

## The Concept of Imbalance as a Marked Sign In the Heart of America

## مفهوم التوازن وعدم التوازن في مسرحية في قلب أمريكا للكاتبة ناومي

Dr. Majed Sh Alenezi<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Assistant Professor of English Literature, Department of Languages and Translation, Northern Borders University, Saudi Arabia

د. ماجد شديد العنزي<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> استاذ مساعد في قسم اللغات والترجمة، جامعة الحدود الشمالية، المملكة العربية السعودية

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### الملخص:

تتركز مسرحية في قلب أمريكا للكاتبة ناومي والاس على عدد من القضايا الاجتماعية من أهمها الحياة الشخصية العلاقات الإنسانية والتحول الثقافي وتشكيل الهوية. كما تسلط المسرحية الضوء على العلاقة الاستطردية بين السلطة والعنصرية وحيث تقود هذه العلاقة الي تهميش أقليات معينة بسبب الخلفية الثقافية والهوية الجنسية. تبحث هذه الورقة في موضوع الهوية والانتماء في مسرحية والاس من خلال نظرية فيلان (الموسوم وغير الموسوم). ينبع التوافق بين المسرحية ونظرية فيلان من السمات الأساسية كل منها: حيث تدور أحداث المسرحية حول التفاعلات البشرية بينما نظرية فيلان تدور حول عملية القوة والمفاهيم الاجتماعية. وهذا التحالف بالتالي يساعد على تعطيل الشلل الأبدي الذي يعتبر عدم المساواة والعنصرية أمراً لا حياء عنه.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** مسرحية في قلب أمريكا، نظرية الموسوم وغير الموسوم، الفلسطيني الأمريكي، الهوية والانتماء.

### Abstract

Naomi Wallace's play in the Heart of America is about personal lives, human interactions, cultural metamorphosis, and identity formation. The play attempts to highlight the compatible alliance between power and racism that leads to marginalization of certain minority groups based on cultural background and gender identity. For no apparent reason other than neutralizing social class differences, authority operates at the socio-political level to affirm the alleged beneficial relationship between power and racism. This paper examines identity and belonging in Wallace's play within the framework of Peggy Phelan's Marked and Unmarked Theory. The compatibility between the two stems from the essential features of each: the play weaves around human interactions, and Phelan's theory is about power operations and social perceptions. This alliance, thereby, assists in inactivating the aporetic paralysis in which inequality and racism are taken for granted.

**Keywords:** In the Heart of America, Marked and Unmarked theory, Palestinian American, Identity and belonging.

## Introduction:

Naomi Wallace's *In The Heart of America*, is a "poetic anti-war love play written in reaction to the Gulf War of 1991". (1) The play weaves around politics and violence; war and racism. Wallace delves deep into political events providing multiple versions of views related to belonging and identity shaping. Indeed, she creates a space for the characters to define themselves in surrealist and episodic, non-chronological play. The play's actions and events take place during a war of attrition, and move back and forth in place and time, being set between two different eras: the Vietnam war in 1969 and the first Gulf war of 1990 and its immediate aftermath. Wallace is interested in the way the metaphorical language can be used to dehumanize those seen as enemies and also can serve to explore notions about identity. However, the metaphorical language in the play will remain controversial and its resourceful richness will exceed the purview of any particular approach.

The play operates at socio-political levels whose ambivalent richness goes beyond the theme of war and violence and sheds light on "self-actualization" as Engler states. (2)

The concept of balance and imbalance are metaphorically implemented as the play demonstrates that white characters maintain balance whereas Palestine Americans lack this dexterity. Wallace uses the two terms to depict how unequally minority groups namely Palestine Americans are perceived/ viewed/ treated in the United States. The notion of balance in the play hints at belonging in which the white American character maintains balance as he performs the head-stand, whereas the term imbalance is associated with inequality and powerless. The play metaphorically demonstrates that white men, because of their social status, have balance/ power (can accurately perform the head-stand) while other minorities group do not have the same race privilege. Wallace establishes the concept of balance with the white American character Craver, and imbalance is a characteristic of the two Palestinian American characters; Remzi and Fairouz who can not maintain their balance while performing the head-stand. This paper, henceforth, analyzes the two terms in context of Peggy Phelan's Marked and Unmarked theory. It investigates the significant roles of the two aspects in the play and how they operate metaphorically at the socio-political levels. Paradoxically the Palestinian Americans are marked by the unmarked group. And it is in this paradox the Marked theory finds its explanatory power.

