



**We're Not Weak: Portraying Arab  
Women's Power in Betty Shamieh's  
The Black Eyed & Roar**

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## **Abstract**

For a long time, Arab/Muslim and Arab-American women were invisible or misrepresented in the West. They used to be either neglected or stereotyped as subhuman, too passive and mute. The continuous state of absence and invisibility, and the constant attack on Arabs and Muslims after 9/11 has generated the need to relocate and create a space through which Arab-American women can speak. In resistance to invisibility and silence, many Arab-American women writers have decided to give Arab-American women the right to speak about their own issues in order to prove Western stereotypes of Arab women to be wrong.

*Keywords: 9/11, Transnational Feminism, Arab women, Shamieh, Black Eyed, Roar*

## **Introduction**

*In Personal and Political: The Dynamics of Arab American Feminism*, Susan Muaddi Darraj argues that despite recent interest in the Middle East, following the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, the West has not made significant progress in understanding either Arab culture or the role of women in Arab society and within the Arab community in America (249). Arab women are viewed by many Western feminists as the 'poor' who

need to be liberated from their men. But such representations doesn't reflect the real status of Arab women in their societies.

As a result, a new movement emerged, the Transnational Feminism, to challenge, in Gayatri Spivak's words, the universal claim of the "Western feminism for speaking ... on behalf of third-world women" (qtd. In Kroløkke, 12). It counters the Western feminists' assumption of women's universalism because many Western feminists ignore women's specific cultural, social, and political conditions (Lemmerich, 9). In this way, Transnational feminists refuse the Western feminists' assumption that all women are the same and emphasize the necessity of difference in race, class, religion, citizenship and culture of women. They aim to correct the Western feminism's claims that Third World women are submissive and lack their individual feminine identity.

Being classified as Third World women, Arab-American feminism is deeply influenced by the Transnational Feminist theory as it emphasizes studying women's status within their social, economical, historical, and political context to show that Arab women are empowered and not weak as they are usually perceived by Western feminism.

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The terrorist attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup> and their negative impact on Arab-Americans resulted in a noticeable production of Arab-American women's literary works, and theater in particular witnessed a good few of plays written by Arab-American women, who became, as Angele Ellis puts it "more daring and more direct" (qtd. In Radwan 194). The attacks contributed to the heavy feminine presence of Arab-American playwrights such as Leila Buck, Heather Raffo, Betty Shamieh, and others. Such women dramatists have introduced performances to the American stage that dispel the stereotypical image of the weak victimized Arab woman.

Using Transnational Feminist theory as a framework, this paper analyzes two plays by the Palestinian-American *Betty Shamieh* to demonstrate, through examining her female protagonists, that Arab women are not weak or passive, they are educated, have feminist consciousness, and strong enough to defend their rights.

### **Betty Shamieh (1979-)**

Shamieh is a playwright, screenwriter, and actress. She was born in San Francisco, California. She has authored about 15 plays among them *Chocolate in Heat-Growing up Arab in America*,

*Again and Against, The Machine, Territories, The Black Eyed and Roar.*

Being one of the most notable contemporary Arab-American women writers, Shamieh's writings play an important role in correcting the misconceptions about Arabs in America. The Arab-women in general, and Palestinian women in particular, who are the main focus of Shamieh's plays, have always been misrepresented in the West. Commenting on the stereotypical misrepresentation of Arab woman, Barbara Nimri Aziz says:

First, we are perceived as weak. Second, we are seen as victim. Third, our oppressor is typically a male relative. Fourth, we appear uneducated and incapable of managing without outside help- namely support ...from those already educated and liberated, the capable western [.....]. Fifth, the Arab or Muslim woman is caged and needs to be released. (150)

Shamieh is part of the Arab-American feminism that has played a crucial part in giving Arab-American women the right to speak about their own problems in order to counter-narrate the Western's negative portrayal of them. In her plays, Shamieh presents strong female protagonists who struggle to define themselves and challenge western perceptions about Arab women

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as silent, passive, submissive, weak, and need someone to help them and defend their rights. This is one of the main justifications of Americas' intervention in the Arab and Muslim countries. Evelyn Alsultany comments:

Pity for the oppressed Muslim woman has been strategically used to advance US imperialism. This highly mediated evocation of outrage for the plight of the oppressed Muslim woman inspires support of US interventions in Arab and Muslim countries. ... Sympathy for Muslim women operates to justify withholding sympathy for Muslim men because they presumably deserve to be in Guantánamo or Abu Ghraib. (167)

But by portraying her women characters as reflected in *The Black Eyed and Roar*, Shamieh breaks that claim down as Arab women are able to defend themselves. Her female characters are not silent and submissive, instead, they speak out and roar.

