

# THE COMPLEX INTERRELATIONS OF HOME, BODY, IDENTITY AND OTHERNESS IN TONY KUSHNER'S *HOMEBODY/KABUL*

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## PALABRAS CLAVE

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## ABSTRACT

Juxtaposing two terms, at once separated by and connected through a slash, the title of Tony Kushner's play *Homebody/Kabul* (2001) raises questions about the constitution of identity and its relation to place. The play suggests the home and the body, evoked by the title's first term, to act as safeguards for a stable and unified identity in privileged regions while the homes and bodies of other places are continually exposed to the threat of violence.

Systemic and symbolic violence (Žižek) are revealed to enforce totalizing boundaries (Bhaba) projecting a homogeneous Other that serves as an object to be conquered. At the same time this homogeneous Other is a precondition for the projection of a stable and unified hegemonic self. In the final analysis, however, the play shows how any project of a stable and unified self is radically undermined by the heterogeneity and the unappropriable alterity of the Other.

## RESUMEN

Yuxtaponiendo dos términos, a la vez separados y conectados por una barra, el título de la obra *Homebody/Kabul* (2001), de Tony Kushner, plantea preguntas sobre la constitución de la identidad y su relación con el lugar. La obra sugiere que el hogar y el cuerpo, evocados por el primer término del título, actúan como salvaguardia de una identidad estable y coherente en regiones privilegiadas mientras que los hogares y cuerpos de otros lugares están continuamente expuestos a la amenaza de la violencia.

La obra demuestra como la violencia sistémica y la simbólica (Žižek) imponen fronteras totalizantes (Bhaba), proyectando un Otro homogéneo que sirve como objeto a conquistar. Al mismo tiempo ese Otro homogéneo es una precondition para la proyección de un yo hegemónico estable y coherente. Sin embargo, la obra

demuestra como cualquier proyecto de un yo estable y coherente se ve socavado por la heterogeneidad y la alteridad inapropiable del Otro.

## 1. INTRODUCTION: *HOMEBOODY/KABUL*

When Tony Kushner first presented his play *Homebody/Kabul* to the public in a partial reading at the University of Pennsylvania's Kelly Writers House in February 2001, the playwright, albeit somewhat tongue-in-cheek, emphasized the title and predicted that academics were going to "be very excited by the slash mark" ("Reading") separating the two words, 'Homebody' and 'Kabul'. Irony (directed at himself and at academic practice) apart, this remark suggests that Kushner had deeper implications in mind when deciding on the play's title.

The title and the slash were indeed commented on by quite a few reviewers and academics, most of whom (e.g. Gussow, Bouchard 301) interpreted them as simply denoting the play's plot structure, dividing the play into two distinctive parts: the Homebody's monologue, taking place in a London home, and the remaining scenes, happening in the city of Kabul under Taliban rule. At a basic level, this makes sense, of course. However, rather than indicating a sequential order, a slash usually implies some kind of relation between two terms: as alternatives or opposites (*MLA* 76), or suggesting a connection or, conversely, a conflict (Penn).

More in tune with these relational implications, Sara Soncini reads the slash as signaling "division, disjunction, dichotomy" (373), thereby foregrounding the contrasting elements that characterize each part of the play as well as the rupture between the monologue and the unexpected turn of events that follows it. Peter Marks, in contrast, interprets the slash as symbolizing the link between the two parts, personalized in the characters of the Homebody and Mahala, the Afghan woman who takes the Homebody's place in the final scene. Jessica Ng takes the title and its separation of the two terms to symbolize the alienation and impossibility of connection experienced by the Homebody in spite of her trip to Kabul (4). This interpretation, however, neglects the fact that the play insinuates the possibility that the Homebody may actually have found that connection, by converting to Islam and marrying an Afghan doctor. Erith Jaffe-Berg accordingly considers that, while initially creating an opposition between "home and foreign" (80), the title, by fusing "the two words [. . .] in a one-word title," suggests that the Homebody eventually becomes part of Kabul. In quite a challenging way, Joshua Abrams construes the slash in the title as "acknowledging a disappearance" (62), i.e. that of the Homebody, hovering over the Kabul part of the play as an "absent presence."

All these interpretations of the title and its slash are reasonable. But none of them tries to delve deeper into the title's multiple implications for the interpretation of the play. This article intends to read the play through the lens of the title and its juxtaposition of the two terms—'Homebody' and 'Kabul'—both separated and

connected through the slash in order to come up with an interpretation of how the play relates both terms to each other.