## Hypotheses of the Study:

The theory of Marked and Unmarked is highly effective as it exposes the implied meaning or the form of real. Phelan uses psychoanalysis and feminist theories of

representation to create connections between the word and the image, the marked and the unmarked. According to Phelan, Unmarked serves to expose "the blind spot within the visible real". (3 p3) Visible real does not always convey the whole image. For instance, perceptions of certain religious or cultural aspects are usually misunderstood due to inaccurate performance. Phelan distinguishes between representation and performance in relation to portraying the other, "Representation reproduces the Other as the Same. Performance can be seen as a model for another representational economy one in which the reproduction of the Other as the Same is not assured".(p3) This assertion hinges on the perception that the relationship between self and other is not equal. During colonization, for example, the relationship between colonizers and colonized people are not equal with regards to social status and power. The colonized people are marginalized and made known to western mainstream through the perspective of the white people. Henceforth, Phelan views visibility as a trap as she affirms, "The visibility of black skin is not and cannot be, an accurate barometer for identifying a community of diverse political, economic, sexual, and artistic interests" (p10).

Moreover, the theory of Marked and Unmarked operates within a binary scale. Ego, because of its status in society, constructs and maintains its differences from the other. Phelan differentiates between marked and unmarked in relation to values, stating "One term of binary is marked with value, the other is unmarked" (p5). And in the case of gender relations, she adds, "within the psycho-philosophical frame, cultural reproduction takes she who is unmarked and re-marked her [] while he who is marked with value is left unmarked" (p5). However, the theory exceeds the limits of gender relations; it serves a wider perspective, "Having no particular home, no boundaries dictated by genre, the unmarked can be mapped across a wide terrain" Phelan writes (p27). Arab Americans or African Americans, for example, are marked as the others (not fully American) because of the lack of power/whiteness in a solely white dominant society. "There is real power", Phelan affirms, "in remaining unmarked" (p6).

Hence, the theory concentrates on how struggle and power form and influence social interactions and perceptions. People are categorized according to their race, religion, age, gender and nationality and their social identity is compatible with social structure. For Phelan "Identity is perceptible only through a relation to another – which is to say, it is a form of both resisting and claiming the other, declaring the boundary where the self diverges from and merges with other" (p13). Thereby, categorizations within the same community create a great deal of cultural anxiety in which hierarchy is legitimized in the mind set of both the Marked and Unmarked. The other, accordingly, is seen in the image of the same. Phelan argues, "The other then is transformed into the image of the same, an image projected

by he who looks at the other in order to see himself” (p45). White men, as such, maintain their white identity/whiteness of America through their own distinctive features from others namely; None-White Americans. Indeed, immigrants with different cultural backgrounds and belief are subject to classifications in any given society, they encounter issues of categorizations and marginalization within society. Arab Americans share the same attitudes as many minority groups in their voyage of seeking recognition within American community, yet the total integration into the mainstream seems impossible to achieve.

### ***In The Heart of America:***

Wallace’s plays match well with the theory of Unmarked, since her plays always weave around the issue of power. She, in one of her interviews, underscores that “On the stage the question is always who has the power and who does not, who is trying to get it and why somebody does not have it”.

Charles Haugland argues that Wallace’s plays do not provide an ideal world to audiences, instead “Wallace has created worlds in which characters are constantly assaulted by outside forces” (4F p3). She, henceforth, rejects the constructed knowledge of human nature with regards to issues of gender, social class, racism and sexism. Wallace states her view in an interview with Connie Julian:

For me, it’s also because I don’t believe in the evilness of human beings, any human being really, although certain base elements in our present administration want me to revise that notion. But it’s a system people get caught up in that deforms their humanity so to speak, deforms the goodness in them. And we see flashes of their own awareness of that.

