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Politics and Culture in Tony Kushner's *Homebody/Kabul*: A Critical Analysis

A B S T R A C T

This essay offers a critical analysis of Tony Kushner's play *Homebody/Kabul*. Overall, it is argued that politics and culture represent salient dimensions along which the author has structured characters' identities and organized the narrative of the play. Drawing upon the work of Edward Said, particular attention is paid to Orientalist representations of Kabul by the *Homebody* as symptoms of and reactions against legacies of imperialism and colonialism. The function of language as a marker of culture, political affiliation, and identity is discussed. Further scholarly attention is strongly indicated.

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السياسة والثقافة في مسرحية توني كوشنر هوم بدي/كابول: تحليل نقدي

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الخلاصة:

يقدم هذا المقال تحليلاً نقدياً لمسرحية توني كوشنر هوم بدي/كابول. واجمالياً يمكن القول أن السياسة والثقافة تمثلان أبعاداً بارزة قام المؤلف على أساسها ببناء هويات الشخصيات وتنظيم سرد المسرحية. وبالاعتماد على أعمال إدوارد سعيد، يتم إيلاء اهتمام خاص للتصورات الاستشراقية لكابول من قبل شخصية الهوم بدي كأعراض وردود فعل ضد إرث الإمبريالية والاستعمار. وسوف تتم مناقشة وظيفة اللغة كمؤشر للثقافة والانتماء السياسي والهوية.



Introduction

Tony Kushner prefaces the script for his *Homebody/Kabul* with seven brief quotes, which are situated just after the *dramatis personae* and the author's performance notes, and just before the opening of the first scene.¹ The first four are drawn from scholarly and journalistic treatments of Afghanistan, and are oriented toward its geography, history, and culture, while the fifth is excerpted from the writings of the Muslim theologian Al-Ghazali, who was born in the eleventh century and is often regarded by Islamic authorities as one of most important Muslim Scholars after Prophet Muhammad (PBUH).² The sixth quote consists of a single line from Lord Byron's 19th-century drama *Cain*; and the seventh and final quote is drawn from a news report about the accidental bombing of a residential neighborhood by a US warplane. The last sentence the reader encounters before the curtains open is a quote-within-a-quote, the news report reproducing a comment from a woman whose house was a part of this collateral damage: "We are so afraid," she says, "[...] we have forgotten our own names and can't even understand what we say to each other."³ Considering Kushner's well-known penchant for revising his plays (which are often quite extensive, particularly in their early drafts, which represent the product of years of gestation) down into leaner forms even after their publication, it is safe to assume that these four quotes represent a tiny fraction of the source material upon which he drew in composing the play.⁴ The heterogeneity of the collection, moreover, gives the reader the sense that it, too, has been revised down, painfully, to a bare minimum—that if Kushner had his way, rather than six brief quotes, we might be confronted with an elaborate tapestry of excerpts meandering on for pages.⁵

As argued below, there is a case to be made this collection of quotes can be read as something more than a mere primer meant to provide the reader with an essential-yet-cursory background on Afghanistan, which constitutes the setting for the latter half of the play and an object of obsession in the first. In addition to framing the country as a liminal site of collision, contestation, and perhaps even mutual solvation between diverse and often-competing identities, perspectives, and value systems at scales from the civilizational to the individual, this curious collection of quotations prepares the reader for the unique and often surprising way in which Kushner constructs the narrative of the play as a whole. Despite featuring a sum total of just a dozen characters (not to the fact that it begins with an hour-

long monologue!) *Homebody/Kabul* is a profoundly a multi-vocal work. In it, Kushner revels in the juxtaposition and interpolation of multiple layers of human identity and delights in exploring attempts to articulate, contest, and defend the dazzling array of shifting inter-subjectivities inherent within this construction. In seeking to analyze this complex, uncertain, and often self-contradictory terrain, however, it quickly becomes clear that issues of politics and culture represent key dimensions structuring the basic conflicts driving the narrative of the play.

