

Politics of Space and Identity: A Reading of Tony Kushner's *Homebody/Kabul*

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Abstract:

This paper looks at the relationship between space and identity. The title of the play- *Homebody/Kabul* is seminal in highlighting the semantics of this relationship. Identity is constituted by the space within which it is located. Unequivocally this has a bearing on its making or unmaking. It is also worth noting that the politics of cartography also plays an important role in according value to life and pronouncing it as livable or grievable (in Butlerian terms), thus affecting identity.

Keywords: Body, identity, cartography, precarity.

Homebody/ Kabul (2000) is a “state-of-the-international-relations drama” by the American playwright Tony Kushner. (Fisher 63). The play is a result of American interaction with Afghanistan. The postcolonial reflection on this imperialistic monologue carried out by the West, specifically, its unanimously hailed representative America, is a key concern in the play. A dysfunctional British family, in pursuit of the titular Homebody, helps excavate deep-seated anxieties of imperialism. Kushner writes about the genesis of the play in the Afterword. From within the public consciousness about Afghanistan, he draws out his private relationship with the land:

Homebody/Kabul is a play about Afghanistan and the West’s historic and contemporary relationship to that country. It is also a play about travel, about knowledge and learning through seeking out strangeness, about trying to escape the unhappiness of one’s life through an encounter with Otherness, about narcissism and self- referentiality as inescapable booby-traps in any such encounter; and it’s about a human catastrophe, a political problem of global dimensions. (142)

Afghanistan emerges as a trope for mapping otherness, subjugation and alienation. It is abstruse and incoherent in the minds of the colonisers, the western hegemonic powers, which reduce its understanding to nothing more than a rubble. Thus, there lies a perceptible difference between “the language of those who write of it and the lives of those who live

it...” (Bhabha 1) In this respect it is apt to quote Bhabha once again who echoes Kushner's thoughts on Afghanistan as an abject beauty:

Nations, like narratives, lose their origins in the myths of time and only fully realize their horizons in the mind's eye. Such an image of the nation —or narration —might seem impossibly romantic and excessively metaphorical, but it is from those traditions of political thought and literary language that the nation emerges as a powerful historical idea in the west.

The juxtaposition in this way- Homebody /Kabul is a novel way for a play to be named; the juxtaposition of person and place(space) carries significant connotations. Politics determines the spaces we inhabit and their symmetrical effects upon us. In this sense it is akin to what Una Chaudhuri draws attention to- the “mutually constructive relations between people and place.” (xii) The “spatial turn” has promoted greater engagement with understanding the semantics of space and not some innocuous land, devoid of inscriptions of power and politics. It is coded with possibilities animated by politics, facilitating either exclusion or inclusion. Thus, space and politics are conceptualised in political terms and undoubtedly “the spatial dimension of our lives is also essentially political.” (Certoma, et al. 1) Space is socially produced and fosters “reinterpretation of social dynamics- antagonisms, interactions, conflicts and collaborations.” (Certoma, et al. 1) Afghanistan is the palimpsest against which stories of invasions, plunderings and depletions have played themselves out. Kushner had read the guidebook to Afghanistan, *An Historical Guide to Kabul*, written by Nancy Dupree, which he found at the New York Library and the place had riveted itself to him ever since. He could not cast off its eerie attraction. In the opening monologue, Homebody gives a detailed account of the geography and its inextricable entanglement in fashioning the Afghan destiny. The tribal animosities and war resulted in an endless drama of conquest and human misery, where the land bemoans its plunder from one hand to the other. Homebody reads from the aforementioned book, putting our point in perspective:

In the middle of the second century B.C., during the Greco-Bactrian Confusion, a Chinese tribe, the Hsuing-Nu, attacked a rival tribe, the Yueh-Chih, and drove them from their homes to what is now southern Afghanistan. Then the Hsuing- Nu, displaced from their new homes by another Chinese tribe, also migrated to Afghanistan and once again displaced the Yueh-Chih, who emigrated to the Kabul Valley. As the first century B.C. dawns, the valley, populated by Indo-Greeks, Mau- rya, and Macedonians, is now surrounded by the restless nomadic kingdoms of the Yueh-Chih. By 48 B.C. the Chinese tribes are united under the banner of their largest clan, the Kushans... From the city of Kapisa, the Kushan court came to rival the Caesars in Rome. Buddhism, Hinduism, Grecian and Persian deities are gathered into the valleys of the Hindu Kush where a remarkable cross-fertilization takes place. (16)

Homebody and Kabul embody a relationship of mutual reciprocity, where one is defined by the other and vice- versa. The person and place are dovetailed into each other, inhabiting the spaces claimed by them. The action of the play takes place in a flat in London and later on moves to Kabul, the identifiable epicentre of violence. Homebody's monologue in her London flat is integrated with the larger experience in the play and hence not divorced

