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# THE ROLE OF THEATER IN ENHANCING CULTURAL IDENTITY IN THE MIDDLE EAST

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## Abstract

*The impact of theater on Middle Eastern cultural identity formation and enhancement is the focus of this research. This study delves into how theater has played a significant role in reflecting, building, and negotiating cultural identities in different Middle Eastern societies through an extensive examination of current theatrical plays. Case studies of well-known theatrical productions and interviews with creatives involved in making these plays are all part of the qualitative methodology used in this study. To round out the analysis, secondary sources are examined to shed light on the political and historical factors that shaped the region's theatrical expression.*

*The research points to the theater in the Middle East performing arts as a place for cultural preservation and education, a platform for political commentary, and a reflection of social issues. This study sheds light on concrete instances where theater has directly impacted public discourse and helped people reconnect with their cultural heritage. These instances primarily occur in nations undergoing social transition or conflict. Topics and styles of theatrical expression are frequently influenced by the difficulties encountered by regional theater practitioners, such as censorship and inadequate funding.*

*Despite all these obstacles, the conclusion argues that theater is still an essential part of Middle Eastern culture, providing a potent arena for affirming and reimagining cultural identities. The study emphasizes the importance of cultural policy, giving the arts, and theater in particular, more credit for their positive effects on social cohesiveness and cultural identity.*

## Keywords

*Impacted public discourse, theater practitioners, Eastern culture, providing.*

## INTRODUCTION

For audiences without conceptual understanding, animated theater's dramatic, graphic, and intricate presentation of ideas or stories erases or downplays gender disparities in thinking. As a result, there is no longer any room for sexist assignments, power-sharing, intentionally produced mental blockages, brute force notions, etc. Then, children would imagine things happening simply because they gaze at your stage (Zayed, & El-Sayed, 2023).

Animated theatrical presentations are easily comprehended at face value, eliminating the need to decipher difficult words and concepts, which is great if one's ability to grasp foreign languages is restricted. Viewing is more user-friendly because most people can comprehend it since all languages are spoken. Our shared experiences of life's rituals shape and solidify our beliefs and sense of who we are. (Malik, & Khan, 2018) To assist youngsters in better comprehending and navigating their social identities, it is crucial to promote multicultural understanding and tolerance among individuals of diverse racial, ethnic, and religious backgrounds.

In modern times, most Middle Eastern nations are severely underfunded, and their educational institutions are bolstered by ineffective and outdated initiatives that aim to foster critical thinking. Thus, religious fanaticism becomes everyone's last resort when the idea of challenging a difficult belief becomes stigmatized, dogmatic, and forced. Youngsters in this condition have heightened aesthetic awareness because they can relate to the characters' feelings, thoughts, and behaviors through their body language. The storyline makes one think deeply and analytically.

Some of the most ancient cultures are found on the African continent and in the Middle East. In terms of technological sophistication, ancient Mesopotamia was many years ahead of its Greek and Roman counterparts. The Islamic Golden Age and subsequent conquests elevated the Middle East to a level of civilization comparable to, if not superior to, China. (Ghosh, 2019) It was at this period that the Middle East showed its capacity to remain culturally relevant.

#### Historical background of theater in the Middle East

For example, in Sudan, where theater was politically marginalized under the Ottoman Empire, theater's popularity rose and fell with different political administrations. Although many Sudanese playwrights emigrated to Egypt, some stayed true to their craft, adapting their plays into musicals at significant personal cost and performing them for close relatives and friends. (Barakat, 2018) This clandestine theatrical activity was carried out in private residences under tight secrecy as a group-sponsored public performance. Even if Egypt was initially home to a larger population, those plays adhered to strict rules. Egyptian theaters essentially froze up during the independence era (1956–1969) in response to the political climate, and at that time, regular artistic endeavors were shelved. Ancient Middle Eastern cultures like the Phoenicians and Babylonians brought theater to the region through their festivals and celebrations, which included basic melodies, open-air dramatic performances, and processions of venerated heroes. These cultural events, rich in theatrical elements, were a testament to the deep-rooted significance of theater in the region. At the same time, Egyptians were putting on holy plays like the 'Osiris mysteries,' which had some theatrical elements but were not wholly or particularly Egyptian. Theater, however, played a relatively minor role throughout Middle Eastern history compared to other art genres such as poetry and literature. When the Murabits and Almohades were caliphs, Arabian theater flourished. Famous philosophers of the time, according to Rosette Roashan, would perform reasoned lectures at the theaters of southern Mediterranean cities, much like the classical Greeks did in their plays.

