

# Analyzing the Concept of Authority in Yussef El Guindi's Play "Back of the Throat"

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**ABSTRACT:** The study focuses on Yussef El Guindi's play "Back of the Throat" and how the playwright presents American authority's influence on shaping peoples' religious beliefs, identity, freedom, and social norms. The study considers the author, his play and documents published by researchers and critics. The author, through his literary work is viewed as a contributor whose viewpoint affects the community responses. He is also viewed as a compelling character that develops the situation of people who live in America, especially those with Arabic origins and Islamic beliefs. Theoretically, the study uses cognitive sociology, Max Weber's theory of action, through the two concepts of micro and macro in order to reach Parson's theory. The first concept of micro is concerned with individuals' behaviours in society. The second concept of the macro is concerned with how society shapes individuals' behaviours through various ways in a chain of causes and effects. The study sheds light on the American agents' interrogation and how the protagonist Khaled is treated in America. The interrogation results reveal how the American authority could not find any evidence to accuse Khaled as a terrorist. It shows that social, cultural, and individual interactions stem from an inherent social norm governed by an authoritarian power in American society. Therefore, any social change comes from individuals who run governmental institutions.

**KEYWORDS:** Authority; Yussef El Guindi; Religion; Identity; Freedom.

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Date of Submission: 21-05-2023

Date of Acceptance: 03-06-2023

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Yussef El Guindi is an American writer of Egyptian origin. He was born in Egypt in 1960. At age three, he moved to London. He received his education in the UK and France. Later, he received his BA from the American University in Cairo 1982. In 1983, El Guindi moved to the United States and became a US citizen in 1996. He wrote full-length, one-act, and adapted plays on the Arab Muslim experience in the United States. El Guindi's play *Back of the Throat* (2005) was among the several literary works for which he was recognized with awards. Some of his works include *10 Acrobats in an Amazing Leap of Faith* (2005), *Jihad Jones and the Kalashnikov Babes* (2008), *Language Rooms* (2010), *Collaborator* (2016), *The Talented Ones* (2016) and *People of the Book* (2019).

Egyptians are known for loving their homeland. Egypt is the land of magic, beauty, and Pharaonic civilization. Over the years, Egyptian literary productions have had a significant impact not only in the Arab world but also in Western countries, including America. El Guindi is also one of the writers with a solid and effective influence, especially in his plays with political features to present the issues of people in America. In addition, Western societies differ from Eastern societies regarding their lives, culture, education, history, rules, Etc. In America, people are governed by a strict system. American citizens are familiar with each other's norms, the same as in Arabic societies. Arabs are oppressed in their countries; therefore, they migrate to other countries like America to live better.

According to Weber, "The current state is an obligatory organization that plans dominance. It has been effective in its efforts to monopolize the appropriate application of physical force as a tool of dominance inside a region." (Gerth & Mills, 1946, p.5) However, in America, people are under authoritarian rules and practice their freedom according to these rules. This fact reminds us of Parson's notions about the relation between actions and social norms and how institutions have the power to shape and construct societies. However, Weber's perspective about society is that an individual's behaviour shapes society and the individual himself initially creates institutional rules. In Western countries like the United States, religion does not govern Americans' life on a standard level. America is known for its multiculturalism and multiple identities. In contrast, the Arab way of thinking is derived from religion, which is the main force controlling their interactions. Religion is the builder of Arabs' ideologies. "The God of Islam is not a different deity to that worshipped by Christians or Jews; Allah is merely the Arabic word for God" (Husain, 2019, p. 19). In common, people who are not citizens in any country do not get the same treatment as the state's citizens.

Social media, books, history, and travel from one country to another all impact how to understand and construct an idea about anything in the world.

As a writer, Yussef El Guindi is an Egyptian- American who greatly influences America. He depicts people's life, and his literary works changed many Americans' opinions about Muslims who live in America, especially those with Arabic origins. In his play "Back of the Throat", the protagonist Khaled represents an example of a man, who works as a writer, lives in America, and comes from an Arabic origin and has an American identity. Yussef El Guindi, in this selected play, reflects his character through the protagonist Khaled. The American agents raided Khaled's apartment and started questioning him about his interests and life. Khaled uses books related to Islamic religion, literature, and politics in his work. In this case, Khaled is a source that threatens the American authorities. In this play, the American agents tortured Khaled psychologically and physically to force him to confess if he had any terrorist activities. Moreover, the agents prevent Khaled from calling a lawyer to defend himself. In America, Khaled is under surveillance, just like many people, even when they have an American identity. He wants to be treated as a citizen like American citizens and gain rights in everything the American government offers.