**I- The Black Eyed**

*The Black Eyed* (2005) is a post 9/11 play that depicts the position of Arabs, especially Palestinian women, and the oppression practiced over the Palestinians throughout history by tracing four Palestinian women from different time periods:

Delilah , Tamam, Aiesha, and the Architect. Waiting with one another in the afterlife, each one of the four women narrates her story of exploitation and persecution that reflects the political conditions at her time.

In this play, Shamieh tries to depict the influence of the political turmoil on the lives of her characters and shows how they, despite all the miseries that have befallen them, remain strong and defend themselves in various ways. Each one of them is an example of strong woman who refuses to accept her fate passively and decides to act to change it and defend, not only herself, but her people as well.

### **1. Dalilah: The Power of Seduction**

Delilah is the first one of the four women who begins to narrate her story with Samson. Their story is a well-known one, there were many different interpretations to it but it is the first time to see it through Dalilah's eyes, from a feminist perspective. She defends herself against those who accuse her of treachery and deception by stating her motives behind betraying Samson.

The story of Delilah and Samson is a clear example of Arab woman's strength and endurance. Delilah's people convinced her to seduce Samson to revenge the injustices that have befallen them at his hands "...if Samson isn't stopped.... our men can't win



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against him. We don't want to lose more men... the only weakness that man has is for women. And then in perfect time, they all turned and looked at [her]. It was then that [she] offered to try" (16-17). Delilah agrees to help her people get rid of Samson. Although she is physically weak, Delilah, like women in general, has many other sources of power. She derives her power and strength from Samson's desire for her and exercises her power over Samson by persuading him to reveal the secret of his strength. Using her powers of seduction and deception, she eventually gets to know the secret of his power- his divine hair. She later planned with her people to shave it off, leaving him subdued for easy capture.

Although she loved Samson, Delilah's love for and devotion to her country was much greater. Philistine is a part of her identity that she couldn't abandon despite her love for a Jewish man. When Aisha tells her: "So why don't you go join the Jewish women, Delilah?" (32) Delilah rejects this request since her love for Samson cannot detach her from her nation's love: "Just because I love someone else doesn't mean I become something else" (32).

In *The Book of Judges: Paradigm and Deviation in Images of Women*, L.R. Klein suggests that, looking at Delilah from a

Palestinian point of view, she is seen as “a resourceful woman, possibly a heroine to her own people, who perpetrates an age-old and repugnant ruse: using a man’s love to bring him down” (qtd. In Smith 47). Carol Smith supports Klein’s point of view asserting that the Philistines could not have conquered Samson without Dalilah’s “real power,” “the only kind of power available to her” which she used very well indeed (47). Even the powerful Palestinians are incapable of conquering Samson, who is, after all, only one man, except with the help of a woman.

By re-presenting the historical tale of Delilah and Samson in her post 9/11 play, Shamieh indicates the effective role of women in that struggle. Arab women are always there sacrificing their lives in order to defend their people. They always show a surprising power and effectiveness particularly at times of crises.

## **2. Tamam: The Power of Revenge**

The second woman to narrate her painful story of oppression and persecution is Tamam, whose name, as she explains, means “enough” (38). Although Tamam said that she was named that way because she was the seventh girl in her family and they wanted to say enough girls, her name can be also

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regarded as a symbolic cry against persecution and violence, it is Tamam, enough!

Tamam is a Palestinian who lived during the Crusades period where her people were badly persecuted. In the afterlife, Tamam is looking for her brother, Muhammed, who was killed during his fighting against the Crusades.

Because he was imprisoned, Tamam decided to pay ransom for her brother's release and confront the Crusaders herself. She is aware of her femininity and its effect on the Crusaders: "I am a pretty woman. It's not a boast. It is a fact" (39). She hopes to persuade them to release her brother. Unfortunately, instead of accepting her offer, they rape her in front of her brother to demonstrate their power over her and her people (40). She recalls: "The crusaders believed rape would enrage our men" (40). The chorus considers her statement and replies: "Enraging a man is the first step on the stairway that gets him to a place where he becomes impotent, helpless" (40). Two weeks later, her brother was released and he decided to take revenge. He joined a rebel group that was organized in the prison. Each man of this group went to a certain point in the crowded Crusader marketplace, "each with a knife and a double-ball battle mace, killing as many as they could..." (41). As a result, her

brother was killed by the Crusaders and they hanged his head and hand on the city walls, preventing Tamam from burying any part left of his torn body.