Constructions of Politics and Culture in *Homebody/Kabul*

Before undertaking this exploration, it may be useful to begin with a brief terminological discussion: what, precisely, do we mean by terms such as *culture* and *politics* in this context? Unfortunately, there is likely no single, definitive answer: these terms are, of course, employed in many ways both colloquially as well as in various scholarly or technical disciplines, and as a result their meaning has been subject to scholarly debates far more extensive and wide-ranging than can be adequately addressed here.⁶ However, it should be possible to introduce a measure of clarity into the present analysis by at least considering the general sense in which these terms are to be used here, even if that attempt falls somewhat short of a rigorous operationalization. Although Jacques Ranciere suggests that politics might be defined as "the implementation of a human disposition to the community", for example, this construction is probably too broad for our purposes here, just as the Marxist articulation of politics as essentially a feature of "class struggle" where the "state is an oppressive instrument in the hands of the ruling class" is too narrow in its focus to be useful.⁷ While systems of governance and social class certainly help to structure the worlds of the characters in *Homebody/Kabul*, the political is most visibly manifested in the play as an expression of identity underpinning social interactions at the level of individuals. Politics in this context, therefore, should arguably be understood with reference to its most essential, time-honored definition—which is to say, as a kind of interaction hinging on the nature and scope of one's membership to a *polis*, or one's identification with and perceived membership to an imagined political community.⁸ This emphasis on scale as a critical element applies equally well to the use of the word *culture* here. For the purposes of this discussion, culture might be defined in its most general anthropological sense as "a system of symbols of meanings" which individuals use to make sense of their worlds and assign values and other referents

to it; this definition is appealing insofar as it enables the scholars to "disentangle, for the purposes of analysis, the semiotic influences on action."⁹ Thus, culture might comprise rituals, social patterns, and even language. Other elements and applications of these concepts are discussed where relevant below; however, the essential conceptual groundwork for this analysis has been established.

Let us begin, then, at the beginning: with the Homebody's famous hour-long opening monologue, which constitutes the entirety of Act I, Scene 1. The discourse in this act bounces back and forth between two sources as the Homebody alternately tells her story in her own words and reads from "an outdated guidebook about the city of Kabul", which was published in the 1960's, more than thirty years before the play is set.¹⁰ It is through descriptions of her relationship to this guidebook that the Homebody first begins to characterize herself: when she says that her research is "moth-like [...] impassioned, fluttery, doomed", she is revealing something about herself. But while she may be fluttery, doomed, and wrought by passions in her own way, there is a critical difference between the Homebody and a moth:

I invariably seek out not the source but all that which was dropped by the wayside on the way to the source [...] old magazines, hysterical political treatises written by an advocate of some long-since defeated or abandoned or transmuted cause [...]¹¹

Almost immediately after this revelation, the Homebody resumes her exploration of the guidebook. Reading the script, it is possible to stitch together, paragraph by paragraph, a somewhat coherent (albeit necessarily incomplete) narrative history of the city by simply skipping over the Homebody's interjections—which is to say, we can adopt the position of standing side-by-side with the Homebody, contemplating what appears to be her primary source text for the object of her obsession, much as she seeks to feel what her husband is feeling by sampling his anti-depressants from time to time. In doing so, we quickly see that her outdated guidebook (or at least the excerpts she chooses to share with the audience) appears to be primarily concerned with tracing the political and cultural history of Kabul over the course of millennia. The story it tells is one of endless flux and conflict, of an eternally unfinished coming-into-being which the Homebody finds endlessly enchanting. It is a procession of civilizations against the backdrop offered by the stark beauty of the Hindu Kush, of conquering empires,

fierce tribesmen, intersecting trade routes and "remarkable cross-fertilization" of religious traditions, emigrations and displacements,—but it is also a record that is definitively incomplete, checkered with gaps in the narrative that are permanently and irrecoverably lost.

What we cannot do, however, is piece together a similarly coherent narrative about the Homebody by skipping over the historical interludes excerpted from the guidebook. The reason is simple: the guidebook serves as a consistent reference point grounding the Homebody's stream-of-consciousness articulation of herself, the revelation of which is catalyzed sporadically and chaotically by the information she encounters in her "fluttering, impassioned, doomed" research. The Homebody's dreams of Kabul colour her experiences in day-to-day life; they underpin her fantasies when she encounters ethnic others while shopping, they inspire her to conjure exotic words, and they anchor her judgments of struggle and tragedy. Despite her fascination, however, the Homebody clearly constructs the narrative of Kabul not as her own, but as something inherently foreign, perceiving and interpreting the information she learns from the vantage of her own cultural perspective and ways of assigning meaning to the world e.g. "I find myself disliking intensely the Hephthalites."¹² The unavoidable necessity of interpreting the world through one's own cultural lens, and the difficulty of stripping away and stepping beyond one's own ways of seeing the world, is not only highlighted with reference to foreign lands, however; we see it too in the Homebody's simultaneous claims, regarding her husband's work as a network engineer, that she understands "none of it", yet that she nonetheless finds it "quite impossible" to imagine her husband "having to do in any real way with processes so... speedy, myriad, nervous, miraculous."¹³ The Homebody's loyalty to her fantastical but indeterminate idea about the physical processes involved in her husband's work supersedes (or indeed, is more real than) any desire to understand how those processes are manifested in the humdrum reality of daily life.

