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BELONGING ON STAGE: Theatre as a Practice of Belonging for The Syrian Diaspora in Turkey

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Abstract | This article is a preliminary research focusing on the role of theatre as a belonging practice for the Syrian diaspora in Turkey. Based on a qualitative and narrative research methodology, the work analyzed the experience of “Theatre Scene” group and their performance of the *Outside the Flock* play. Building on the belonging conceptual framework presented by Yuval Davis (2006), the work offers an overview on how theatre was a space and a practice of belonging for the Syrian diaspora. It contributes to the growing scholarship on the diasporic arts, highlighting the specificity of the Syrian theatrical experience.

Keywords | theatre, Syrian diaspora, Syrian theatre, diaspora theatre, belonging, identity.

Abstract | Cet article présente une recherche préliminaire sur le rôle du théâtre comme pratique d'appartenance par rapport à la diaspora syrienne en Turquie. Fondé sur une méthode qualitative et narrative, le travail analyse l'expérience du groupe « Theatre Scene » et leur représentation de la pièce *Outside the Flock*. En s'appuyant sur le cadre conceptuel de l'appartenance élaboré par Yuval-Davis (2006), il présente la manière dont le théâtre a constitué un espace et une pratique d'appartenance pour la diaspora syrienne. Il contribue aux études de plus en plus nombreuses sur les arts des diasporas, en mettant en lumière la spécificité de l'expérience du théâtre syrien.

Mots-clés | théâtre, diaspora syrienne, théâtre syrien, théâtre des diasporas, appartenance, identité.

Introduction

The literature shows that Syrian theatre has a rich and extensive history and is widely recognized as one of the foremost theatrical schools in the Arab world. The memory of the Syrian theatre and performances was frequently discussed considering its artistic value and political position. For long decades, Syria's theatre has consistently challenged political authority, autocracy, and dictatorship, facing all the attempts of control and censorship¹.

After the 2011 revolution, and besides war and displacement, the Syrian theatre succeeded in facing all the challenges and created from the negative circumstances an opportunity to expand performing all over the world. Researchers have explored the consequences of the migration of contemporary Syrian art and its potential for continuation in the diaspora, with much of the academic literature focusing on theatre as a performative art. A large body of the broader literature in the existing studies have examined a variety of Syrian diasporic theatrical experiences in many countries, both in Europe² and within the Arab region³, stressing its role and implications both as a personal and a collective end over. Furthermore, several researchers did shed the light on the theatrical experiences of the Syrian diaspora in Turkey delving its role as a form of communication⁴ and a psychological coping mechanism⁵. Adding to this field of research and considering theatre as a reflection of the Syrian experience in the diaspora, this article aims to analyze the role of theatre for the Syrian community in Turkey in relation to the concept of belonging.

In fact, several cultural initiatives and theatre performances have been present in different regions in Turkey and most recently a theatre group named "Theatre Scene" that was founded in 2021, performed the first Arabic speaking Syrian drama in Turkey on the 24th of August 2022 in Istanbul. This group, its work, members, and the involved performers present the subject case of this research. Despite its young age, the group performing a re-enactment of Muhammed El-Maghut's *Outside the Flock*, has managed to attract the attention of not only

1- ZITER Edward, *Political Performance in Syria: From the Six-Day War to the Syrian Uprising*, London / New York, Palgrave MacMillan, 2015.

2- AL-YASIRI Jumana, "Syrian Theatrical Practices beyond National Borders. A conversation with Abdullah Al-Kafri and Simon Dubois" (June 28, 2021), *SyriaUntold*, <https://syriauntold.com/2021/06/28/syrian-theatrical-practices-beyond-national-borders/> (last accessed February 11, 2023).

3- ELIAS Marie, "Current Conditions of Syrian Theater. Introducing SyriaUntold's series on Syrian theater" (May 28, 2021), *SyriaUntold*, <https://syriauntold.com/2021/05/28/current-conditions-of-syrian-theater/> (last accessed February 11, 2023).

4- ALSHUGHRY Usama, "Non-Violent Communication and Theatre of the Oppressed: A Case Study with Syrian Refugee Women from the Kareemat Centre in Turkey", *Intervention (Amstelveen, Netherlands)*, 16, no. 2, 2018, p. 170. https://doi.org/10.4103/intv.intv_45_18 (last accessed February 11, 2023).

5- YÜKSEK Cafer, "Dealing with Stress Using Social Theatre Techniques with Young Syrian Students Adapting to a New Educational System in Turkey: A Case Study", *Intervention (Amstelveen, Netherlands)*, 16, no. 2, 2018, p.175-180. <https://www.interventionjournal.org/article.asp?issn=1571-8883;year=2018;volume=16;issue=2;spage=175;epage=180;aulast=Yukse;type=0> (last accessed February 11, 2023).

the Syrian community and the Arab Diaspora in Turkey, but also the Turkish society⁶. Following the production of its first play, the group has started working on its second play to be staged in January 2023. The second play *Heroes from Paper* is an original text written by Ghazwan Al Balah the co-founder of the group. While conducting the research, this play was not staged but the researcher was able to observe the rehearsals, read the play and discuss it with the group members. This was in fact another chance to discuss the importance of theatre as an agency of expression for the Syrian artists and community in Turkey.