### **Objective of the study**

The study aims to investigate the influence of Yussef El Guindi as a playwright in his play "Back of The Throat". It also attempts to present people's issues in America, especially those with Arabic origins and Islamic beliefs and to investigate the influence of authority in shaping people's religious beliefs, identity, freedom, and social norms.

### **Question of the Study**

To achieve the objective of the study, the researcher attempts to answer the question of how did Yussef El Guindi as a playwright in his play Back of The Throat, influence society by presenting people's issues in America, especially those with Arabic origins and Islamic beliefs and the influence of authority in shaping people's religious beliefs, identity, freedom, and social norms?

### **Significance of the Study**

The study sheds light on the importance of Yussef El Guindi as an Egyptian-American playwright and his role as a writer in criticizing American society and presenting social issues of people in America who have Arabic origins and Islamic beliefs.

## **II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

Qutami (2016) argues that Americans who are Arab or Muslim have been made to feel unwelcome and inferior. They cannot feel belonging if they are consistently treated as outsiders. Moreover, distinguishing between "us" and "them" makes crimes against minorities seem more acceptable. However, if there were to be equal success in demeaning minorities in the USA, the prevailing discourse and policies would have to halt the act of demonizing and dehumanizing them. Positive change, accepting "the other" and their differences, may be achievable once the general climate is no longer antagonistic toward Arab Americans.

Al-Shetawi (2021) acknowledges that by presenting Arabs and their culture to American audiences, Arab American playwrights and performers contribute to dispelling the prejudices against Arabs and Muslims that the media and politicians have perpetuated. They have generally created favourable representations of Arabs and challenged common Muslim and Arab preconceptions in Orientalist discourse. He also reported that El Guindi, addresses several facets of Arab American identity creation in his plays. El Guindi refutes the negative preconceptions of Arabs in American media in nearly all his plays, which are connected thematically. He addresses various subjects and problems in his plays, including racial profiling and discrimination, the hybrid existence of Arab Americans and their attempt to adapt to their new channel society and cultural norms. He also highlights the struggles and obstacles which Arab immigrants face as they try to blend into American society.

Similarly, Al-Amro et al (2021) state that "Back of the Throat" is a play that reflects the difficulties of being a Muslim in American society. The conventional role that Muslims have been given without considering their rights has exacerbated prejudice against Muslims, particularly those of Arab heritage. A Muslim may be detained, tortured, or even executed for seemingly minor offences like owning a computer device that was not made by a Muslim or possessing lawful adult materials. During the harsh interrogation, Khaled has endured the theme of violence and the traditional roles Muslims in America.

According to Weber's ideal types, El Guindi and the critics defended the play's protagonist, Khaled, as the value of social action determines the values and beliefs they possess, whether religious or moral. The reactions stem from sympathy with Muslim Arabs or Muslim Americans, which is controlled by emotional action. Moreover, with a deeper analysis, religious beliefs are an emotional response to human feelings for a

sense of safety. Writers, as in the case of Khaled, requested their right for protection from American authorities as a basic need in any human's daily life. What is more, traditional social action shows the role of the writer and critics in defending their ideologies through their writings. Social media has a significant impact in creating a connection among people and to use it as a powerful, influential tool to separate their ideologies. According to Bavel and Packer (2021) Donald Trump said in 60 minutes, "I think social media has more power than the money they spent." (p. 106).

### **III. METHODOLOGY**

The study uses the analytical methodology and the application of Max Weber's theory of action through macro and micro concepts in cognitive sociology. Weber, in his theory, asserted four ideal types:

- 1- Goal Rational Action: The actor's action (the term actor refers to individual) is oriented. The actor's motive is derived from the actor's desire, and the goal is realistic.
- 2- Value Rational Social Action: The goal's value determines achieving the goal's end. The actor's action is justified through a set of beliefs which may be religious, moral, constitutional, etc., based on a professional policy.
- 3- Affective Social action: The actor's emotion determines the action.
- 4- Traditional Social Action: The actor's action is determined by the customs and traditions of the society.