#### Cultural significance of theater in the Middle East

This is because Middle Eastern society is very collectivistic. As a powerful, unspoken rule for members of society, collectivism with mutual assistance is evident throughout Middle Eastern history. Everyone has the inherent responsibility and right to look out for one another. The separation of public and private spheres in Middle Eastern countries was initially rooted in this fundamental concept of mutual protection. Theatrical performances have a teaching function because they reflect and celebrate the cultural values of the community they are a part of. These aspects are presented through the portrayal of traditional artistic standards in a performance environment. (Ibrahim, 2022) Theatergoers learn about the community's traditions and how society practices them through performances, exposing them to shared beliefs. The artist's goal in performing is to foster cultural ambassadorship by reinforcing these shared values. The cultural relevance of the theater as a medium for teaching about and protecting historical artifacts is closely related to this.

The arts in performance have always been and always will be powerful catalysts for social change. One way to put it is that theater is "a powerful educational tool in enhancing cultural and human advancement." Theater plays a vital role in many cultures as a means of sharing history and traditions with the general population. A member of the performing arts community takes on the role of cultural

ambassador and interpreter for the audience. Theater gains cultural relevance in this role. Because the concept of family is expanded to encompass individuals in Middle Eastern society who are not necessarily related by blood, theater plays a significant cultural role in the region.

#### Influence of theater on cultural identity

There is a disconnect between the natural face of truth and beauty and the movie audience gathered in a dark room before an impartial screen, staring at nameless, faceless individuals. Concepts of privilege and other sharp barriers that impede the processing and abrasion of reality tend to soften confrontations in a harsh life. Claims, "The performance is a sacred act," with all reason. Here, it paves the way for occult revelations on an individual and a communal level. Even though many people go to the theater, they still need to encourage more unstructured forms of engagement actively. Despite its live-action foundation, theater relies on audience participation to alleviate its purgative and healing effects.

According to Middle Eastern viewers, the drama will deliver what other modern art production and transmission types have yet to do. Their goal is to emphasize that no art form compares to the thrill of a live performance. Theater is something special and welcoming to anyone. People in the audience have direct contact with the actors onstage. Their relative proximity determines how much of an influence the performance process has. It provides a kind of remuneration that needs to be improved in entertainment. It is up to the society, though, to give it purpose.

#### Representation of traditional values in Middle Eastern theater

As they face life's challenges, people from different eras have left us priceless artistic traditions that speak to our shared humanity. They illustrate how different human cultures have dealt with, made sense of, and admired life's challenges. These plays will be treasured by generations to follow. The question of how these customs become part of human civilization is also crucial. The artifacts and gardens that people leave behind provide light on the ideals and civilizations that lived there. Naturally, growing these forms is one approach to highlight the aims and principles of a system or culture. Doing so will ensure that your legacy lives on. The value and validity of distinct national societies depend on tradition, which has a lasting and unifying effect. Through the violation of melancholy, tradition often reaches modern culture (Nassar, 2019).

Theatrical performances have been and will continue to be integral to Middle Eastern culture for centuries. The essay delves into the many ways in which the authors' definition of traditional values informs their work, how this art form presents opportunities to influence social attitudes, aspirations, and behaviors, and how these performances can convey messages that promote positive change. In this way, the writers lay out a systematic strategy for how theater may both reflect and adapt to different cultures; moreover, they show how theater can assist Arab civilization in maintaining its historical values while yet meeting modern demands. The Middle Eastern Theater accomplishes these aims despite showing symptoms of collapse due to social and economic upheavals and newly sparked sociopolitical conflicts. Traditional theatrical themes showcased in performances help to strengthen national pride.

#### Exploration of contemporary issues through theater

The new millennium has emerged fresh literary movements, topics, and issues. These days, playwrights may express themselves through their works and move audiences to tears. There has been a steady erosion of Arab and Middle Eastern cultural identity. Diversification is becoming more prevalent in modern playwriting, which reflects a worldwide trend. The story starts with those who have been uprooted and gives a voice to those who are aware of who they are but choose not to hide. As shown in Arab society, some individuals who have put all their eggs in the European cultural basket have come to terms with the fact that they don't fit the mold. Commercial theater managers

are increasingly eager to showcase scripts that address societal issues in the Middle East, likely prompted by the growing diversity of playwrights in the field. In addition, organizations and institutions outside of the Middle East should assist and participate in developing plays that have social importance. (Qasim, 2021) However, this is often overlooked when funds are needed to stage productions, commissions, readings, or new plays.