Through a qualitative data collection methodology, this work tries to understand the role of theatre in representing the Syrian diasporas' belonging in Turkey through investigating the artists' experiences engaging in this performative art. Situated in the frame of the anthropology of the performing arts, this research considers the theatre productions to be a dramatic expression of the society, and that through the performer. Thus, besides of existing literature who have investigated the Syrian theatre in the diaspora, this article draws upon first-hand interviews and performances with Syrian artists and performers. In the framework of these interviews, we tried to explore the following: why do Syrian artists engage in this art? How do they relate between theatre and belonging? How and at which level does theatre become a belonging space?

Theoretical Framework and Methodology

Anthropological approaches to performance arts show the academic interest in a specific range of matters basically: memory, belonging, identity, conflicts, and the expression of the related collective experiences⁷. In the context of enforced displacement, refugeeness and migration, the anthropological approach to theatre has been garnering attention⁸. Indeed, different academic research and academic works have been produced on the matter, the most important of which are arguably Alison Jeffers' *Refugees, Theatre and Crisis: Performing Global Identities*⁹ and Emma Cox's *Theatre & Migration*¹⁰, as well as S.E. Wilmer's *Performing Statelessness in Europe*¹¹. This body of literature highlights various dimensions related to the importance of performative arts in expressing the diasporic, migratory and displacement experience, while analysing numerous case studies, theatrical formats, and art initiatives especially in the European continent.

6- Suriyeli derdini sahnede anlatıyor (September 25, 2022), *Yeni Şafak*, <https://www.yenisafak.com/hayat/suriyeli-derdini-sahnede-anlatiyor-3860214> (last accessed February 11, 2023).

7- ROYCE A. P., *Anthropology of the Performing Arts: Artistry, Virtuosity, and Interpretation in a Cross-Cultural Perspective*, Lanham, Alta Mira Press, 2004.

8- GUTERMAN Gad, *Performance, Identity, and Immigration: A Theatre of Undocumentedness*, London / New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.

9- JEFFERS Alison, *Theatre and Crisis: Performing Global Identities*, London / New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2012.

10- COX Emma, *Theatre & Migration*, London, Methuen Drama, 2014.

11- WILMER S.E., *Performing Statelessness in Europe*, London / New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2018.

In the aftermath of the Syrian refugee crises, a body of research on the nature of the theatre diasporic art has come to light. First, a part of the literature focused on the theme of theatre as a way of coping, healing, and integration¹². A recently published book *Syrian Refugees, Applied Theatre, Workshop Facilitation, and Stories*¹³ by Fadi Sheiker analyzed the efficiency of using theatre as a medium to address refugee challenges focusing on the Syrian case study. Another category of the research aimed to connect the theatre practice with the refugee experience, exploring a variety of theatrical experiences of the Syrian diaspora in different hosting countries such as in Germany¹⁴, Sweden¹⁵, Jordan¹⁶ and Lebanon¹⁷.

Additionally, prior research provided a historical overview of the Syrian theatre highlighting different political eras. In this context, Edward Ziter's book *Political performance in Syria: from the six-day war to the Syrian uprising*, is a valuable document providing a historical, analytical, and critical perspective to the Syrian theatre presenting an important pool of staged performances and written plays¹⁸.

The literature pertaining to the challenges facing Syrian arts and artists in the diaspora, strongly suggests that there are several similarities related to socio-economic conditions and political systems. The challenges faced in Turkey could be categorized to three main points: first, the Syrian community in Turkey is still facing the challenge of integration and resettlement. Particularly in the last couple of years, the xenophobic discourse and the political instrumentalization of the Syrian question is creating rather an insecure space affecting the possibility of an artistic presence. A second main challenge is the absence of material support to the Syrian art and artists. Civil society is generally focusing on supporting more urgent matters related to protection, humanitarian assistance

12- SMET Sofie de, ROUSSEAU Cécile, STALPAERT Christel, and HAENE Lucia de, "A Qualitative Analysis of Coping with Trauma and Exile in Applied Theatre with Syrian Refugees: The Role of within-Group Interactions", *The Arts in Psychotherapy*, vol. 66, no. 101587, November 2019. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.aip.2019.101587> (last accessed February 11, 2023).

13- SHEÏKER Fadi, *Syrian Refugees, Applied Theater, Workshop Facilitation, and Stories. While They Were Waiting*, London, Routledge, 2021.

14- LITVÍN Margaret, "Syrian Theatre in Berlin", *Theatre Journal*, vol. 70, no. 4, December 2018, p.447-450. <https://doi.org/10.1353/tj.2018.0094> (last accessed February 11, 2023).

15- WESSELS Josepha Ivanka (Joshka), "'Our Dream Is Simple: Peace, Safe and Freedom': Regime-Critical Activism and Artistic Expression by Syrians in Denmark and Sweden", *Journal of Arab & Muslim Media Research*, vol. 13, no. 1, April 2020, p.7-29. https://doi.org/10.1386/jammr_00008_1 (last accessed February 11, 2023).

16- NASHWAN Ayat, STECKLER Timothy, and ABDULHAQ Bayan, "Healing through Expression: How the Arts Can Be a Tool for Wellbeing and Empowerment for Syrian Refugees Youth in Jordan", *Dirasat: Human and Social Sciences*, 46 (3), September 2019, p.377-388. <https://archives.ju.edu.jo/index.php/hum/article/view/102313> (last accessed February 11, 2023).