Indeed, the emphasis on paradigm of knowledge and thereby Wallace treats human nature in terms of sharing and resisting oppressions. In *One Flea Spare*, for instance, the strife of social class is draw into the center through constructing characters of different social status setting in a particular historical moment. Wallace employs the historical past to understand the current present. She argues that if history is very close, people would not be able to see the implied/hidden meaning. “Setting her plays at particularly fraught historical moments”, Hugland states, “Wallace chooses to dramatize the ways in which larger forces, war, plague and the past act on her characters” (9). In *The Heart of America*, for example, Remzi’s personality/view/ perception of the world has changed as a consequence of his experience in the second Gulf War.

Wallace’s *In The Heart of America* weaves around Fairouz, a Palestinian American woman whose main trip was to find her brother. The setting is the second Gulf War of the early 1990s, however the play touches upon domestic and international issues. For Scott T. Cummings *In the Heart of America* criticizes American

foreign policy, yet the play not only limited to the role of United States in the Gulf War, but it also refers to the Vietnam War as well. Amany El-Sawy, argues that “the play illustrates the destructiveness of the American imperial hegemony” (5 p47). Simultaneously, Wallace sheds light on minority groups in American society, particularly the Palestinian American minority group. As stated earlier, Wallace uses historical events to highlight social concerns. For instance, In *The Heart of America*, in her journey to find her brother, Fairouz discovers Remzi’s love story with Craver, a white American soldier, moreover the love story took place in Saudi desert. Indeed, the time and the place are not suitable to start a gay relationship. Nonetheless, by depicting this relationship in a specific environment where gay relation literally is prohibited, Wallace demonstrates a form of resistance. This style fulfils the play’s purpose to manifest multiple levels of threat into dialogue. “The interplay between these two levels”, Hugland asserts, “is striking as the audience’s understanding of each is in relation to other” (p9). Wallace, thus, does not represent straight realism in which the play depicts real concerns in society, instead she adopts historical events to dislodge issues of current importance. This oscillation between the past and present becomes the essence of the play.

*In the Heart of America*, imbalance is a feature associated physically with female characters and minority groups, each female character has a body defect. Wallace employs the notion of imbalance as a marked sign to expose how Palestinian Americans as a minority group are perceived/ represented/ made known to the dominant group. Farirouz and her mother are physically injured and can not walk properly. Also, the wandering ghost Lue Ming reveals her mother’s disability. Lue Ming told Fairouz, “You should meet my mother; she has one foot” (6 p91). Moreover, Lue Ming adds that women in Vietnam have some difficulties with walking and thereby can not maintain their balance:

“Fariouz. How do the women walk in your country?  
Lue Ming. Not as upright as we’d like. Hunched over a bit most of the time” (p 91).

Ron Daniels argues that “In Naomi’s work something is always being done to the body” (Daniels qtd. in Baley, 23). Wallace uses female’s body to manifest the oppression of women in many societies. Walter Bilderback argues that body consumes an important aspect of Wallace’s writings, stating [Wallace ] “speaks to and for the body” (69). In a way similar to Bilderback, El-Sawy, asserts:

Wallace’s dramatic centrality of the body is clearly emphasized in the play *In the Heart of America* as the characters bodies are made to interact within the different contexts of war, homeophobia, love, lust, guilt and other social and political backgrounds, building the drama on the result of those bodies’ interactions (47). Thereby, the use of females’ body is perceived

metaphorically at two levels: it demonstrates that women are marked in the male-dominated society, secondly these signs hint at a struggle of identity and equality. In the heart of America, the concern for identity shaping and equality needs are manifested through the idea of imbalance. In one of her interviews, Wallace says:

One of my leads into the play was thinking about the body in love and in war. While war is intent on destroying the body, love supposedly has a capacity to reconstruct or rediscover the body's sensuality. The body is central and vulnerable in both love and war. The question is: how does the body's sensuality or sexuality survive in the face of systems designed to destroy it either war or late capitalism (25).