### **IV. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION**

Ancient history testifies how Islam had an active role in many societies through the conquests they made. The importance of understanding Islamic society as a faith enriches people regarding beliefs that Western society fears, and they know that Arabs are ready to die for their beliefs. "There were songs, slogans, wall paintings, and people constantly mentioned, you are Egyptian holds your head high" (Husain, 2019, p. 172). The play, *Back of the Throat* was born after the events of September. El Guindi asserted that he started to look over his apartment. If an agent entered his flat, what would they find? His publications indicate an interest in the Middle East, including books on assassins, firearms, Islam, research materials, and the Qur'an. In his paranoia, he began to consider what might occur.

#### **The Emotional Impact of Religion and Poetry**

When one of the American agents asks the protagonist "Khaled" about a picture that he keeps in his apartment, written on it "Allah" in a state of fear and terror because of the American agents' visit, Khaled answers, "a present from my mother" (p.3) and that he is not a religious person. Through Khaled's character, we do not know whether he is religious or not. El Guindi reflects on the contradiction of the religion that the Arabs experience within Islamic beliefs and how they are forced in America not to declare their faith even if they are religious. The Americans view the religion of Islam and every Muslim as a terrorist and poses a threat to American society. However, the question is, why does the West have this view of Islam and Muslims, while we do not find it in Christianity and other religions? The reason for this is the terrorist acts carried out by terrorist groups in the name of Islam.

Working as a writer is a challenging matter in America. Through Khaled's character, we learn about writers' difficulties due to authorities' surveillance. The result leads us to the impact of work on the individual's economic condition, but at the same time, America is also trying to protect its economy. Weber's concentration on power and struggle is an essential addition to or complementary to Marx's theory of economic domination. Moreover, Weber's conception of social classes is consistent with Marx's understanding of economic classes in conceptualizing capitalism (Hilton & Turner, 1989).

Religion exacerbates the feeling, fuels the spirit, and gives man comfort and tranquility. It also has the most substantial influence on controlling fear. For Muslims, that God who resides in the sky and the prophets and those who succeed them is the supreme authority; they have the command in everything. As for the Americans, the individuals who govern government institutions are the ones who represent the ultimate authority. Religion gives a person a reason to find his purpose in life, but the government in America governs these reasons, which may sometimes conflict with religion. Religion is a feeling and a personal matter within a person, while the state is the external ruler. Moreover, this is what America fears; Islam's hegemony and the dissemination of ideas contradicting their authoritarian interests and managing their economic growth because of their inhumane practices with people. Therefore, we find that societies governed by religion and legislation together are more balanced when religion reconciles with authority, as one compensates for the other, according to wise leaders.

Khaled continues his interrogation with the American agents and tries to convince them that he is a writer and uses his books for work. In his book *The Protestant Ethic and The Spirit of Capitalism* (2005), Weber argues that religion is the cause of the accumulation of money among individuals that led to the emergence of capitalism. Religion, according to Karl Marx, is the opium of the people. Moreover, when considering the ideal

types of Weber's social theory, the character of the protagonist Khaled uses religion to cause an emotional impact on individuals' ideologies and to sell his writings.

A writer like Khaled is a challenging person for American authorities. His interest in the Middle East and poetry reflects his deeply rooted Arab thinking. Arabs are famous for their love of poetry. For example, the Persian poet Omar Khayyam used to praise the Prophet and God. The poet refused to eat or drink until he performed his night prayer, "O Lord, I know you as much as is possible for me; forgive me, for my knowledge of you, is my way of reaching you", before his death (Husain, 2019, p. 91). For American agents, knowing the psychological side of their victims is essential. One of the most prominent features of poetry is exaggeration, ambiguity, and emphasis in description to the extent of astonishment.

What is more, poetry possesses the characteristic of influential words and the eloquence of meaning in communicating ideas. For example, the Qur'an has a poetic language. In addition, it has powerful emotional stimulation. These characteristics are in Khaled's personality, leading to his thoughts, books and writings. As a result, this leads us to Khaled's isolated personality and work. He may be a spy or the head of a terrorist organization. Therefore, his role as a writer is to sharpen and galvanizes individuals who are against authorities. Moreover, as mentioned earlier, all those are possible according to individual preferences. That is why Americans must know with whom they are dealing.