17- DUBOIS Simon, « Négocier son identité artistique dans l'exil. Les recompositions d'un paysage créatif syrien à Berlin », *Migrations société*, n° 174, 2018/4, p.45-57. <https://doi.org/10.3917/migra.174.0045> (last accessed February 11, 2023).

18- ZITER Edward, *op. cit.*

and livelihood support. Consequently, the number of funds and support to the cultural programs is limited in comparison to other intervention fields. Additionally, the Syrian community in Turkey is still suffering from detachment and distrust as a result of the traumas of war. Therefore, the initiation of collective acts -regardless of its nature- may be challenging to a healing community and to a society still in the process of rethinking its belonging.

Belonging in the frame of this work is perceived to be a constructed “act of self-identification or identification by others, in a stable, contested or transient way”¹⁹. Building on the work of Yuval-Davis, we establish the analysis of belonging-related presentations on stage against “three major analytical levels on which belonging is constructed, the first level concerns social locations; the second relates to individuals’ identifications and emotional attachments to various collectives and groupings; the third relates to ethical and political value systems with which people judge their own and others’ belongings”²⁰. Hence, in reference to the mentioned theoretical framework, this investigation will focus on analysing the belonging experience’s expressions within the theatrical practice through the Syrian performer. To that end, two main qualitative research methodologies were used: first a focus group consisting of members of the “Theatre Scene” group, focusing on their journey in building and pursuing their theatrical ventures in Turkey. After the focus group, separate in-depth interviews were conducted with the four founders of the group who are as well performing actors of this play to have specific insights on the personal experience of the Syrian artist as a cultural agent.

As mentioned in the introduction, the newly founded group staged an edited version of the *Outside the Flock* play. The selection of this play originally written by Muhammed Al Maghut, may be described as the first expression of belonging reflected through the selection of a play written by one of the Syrian theatre pioneers. The play narrates the story of a group of young artists trying to present their performance of *Romeo and Juliet* to a “donor” in the hopes of receiving funding and support for their artistic project. The committee coming to supposedly watch and assess the play decides to censor the work and eliminate any unwanted elements based on their political views. Eventually, the committee bribes most of the group members and dissolves the theatre group.

The play was performed by 8 actors and this research was conducted with 4 of them, who are at the same time, the co-founders of the group. The first participant in this research is Ghazwan Al-Balah, who is a 35 years old Syrian artist, from Damascus. While he studied economics at the university, his theatre path started since high school. He was active and involved in university theatre

19- YUVAL-DAVIS Nira, “Belonging and the politics of belonging”, *Patterns of Prejudice*, 40:3, August 2006, p.197-214. DOI: 10.1080/00313220600769331 (last accessed February 11, 2023).

20- *Ibid.*

and had more than a decade of theatrical experience before being forced to leave Syria. He has been living in Turkey for five years now under the temporary protection status. Previously to this, he lived for different periods in Jordan, Iraq, Lebanon, and Egypt where he was as well a part of theatre performances as an actor.

The second participant in this research is Al-Mutasem Al-Khalide, who is a founder of the “Theatre Scene” group and a performing actor in the subject play. Al-Mutasem recently came to Turkey and has been living in Turkey for 2 years as a temporary protection holder. He is 26 years old, from which 10 years he passed in Syria during the war, and he spent four of these years under siege. While he was not able to finish his studies due to the described conditions, he was engaged in a civil organization who helped the children of his city to get education and meanwhile – with a group of young activists – they initiated their theatre journey.

Hande Laham, a 32-year-old Syrian woman, is a member of the group and a performer. She plays the role of the director and the coordinator of the theatre group. Hande Laham, who has been living in Syria for the last 8 years, and carried her higher education in Turkey, is an architect. Despite her long interest in theatre, being a member and a performer with “Theatre Scene” is her first theatre experience.

The final participant in the research is Ola Bawarshi is a 29-year-old Syrian woman artist who has been living in Turkey for the last 8 years and who has been granted the Turkish nationality. She studied architecture as well but was involved in different forms of performative arts in the last decade, mainly TV productions, cinema, and theatre. Before the “Theatre Scene” initiative, she had other experiences as an actress with different theatre projects and plays in Turkey. Ola Bawarshi performed Juliet in this play.

The interviews were conducted between September and December 2022. They were transcribed verbatim and supported by the focus group’s notes, and the observations during the rehearsal sessions were further analyzed. Guided by the anthropological study of the performative arts as a theoretical background²¹, and aware of theatre’s role as an existential and collective expression especially for diasporic communities, we probe the Syrians narrative of belonging expressed and experienced through the performative art of theatre in the diaspora.