As consequences of the war, Fairouz's mother breaks her hip and becomes paralysed. Fairouz asks her brother, "Did mother ever tell you how she broke her hip before she came to America?" (93). Despite her broken bone, she resists and moves on to have a better life. For the vast majority of white dominant community visible real is incomplete as such their perception of Palestinian American, for instance, is inaccurate, since they construct their view of Palestinian Americans through the narrative of a single story. Palestinian Americans are only viewed as immigrants regardless of the motifs behind their immigration, as the dialogue between the two siblings shows, "I want a quiet life. As an American citizen" (95), Remzi tells his sister. Fairouz responds angrily, "An American citizen. What is that? This government pays for the guns that force us off our land" (95). Fairouz singles out the contributions of American foreign policy in creating Palestine crisis. Thereby, Wallace not only shed lights on the ignorant of American people towards Palestinian Americans, but also criticizes the double standards of American foreign policy: "Remzi: Iraq invaded a sovereign country. That is against international law.

Fairouz: International law? Ha! Your own land is over-run occupied, slowly eaten up...

Remzi: (Mocks) Village by village, orchard by orchard.

Fairouz: And no one's ever smacked a Desert Shield on those bastard! (Wallace 93).

Wallace's negative attitude towards American foreign policy is emphasized through connecting the second Gulf War with Palestinian crisis. American army went to liberate Kuwait from Iraqi's troop and turns blind towards Palestinian people. Wallace's position is assured by the Palestinian American playwright Ismail Khalidi who says:

It is revelatory to see an American writer tackle the Middle East and the ever-taboo subject of Palestine with such nuance and imagination and at the same time such a fierce sense of justice and such a firm and courageous grasp on history (211).

In addition to their mother, both Fairouz and Remzi have

no balance, their lack of balance is a marked sign provided to them by the unmarked group. Even though America is a multicultural nation, minority groups are marked or categorized according to their race, culture and religion.

Throughout the play, Fairouz is not fully accepted as an American. Said otherwise, she is always represented as the other. At school, children believe that she had a devil's feet, implying that she does not belong to this white American community. And thereby, she was asked to leave the country "Dirty Arab devil, you go home" (92). Furthermore, Fairouz's physical disability is not a result of war violence, but it was caused by the white people:

"Lue Ming: But it did come off? And when they saw you did not have devil feet did they let you be their friend?

Fairouz: A happy ending? It was for them. I think they were scare of me. Afterwards, they were not.

Lue Ming: And now you have a devil's foot?

Fairouz: It does look a bit like a hoof now. The bone is curved wrong" (Wallace 92).

The above dialogue manifests that even though Fairouz does not have distinctive features as a human being, the white people do not accept her as a friend, instead they attacked and wounded her. As a result, she becomes visibly different from the dominant group. By giving Palestinian-American a sign, Wallace implies that there is a sort of segregation within American community. The concept of imbalance signifies failure of assimilation. Throughout the play, Fairouz assures that she is an Arab-America. Based on Phelan's definition of identity, Fairouz identifies herself through her difference from the other. The concept of imbalance reveals that Fairouz and Remzi have difficulties in forming their own identity. They are neither fully American nor Palestinian, they oscillate between the two identities. Therefore, their identity is incomplete in either side. This is manifested in Fairouz's walking skill, she can walk but still she is limping. Also, the struggle for identity is seen through the dialogue between Fairouz and Lue Ming:

"Lue Ming: You can not go back to Al-Dawayima. There is no place to go back to. (Beat) So you are Arab?

Fairouz: American. Lue Ming: American?

Fairouz: Arab.

Lue Ming: Make up your mind!

Fairouz: I am a Palestinian-Arab- American. From Atlanta. Sir. (Wallace 110).