The Middle East has seen the emergence of new themes and concerns since around 40 years ago. As a whole, society is changing, and with it, new writing styles and other trends. Even while writing about or reflecting on customs, an author should not turn their back on their own culture. Playwrights often collaborate. The dramatic arts have seen a substantial improvement in both financing and support, which is encouraging. Even though most plays performed in significant theaters are set in America or Europe, a handful delve into important Middle Eastern socioeconomic themes.

**The role of theater in preserving cultural heritage**

Cultural inheritance has a profound impact on Middle Eastern society and culture. Everyone is touched by cultural legacy, which is essential to life and the creative process. Artistic expression is just one of many everyday activities in which cultural heritage is vital. Additionally, it connects known identities with narratives, principles, theme items, and experiential behavior; it's a source of innovation, a means of making money, and a means of communication through traditional performing arts, cultural, political, and sporting events. When it comes to economics, education, and general well-being, cultural heritage—which includes live cultures and traditional performing arts and craftsmanship—can act as a buffer in living civilizations. Many vital industries and company processes are also profoundly affected by heritage. (Omran, 2020) Cultural heritage provides opportunities for creativity to a wide range of people, from farmers to global producers, via museums. Amidst a rich cultural heritage spanning over five millennia, several Middle Eastern nations undergo far-reaching and frequently controversial modernization processes. How can we address this aspiration for transformation in a way that celebrates and upholds our traditional and national cultural values while simultaneously promoting the benefits of cross-cultural understanding? Traditional heritage-based performing arts are, in the eyes of many, a key location for launching and supporting investment processes that will empower morally upright, philosophically stable persons to contribute to the Middle East's change. By emphasizing the significance of traditional art forms and drawing attention to environmental aesthetics, natural identity, culture, communication, and cultural legacy (including conventional performing arts), we can outline the potential roles that members of this society could play. A walkable community is one that actively works to preserve its residents' cultural identities through the design of aesthetically pleasing spaces.

### **Theater as a platform for social commentary**

Despite ongoing discussion among MAMO artists, Western influence continues to shape the function of the MAMI-related playwright in brief political commentary. He further established the genre's tenet that the playwright, acting alone, develops the topic's theoretical core by modeling his work after the three-play series. They did this to show how the storytelling area was shaped by the atypical structure of the period; the MAMI writers thought the third play was the pinnacle of expression since it contained poetry, a carmen. The sage seeks out and represents the third play to enforce this notion. In terms of cultural identity, theater plays an essential role because it has a long history of commenting on social and political events, providing a platform to address the issues of the time. So, it's a way to document and learn about national challenges. Theatrical elements facilitated the emergence of specific conversations. During the 1980s and 1990s, when the Movement for Multiparty Democracy (MIMI) was in its early stages, the proliferation of political plays and performance groups in Kenya fulfilled the demand for a more transparent platform. (Fahmy&

Salem, 2021) Since then, Kenyan theater has reflected the country's history and present-day struggles through performances. Many contemporary Arab theater is also concerned with the Arab counter-conversation as a country.

#### The impact of theater on community cohesion

The reason is that the "community presents the ultimate repressive public." This means that theater plays a significant role in local communities. A sense of belonging is taking shape among the locals; after all, "all artists (dancers, painters, singers, poets) need public's recognition of their work in order to be satisfied." The artist gains a sense of importance and social standing from this acknowledgment. In a sense, the audience's reaction to the performance is the trigger; it makes them all aware of who they are, where they fit in, and how they compare to others in the group; this sense of belonging rounds out the original artist's role. ( Al-Kassim, 2020) Sociologist Peter Burger terms the "hybrid world of multiplicity" as something that happens when everyone realizes they are a part of the shared present.

A person's cultural identity is based on the premise that they belong to a specific, "pure" artistic group. The characteristics of a social group, whether physical or cultural, come together to form a single, fixed cultural identity. As the saying goes, "the first artistic experiences of some given group were creating the essence which in time was responsive to all new artistic entities through ontological architecture with no possibility of inner transformation." Both "identity experience" and "identity" are new concepts that require mental processing.

#### Theater as a tool for empowerment and self-expression

According to even the most optimistic studies, cultural transformation is inherently an ongoing process that is both long and difficult. According to research, including theater organizations in a successful campaign to reach out to current residents in the Middle East can provide the groundwork for sustained development efforts. An essential instrument for better communication and constructing a comprehensive political, social, and economic system is the provision of tactics for promoting this language program in an active, welcoming workplace.