## 2. HOME AND BODY AT HOME AND IN KABUL

When the curtain rises on the first scene of *Homebody/Kabul*, all the audience sees is a woman sitting on a chair, reading a guidebook to Kabul. The few props mentioned in the stage directions include a second chair, a table with a lamp and tablecloth, a coat, a pocketbook, and a shopping bag (Kushner, *Homebody* 6). These props evoke a room in the house of a middle-class family, a setting with which the audience is sure to be familiar from their own lives.

The whole first scene is static: it never leaves the room, and the only person on stage for about one hour is the anonymous woman to whom the first term of the play's title refers: the 'Homebody,' an adequate label—at least initially—for the character, referring as it does to someone who prefers staying home to going out in the world.

Apart from its conventional meaning, in Kushner's play the word 'Homebody' can be taken literally because the woman's identity is initially defined through the presence of her body and the home—which Gaston Bachelard describes as a metaphor for the self that provides it with a sense of stability.<sup>1</sup> The beginning of the play, thus, implies notions of identity as grounded in the human body and safeguarded by the home.

Unlike the word "Homebody", referring to an anonymous person, the title's second term, "Kabul", is a proper name, identifying a specific place in its geographical and socio-historical particularities, the very place where the Homebody, in the interstice between scene 1 and scene 2, has traveled and disappeared and where Priscilla, her daughter, is now looking for her body. Here the spectator is confronted with quite different homes and other bodies.

As to the Afghan home, the verbal scenery emphasizes the city's ruinous state. Historical landmarks have been severely damaged or disappeared as one Afghan character points out: "That was the dome of Ziarat-I-Jan Baz, now destroyed, and that is Ziarat Panjeshah, what's left of it" (Kushner, *Homebody* 55). According to the stage directions, there are "mountains of rubble [that indicate] terrible fighting" (Kushner, *Homebody* 111). The bodies of the Afghan people match the state of their living quarters. As a British character remarks, an important section of the Afghan population are dismembered: "nearly every other man you meet here is missing pieces" (Kushner, *Homebody* 101). The atmosphere thereby evoked is harrowing.

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<sup>1</sup> "La maison est un corps d'images qui donnent à l'homme des raisons ou des illusions de stabilité" (Bachelard 34).

Seen in this light, the play's juxtaposition of 'Homebody' and 'Kabul' also reflects what Una Chaudhuri has called "the mutually constructive relations between people and place" (xii). And these relations are quite different for people living in a place like Kabul from those one could expect in London. The play's title, thus, simultaneously evokes and subverts notions of identity as a unity grounded in the body and given stability by the home. The stability and unity that home and body seem to confer on the self are shown to be reserved to the hegemonic regions of the world.

### 3. HOME, BODY AND VIOLENCE

In the Kabul scenes, the home no longer acting as a safeguard for the body, both become exposed to various kinds of violence. On the one hand, violence in *Homebody/Kabul* is hardly ever physically acted out on stage. On one occasion Priscilla takes off her burqa on the streets of Kabul and Khwaja, her future guide, is beaten when he protects her against an angry member of the religious police. Another violent moment occurs in the penultimate scene, when a border guard almost shoots Mahala, the woman whom Priscilla and her father, Milton, are taking out of Afghanistan. But even though violent acts are rarely represented on stage, violence is in fact omnipresent in the play. From the Homebody's retelling of the history of Afghanistan (full of war and bloodshed), to the description of the Homebody's dismemberment by an Afghan crowd, to the verbal references to destruction and harm mentioned above, an atmosphere of violence and its consequences pervades the play, sure to leave an unsettling impact on the spectators.