To be clear about the framework and the positioning of the performative act, a discussion about the categorization of this theatre initiative took place during the

21- DAMERY Shannon and MESCOLI Elsa, “Harnessing Visibility and Invisibility through Arts Practices: Ethnographic Case Studies with Migrant Performers in Belgium”, *Arts*, 8 (2), 49, April 2019. <https://doi.org/10.3390/arts8020049> (last accessed February 11, 2023).

focus group. The researcher had initially proposed the utilization of the concept of “Refugee Theatre” in this investigation. However, this framing was debated by the Syrian artists, who instead advocated for the use of the term “diasporic categorization.” This opinion was supported by two main arguments. Firstly, the Syrian population in Turkey comprises individuals with various legal statuses, including temporary protection, students, migrants, workers, and even Turkish citizens. As a result, homogenizing the Syrian presence in Turkey under the single category of refugees does not accurately reflect the reality of the situation. In fact, the “Theatre Scene” group comprises Syrian artists with differing legal statuses including a member who has obtained Turkish nationality. Secondly, the Syrian artists argued that the categorization of the Syrian population in Turkey as refugees has become a tool of exclusion and a primary element in xenophobic political discourse. As a result, the group members sought to avoid the use of the term “Refugee Theatre” in their interactions with media outlets, instead emphasizing the multi-faceted experiences of the Syrian diaspora in Turkey. In this context, it is meaningful to note that refusing to be identified as “refugee theatre” is a position reflecting the ongoing debate among the Syrian community in Turkey in relation to their belonging, collective presence, and self-identification.

Consequently, the “Refugee Theatre” concept sounded to be inconsistent with the reality of the Syrian diaspora in Turkey, and hence instead, “Diasporic Theatre” or “Theatre of the Diaspora”, was considered be a better fit to describe the case study.

In the next parts, we explain the role of theatre in relation to the new social location experienced by the Syrian society in the diaspora. Afterwards, we navigate the narrative of memory that Syrians are expressing through the practice of theatre. Finally, we explore how theatre becomes a space of activism indicating specific ideological and ethnical expressions of belonging.

Being a Syrian in Turkey and the challenge of Belonging

The theoretical background we built on proposes social location as a key factor that shapes an individual’s sense of belonging, identity, and membership in a particular community nation or society which carry certain power positions within society, subject to change in different contexts affected by various social, economic, and political dynamics. In this sense, the change that social location is subject to is expected to possibly cause a resulting change in the individuals and collective’s belonging experiences.

In this study, we explore how social location is a multifaceted concept that can encompass a multitude of attributes. However, for the purpose of our case analysis, we have chosen to concentrate on a singular central attribution

based on the accounts and narratives of Syrian artists who were interviewed. The revolution, displacement, and resettlement that Syria underwent after the revolution have resulted in the emergence of a novel social location associated with being a Syrian in the diaspora. Consequently, this research specifically focuses on the social location of “being a Syrian in Turkey” and how it relates to the theatrical experience. In this frame, when asked about his experience as a Syrian artist in Turkey and the difference it has with other theatrical experiences he had, Ghazwan Al-Balah, the co-founder of the “Theatre Scene” group, answered:

Whatever we do – including art and theatre – is conditioned by the reality of us being here and of the nature of our presence here: why are we here? Who are we here? Under what circumstances we are here? Till when will we be here? And do they want us here? (Ghazwan Al Balah, September 2022)

The quoted statement reflects how the diasporic presence of the Syrians in Turkey presents a principal social location that woven all the other aspects of the Syrian’s presence in the diaspora. In this sense, “belonging as a Syrian in the diaspora” comes along with aside questioning of the nature of the Syrian presence in the diaspora and the related identity matters: is the Syrian in Turkey a refugee? Is he a guest waiting to return home? Or is this a “new kind” of Syrian identity that is being experienced and developed along with the experience of the diaspora?

The experience of belonging – as described by the Syrian artists – is intricately linked to a state of ambiguity and a sense of loss. This phenomenon is commonly observed among communities that have migrated to a new environment and society, and often faces criticism and opposition from the host community. It constitutes a critical issue for immigrant and refugee communities, requiring significant effort and navigating challenges both individually and collectively to establish a recognized and accepted presence in the new society. In this frame, the central character in the play *Outside the Flock*, Atef, embodies a similar struggle with belonging. From the outset of the story, Atef, who works as a cleaner in a theatre, tries to secure a role in the play and to become a part of the group participating in the performance. Atef has struggled to belong and was always rejected. This struggle experienced by Atef can be interpreted as a symbolic representation of the struggle to belong among the Syrian diaspora in Turkey.



Figure 1: The group is discussing with the committee in an effort to convince them to preserve the authenticity of the play's content and resist making changes. From: Outside the Flock, 2022, a performance of "Theatre Scene" Group, Istanbul-Turkey @Courtesy of the artists.

Despite its challenging aspect, the social location of “being a Syrian in Turkey” provides a sense of belonging for Syrians, unifying a large population. This social location is functional as a reference attribute to belong to all Syrians, regardless of their diverse experiences and circumstances. As expressed by Ola Bawarshi, the only member who obtained Turkish nationality, legal status does not alter the experience of being a Syrian in Turkey and this experience is consistent across different social locations, such as gender, religion, class, and status. Bawarshi stated that the widespread rejection and negative perception of Syrians in Turkey serves to reinforce a collective sense of belonging among Syrians in Turkey and that their theatre initiatives could serve as a manifestation of this:

I think that we are somehow presenting the Syrian diaspora in Turkey : with all our differences we come together because we belong here, on the stage and we express our belonging through theatre... this is what brings us together as a group of artists, as a group of Syrian youth... and I think that's what brought dozens of Syrians to watch the play, they did not come to watch us because we are famous or awarded performers (laughing) people came to watch us because we belong to them and they know that whatever we will perform, it will talk about them and will tell one of their stories. (Ola Bawarshi, September 2022)

The discussions in this frame have posited that “being a Syrian in Turkey” operates as a social location that reinforces a sense of community and provides support to its members. Furthermore, it sheds light on one of the reasons

that drive Syrian artists to engage in theatrical practices. These artists use performance as a means of expressing their connection to the Syrian diaspora in Turkey and increasing the visibility of this social location, thereby enhancing its legitimacy.