Shamieh uses the character of Tamam to draw attention to the fact that oppression and injustice are the main stimuli behind terrorism. When one experiences extra pressures and unfairness, he may turn into one whose only goal is to destroy those who oppressed and persecuted him. Tamam comments:

Oppression is like a coin maker. You put in human beings, press the right buttons and watch them get squeezed, shrunk, flattened till they take the slim shape of a two-faced coin, one side is a martyr, the other a traitor. All the possibilities of a life get reduced to those paltry two.” (42-43)

Her brother turned into a terrorist to avenge his sister, himself, and his people. Shamieh here suggests that what drives a terrorist is not unjustified desire to kill, destroy, and terrify others, it is an immense anger, bitterness, hatred, unbearable feelings of oppression and injustice.

Tamam was humiliated and persecuted because she is both a woman and an Arab, however, she didn't give up, she became

stronger and decided to avenge all the miseries that befallen her and her people.

In the afterlife, Tamam is granted authority over those who abused her. In Shamieh's world, the rules are reversed; the Palestinian women possess agency, choice, and dissent even in the afterlife.

### **3. Aiesha: The Power of Resistance**

Aiesha is a contemporary Palestinian suicide bomber who describes herself saying: "I am a martyr. There are female martyrs too, you know" (33). Throughout the play, she keeps asserting her power and agency: "Women like me take matters into our own hands, and we get our rewards" (34).

Although the suicide bombing is well known as a male phenomenon, in the few last decades it became quite common to hear about female suicide bombers, particularly Palestinian ones. In her study on Palestinian women suicide bombers, Barbara Victor contends that the main motive for doing this is the "hopelessness, social stress, and depression, which these relatively destitute women suffered from" (321). Because of their endless suffering under the Israeli occupation, Palestinian women have gained more visible roles in the Palestinian national struggle through protesting, sending sons out for jihad, and participating in

jihad themselves. This active involvement in the political struggle deploys the prevailing stereotypical image of Arab women as weak, submissive, and passive. Dorit Naaman comments:

When women opt to fight alongside men, they challenge the dichotomy of woman as victim/man as defender. They challenge not only the images of women as victims of war but also the traditional patriarchal binary opposition that postulates women as physically and emotionally weak and incapable of determining and defending the course of their own lives. (935)

Islah Jad also states that the acts of female suicide bombing were “committed out of a sense of empowerment and uniqueness”, and that the women undertaking these deadly missions “were in full control of their actions and their agency” (190).

Aeisha has witnessed the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and has seen her brother killed by the Israelis. She suffered a lot, she says to the architect: “what have you suffered? Did someone make fun of your parents’ accents? Didn’t get an award or two because of racism? live my life on earth in my dirty, crowded refugee camp, in the place that your parents abandoned...I wasn’t born to have that luxury...so don’t you judge me” (83-84). So, Aiesha decided

to take revenge any way even if she has to blow herself up and become a terrorist. She says: "How do you survive in a violent world and not be violent?" she wanted to attract the world's attention towards her people's suffering under the occupation because, "no one hears [their] cries" (75).

Aiesha's dilemma represents that of many oppressed Arabs who are confused and unable to choose the righteous way for protest. She wanted to be heard, she wanted the world to wake up and put an end to the misery of her people. Her act of blowing herself up is a form of resistance against the cruel forms of oppression and persecution practiced by the Israelis who go so far in humiliating the Palestinians just to facilitate their own occupation and expansion. In such atmosphere men and women are equals and both have rights to defend their people. Amal Amireh argues that Palestinian women suicide bombers posed a challenge to the Orientalist view of Arab and Muslim women's bodies as "dormant or inactive, passively waiting for outside help" (230). Arab women no longer function as passive and weak bodies but as active, complicated figures.