Such an embedding of the few violent acts portrayed on stage in a general, verbally projected atmosphere of violence evokes what Slavoj Žižek has explained as an indissoluble entanglement of three different kinds of violence: subjective, systemic and symbolic. "Subjective violence" is the most visible of the three since it is "performed by a clearly identifiable agent" (Žižek 1), i.e. what a commonsensical view would misconceive as violence per se (the adjective 'subjective' not implying subjectivity as opposed to objectivity but rather being used because this kind of violence is carried out by an identifiable subject). "Systemic violence" refers to socio-economical and political constraints acting on individuals and groups both locally and on a global scale. Finally, "symbolic violence" denotes the violence exerted by the symbolic order, such as language's "imposition of a certain universe of meaning." This homogeneous universe of meaning frequently petrifies and naturalizes systemic violence. According to Žižek, systemic and symbolic violence provide a "zero level" (2) that is generally perceived as the norm against which subjective violence is considered a breach, i.e. "a perturbation of the 'normal', peaceful state of things." At the same time, however, systemic and symbolic violence frequently create and perpetuate the very conditions that favor the outburst

of subjective violence—and often the failure to stay within the confines prescribed by systemic and symbolic violence does not so much represent a violent breach in itself, but is rather the cause that triggers the guardians of the system to exert subjective violence on the transgressor.

Kushner's play provides a case in point: in Taliban-ruled Afghanistan attire has strong repercussions on the female body. Thus, the audience watches Priscilla forced, like all women in the Afghanistan under the Taliban, to wear a burqa in public, struggling with it in her wanderings through the streets of Kabul and thereby demonstrating the severe physical limitations it sets on the body. The obligation for women to wear the burqa is exposed as a discriminatory practice that severely limits women's movement and semiotically marks them off as un-identified Other, thus functioning as a constraint that is both real and symbolic. In this way, the burqa combines traits of systemic and symbolic violence because it simultaneously enacts and represents the Taliban's permanent subjugation of women's bodies. This subjugation also works in cultural terms, limiting the women's scope of perception via the burqa's grille, which lets the wearer only see a small fraction of the outside reality (a limitation of perception that is otherwise reflected in the Taliban's aversion against girls' attending school). Thus, as long as Priscilla keeps wearing the burqa, complying with the denigrating rules imposed on Afghan women and, thereby, staying within the restrictive cultural parameters these rules encode, she cannot help but remain blind to the world that surrounds her. This is emphasized when she takes the burqa off and can now, for the first time, fully contemplate the sight. She exclaims in surprise: "Oh, *beautiful*" (Kushner, *Homebody* 55). Quite in coherence with the interrelation between symbolic, systemic and subjective violence as explained above, Priscilla's attempt to take the burqa off (disrupting the norm imposed by symbolic and systemic violence), almost has serious repercussions on her body since a member of the religious police is on the point of beating her with a rubber hose, an instance of subjective violence which is eventually directed at Khwaja, who intervenes on Priscilla's behalf.

A few hostile critics have read the play's preoccupation with the history and present of Afghanistan as the author taking sides with the Taliban regime, one of them actually affirming that most of Kushner's European characters "might as well have been created by a Taliban playwright" (Phillips). Similarly, Mark Steyn accuses Kushner of idealizing the Afghans as "cultured, educated, artistic, urbane, articulate, poets, and librarians, masters of all the virtues the metropolitan power once claimed for itself" (qtd. Juntunen 184). However, such opinions contrast with the fact that the play points out many cases of all three kinds of violence perpetrated by the Taliban. In fact, the two instances of on-stage subjective violence mentioned above show members of the Taliban as aggressors and women as their potential victims. And further verbal references leave no doubt about the Taliban's harshness. However, this trait is not projected as intrinsic to Afghanistan and its people (nor,

for that matter, to Islam) but is directly related to a complex web of history and international political and socio-economic relations.

Both the Homebody's monologue and the Kabul scenes make it clear that the country's history of violence and bloodshed, rather than corresponding to any sanguinary streak of the Afghan people, is the outcome of the area's geopolitical position at the crossroads of competing empires, from the Macedonian and Persian ones right down to the USA and the USSR (e.g. Kushner, *Homebody* 12, 14, 16, 18, 22 etc.). Throughout history, the inhabitants of the Kabul valley have become involved in a colonial fight for power, continually exposing them to the threat of victimization. In contrast to the aptly named Homebody, the Afghan body, due to this systemic violence on a worldwide scale, is left without any protection against subjective violence. The mutilated state of the bodies of many Afghan citizens mentioned above is, thus, directly related to Michel Foucault's claim that "The body is the inscribed surface of events. [It is] totally imprinted by history [. . .]" (148). Afghan history sadly proves Foucault right: the dismembered Kabuli citizens offer particularly cruel examples of how history, in a combination of systemic and subjective violence, has been imprinted onto the Afghan body.