Indeed, the dialogue shows Fairouz's uncertainty and her hesitant personality as she fails to provide the right response. Moreover, Fairouz's struggle for identity is seen in her understanding of the idea of balance when she tells Craver how Remzi perceives balance: "He said balance could be a bad thing, a trick to keep you in the middle, where things add up, where can do no harm" (138). Fairouz implies that for Palestinian-Americans, it is very hard to hold the dual identities. Because of the

huge differences between the two cultures, the double identities can not tie together. Thus, Wallace uses the idea of lacking balance metaphorically to refer to the issue of identity within minority groups in American community. According to Jill Dolan the use of metaphor is significant in theatre studies. He states:

Metaphor is used increasingly to describe the nonessentialized constructions of marginalized identities, like white and ethnic women, gays and lesbians, men and women of colour and various conflicting combinations and intersections of these categories and positionalities (419).

Accordingly, Fairouz and Remzi's characters reflect Dolan's notion of the value of metaphor in theatre studies. Both as Palestinian-Americans are marginalized. Despite, their efforts to be recognized as Americans, they are represented as the others. Fairouz shows students at her school that she does not have a devil's feet, signifying that she is just like them without any distinctive features. Lately, after her deformity, she practices walking to stabilize her strides. Also, her brother twists her foot but she tolerates the pain in order to redeem her deformity.

Remzi (Talking to her gently): Just once more.

Fairouz: I can not. I cannot

Remzi: You have got to do it or you will never walk right. Just once more. Fairouz: Just once more. Only once more. Will it be better then? (Wallace 115).

*In the Heart of America* demonstrates that all Fairouz's attempts to form her identity fail down. She remains in a state of in-between. Wallace establishes another connection between female body and identity, in the conversation between Fairouz and Remzi regarding the honor and dignity of female body.

Remzi: If you walked into our village today, they'd tar and feather you.

Fairouz: Fuck you. I'd put on a veil.

Remzi: The veil is not the problem. You have not been a virgin since you were thirteen.

Fairouz: I was at least fourteen! (They laugh)

Fairouz: Mother still says to me "The honor of a girl is like a piece of glass. If it is broken, you never glue it together again. (Wallace 94).

The veil is used as a metaphor to hide Fairouz's inability to fit with her motherland's culture. In other words, Wallace employs the veil metaphorically to hide Fairouz's violation of some major aspects of her motherland's culture. However, covering her broken aspects of her culture background is not permanent. Fairouz's mother tells her that "If it is broken, you never glue it together again" (94). In Arabian culture, virginity is an important facet especially for women. Consequently, a woman who lost her virginity out of wedlock is rarely accepted by society. Therefore, Fairouz's deformity and her lost virginity are symbols of her inability to form her identity in either side. Furthermore, her mother's words imply that the

future situation of minority groups in America is not promising in terms of recognition and equality. Wallace not only reveals the challenging situation of minority groups in America, but also criticizes the American politics of classifying its citizens based on their race and culture background.

As mentioned earlier, Remzi finds it hard to form his identity. He is marked by the dominant group as an outsider. Even Craver his partner considers him the other, Craver tells him, "You are a Palestinian" (107). Within the binary aspect of the Unmarked theory, Craver distinguishes himself from Remzi and forms his white identity based on the differences rather than the similarities. In this case, Craver is marked with value as he belongs to the white dominant community. And thereby he is left unmarked due to the privilege he has over other minority groups. He as a representative of his collective community has the authority/power to mark the unmarked people. Wallace uses the concept of balance metaphorically to signify the privilege that Craver has:

Fairouz: Can Remzi do that? Stand on his head like you?

Craver: (Back on his feet) Remzi has no balance. (p 84).

Fairouz's question implies/suggests the sort of assimilation that her brother seeks. She clarifies her question by addressing Craver directly, "stand on his head like you"? Since both she and her brother struggle with identity formulation, she wants to find out if there are possibilities for him to fit in with the white dominant community. In the early part of the play, Remzi reveals his concern regarding his identity. He wants to be perceived as a pure American without any marks or categorization, he tells his sister, "I want a quiet life. As an American citizen. That is good enough for me" (p94). He liberates himself from his religious and cultural backgrounds seeking to be recognized as an American. Being a second generation, Remzi's mother has direct influence on his early identity formulation. Hence, giving up aspects of his cultural and religious backgrounds and adopting new ones do not mean a totally acceptance of American community. Ultimately, integration between the two cultures is inevitable. Thus, Remzi creates a state of in-between which metaphorically seen in his inability to have balance. He keeps oscillating between the two identities: Remzi tells Craver that he went for the interview to join the American army just "to piss my mother and my sister" (p87) signifying that he just wants to act against his religious and culture backgrounds.