Then Khaled's interest in politics after poetry reflects his strong and rebellious way of thinking, and his interest in sex is complementary to his thinking. According to Sigmund Freud, human behaviour is controlled by his drives, which lead him to make decisions to meet his fundamental wants. However, his actions affect society. In America, a character like Khalid if he wants to write a book, what would he write? For sure, his writings will have firm facts, and their power will strongly influence people's minds; through sectarianism and racism associated with religious beliefs many will follow him. Therefore, Khaled, the American's prey, must pounce on and then be thrown into their prisons because his influence as a writer represents a threat to America and its authorities.

### **The Importance of Identity**

The ability of the United States to separate itself from political and military interferences with the rest of the world is reflected in its early history. America avoided conflicts and battles between states in those regions because it was separated from Europe by one ocean and Asia by another. As a result, peace created a favourable ground for the new nation's growth and expansion. Moreover, farmlands in the United States are rich in many parts and could support a growing service economy by supplying more food than is required. Therefore, many immigrated to America seeking a better life, but the growing political and economic system led the authorities to practice cruelty and intransigence against immigrants.

During the interrogation of Khaled by the American agents, Khaled defended himself through his passport as an American citizen:

Khaled: Did I mention I'm a citizen, by the way. I can show you my-  
Carl holds up Khaled's passport.  
Right. Just so you know. (p. 6)

Being an American citizen gives him many privileges in America, including state protection. Moreover, in Khaled's conversation with the American agent Bartlett, he informs him that he does not know what charges the American agents are trying to attach to him. Khaled's character shows us that he does not communicate much with the world. He isolates himself from people and only owns his books. For him, these books are inspirational sources to write and read. For the Americans, Khaled's status, in this case, is also suspicious. Bartlett intimidates Khaled by implying that he is a government official and that seeing him at his house without an invitation is unpleasant, but he must deal with the issue. The Americans use methods of intimidation against the Arab Americans under the pretext of protecting the country. Therefore, Khaled's character appears as an innocent person pressured by government officials.

Bartlett: What I'm saying is we know we've put you on the spot. (p.8)

Putting Khaled on the spot by the American agents does not go unnoticed. While he mentions that he has an American identity and receives torture during the interrogation, then how do the Americans treat their prisoners? For them, there is no difference between guilty and innocent; the accused person is guilty until he proves his innocence. What is more, the surveillance of innocent people continues.

Bartlett reassures his assumptions to Khaled that he would not be surprised if he turns Khaled's computer and finds "plans for tunneling under the White House" (p. 14). Mekkah is the qiblah of Muslims; then, the White House is like the qiblah for Americans. The authorities seek to protect the White House at any cost,

just as any country is interested in protecting its security and important centers. The common reputation of writers is that they are master planners. Social and cultural institutions aptly testify to writers' controversial ideas and their influences.

Moreover, the population of America is vast. In addition, security monitoring is imposed on groups and gangs that try to set their control in one way or another, which is likely to happen. This statement from the American side significantly indicates the power of writers and educated people. What is more, America is a developed country and pays excellent attention to knowledge, and its people know the value of learning and the impact of books within a society. Moreover, human history is also full of examples of intellectual movements that led people to positive societal changes in the long run.

Bartlett: You don't speak Arabic?

Khaled: No. That's why I didn't call. I knew you were looking for Arabic speakers.

Carl holds up two books in Arabic.

Khaled: Yes. I keep telling myself I should learn it. (p. 10)

Language has an essential role in humans' identity and its impact on their life and cultures. Therefore, many immigrants forget their native language. Moreover, this reflects the immigrants' affiliation and attempts to familiarize themselves with other cultures. On the other hand, Khaled refuses this heinous interference with his privacy and asks for a lawyer to defend his legal rights as a citizen. All American citizens have the right to defend themselves through a lawyer regardless of their race, religion, creed, gender, and sexual orientation. He uses the constitutional rights provided to confront the authorities. In a conflict that inflames his soul, the protagonist tries to hold on to a straw of hope to defend a soul tired of life's worries that result in isolation. He works as a writer with a spirit full of hope, eagerness, and fear, but he is thoughtful because he knows his actions are for his benefit. On the other hand, the toxic anti-Western ambience that gives rise to "Death to America" slogans in Iran, flag burning in Pakistan, and a pervasive conviction in Egypt that the CIA was responsible for the atrocities of 9/11 is caused by the historical narrative of humiliation and indignity that is still being lived out today (Husain, 2019, p. 175). Khaled does not fear the American authorities; otherwise, he would not use his books in his work. El Guindi conveys a writer's life and what kind of life Arabs live in America. Nevertheless, actions taken by the American agents are their duty for the safety of the people and the state.