Neither does the Afghan home serve as shelter. In her monologue, the Homebody describes a fantasy trip through an imaginary Kabul, at the end of which she says: "I long to be back in the safety of my kitchen" (Kushner, *Homebody* 26). The British (or more generally Western industrialized middle- and upper-class) home acts as a safeguard for the wholeness of the body (a safeguard which is, in turn, guaranteed by these countries' position with respect to global systemic violence). The Afghan body lacks such a guarantee—as the repeated references to casualties due to Western bombs mistakenly dropped on civilian Afghan houses (Kushner, *Homebody* 33, 77, 86, 100, and 133) make clear. In certain areas of the world events demonstrate that the home per se does not at all provide a protection of the body against subjective violence and, thus, utterly fails as a guarantor of identity.

#### 4. THE HOMEBODY, KABUL AND SYMBOLIC VIOLENCE

As mentioned above, systemic violence is usually bolstered by symbolic violence. In a representative/narrative doubling, in which the audience is shown an actress playing a British housewife reading to them from a guidebook to Kabul, written by an American author (Nancy Hatch Dupree), the play self-consciously foregrounds the symbolic violence inherent in historical narrative. By expressing location always in relation to the nations claiming sovereignty over it, the guidebook projects empire-building as the one element that provides a unifying meaning to historical processes. Thus, the momentary disappearance of imperial forces leads to periods "of disorder, migration and tribal unrest" (Kushner, *Homebody* 15), leaving the region in "a state of anarchy" (Kushner, *Homebody* 19). Dupree's Anglo-

American historical narrative always reads Afghanistan in its function as the one to be colonized, thus naturalizing the above-mentioned systemic violence historically exerted on the region and its people.

As Framji Minwalla points out, this historical narrative “is recorded in a mode that can only be called Orientalist” (31). In fact, Orientalist discourse in the monologue goes far beyond the guidebook and has inevitably entered the Homebody’s imaginary, reinforcing the symbolic violence of the historical narrative through what Peter Dickinson identifies as an “exotization of the other” (435). The Homebody intersperses her retelling of the guidebook’s history with personal accounts, which include an imaginary visit with a (presumably Afghan) shopkeeper to Kabul, during which they pass by picturesque places. She imagines admiring the painting of “handsome Shah Shujah [. . .] of olive complexion and thick black beard, [who] wears a green tunic over which are worked flowers of gold and a breastplate of diamond and the throne is covered with a cloth adorned with pearls” (Kushner, *Homebody* 25-26). The Homebody is so moved by her reveries of exotic splendor that “She cries softly” (Kushner, *Homebody* 26). The Orientalist discourse recycled through the Homebody’s imaginary trip keeps in circulation what Edward Said has denounced as the “European invention” of the Orient as “a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences” (1). The play thereby exposes how the combined symbolic violence of Western historical narrative and Orientalist discourse appropriate the concept of Afghanistan, projecting on it the picturesque and the exotic as safeguards of a cultural identity that turns country and inhabitants into what Una Chaudhuri has termed the “spectacular Other” (2), against which the imperial self can be defined and upheld. The Western self only receives its defining contours through its difference from the ‘Other’, which to a considerable extent is constructed through an othering discourse combined with the narratives of history of the colonized world. The play’s title and its juxtaposition of “Homebody” and “Kabul” thus, also implies how the Western self, presumably anchored in the home and the body, is actually dependent on alterity for its definition.

A further element of symbolic violence foregrounded by the play is that of mapping. By outlining borders, the map defines a country as entity to begin with. Accordingly, right from the beginning of the narrative construction of the Afghanistan represented in the play, two natural borders are mentioned: “the River Oxus” (Kushner, *Homebody* 10)—which is now called the Amu Darya and forms the border between Afghanistan and its northern neighbors Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and, in part, Turkmenistan (Wahab and Youngerman 5)—and the Hindu Kush mountains, which separate Afghanistan from Pakistan.

A comparison of the physical, political and ethnical maps, however, reveals that the ethnicities that make up the Afghan population do not at all keep to these borders. Thus, Tajiks represent about a quarter of all Afghans (Wahab and

Youngerman 14), but live of course on both sides of the Amu Darya, and ethnic Uzbeks and Turkmen comprise a considerable part of the northern Afghan population. In addition, Kushner's play explicitly calls attention to the fact that the Pashtuns, Afghanistan's dominating ethnicity—accounting for approximately half of its population—extend far beyond the Hindu Kush mountains, into Pakistan (Kushner, *Homebody* 98-99).