In turn, the theatrical practice serves as a mutual tool of recognition for both the artists and the audience. The artists aim to gain recognition by performing narratives that are meaningful to them and the audience seeks recognition by relating to the stories being told on stage. Hence, theatrical performance becomes a means of asserting identity and fostering community, both for the performer and the audience.

The discussion with Syrian artists regarding the role of theatre in their experience of belonging was a central topic in this work. The questions posed pertained to the significance of theatre for the performers as individuals:

Whenever I came to the rehearsal, it felt like I was coming home. Maybe because with the team, we speak Arabic in our own Syrian dialect, we perform in our own language, maybe because everyone would understand my jokes, my metaphors, my memories, maybe because I am free here to be a Syrian and to discuss everything related to Syria without being afraid of the others' refusal of our presence, nor of the Assad's soldiers arresting us (...) this feeling of being home got to a trance the day we performed the play... especially in the last few minutes, when everyone was applauding.. it felt like encountering a very dear old friend, in one of the streets of Damascus. (Ghazwan Al Balah, October 2022)

Based on the interviews, and as stated in the quote above, the responses indicated that theatre as a space was linked with feelings of safety, familiarity, and acceptance. The participants described the moment of coming to the rehearsal to be linked with a sense of relief and comfort, and they described their time in this space of gathering, performing and interaction as:

a chance to be a Syrian without thinking about being a Syrian, or discussing it, or being rejected because of it... It is a rare place in which I can be present without being pursued by the responsibility to debate my presence and fight for it. (Al-Mutasem Al-Khalide, October 2022)

For the actors and members of the "Theatre Scene" group, theatre has variant functions in relation to their belonging as "Syrians in Turkey" and while many of their testimonies were similar, some of their accounts have brought contradictory perceptions of the role of theatre in relation to the belonging experience. While they describe it as a space of belonging, a platform through which they exercise their belonging, an encounter that provides a sense of belonging, they did also mention it as a chance to escape from the "burden of belonging".

Theatrical Expressions of Belonging: Navigating Memories

“Being a Syrian in Turkey” as a social location is rather a challenging path towards self-positioning and belonging in the diaspora which is meanwhile an experience linked with a struggle against judgment, rejection, and xenophobia. This struggle towards belonging is specifically significant as it intertwines with the identity question.

The conceptual framework adopted in this study places an emphasis on identity and posits that “identification and emotional attachment” constitute the second level of analysis in understanding belonging. Narratives are considered as carriers of identity, as they are “stories that people tell themselves and others about who they are, who they are not and who/how they would like to be”²². Telling these stories is a way of reminiscing and highlighting crucial memories that shape one’s identification and attachment.

In this study, the examination of identity-narratives and memories is of crucial significance as they highlight the central theme of theatrical practice as a performative art. The narratives portrayed through performance are reimagined representations of real-life experiences and memories. We asked the participants in the focus group about the most valuable moment related to their theatre experience. It was hard for some of them to decide about one single memory, but Hande Laham shared a very specific moment:

The last week, I was not able to remember the lyrics of a Syrian song, one that I really loved and used to sing with my mother, I got terrified, I was scared that I am forgetting, forgetting Syria, forgetting my childhood, my neighbourhood, my country... We had a rehearsal the same day, and as I entered, I heard it, the song was playing, and I had a grateful smile and two tears (...). I know that by coming here I am protecting my memories. (Hande Laham, September 2022)

The theatre – as a gathering place for the Syrian diaspora – provides individuals with a space to share various elements of their heritage. Laham experienced a rekindling of her cultural identity when she encountered the Syrian atmosphere within the setting of a theatre. While theatre was a familiar place to which she felt belonging, she felt as well rescued from the threat of forgetting. Of course, any other place that brings the community together and exhibits cultural elements of the Syrian heritage may play this role, but what is specific to the theatre in this sense is that it provides a chance to the artists as agents of the society to take an active role in remembering:

22- YUVAL-DAVIS Nira and KAPTANI Erene, “Performing Identities: Participatory Theatre among Refugees”, in WETHERELL Margaret, *Theorizing Identities and Social Action*, London, Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2009, p.56-74.

Many of the Syrian people came here at a young age, and did not have the chance to see a Syrian play or go to a Syrian performance, they grew up in Turkey and they don't even know that Syria was a land of art. All they have in mind is images of war and death (...). We want to give the youngest Syrians in Turkey a chance to know that Syria is more than the news of bombings, the memories of war and the narratives of death... We try to revive the beautiful memories of Syria; we try to remind ourselves of these memories and tell those who were not lucky to "live" Syria about them (...). Maybe we can help them imagine how beautiful Syria was. (Ghazwan Al Balah, October 2022)

Hence, the importance of theatre as a means of remembrance and connection is highlighted. Through theatrical performance, the memories and heritage of Syria are passed down to future generations, providing an opportunity for community members to reconnect with the brighter moments of their cultural past. The unique role of theatre as a space for active engagement in the preservation of cultural memory and identity is emphasized.