from it. It is undergirded by the events taking place in Afghanistan and thus, becomes an eye-opening scene, speaking figuratively. The play illuminates evocatively the interactive relationship between spaces and identity. Space is not simply a physical land; it is a social and political construction whose meanings evolve over time and deposit themselves collectively in our consciousness. Homebody knows that Afghanistan was once “—a country so at the heart of the world [and yet] the world has forgotten it.” (28). One of the problems facing Afghanistan is its representation. Hardt and Negri speak about the formation of people as a coherent unified whole in their book *Reflections on Empire*. They posit that “people is not a natural or empirical unity; one cannot arrive at the identity of the people by summing up or even averaging the entire population.” (82) However, Afghanistan has been represented in a restrictive vocabulary of destruction and decrepitude, primarily. It comes to light that representation allows people to be seen as they are, as a unity. The mechanisms of representation are significant, inclusive of political as well as aesthetic connotations laden in them. Afghanistan is a “non-measurable, boundless” entity (Negri 82) and thus, stays outside the ambit of representation. It is a residue of subjective experiences and memories that have been imprinted on the western consciousness and repeatedly implanted and distributed through a carefully articulated and orchestrated “circuit of culture.” (Gay xix) that engages in a process of producing, distributing, and circulating non-western, Muslim and Afghan identities. These identities are not limited by spatial and temporal compulsions and thus, available for consumption in the global market. Through the transaction of iterability, these manufactured Afghan identities enter the space of subjecthood of Afghans, which is subsequently regulated and reified. Doreen Massey in *Space, Place and Gender* argues that “[w]hat gives a place its specificity is not some long internalised history but the fact that it is constructed out of a particular constellation of social relations, meeting and weaving together at a particular locus.” (154)

For Afghanistan, terrorism has become the locus of international understanding, the genesis and historicity of which has been strategically written over with narratives of orientalist ambitions. Kushner states this in his stirring Afterword:

This century has taught us to direct our imagination however fleetingly toward the hidden suffering: evil consequence of evil action taken long ago, conjoining with relatively recent wickedness, and wickedness perpetuated now, in August 1998, now, now, now, even as I speak and speak and speak. (17)

Western imperialism is tyrannised by rigid attitudes, passivity and high handedness towards understanding Afghanistan. Hans Bertens explains this effect in *Literary Theory: The Basics*:

So instead of the disinterested objectivity in the service of the higher goal of true knowledge that Western scholarship has traditionally claimed for itself, we find invariably false representations that have effectively paved the way for military domination, cultural displacement, and economic exploitation. (204)

Erith Jaffe-Berg advances an interesting argument that suggests that by joining “the two words... in a one-word title” Homebody is absorbed into Kabul. (62) Materiality of the body is important for a sense of self and thus, identity. Inevitably, identity is dislodged in an alien

environment, putting it in an uncertain terrain. The stable and secure environment of London is diametrically opposite to the uncertainty of Kabul where the body of Homebody disintegrates. Quango, who is a British aid worker and acts as the unofficial liaison for the British Government, bears it out when he admits to Milton that “nearly every other man you meet here is missing pieces.” (101) Milton and Priscilla travel to Afghanistan to trace Homebody’s body which has disappeared. It is a testament to the unstable bedrock of western imperialism that has caught even the West in its vortex and not even spared it; it does not differentiate while distributing its dehumanising results. Homebody is as unstable as Kabul. The illusory sense of security has been stripped in the play. Afghanistan is read as a site of uncertainty, a destabilised region. Khwaja who is a Tajik, Afghan man, a poet and Mahram (guide for women) talks about the politics of mapping the land. Khwaja says that Priscilla’s guidebook reads: “Grave of Cain?” ... on no official map is there ever a question mark. This would be an entirely novel approach to cartography. The implications are profound. To read on a map, instead of “Afghanistan,” “Afghanistan?” It would be more accurate...” (68) Cartography is one of the politically activated dimensions of oppression. They help define mapping as “geometries of domination.” (Keith 1). Mapping does not only fix and define borders but also demarcates spaces of exclusion. Within the privileged spaces of exclusion, the State undertakes as its function the protection of its citizens. Through the Foucauldian regime of biopower, the State determines its realm of functioning. In the non-privileged spaces, it facilitates creation of vulnerable identities which are devoid of any protection by the State.

Afghanistan is the “site of escape” for Homebody, representing “the possibility of her disappearance - a loss of the domestic containment of marriage and motherhood, an escape from the language that both defines and isolates her.” (Kushner x) The stability and security implicit in her name, Homebody, crashes in the uncertain terrain of Kabul. The two words constitute a dissonance to each other. The loss of her body is representative of the realities of the mapping of boundaries that determine lives that are grievable and livable or otherwise. Such a situation of precarity subjects them to inevitable violence and dispossession. Butler writes about the body saying that it, “implies mortality, vulnerability, agency...the body has its invariably public dimension.” (26) Mahala, Homebody and Priscilla, as women, are victims of their bodies. Michel Foucault’s claim that “[t]he body is the inscribed surface of events [and] totally imprinted by history...” (148) holds true within the context of this play also. The retelling of Homebody’s death by the Afghan people situates the cultural and historical oppression in the materiality of the body. The body of the woman is the object of control by the Taliban, a patriarchal institution. When Priscilla tries to take off her burqa, she draws the ire of a member of the religious police who brandishes a hose at her for this alleged misdemeanour. Violence enacted on the body is a consistent proof of its materiality. It is an important site for understanding operations of power. The opening monologue forecloses the violence in the play, given the historicity of violence that Afghanistan has inherited. A palpable sense of discomfiture and agony lurks below the surface in the play, waiting to be destroyed. Kushner brings to light the instability that bodies command. Bodies are not fixed and stable; they display tendencies to disintegrate and reformulate themselves. Homebody and Priscilla carry wholeness as long as they are within the spaces deemed stable by the politics of cartography. Outside this realm, they lose their meaning and flounder to maintain themselves. The play encapsulates the pitfalls of creating an artificial marker that demarcates regions of stability from those defined by instability. The destabilising practices of a capitalist

economy find advancement in the imperialist agenda. Kushner deftly brings into consideration the closely bound relationship that spaces have on marking bodies, moulding them into receptacles that hold residues of history.

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