The unquestioned identity and unity of place that the borders on a map suggest is thus contrasted with the questionable status of clear-cut geographical-ethnic units. According to one of the play's epigraphs, in Afghanistan "each group and region has more in common with its Nancy Hatch Dupree, neighbors over the border than with each other" (Kushner, *Homebody* 7). Rather than representing a homogeneous entity with a unifying political center, Afghanistan is a heterogeneous conglomerate where centripetal forces draw the regions that compose the state towards widely differing cultural identities, transgressing all borders, even and most conspicuously so the natural ones. The dividing act of the border (yet another implication of the slash in the play's title) is thereby exposed to be arbitrary—dividing into sometimes almost irreconcilable difference what in many respects (culturally, linguistically, and ethnically) is similar or sometimes even the same while simultaneously acting as what Homi Bhaba has termed "totalizing boundaries" (149), which project a false homogeneity on a country that is in no way warranted by its underlying heterogeneity. This ostensible homogeneity engendered by boundaries reinforces the self-defining projection of otherness mentioned above.

At the same time, the combined symbolic violence of historiography, Orientalist discourse and mapping becomes a tool in the construction of what Michael Keith and Steve Pile have termed the "geometries of domination" (1), in which borders function as lines of exclusion, one of the foremost instances of systemic violence. They protect the privileged selves of hegemonic countries, their bodies and homes, by keeping hardship within the bounds of what Western discourse has been variously calling third-world or underdeveloped countries, preventing this hardship from spilling over and affecting surrounding peoples, thereby generating a safe haven for the wealthy by shutting the regions of better-to-do people off against the under-privileged, one of whose very few chances of crossing the borders that maintain them in poverty is as immigrants (frequently illegal ones who are under a permanent threat of being expelled from the hegemonic self).

The Other does have some chance of crossing the border, but even if they manage to stay, the borders they cross are only external, geographical ones. The border in its sense of exclusionary boundary remains intact. But its effects are different: in one passage of her monologue, the *Homebody* laments the plight of immigrant shopkeepers who spend long hours in shops stuffed with artefacts of various, ethnically different places, forced by the global market to be artificially

embellished so as to fit into “the safe container of *aesthetic*, which is to say, *consumer* appeal” (Kushner, *Homebody* 17, emphases in the original), thereby becoming degraded to indistinguishable “Third World junk” (Kushner, *Homebody* 17). The difference between products of widely differing cultures is abolished by converting these products into commodities for the consumer, who buys them to lend his or her life an air of chic exoticism, not caring what exact place and culture a particular product comes from nor what significance it has for the people who created it. Members of the former colonizing countries acquire a presumable piece of otherness without, however, caring to meet the Other in its alterity, appropriating it while ignoring its particularity.

While these shopkeepers escape the hardship they suffered in their home country, the home they acquire in a hegemonic country, rather than guaranteeing an identity, actually deprives them of it. In the Homebody’s words, they bring to their junk shop a “great, heavy, no longer portable self” (Kushner, *Homebody* 20). The Other, thus, may under certain circumstances enter the territory of the Western self, but frequently in doing so they are obliged to shed their particular otherness, which is appropriated by Western discourse under the general headings of ‘refugee’ or ‘immigrant’. Thus, while the external borders are at once exclusionary and constitutive of the simulacrum of national identity, the internal borders are only exclusionary. If the external border is passed, a wide variety of different othernesses is merged into what the Homebody calls a mass of “desperate indiscriminateness” (Kushner, *Homebody* 20). In this sense, the slash separating ‘Homebody’ from ‘Kabul’ becomes the demarcation line that, in a combination of symbolic and systemic violence, excludes the specific Other in his or her particularity from the hegemonic self and which through this same act makes the effect of a unified and stable identity possible for the privileged in the first place.

## 5. THE HOMEBODY IN KABUL

The first thing we learn in the Kabul part of the play, as soon as it leaves the Homebody’s home, is the account of the dismemberment of the Homebody’s body. The circumstances of her death are described in atrocious detail by Doctor Qari Shah in a page-long description (Kushner, *Homebody* 31-32) that brings, this time verbally, the body to the centre of attention.