Khaled: This is my country. (p.21)

Once people understand how identity affects value, they can comprehend why certain seemingly crazy decisions make perfect sense to others. People attach higher significance to a person and the goods and acts that indicate their membership when social identities scratch their motivating itches. Identity signaling, for example, is frequently used to confirm one's membership in a group. Social identities are potent motivators for collaboration. During the late nineteenth century, many immigrants were encouraged by political parties and granted homes and jobs in exchange for their votes and political support. The American identity is essential because Arab Muslim immigrants travel miles and leave their families and countries to obtain it. El Guindi presents the tragedies of immigrants and the brutality that they face, even if they have an American identity. Khaled is being physically tortured by the American agents without pity or mercy. For him, even when he receives cruel acts, "this is still America"; it remains his home, and he belongs to it. This intense feeling of national belonging reveals his love. Identity is an area of interest chosen to expend one's love and commitment. Humans have a solid attachment to fit in and bond with others in their community. Khaled's identity is his optimal distinctiveness.

### **Social Norms**

El Guindi presents how American agents interfere in Khaled's life by showing his interest in magazines that carry sexual overtones. Khaled does not like women and has one or two complexes with the opposite sex. The need for sex is like the need for food; only leaders in society are the ones who master their physical needs. Moreover, human emotions are like a river and can transmute into constructive activities. "It keeps the nervous system fueled with the energy needed to keep the body and imagination sharp, enabling one to develop beneficial ideas" (Hill & Lechter, 2011, p.191). His answer to them is that it is not forbidden, according to Weber's traditional social action, "the way it has always been done". What is more, rich banquets with wine-drinking guests are depicted in ancient Egyptian art, together with musicians and dancing girls. The air is strongly scented with flowers, incense, and other erotic fragrances. In the case of the dancing girls, the guests and musicians dress in fancy costumes or nothing at all. These images may depict religious celebrations, according to scholars (Riggs, 2020). Therefore, society justifies people's behaviour according to social norms. In

addition, the notions that the West inherited from novels such as *One Thousand and One Night* is that the Arabs are being obsessed with immorality, sex, money, and power.

In his literary work, "Back of the Throat", Yussef El Guindi reflects the situation in America, by criticizing the social and political reality. According to Weber's affective social action as he talks about professional politicians gives in-depth analyses of the situation and its antecedents. Politics can be a man's profession or an avocation, like a business. One can enter politics and attempt to alter the power balance inside and among political structures as an "occasional" politician. When we vote or make a similar declaration of intent, such as by clapping or objecting during a "political" meeting, making a "political" speech, Etc., we are all "occasional" politicians. It is the extent of many people's involvement in politics (Gerth & Mills, 1946).

For the Americans and the ruling authority, the security of the country, its people and its economy are what they seek in the first place. On the other hand, the immigrants who live in America are intruders to national security, and more than that, they demand equality and rights. Their countries could not meet all these demands, so how do they demand their rights from their country of exile? El Guindi tries to communicate the idea of differences in identity, race, religion, and the consequences of living in a country, which means "being different from the rest". Authority is possessed by both the West and the East and their effects. What is more, the effects of the origins, customs and traditions of each, and the beliefs rooted in a person's mind influence his actions and thus affect society. The American agents examined Khaled's character and his mental need to control his frustration and his belief in himself as an influential writer. In other words, he needs to express himself as a writer, his knowledge, and how to control his fear of death, power, to excel over others, economic growth, love and sex.