The research also indicates a palpable fear, among Syrian artists, of losing their sense of self and belonging. As individuals and as a community, they experience an existential crisis and at times question the very existence of their ancestral homeland. Ghazwan Al Balah points to Atef as a representation of this struggle, reflecting the experiences of many Syrians in the diaspora.

In the performed play, *Outside the Flock*, the protagonist, Atef, embodies a person of unwavering ethics and critical insight. He fearlessly speaks the truth and steadfastly adheres to his beliefs, even when faced with opposition. In the play, Atef faces censorship and authoritarianism embodied by the powerful committee of donors, who hold economic and political sway. These donors sought to control the play and ultimately eliminate the theatre, in order to utilize the space for more financially profitable endeavors. Despite the bribery offered to the other members of the group, Atef steadfastly resists the attempts to control the play and close the theatre. He fiercely protects his beloved theatre, displaying his unwavering commitment to his belonging. However, Atef gets tricked by Juliette who made him think that she was of the same stand. She convinces him to commit suicide together as they will not be able to change and protect the theatre. Juliette, who was as well bribed, empoisons Atef trying to get rid of him. Ironically the poison was fake and Atef only slept and waking up, he discovered that everything was a delusion and that everyone tricked him, and they aimed to kill him. Atef, facing this betrayal and understanding the reality, screams rebelling against everything:

Everything turned out to be an illusion, Juliet is an illusion, the theatre is an illusion, love is an illusion, the revolution is an illusion, civilization is an illusion, the freedom is an illusion, everything is an illusion. (Atef, *Outside the Flock*)

Ghazwan Al Balah makes an analogy comparing the story of Atef and the Syrian people, who have fiercely fought for their country, only to find themselves deceived. Through Atef's story, the reality of Syrian individuals who have dedicated themselves to protecting their nation and freedom is depicted. However, they later come to realize that their efforts were in vain, ultimately losing hope. In this sense, Atef symbolizes the struggle of Syrians who are grappling with disbelief, questioning everything related to their homeland, including the existence of a place they can call home. The end of the play was with Atef standing up, gathering his strength, and reminding himself that whatever happens, there is a real place to which he belongs:

And there, there is a homeland, bordered to the north by Turkey, to the east by Iraq, to the south by Jordan, to the west by Palestine, Lebanon and the Mediterranean Sea, and above in the sky there is a sun that no one would be able to extinguish, and under the ground there are detention centres, individual and group cells, and detainees who spent their lives in them for an opinion or a word... We have a lot of doors and windows... and freedom won't be incapable to reach us one day. (Atef, *Outside the Flock*)

Atef's role extends beyond personal reflection, to a principal reminder telling the audience of their existence and connection to a real, tangible homeland. With his gaze directed towards the audience, Atef tries to demonstrate through reference to geographical borders and natural features that Syria is a tangible reality and that their belonging is not an illusion. Throughout the play, Atef transforms from a representation of the Syrian struggle to a leader inspiring the audience to maintain their faith.

While performing this scene, Ghazwan Al Balah cried on stage spelling these final sentences. During the interview, he stated that it was possible for every Syrian to relate to Atef and to his struggle. Talking to the audience and reminding them of the homeland, was a mission related to expressing and reviving memories of belonging.

In conclusion, theatre serves as a space for Syrian artists to reconnect with their identity, contemplate their sense of belonging, and assert their cultural existence within the diaspora. The act of retelling their memories as identity-narratives is both a means of remembering and a demonstration of attachment to their Syrian identity and sense of belonging. Through their statements, the members of the "Theatre Scene" articulate the role that theatre plays in enabling them to encounter and preserve their memories, and in turn, share these experiences with the audience as a form of communal recognition. Thus, theatre for the Syrians in the diaspora is an interactive space of memory.



Figure 2: Juliette (performed by Ola Bawarshi) looking at Atef, trying to seduce him before convincing him to commit suicide. From: *Outside the Flock*, 2022, a performance of "Theatre Scene" Group, Istanbul-Turkey. @ Courtesy of the artists.

Beyond art: Theatre as a form of activism

The study of performative arts generally and theatre specifically comes frequently to examine the relation that theatre has with political activism. In fact, theatre as “a place where the issues (...) are framed, problematised, opened up and made accessible to analysis and critique”²³, makes this relation with political activism evident. Additionally, the performative practice is shaped by the personal and collective experiences produced and performed by the artist as an agent of the society, making it a reflection of the daily debated ideological and ethical matters.