Interestingly, one of the main events of *Homebody/Kabul*—whatever happened to the Homebody in Kabul—is not shown on stage but only recovered through narration. But it is not recovered univocally because we get two vastly differing narratives, the first one representing the account of Qari Shah, a representative of the Taliban establishment whose very name—Qari (‘reader’ in Arabic)—designates an official reciter of the Quran, i.e. someone in charge of keeping the sanctified discourse in circulation. In addition, the doctor’s last name,

Shah, apart from implying authority, is also the origin of the word ‘chess’. Given the fact that he eventually turns out to be Mahala’s husband, and thus the presumable new husband of the Homebody, his narrative of the Homebody’s death might well be a clever move in a game of chess with the Homebody’s husband and daughter.

The other, competing narrative (that of the Homebody’s conversion to Islam and marriage to Doctor Shah) cannot be ascribed to one single narrative voice. Rather, it is refracted through multiple voices, including those of Priscilla’s protector and guide Khwaja (who, as the penultimate scene intimates, might be a spy for the Northern Alliance, using Priscilla to deliver strategic information to London) and Mahala, Doctor Shah’s first wife, who is eager to enlist Priscilla’s help in escaping the country. Both might simply be following a personal agenda in insinuating to Priscilla that her mother is still alive. To top things off, Zai Garshi, the hat seller who confirms the Homebody’s survival, conversion and marriage, turns out to be a former actor, who might just be putting on an act on behalf of Khwaja and Mahala. This narrative and representative constellation mirrors the representative/narrative doubling of the play’s first scene. In an ironic inversion, the imperial self, rendering a homogenizing narrative of the Other from the safety of her home, becomes herself the object of the Other’s heterogenizing narration/acting when entering the territory of the Other.

When the Homebody leaves her home, one of her anchors of identity is cast off. In addition, the Homebody’s voyage results in her body’s disappearance, which is maintained until the end since neither of the two competing narratives of the Homebody’s fate is ever confirmed.

Here we find a motif: both British women of *Homebody/Kabul* become lost, Priscilla geographically, disoriented by the bombed streets of Kabul, which no longer coincide with their representation on the map, and her mother in all respects, not even having left a physical trace behind. Being lost in Kabul, both Priscilla (temporarily) and the Homebody (apparently forever) lose their selves in the Other.

If, as argued in section 4 above, the stable self is the result of a radical exclusion through boundaries implied by the title slash, then the crossing of these boundaries inevitably endangers one’s identity. Thus, the Homebody’s disappearance follows a clear logic: the character’s identity being dissolved through her immersion in the Other, there can be no more body to be identified as ‘her’. The play thereby inverts the topos of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries’ travel literature, according to which the self finds itself when moving, renouncing its home (Schulz 18). Kushner’s play turns this topos upside down: instead of finding herself through abandoning home, the Homebody—or rather the identity that has heretofore been associated with her—ceases to exist. At the same time it is suggested that, in the course of her connection with the Other, a new home may have forged a new identity on her body. The play’s open-endedness with respect to the Homebody’s true fate insinuates that in a territory where the symbolic violence of the

imperialistic homogenizing discourse no longer holds, the identity of the hegemonic self becomes totally dependent on the heterogeneous narratives of the Other.

## 6. HOMEBODY/KABUL

Apart from all the implications established so far, the slash expresses yet something else. Although initially the Homebody is exclusively defined through the body and the home, this is only true until she starts speaking. From that moment on, the Homebody also defines herself through her monologue, through the discourses she circulates, through her language, which is, according to Heidegger, the house of being (5), i.e. another kind of home.

In this respect it is relevant that, although the Homebody's language generally replicates Orientalist discourse, she also occasionally counteracts its symbolic violence by pointing out the systemic violence it supports. Thus, she emphasizes the sordid realities of poor countries with their ailments that result from hardship, such as deficiency diseases, and an elevated infant mortality rate (Kushner, *Homebody* 20)—phenomena that have almost disappeared in industrialized countries. Furthermore, she describes “the suffering behind the craft” (Kushner, *Homebody* 17), i.e. the cruel process of underpaid labor, exploitation, and extortion involved in the creation of the de-particularized cultural pseudo-artefacts discussed in section 4.