#### **4. The Architect: The Power of Imagination**

The architect is an unnamed Palestinian-American woman who died on one of the flights during the attacks of 9/11. The

power of the architect as an Arab-American woman is reflected in a different way. It isn't a physical or executive power, but a mental one. She is presented as speechless; however, her imagination is so powerful and creative. Many factors, such as language barriers and inarticulation prevent her from stating what she wants, but she is very intelligent and uses the power of her imagination to build a real-like life. First, she creates a fantasy life with her half Arab supervisor whom she describes as "the Half-Breed". She fantasizes about marrying him, and how that would lead her to abandon her architectural work in order to care for her family, while he succeeds through her support. This imaginary image reflects the status of the strong Arab woman who sacrifices her job in order to take care of her family and support her husband to get higher and higher. This image dispels the western portrayal of Arab non-working women as submissive and compelled to do so. But the fact is that there are many Arab women who decide, willingly, to stay at home and focus on their roles as housewives. They prefer spending time looking after their families rather than go out for work. This is why Transnational Feminism is much more appropriate in studying the status of Arab women since it emphasizes women's specific cultural, social, and political conditions.



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Her fate leads her to be on a plane hijacked by Arabs. She imagines that, through her eloquence in the Arabic language, she is able to convince the hijackers not to harm the passengers and to help the Americans on board understand the suffering of her people by exposing the government's manipulation of the facts. She manages to save the day, which makes her a celebrity. The Architect sees the hijackers as some people who have "lived lives that would break the hardest of men... They only want to be heard" (65). She imagines that she could work as a bridge between them and the American passengers who would listen to the hijackers and would be highly moved by "stories of those they feared" (67). They would refuse to leave the plane before the hijackers' demands are met which are: "Palestinians are allowed the right to self – determination, Iraqis are not killed so their oil can be stolen" (67). People on the plan would realize "the crap the American government tries to sell [them] about trying to secure the human rights" (67).

Through these two elaborate fantasies, Shamieh gives an insight into the Architect's life and her fears, hopes and dreams living as an Arab woman in America. She comes to terms with her condition as belonging to two different cultures and accepts being a bridge between them: "I lived like an Arab in America. I was never ashamed of who I was ...I knew if I was not proud to be a

Palestinian, I could not live a life with dignity. I knew if I did not love my people, no one would. I would no longer resent being a bridge between two cultures” (66-67). She is a strong Arab-American woman who embraces the two halves of her hyphenated identity.

Although they were not given the full credit and appreciation they deserve, in *The Black Eyed*, Shamieh allows her Palestinian women to speak out and declare their political opinions and dispel the stereotypical misconceptions of Palestinian-American women in particular, and Arab women in general, as passive, submissive, and weak. Most of the time they speak in a chorus and repeat certain words to emphasize the unity of their voice. Although each one of them has a unique story, the four women are almost alike in their unlimited strength and power of resistance. Although they are all victims, no one of them accepts her victimization passively.

## **II- Roar**

*Roar* (2004) takes place in the immediate aftermath of the invasion of Kuwait by Iraqi forces in 1991 and depicts a marginalized Palestinian-American family living in *Detroit* and tries hard to assimilate and become part of the American society in order to fulfil their American Dream. Ahmed and Karema

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Yacoub own and operate a “party store” in Detroit, above which they reside. Their daughter Irene, a Palestinian-American teen, has dreams of becoming a famous American singer. Both Karema and Ahmed immigrated from Jordan to America in the wake of the First Gulf War. They desperately want to melt into the American society, yet they find it hard to hold on their ethnic identities and be accepted in the mainstream. They find it difficult to fit in, whereas their teenage daughter, Irene appears to be more assimilated and accustomed to the American lifestyle.

In this play, Shamieh focuses on the determined struggle of three Arab-American women to fit in and overcome their sense of alienation, displacement, and marginalization. Karema, Hala, and Irene adopt different strategies to reach their goals. Whether they managed to do so or not isn't important, what matters here is that they, despite the countless disappointments that they face, they keep trying and never give up.

Irene is a second-generation immigrant who wishes to be an American blue singer. She does all what makes her looks as a native American, she wears “designer clothes, listens to popular music, and follows stylish new trends” (37). Every now and then, Irene performs at open-mike nights at local Detroit venues. In order to be accepted within the mainstream and succeed as a blue

singer, her father, Ahmed, asked her to hide her Palestinian identity during her night performances, he justifies to Karema: “Come on, Karema. Who in America has ever heard of a Palestinian blues singer?” Karema by her turn replies “who in America has ever heard of a Palestinian anything” (5, 6). They refer to the invisibility of Arabs, particularly Palestinians, in America. It is hard for them to succeed unless they hide their true unwelcomed identities and pretend to be someone else.