This relation between theatre and activism could be further investigated in lights of the concept of belonging with reference to its third analytical level. As suggested by the conceptual framework developed by Yuval-Davis, the experience of belonging encompasses not only the attributes of social locations, identification, and attachments, but also the evaluation and judgement of

23- NiELD Sophie, “The Proteus Cabinet, or ‘We Are Here but Not Here’”, *Research in Drama Education. The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance*, 13, no. 2, June 2008, p.137-145. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13569780802054778> (last accessed February 11, 2023).

these levels of belonging²⁴. Thus, while theatre performances reflect different expressions of belonging built on identity-narratives, they also establish an indicative belonging to a certain ethical and political positioning, reflecting another analytical level of belonging. Indeed, owing to this described nature of theatre, as a potential “arena of the contestations around these ethical and ideological issues”²⁵, we aim to investigate how the Syrian theatrical practice in the diaspora plays this role. It was successfully established during the interviews and the focus group that Syrian artists are cognizant of the empowering nature of theatre and are equipped to utilize it as a venue to reclaim their status as citizens entitled to rights, starting with the right to freedom of expression. Al-Mutasem Al-Khalide has outlined the challenges faced by the group, including difficulties in securing rehearsal spaces, obtaining funding for production, and performing their plays. Despite these challenges, Al-Khalide explains that their drive to perform is rooted not only in a personal passion for the arts but also in a sense of obligation to their community:

Our struggle to be on stage is not only wired by our personal passion of art, but also by our feeling of responsibility towards our community (...) because being on stage is our way to speak up, to denounce what is going wrong, to revive the belief of a better future and to start the flame of debate in the Syrian mind (...). Being on stage is a privilege, and even if we don't aim to take a political side, we are aware of our responsibility to speak up. (Al-Mutasem Al-Khalide, September 2022)

This sentiment of responsibility was echoed by all the interviewed participants, who emphasized the infinite issues they aimed to critique and their steadfast commitment to addressing everything of interest to the Syrian society both in the diaspora and back home. The artists see the theatre as an opportunity to speak-up and actively belong to the community, through debating essential matters as a responsible member of the community.

The play *Outside the Flock* serves as an example of the use of theatre to address significant national issues, including political corruption, the atrocities committed by the Assad regime, the emptiness of the Syrian opposition, and the danger posed by political Islamism. The play depicts these criticized actors through the presence of a committee of donors who come to assess the group's eligibility for funding. However, the committee tries to alter the content of the play to align with their own ideologies and reinforce existing power dynamics. The political leadership seeks to convince the group to include recognition and expression of gratitude to the empowering leadership, while the representative of the Islamist movement pushes for changes to the story, including the climax of a marriage ceremony for Romeo and Juliet with Juliet's head covered in

24- YUVAL-DAVIS Nira, “Belonging and the politics of belonging”, *Patterns of Prejudice*, 40:3, August 2006, p.197-214. DOI: 10.1080/00313220600769331 (last accessed February 11, 2023).

25- *Ibid.*

accordance with religious and cultural rules. The character of Juliette in the play resists the attempts at censorship and alteration, reminding the audience of the significance of theatre both as an art form and a reflection of civilization:

But for your information, theatre is not a shop. Theatre is a word, poetry, thought, music, heritage, memories, and dreams... Theatre is a civilization. Is it logical that you want to abolish a civilization? (Juliette, *Outside the Flock*)

This scene highlights the conflict between the desire for artistic expression and the pressure to conform to political and cultural norms, which mirrors the reality experienced in Syria. The attempts by the committee of donors to control the content of the play symbolize the ongoing internal struggle over the control and definition of Syrian identity and the attribution of ideological markers to Syrian society. In the frame of the play *Outside the Flock*, the group's struggle to present the original play without censorship, symbolizes the broader struggle of Syrian society, which has been subjected to a system that not only restricts freedom of expression but also attempts to impose specific constructions of identity and belonging on the population for decades. In this context, what the Syrian artists define is a frame of ideological and ethical belonging "using a common set of values, such as 'democracy' or 'human rights', as the signifiers of belonging"²⁶.



Figure 3: In this scene, a member of the donors' committee try to threaten the Syrian artists and force them to change the content of the play and make it "respectful" to the Syrian identity. From: *Outside the Flock*, 2022, a performance of "Theatre Scene" Group, Istanbul-Turkey. @Courtesy of the artists.

26- YUVAL-DAVIS Nira, "Belonging and the politics of belonging", *Patterns of Prejudice*, 40:3, August 2006, p.197-214. DOI: 10.1080/00313220600769331 (last accessed February 11, 2023).

Moreover, Hande Laham expressed her thoughts on the relationship between political practices and theatre, and how the latter provides a space to discuss and challenge these issues. She states that the Syrian identity and sense of belonging have been constructed and controlled by the Assad regime for decades, with individuals and groups being afraid of deviating from the prescribed norms:

We have been told and taught by the system, who is the Syrian and who is not... and there were always unlimited externalization factors built according to the regime's rules and interests. Assad regime tried over the decades to control everything about the Syrians and the Syrian identity, and this made us as individuals and as a society scared of being different as it would mean "deviating" from the circle of belonging, a belonging that was defined by the regime (...). What we aim to reach and tell is a perception of a new meaning of being a Syrian, a new understanding of belonging, one that has no externalization conditions. On stage, we practice a revolutionary excursion towards an inclusive Syria, and we perform an imagined future and a new reality for the Syrians, one that eliminates all the forms of social and political repressions. (Hande Laham, October 2022)

Building on the insights shared by Hande Laham, the Syrian artists seek through their theatrical performances to promote a new and inclusive understanding of the Syrian identity and belonging, free from external conditions and political repression. They aim to challenge conventional notions of Syrian identity and belonging through their theatrical performances. The theatre is posited as a platform for practicing an imagined reality, built on principles such as democracy, freedom, and justice. These ethical and political values are seen as an intellectual and ideological site of belonging for the Syrian people, who have faced dictatorship as a rejected ideology and political practice.