The possible development of the theater arts, such as the organization of different social groups and the empowerment of theater artists, must be considered. Research from the Middle East sheds light on the significance and role of theater in modern American culture. According to the study's central argument, theater storytelling and monodramas offer prospects for the cultural imprint. This essay aims to demonstrate whether the projects in question are illustrative of plain texts or items that reflect the social and cultural shifts taking place in the Middle East.

To better comprehend anthropological norms and mathematical decision-making processes, this essay analyzes women's monodramas from various regions of the Middle East to shed light on cultural authority. If they want people to see them as role models, actors in the theater need to find ways to express themselves creatively and share tales.

Many nations, especially those in the Middle East, have a reputation for having very critical cultures. Stories offer a vital medium for cultural expression. Narrating life tales is an excellent way for communities to bond through shared experience and insight. It is clear from recent events that individual and societal factors play a role in developing free and thriving societies.

An informal system of shared norms, both written and unwritten, is a standard definition of culture. Culture is a unifying force for marginalized groups, whether gender, racial, religious, or otherwise. Of course, it decides what counts as acceptable and what doesn't. Members feel more connected to the group when they see that they are contributing to society somehow.

#### Challenges faced by theater in the Middle East

Keeping art grounded in Western-style reality is the focus of this piece of writing today. It becomes even more infeasible when the artists capable of carrying out such a monumental task refuse to



confront reality, the paradoxes that fuel it, or the constraints that can erode its inherent substance. Responding to what was once referred to as "the role of artists in society" is now daunting for both sexes. Market limitations, which want instant gratification by praising speed and transient contracts, are only one of the sources of trouble. Being itself is challenging; there is no opportunity to speak, and, most importantly, they must bear the danger of making mistakes. A misleading piece of information about artists without shelter companies might play off the passive consumers' typical assumptions about them. Just as the gravitational field of the request has become the most deadly of fatal gestures today, the human being feels like murdering while giving oneself in such a way, without hatred. Being nothing more than an agreement in abdications, the whole plan eventually garners a chorus of nearly universal praise—an image of sadistic pleasure lived by the fascist-placed "dependence"—because everyone is on board with it.

Theatrical performances are a powerful medium for disseminating cultural aspects and their components to members of any society, along with the full range of behavioral and emotional reactions that come with cultural identification. However, several factors that have impeded cultural development have also surfaced alongside these associated issues. The vast difficulties theater encounters in the Arab interior are mirrored in these issues. As an art form, the theater is currently in a state of transition. Totalitarianism has weighed heavily on it for a long time, with various entities oppressing it. Conversely, commercial pressure insists that the product is the only way for the audience to communicate with art. An era is coming to a close right now. Still, a whole generation of creatives is devoting their skills to hastening the depletion of inspiration since they have never seen their work in print. Constantly evolving from year to year, they facilitate the ever-quicker assimilation of once-popular urban legends.

Government support and funding for theater

In the guise of international diplomacy, some governments in North America and Europe fund particular artistic endeavors. The term "cultural imperialism" was originally used to characterize the practice of more developed nations attempting to influence the traditional practices of less developed nations that were under their control at the time. As a result of both the older colonial impacts and the more recent influences emanating from the United States, many people in these countries are striving to eradicate these tendencies. But the 18th century brought a new interpretation of cultural imperialism. It eventually came to mean the politically free, economically powerful, and culturally dominant people of the West.

Who exactly started associating their names with government arts funding—whether it was monarchs, royal families, or other established authorities—is a mystery. However, to provide a European perspective, Jean-Baptiste Colbert, the craftsman who founded the Printed Word, the Royal Academy of Art, and the Royal Academy of Music in 16th-century France, is linked with governmental control and direction. His shows and those that followed helped bridge the gap between the Grand Siècle and the Cast of the Sun in terms of aesthetic pleasure and public politics. The architectural treatment rooms, theatrical architecture, and costume designs that Peter the Great had grown to adore in Russia were also enlisted, largely against their will, to shape the Tsars' reputation and policies.