In addition to the Homebody's conscious questionings, at moments another discourse disrupts the Orientalist one: when the Homebody deals with the experience of emigration through the metaphor of the trade route, she never seems to be able to finish the sentence: “a many-cameled caravan, having roamed across the entire postcolonial not-yet-developed world, crossing the borders of the rainforested kingdoms of Kwashiorkor and Rickets and Untreated Gum Disease [. . .]” (Kushner, *Homebody* 20). The sentence continues for half a page, only to end on “and so on” (Kushner, *Homebody* 20), implying that it is not finished at all and really never reaches assertive closure. The Other, in continuous danger of being appropriated by and contained in clear-cut definitive statements, introduces an element of complexity that ends up disturbing the very language of the hegemonic self.

In the passage in which the Homebody talks about the presumably Afghan shopkeeper, she notices that three of his fingers are missing. She imagines herself asking him about this. His imaginary answer is full of irresolvable contradictions:

I was with the Mujahideen, and the Russians did this. I was with the Mujahideen and an enemy faction of the Mujahideen did this. I was with the Russians. I stole bread for my starving family, I stole bread *from* a starving family. [. . .] I am happy here in the UK, I am terrified I will be made to leave the UK, I cannot wait to leave the UK, I despise the UK. I voted for John Major. I voted for Tony Blair. I did not, I cannot vote, I don't believe in voting, the people who ruined my hand were right to do so, they were wrong to do so [. . .]. (Kushner, *Homebody* 23-24)

The hat seller's imaginary non-linear and paradoxical speech projects a matrix of experiences that people who have become enmeshed in an unforgiving imperial fight for power undergo. This non-fixing discourse presents the many contradictory situations into which the systemic violence of Afghanistan's recent history HAS placed the Afghan people, continually exposing them to the threat of victimization, no matter whose side they are on, and eventually leaving one at a loss as to what solution to aspire to since all immediately available solutions seem to lead to more suffering and hardship—be it under the banner of religious fundamentalism, be it in dependence on Western economic and industrial exploitation, be it in a perpetuation of fighting and killing, or be it in the loneliness of exile.

All options are desolate—to a degree that we, in the security of our identity-guarding “First-World” homes and the invulnerability of our bodies can hardly begin to imagine. Accordingly, the Afghan emphatically reiterates: “You will never understand” (Kushner, *Homebody* 24), thereby challenging the Homebody's (and Nancy Hatch Dupree's) endeavor to render any kind of coherent history of Kabul.

Nevertheless, we must not forget that the Homebody is not actually quoting any real account. Rather, she is talking about a fantasy of hers. The very fact that the shop owner's speech is the product of the British housewife's fantasy (and in the ultimate instance a creation of the white, Jewish US-American author Tony Kushner) demonstrates that we are indeed able to understand and imagine the Afghan people's desolation and “think the other” (Derrida 91) in all its complexity without appropriating it to the Western essentialist discourse of identity. But doing so inevitably undercuts the stability of the Western self precisely upheld through exclusionary, othering discourses.

In the last scene to take place in Kabul, Priscilla and Khwaja visit an unmarked grave which the map identifies as that of biblical Cain. In her monologue, the Homebody refers to it as “murder's grave” (Kushner, *Homebody* 22). Cain is constructed as the one who has brought violence of humans against humans into the world. In Judith G. Miller's fatalistic interpretation, the play's use of Cain suggests “that men are destined to kill their brothers” (215). The play's designation of Kabul as Cain's burial place is therefore read by Miller as marking “Afghanistan as harbinger of ‘evil.’”

However, matters are not that simple: the play sets the grave up as a holy site, a place of pilgrimage and veneration, and Priscilla ends up paying homage to Cain by kissing the earth on the grave (Kushner, *Homebody* 117).<sup>2</sup> Such a more sympathetic attitude towards Cain brings to mind the Romantic tradition, for which

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<sup>2</sup> In an interesting line of argument, different from the one exposed here, Shelly Mannis reads Cain's grave and its veneration as “intimating the importance of hospitality even [. . .] in the face of perceived threat from the other” (26).

Cain was the misunderstood son of Adam. His violence against his brother is, in the final analysis, a desperate reaction against the discriminations suffered from an unjust father. In Byron's dramatic poem *Cain* (1821), Cain's murder of Abel is constructed as the result of what Paul Cantor has interpreted as Cain's "metaphysical rebellion" (143) against orthodox doctrine suppressing the free human will to know. Very much in the vein of Žižek's notion of subjective violence as frequently being the mere consequence of systemic violence, Cain's murder is thus explained in Romanticism as a logical outcome of an unjustified constraint on the freedom of the human spirit. Cain is Abrahamic mythology's first perpetrator of subjective violence. But he is also one of the first victims of systemic violence and, as first bearer of the mark of Cain, the first victim of symbolic violence. In Kushner's play, he becomes, thus, the foremost symbol for human violence, not only as its agent but also as its victim. He becomes the representative of those who thrash out in unjustifiable violence against a world that has treated them unjustly.