At the same time, the Homebody views her own cultural heritage as fundamentally sick, and therefore assigns a kind of purity to her vision of Kabul, or perhaps more precisely, of the exotic past. She wonders what it would be to "believe in magic" as her culture does not, but she also views the political entities that shaped her culture as having execrated the belief in the power of idols from the world, holding that they could only have truly existed "before colonization and the

savage stripping away of such beliefs."¹⁴ The Homebody views her culture as corrupting through commodification, as we see when she, in the store where she buys the hats for her upcoming party, seeing the shelves as being filled with relics "which [were] once Afghan"—dignified artifacts of a self-contained culture—which "we, having waved our credit cards in its general direction, have made into junk."¹⁵ She bemoans the pervasiveness of the connectivity her culture has wrought "All must be touched. All touch corrupts. All must be corrupted."¹⁶, and yet she herself craves, more than anything, to reach out and touch the cultural other she sees in Kabul—and ultimately, she does.

In many respects, the Homebody's fetishization of Kabul can be viewed, per Said, as a fairly standard instantiation of what he terms *Orientalism*, or a pattern of Western cultural representations, whether patronizing, romanticized, or pastoral, of the cultural East.¹⁷ In Said's analysis, the creation, appropriation, and dissemination of such cultural objects through narration and narrative frames is a process that is inherently imperial insofar as "the enterprise of empire depends upon the idea of having an empire."¹⁸ In the case of the Homebody, this is simultaneously a symptom of and a reaction against the homogenizing, universalizing force of the narratives produced by empire; without bringing "local knowledge [...] to bear on texts", it is functionally impossible to effectively "contest the languages of universalism and standardization."¹⁹ The Homebody's perception of her own society as dull and unremarkable is as much a reflection of her inability to see the ways in which her perspective is defined by cultural systems of meaning as is the extent to which she is dazzled by the Oriental Kabul of her fantasies. There is a case to be made, therefore, that she is at least to some extent "doomed to inhabit the representations that usurp" her own "lived reality".²⁰

Once her disappearance brings her family to Kabul, however, we see something other than clear binarism of dominator and dominated, of purity and corruption. Instead, categories are aggressively, violently blurred. Quango, who came to the country aspiring to save it, has become enamored of—and perhaps crippled by—one of its historic exports, opium, which Milton utilizes as another iteration of his procession of chemical dependencies. Priscilla battles with her burqa, here taking it off where she should not, there frightening her father by wearing it in his room, here tangling herself in it, there using the anonymity it imparts to her advantage. Mahala offers a counterpoint to the Homebody: she, too,

is trapped in a state of desperation, suffocated by the harsh and confining realities of her daily life, longing to reach a distant culture with which she perceives some kind of essential resonance. The characters collide not only with one another, but with religious authorities, social codes, and material dangers in their new and unfamiliar environment, in a continually-unfolding process of negotiation between cultural value systems which are not only occasionally incongruent, but brought into direct tension by the macro-scale geopolitical forces which have wrought destruction on the city. It is the perceived alignment with one or another of these forces as much as issues of social mores or misread cultural symbols that drives the conflict in the narrative.

Throughout the play, these schisms between the cultural, the political, and the identities of individual characters are symbolically underscored through language. At various points in the play, characters speak English, French, Pashtun, Esperanto, and Dari, but they also articulate contrasting jargons, accents, and registers: the Homebody's freewheeling, disorganized, unstructured discourse, for instance, contrasts with her husband's reliance on highly specified, carefully operationalized jargon on the one hand, and her daughter's tendency to default to stigmatized, non-standard utterances in which slang and profanity feature prominently. Linguistic choices are used to signify components of the characters' identities, including not just their occasionally multilayered, intercultural backgrounds (e.g. Quango's familiarity with Dari, the doctor's insecurity about the intelligibility of his English because he studied medicine in Edinburgh, etc.) but also their hopes and aspirations. The most obvious example of the latter case is, of course the decision to make Khwaja, who not only functions as Priscilla's guide and mentor, but is also the only character to have left his home for a distant land, lost a part of himself to his new culture, and returned home of his own volition, speak Esperanto, which Mahala derides as "dream language of universal brotherhood", while Khwaja himself finds another kind of beauty in its cadence: "To me," he says, "it sounds not universally at home, rather homeless, stateless, a global refugee patois."²¹ Language is also politicized: Pashtun and Dari sound equally foreign to Priscilla, but to Mahala, the distinction between England and America is trivial.²²