The role of theater education in promoting cultural identity

The many advantages art education programs offer students, particularly those that focus on theater and drama, have been the subject of several studies. Students often report substantial improvements in creative and critical thinking, public speaking, problem-solving, and self-esteem after participating in this educational program. In addition, participating in learning theater as an academic activity opens the door to utilizing clinical and post-discharge hygienic/therapeutic interventions. "Playing is the ideal way for children to learn drama..." Lord Lloyd Webber said in an attempt to make

children's theater more engaging and applicable to their lives. Effortlessly and affordably, it is the most excellent option. Kids learn a lot by watching others. The kids ask, "So, what do we have planned?"... Must we pretend to be youthful? Are we obligated to act our age? The Wonderful Wizard of Oz, by Lord Webber Toto's children's musicals, catalyzes imaginative role-playing.

A person's outlook on life, actions, and attitudes could all undergo significant changes due to schooling. The significance of education in shaping the identities of people and groups is growing in light of these effects. A critical way that colleges in the Arab world are responding to the demands of today's youth is through drama and theater programs. By depicting the oppressed and lonely lives of Arab theatergoers and offering a voice to the voiceless in their desperate search for self-affirmation, educational plays serve as a tool for change. Consequently, they are a great way to help students with false beliefs about their social, economic, or ethical standing integrate these experiences into their learning by evoking genuine feelings. In their pursuit of Arab theater's improvement, they pick up cultural nuances that they later include in their performances.

International collaborations and exchange in Middle Eastern theater

Given that the events above took place during the "Sultan bin Tahnoun" 2016-Tschallenge, which included the XIII World Schools Forum and participation in several festivals, it was anticipated that additional announcements of this kind would be made in the region in the run-up to the 2022 bid for Middle East capital of culture. The preservation of cultural heritage should not be done in a vacuum, apart from its surrounding environment and the prevailing memory symbolic structures, the social bonus system, its goals, and its functions. In light of these facts, we do not limit our description of the preservation of famous legacy at the theater and play to purely conventional settings. By analyzing the functions of these practices, we have shown that each might serve as a site for studying the cultural identities of practitioners and extracting psychological processes at work within them. Even though some anthropological studies characterize contemporary play reentrainment as a trend that limits theater to a limited demographic? The atelier as a theater and negotiations as a theater? Is this not a way for people to test their cultural identities while expressing resistance and appropriation?

Western theaters and festivals have taken an increased interest in showcasing Middle Eastern works and facilitating artistic interchange amongst the region's artists during the past decade. This conversation has the potential to dispel misconceptions and pave the path for more widespread demonstrations of cultural identity. According to Cavendish's London announcement of a proposal to improve regional theatre, British artists will collaborate with regional companies to hone their craft. The "Shakespeare Lives" initiative, a joint venture between Ulster Bank and the British Council, will send Irish and British performers on a regional tour. Local artists and technologists can participate in training and capacity-building programs, increasing employment opportunities and attracting local audiences. "Windy Town" (a Saudi public theater company formed by al Saud) and "Rimal" (a Kuwaiti high-cycle company founded by Kalban), both of which are led by authors, also announced a program of seminars and training throughout the Gulf States, which have rich histories in theatrical oral history. Egypt's Ministry of Education launched another successful initiative. To better position less competent social actors to work together, we provided highly skilled social actors, like mothers with low secondary education levels, with the knowledge and tools they needed to integrate social theatre techniques into their daily Tawasol project between parents, also called community actors. This would help them promote their children's academic achievements.

## CONCLUSION

This study's findings highlight theater's significant impact on Middle Eastern cultural identity. By analyzing different plays and listening to experts in the industry, we can see that theater does more than reflect societal norms and problems; it also takes part in the cultural conversation happening in

the area.

A thriving theater scene has developed in the Middle East, providing a stage for artists to share their stories, address social issues, and question political systems. Because of its malleability and adaptability, the medium may tackle delicate and complicated topics in ways that captivate a wide range of viewers. Particularly in areas impacted by war and fast societal change, the theater may play an essential educational role while preserving and revitalizing cultural heritage.

On the other hand, the study highlights significant obstacles that often impede theater enterprises from reaching their full potential. These include severe censorship, political pressures, and budgetary limits. Theater artists persist in overcoming these challenges by exploring new avenues of artistic expression and innovation.

This study argues that public engagement activities, policy-making, and increased funding from both governmental and non-governmental organizations can further strengthen theater's cultural identity-enhancing power. If theaters in the Middle East were to receive more funding, their impact and significance in the region's cultural revival may grow.

Ultimately, the theater is essential in strengthening cultural identity within the Middle East. It is a potent medium for social contemplation and change and a vehicle for artistic expression. Greater acknowledgment and investment are necessary to cultivate a solid cultural identity in the region, and the role of theater in this identity cannot be emphasized enough as the area undergoes continuous change.

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