In the early scene of the play, Remzi's main concern is his American identity. On multiple occasions, he denies his origin or his cultural background and heritage. Indeed, he is aware of his in-betweenness state, yet he refuses to accept his liminal identity. Wallace asserts this state as Remzi later tells Craver of the different names people gave him when he was in Atlanta, "I have been called every name you can think of: pimp, terrorist, half-nigger" (p108). Remzi initially ignores the Mark he was signed and moves to form his American identity: "You do not feel you have a homeland, but I do. And it is here.

Not over there in some never- never land” (p93). Additionally, Remzi tells his sister how he attaches to American land. The use of the word homeland is significant as it hints at Remzi’s awareness of Palestine occupation history.

Remzi’s mark is seen metaphorically through his lack of balance. However, his imbalance is not concrete. In other words, he is not physically disabled like his sister or his mother. This is attributed to the differences between them in terms of moments of realization. Fariouz knows that she is marked the moment she was attacked, while Remzi knows this fact but does not accept it until he went to fight for America. Remzi joins the American army to fight against an Arabic country, namely, Iraq. He was only convinced to participate in the war when an interviewer told him that “the army will give you a quiet sense of pride” (p88). The sense of pride for Reemzi is to be accepted and recognized as an American citizen. He is willing to sacrifice himself to obtain the quiet sense of pride. Craver, on the other hand does not have the same eagerness as he is already unmarked. “Craver. A quiet sense of pride”. (Beat) I am not going to die.

Remzi. (Casually) I am. (p 95).

The quiet sense of pride does not represent any value to Craver as he joins the army for financial benefits, whereas Remzi joins the army, first and foremost, to be American. In *The Heart of America* reveals that even fighting for America does not give Remzi the quiet sense of pride he was seeking, instead he has been humiliated. Moreover, at the army, Remzi is perceived as the other and that is when he realizes for fact that he is marked and would not be recognized as fully American. His imbalance, thereby, signifies his oscillating stance.

Evidently Remzi’s conversion with Boxler confirms to him that Remzi can not belong to the American tree.

Boxler. (To Remzi) Where are you from, babe?

Remzi. The States.

Boxler. I mean, where are your parents from?

Remzi. My father died when I was just a kid. My mother never told me where she was from.

Boxler. Now that is not nice... Parents owe the knowledge of their roots to their sons. A root must know its root its origins. You, my son, are a root living in the dark without a compass, and you have no idea what kind of tree is going to sprout forth from your skull. (p 97).

In the wake of Phelan’s definition of identity, Boxler establishes his American identity by maintaining his differences from Remzi. This particular moment leads Remzi to spend his vacation at his mother’s village

instead of his previous plan to spend it with his American friends. According to Beth Cleary, “Remzi’s visit to the territories confused his Palestinian identity and seemed to activate a desire for connection” (9 p111). However, he could not construct a complete Palestinian’s identity as he was called “Yankee Palestina”. Moreover, Remzi does not even speak the language, Remzi tells Craver, “I was a tourist there. An outsider” (p107). Consequently, Remzi could not form his identity in any of the two countries. In each of the two, he is marked. He is not given the recognition that he seeks.

### Conclusion:

*In the Heart of America* is a play about personal lives, human interactions, cultural metamorphosis and identity formulation. Relying on the notion of balance/imbalance, Wallace has exposed the complexity of forming identity and belonging. The disappointment and despair Remzi and his sister have encountered in this fight is noticeable as identity and belonging hinge on power and privilege rather than sacrifices and cultural obliteration.

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