For Kushner, language can be used to divide and confuse, but also to unite and clarify. The contrast between the language Priscilla uses to communicate with

Khwaja early in their relationship ("I'll fucking murder you if you say another word, you cunt.") and her decision to communicate with him on his own terms through the recitation of a poem on their last night together, for example, is quite stark.²³ This progression is mirrored by the relationship between Mahala and Milton: despite both speaking English, they are initially almost entirely unable to communicate meaningfully in the guard house (recalling the final quote prefacing the play, which speaks of being so afraid as to lose the ability to communicate entirely, even with one's neighbors); ultimately, however, the two find a path to mutually intelligibility through a conceptual metaphor structured the Dewey Decimal System.²⁴ As the play progresses, therefore, the use of language offers some of the clearest and most reliable expressions not just of the characters' highly intersubjective cultural identities, but also how they conceptualize themselves in relation to those external categories.

In closing, it is well worth emphasizing that *Homebody/Kabul* represents an incredibly rich and complex substrate for analysis, and that this discussion, therefore, should be viewed as preliminary and introductory rather than definitive or conclusive. In many respects, the play can be read as a wide-ranging exploration of the relationship between culture, politics, and identity, which are articulated not as rigidly defined or rigorously operationalized categories, but rather as shifting, indeterminate, and overlapping. The multivocality of the play foreshadowed by the heterogeneous collection of opening quotes, therefore, is not articulated through a plethora of speakers, but rather through the multiplicity of voices and perspectives that constitute the worldview of each character as social being.

Notes

1. Tony Kushner, *Homebody/Kabul*. (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2004), pp. 6-8.
2. William Montgomery Watt, *The Faith and Practice of al-Ghazali*. (London: Allen & Unwin, 1953), p.11.
3. Kushner, p. 8; emphasis added.
4. Catherine Steindler, "Tony Kushner, the art of theatre No. 16." *The Paris Review*, issue 201, (Summer 2012). <http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/6153/tony-kushner-the-art-of-theater-no-16-tony-kushner>. See also, John Simon, "In brief: Tony Kushner's Homebody/Kabul." *New York Magazine*, 27 January 2002, <http://nymag.com/nymetro/arts/theatre/reviews/917>.
5. I refer to "the reader" rather than "the audience" here because it is unclear whether these quotations were provided to audiences for the play's live performances.
6. Geert Hofstede, "What is culture? A reply to Baskerville." *Accounting, Organizations and Society* 28.7 (2003): 811-813. See also Giovanni Sartori, "What is politics" *Political theory* 1.1 (1973): 5-26.
7. Jacques Ranciere, "The thinking of dissensus: politics and aesthetics," in *Reading Ranciere: Critical Dissensus*, edited by Paul Bowman and Richard Stamp (London: Continuum, 2011), p.2. See also S. T. Akindele, O. R. Olaopa, and N. F. Salaam. "Political intolerance as a clog in the wheel of democratic governance: The way forward." *African Journal of Political Science and International Relations* 3.9 (2009): 368.
8. Greg Anderson, *The Athenian experiment: Building an imagined political community in ancient Attica, 508-490 BC* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003) p. 216
9. Sewell Jr, William H. "The concept(s) of culture," in *Practicing history: New directions in historical writing after the linguistic turn*, edited by Gabrielle M. Spiegel (New York: Routledge, 2005), pp.43-46.
10. Kushner, p. 8.
11. Ibid, p.9-19.
12. Ibid, p.19.
13. Ibid, p. 14.
14. Ibid, p.10.
15. Ibid, pp. 16-17.
16. Ibid, p.11.
17. Edward W. Said, *Culture and imperialism* (London: Vintage Books, 1994), p.9.
18. Ibid, p.11.
19. G. Viswanathan, "Introduction." in Edward W. Said, *Power, politics, and culture: Interviews with Edward W. Said*, edited by G. Viswanathan (London: Bloomsbury, 2007), p.9.
20. Kushner, pp.4-8.
21. Ibid, p.58.
22. Ibid, p.86, see also the third quote prefacing the play, which contains Chris Bowers' observation that "each group and region" in Afghanistan "has more in common with its neighbors over the border than with each other."
23. Ibid, p.70.

24. Ibid, p.125.

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