Karema attempts to teach her young daughter Irene about the Palestinian culture; however, Irene prefers American lifestyle and desires to fully integrate into it. In his study *Acculturation Style and Psychological Functioning in Children of Immigrants* N. Pawliuk writes that “immigrant children, due to their exposure to mainstream culture in school and their eagerness to be accepted by their peers, often assimilate or integrate Western culture faster than their parents” (114). Charlene J. Eisenlohr also comments on the social pressures young Arab women constantly face and states that: “To be accepted by peers at school, they can feel pressured to deny their own heritage” (57). So, Irene dissociated herself from her Palestinian culture to ensure being accepted by American music producers and audiences.

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Irene represents the dilemma of almost all the second-generation American born immigrants who bury down their cultural heritage in order to assimilate completely into the mainstream. They find themselves torn between the two cultures, this laceration results in their sense of marginalization and displacement. This dilemma comes to an end only when they accept their ethnic roots and manage to balance between the culture of their homeland and that of their adopted country. Irene finally realizes this fact and begins to embrace her ethnic roots. As her aunt Hala begins to teach her Arabic music, Irene shows growing interest in learning it and eventually develops an appreciation for her unique cultural background.

Although she is only fifteen, Irene represents an example of a strong Arab-American girl. She is an iron-willed girl who pursues her dream enthusiastically and never gives up. Even when her father leaves her mother and runs back to Jordan with her aunt Hala, Irene chooses not to cry over his betrayal but to support her mother and help her in work. She even finds herself a job at her uncle's office where she can work along with her study.

Karema is another example of a strong Palestinian-American woman who manages to overcome her miseries and starts over with her husband and daughter. She takes advantage of

her new life in Detroit and begins to demonstrate her business skills. Ahmed tells Hala about Karema's efforts to secure their life: "Karema's got us where we are today... Karema saves every penny to buy property and property always goes up.... we could live like royalty just off the rent we get from our apartments alone" (20).

Karema also plays a vital role in preserving her family's Arab identity. As Moghadam states in *Gender and National Identity: Women and Politics in Muslim Societies*, women are often "assigned the role of bearers of cultural values, carriers of traditions, and symbols of the community" (4).. In Arab-American families, women, as Gaby Semaan puts it, are the main responsible for maintaining and reviving the Arab identity of the family and community (25). In *Roar*, it is Karema who attempts to maintain their Arab identity and hold on their Arab values and traditions. She, for example, still holds on their Arabic food traditions. She prepares Arabic dishes to her family. She is busy throughout the play picking leaves of parsley and arranging them, cleaning mint leaves, and preparing a tray of nuts and various Middle Eastern dips for the family; which is typical of Arab housewives' activities. This is one way of preserving cultural identity. Keeping recipes means keeping one's identity and culture.

Karema's power crystalizes when she finds out the secret relationship between Ahmed and Hala, her husband and sister. She doesn't lament her fate or accept her victimization, instead, she sends them out of her life to keep its stability. She forces Ahmed out of their home: "Get out of this house!...you'll come crawling back. On your goddamn knees" (58). At this point, Karema no longer wants to permit a man who no longer loves her to live with her. She is a typical example of a powerful Arab-immigrant wife and mother who survives many obstacles and never gives up.

## **Conclusion**

Shamieh's selected plays depict the condition of the Palestinians in general and the Arab-American women in particular. In *The Black Eyed*, the four women suffer from various kinds of oppression and manipulation, but each one of them doesn't accept her victimization and reacts in a strong, sometimes destructive, way to revolt against oppression and achieve justice. In *Roar*, the main characters feel displaced whether in the Middle East or in America. Their sense of displacement result in either holding on their Arab identities or burying it down in order to assimilate and get accepted within the mainstream.

Shamieh portrays Arab women as being assertive, attentive, and powerful. Those women are presented in various contexts. The Arab women presented in her selected plays do not resemble the Western perception about Arab-women. Shamieh presents powerful images of Arab women's lives showing that although these women live in poor conditions, hierarchical and patriarchal societies, they managed to survive and overcome extreme obstacles that should change the Western perceptions of them as being submissive and subordinated. These women are free, ready to humiliate those who commit unjust behavior or deeds, empowered, and ready to empower their people.

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