. Interestingly, it becomes remarkable that women enjoy a liberated space within the context of Raffo's dramaturgical perspectives. This alludes that Raffo's adoption of Butler's concepts of gender identity concurrent with living in diaspora contribute in supporting Raffo's inspirations to empower the position of women in society. Under the prisms of gender performativity in which the two feminist characters Noura and Maryam, the latter in particular, go to celebrate the USA cultural norms to engage with the society. This can be remarked through Maryam's insistence of having a baby without a husband. It is clear that Maryam's and Noura's personalities come to fit the cultural norms of society regardless of how much these performances are against their her indigenous culture. this leads to conclude that adoptive cultural instances have become the parameters that determine the gender identity of any individual. Comparing Raffo's dramaturgical perspectives of "play making" by which she develops the role of her female characters from marginalization to domination with those of Henrik Ibsen, one can observe how the diaspora can be a site of social negotiation where the playwright can make his/ her own dramaturgies spatially based on where he/ she lives.

Conclusion

One of the most debatable issue that Iraqi theatre keeps to address is the emancipation of women. Women are represented in most nations as inferior to men in which they do not have the ability to reveal about themselves and their role in society is to care and give birth. In reaction to this stereotypical image, many feminist activists arise to de-stereotype the universal image of woman as a weak entity. For example, in diaspora theatre, the influence of these concepts have been clearly noted. For example, Heather Raffo's *Noura*(2018) can be considered as a literary work oriented toward these gender issues. Raffo whose collaboration with a group of Arab female immigrants offers her the opportunity to expend her perspectives on women and how they can be represented in diaspora. From her inspiration to give a voice for the silence issues, Raffo decides to re-write Ibsen play in a way that can allow for her female characters to raise their voices. Having this in mind, Raffo consciously or unconsciously makes Judith Butlers' (1990) understanding of gender identity as a basic stone for her liberated female characters. This points out women gender identity can be constructed based on the community where they live. From these points, Raffo starts to rewrite Ibsen's *A Doll's House*(1997) from a diaspora perspectives to argue that community plays a crucial role in determining the gender identity of women.

Under the prisms of gender performativity in which the two feminist characters Noura and Maryam, the latter in particular, go to celebrate the US cultural norms to engage with the society. This can be remarked through Maryam's insistences of having a baby without a husband. It is clear that Maryam's and Noura's personalities come to fit the cultural norms of society regardless of how much these performances are against her indigenous culture. this leads to conclude that adoptive cultural instances have become the parameters that determine the gender identity of any individual. In this sense, the essay concludes that Iraqi diaspora theater can offer a novel lens to understand the fluidity of gender performativity specifically when the playwright's hybrid identity plays a vital role in formulating his/her cultural stance.

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