In the diaspora, Syrians face new challenges associated with their displacement and in relation to their social location as members of a diaspora community. The injustices faced by refugees and immigrants in the form of instrumentalization, rejection, and racism, have become new areas of concern and subject matter for artistic expressions. The Syrian artists confirm this role of theatre as a tool to face prejudice towards the Syrian diaspora in Turkey:

Performing and being involved in artistic and cultural activities is a tool of fighting the prejudgements and social rejection towards Syrians and all the refugees and migrants in Turkey. Believe me, some people get shocked to know that we can produce art and do art, that we have this capability, that we are educated and civilized... and as much as it is humiliating to face such reactions, it is as well fulfilling to know that we are facing these judgments with art. (Ola Bawarshi, September 2022)

Hence, the research shows that besides the explicit forms of criticism expressed linguistically on stage through the characters and their replicas, the simple fact of being an artist challenges the prejudgement towards Syrians and the Syrian community. In this sense, the theatrical practice as an act presents a form of opposition and social activism against injustices that refugees, migrants, and people in the diaspora may face. Eventually, artistic pursuits in general serve as a means for these individuals to make their voices heard, counter negative perceptions held by host communities, and assert their visibility. Correspondingly, the group members explained that while their first play *Outside the flock* is not directly debating the situation of the Syrians in Turkey, their second play focus rather on the Syrian life and problems in the diaspora including the economic challenges and the social rejection. They mentioned as well that a variety of Turkish media channels were very interested in reporting and broadcasting their work, considering it “a positive example to be highlighted and to be reported to the Turkish society, that could bring appreciation to the Syrian presence in Turkey”. (Ghazwan Al Balah, September 2022)

To conclude and following the statements of the Syrian artists members of the “Theatre Scene” group, theatre as an art allows a practice of belonging interlinked with the critical debate of ideological and ethical matters. It is not limited to criticizing the crimes of the Syrian regime, or the political issues back home, but it becomes an active form of activism through challenging prejudice and building instead a positive discourse related to the Syrian presence in Turkey.

Conclusion

This research, focusing on the “Theatre Scene” group’s performance of *Outside the Flock*, examined the significant role that theatre plays in the Syrian diaspora’s experience of belonging. Besides its preliminary character, this work highlighted the importance of theatre for the Syrian community in Turkey and reconfirmed the role of the performative arts as an empowering tool for diasporic communities. This investigation and the accounts of the Syrian artists showed theatre to be both a space and a practice of belonging. At first, theatre as a place to which the Syrian artists went frequently was a safe place for them, a place they construct through their presence making it feel familiar and capable to absorb the different elements of their culture and belonging expressions.

Secondly, the Syrian theatre in Turkey provides an emancipated platform for the Syrian community to explore identity, confront their sense of belonging, and voice their criticisms of various social and political issues. Additionally, theatre was described as a practice of belonging, through which both the performers and the audience took an active role to revisit belonging matters and reconnect over it. In fact, Through the stage, the individual performer brings voice to the whole community and the fictional characters become the container of

the feelings, the ideas, and the challenges of the Syrian diaspora. From the receivers' side, assisting and watching the performance was described as a form of attachment and care as well as being an action aiming to empower artists of their community. Theatre, as an art form, arguably provides a unique way of encountering and interacting with one's community in the diaspora, allowing the audience to experience a sense of belonging.

Unlike other forms of entertainment or media, the live and immersive nature of theatrical performances fosters a strong connection between the performers and the audience, creating an exchange that can bring people together and create a sense of community. Whether it's through the storytelling, the emotional resonance of the characters, or the shared performed struggles, theatre has the potential to offer its audiences a sense of belonging that goes beyond just entertainment and reaches deeper levels of personal and emotional connection. As a result, this work reflects a need to give more attention to the Syrian artists and the Syrian arts in the diaspora as it is an essential way to observe and investigate the link between the staged messages and the collective matters. Significantly, theatre is a rare encounter between the artists and the audience, and it may be of interest to discuss how the Syrian audience are receiving, experiencing, and interpreting the given art within their belonging.

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ملخص | يقدم هذا المقال بحثاً تمهيدياً حول دور المسرح كممارسة انتماء لدى الشتات السوري في تركيا. بناءً على منهج بحث نوعي وسردي، يحلل البحث تجربة مجموعة «المشهد المسرحي» (Theatre Scene) وأدائها لمسرحية خارج القطيع. تعتمد الورقة البحثية على الإطار المفاهيمي للانتماء الذي طوره يوفال-ديفيس (Yuval-Davis, 2006)، وتستعرض كيف شكل المسرح مساحة وممارسة للانتماء بالنسبة الى الشتات السوري. يساهم البحث في العدد المتزايد للدراسات حول فنون الشتات، اذ يسلط الضوء على خصوصية تجربة المسرح السوري.

كلمات مفتاحية | مسرح، شتات سوري، مسرح سوري، مسرح الشتات، أنتماء، هويّة.

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