### **Writer's Freedom**

Expressing personal opinions is one of the citizens' rights in America. Any individual can say whatever he wants if he acts within the law and does not transgress the laws of American authority. American agents cannot prevent Khaled from expressing his opinions in any subject, nor can they prevent him from publishing his writings or interfering with his personal opinions, beliefs, religious orientations, Etc. If a writer works according to the law in America, the individual is free. Let us ask ourselves from where America gained the social, political, and economic development and technology that the country is experiencing. It is because of the freedom granted to individuals for the country's continuous development. A writer can put his imagination, thoughts, and ideas into action through his pen. In addition, his insight triggers social reformation, of course, not to mention his intentions and the reason behind his writings. Yussef El Guindi uses his pen to describe American society, the role of authority, and its effect on Arabs, Muslims, and Arabs who own an American identity.

A writer can inspire and change the world by doing good things. He can teach people and guide them through learning from one's own experiences and then push a person towards the right road. A writer is a person who thinks differently. He also shares his stories with people, sometimes through logic and sometimes through emotions. In his speech, the poet Dennis Brutus lays out during his transitional injustice and protest and asserts the need for solidarity "It is not opposition to oppression; it is not even liberation, except in the sense of self-government." (Knepper, 2011, p.174). A writer is like an endless fountain full of knowledge and wisdom. Through his language, he can refuse the authoritarian injustice within his society, manage life's contradictions, and lead his society through his beautiful soul. A writer can criticize the reality of culture, history, and events in any place and time through his sharp eye.

A writer's talent is his weapon in peace and war. Moreover, it is an honour when employing its strategies and techniques to defend one's own country, dignity, and family. It is also a helpful way for self-education and economic growth. The American writers influenced authorities during the Great Depression in 1930, including the rise of many great authors in literature. Movements such as modernism and realism speed up. The United States created a project known as Federal Project Number One, and many writers, scholars, and editors were employed. Therefore, writers who have experiences pose a threat to America in that they can manage revolutions and coups against the American government. Writers make their readers think and feel by touching their hearts emotionally. They create a deep connection that may change the way and influence how societies think and interpret the world around them ultimately. For example, *Common Sense* by Thomas Paine supported and encouraged American Revolution. Other writers wrote about Politics, technology, fast food, the environment, Etc., which impacted thousands and millions of people. Writers have the most influential tool through their powerful words, messages, techniques, and motivation to pursue any goal through inspiration.

Howard Gardner defines leadership as "the capacity of a person (or group of persons) to influence other people". Furthermore, President Harry Truman defines a leader as "a person who can persuade people to do what they don't want to do and like it" (Bavel & Packer, 2021, p. 238). Because of this, in America, writers have freedom of expression to avoid revolutions and political coups. However, history also testifies to political changes and revolutions in the region that changed entire regimes. Therefore, the American authorities are

working smartly to accept the other and his differences. What is more, embracing unique talents is for the benefit of the state.

## V. CONCLUSION

In his play, *Back of the Throat*, Youssef El Guindi conveys the lives of Arabs and Muslims and the suffering they face even if they have an American identity, as in the case of the protagonist, Khaled. Life is difficult in America because people experience constant surveillance to ensure the state's national security and vital centers. Also, working as a writer and owning Islamic and political books threatens American authority because of the terrorist acts carried out by groups in the name of Islam. El Guindi rejects these outrageous practices against writers and people that have been passed through generations. He also presents the role of religion, identity, and freedom and their practical impact in the countries of exile. After the events of September, the American authorities exercised their forceful policy through agents who subjected Khaled to interrogation using the method of psychological pressure and physical torture to make him confess whether he was involved in any terrorist act. The results of the interrogation concluded that Khaled was innocent. The critics' reactions to the play were in defense of the protagonist and the religion of Islam, noting that Khaled, during the interrogation, declared that he is not religious. El Guindi also stresses the necessity of coexistence in peace, especially in America, a country of multiculturalism. Authors like him encourage collaboration and production while conquering life obstacles. He also exhorts people to use their creativity as leaders to understand themselves and others in the world to break political stalemate, promote dissent, and manage change.

## Acknowledgements

The author is truly thankful for Professor Bader S. Dweik for his support and guidance as well as for his constructive feedback on the first draft of the work.

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Hiba Hashim Jabbar. "Analyzing the Concept of Authority in Youssef El Guindi's Play "Back of the Throat". *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science Invention (IJHSSI)*, vol. 12, no. 6, 2023, pp. 07-13. Journal DOI- 10.35629/7722