On the other hand, Cain is the community's Other—forefather of the prototypical Anglo-Saxon monster Grendel, who is, after all, "kindred of *Cain*" (*Beowulf* 54)—and as such, he is demonized by the community who uses this very demonization in order to reaffirm, by way of contrast to such monstrosity, the supposed moral superiority of their own group—very much like Orientalism has functioned to create and uphold the identity of the Western self. Cain is therefore the quintessential Other—needed to create a group's identity while himself forever excluded from any group. He represents what Derrida has described as "the aspect of oppressed gesture which remains in all speech" (240), the poststructuralist rest that cannot be subsumed into the whole and thus remains a flaming symbol of heterogeneous alterity that no totalizing effort at homogeneity can ever efface.

In the play, Cain's complex symbolism works both on the local and the global scale. On the local level, within the context of Afghanistan, Cain represents the plurality and multifacetedness of ethnicity and culture that the symbolic violence of the map tries to deny and which the symbolically and systemically violent totalizing theology of the Taliban unsuccessfully threatens to bury. But at the same time, being buried in the political heart of Afghanistan, Cain marks the whole country, in turn, as the world's Other that cannot be assimilated by any universalizing discourse—be it the imperialist narrative of Western superiority, be it the romanticizing view of oriental exoticism.

Revealingly, Cheshme Khedre, the burial ground containing Cain's grave, is where, according to Qari Shah's narrative, the Homebody was killed, where her body, the last physical guarantor of her identity, was supposedly dismembered. It is surely no coincidence that the place of her disappearance should be the site of homage to Cain, the play's symbol of radical alterity. The Homebody's face-to-face encounter with the Other, which, in Emmanuel Levinas's terms, produces "a calling into question of oneself" (81), fatally undermines her self. Thus, her disembodiment

as she enters the territory of the Other, as explained in section 5, is only the physical consummation of an ontological condition: in the final analysis the slash in the play's title, in addition to being the exclusionary line that makes identity possible in the first place, also represents a fraction bar converting Kabul (as Other) into the denominator/divisor that not only delimits (and thereby defines) the Western self but, by that very act, fragments it and subverts its apparent unity and stability.

## 7. CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

The foregoing analysis has shown how the slash in *Homebody/Kabul* has multiple implications, ranging from merely structural issues to political and philosophical questions. On the plot level, the title does, of course, indicate the play's division into two parts with different settings. But more importantly, the title's juxtaposition of the two terms simultaneously separated and connected through the slash actually encapsulates some of the play's central topics: the symbolic and systemic violence inherent in the creation of totalizing boundaries, becoming a tool in an imperialistic struggle for domination; the dependence of a stable hegemonic identity on its difference from a projected (and excluded) homogeneous Other; and, conversely, the questionable nature of the supposed integrity of the self, always already challenged by the heterogeneity of unapproachable alterity.

Although this article is primarily a textual analysis of the play as published in book form, one can imagine how these issues affect an audience. The *Homebody's* monologue confronts the spectators with the symbolic violence of the historical narrative on Kabul. And while they might be seduced by the Orientalist discourse in the protagonist's reveries, they will also witness the voice of the Other as it repeatedly disrupts this discourse to disclose the Other's complex reality, thereby undercutting the unity of the *Homebody's* voice and questioning the symbolic violence it initially transmits.

In the Kabul scenes, in striking contrast to the familiar home setting that has created a sense of identification and security, the audience is exposed to an unsettling atmosphere of violence—both through the danger hanging over Priscilla wandering the streets of Kabul and through the verbal scenery, the stage set and the bodies bearing the traces of subjective violence that result from the systemic and symbolic violence denounced in the monologue. Adding to the perturbing effect of this atmosphere, the total disappearance of the titular character (who has established a certain rapport with the audience in her hour-long monologue) is bound to be disconcerting. The fact that her fate is never clarified, denying the audience closure, leaves them with an uncertainty that inevitably challenges their sense of wholeness, creating an epistemic loss that is in tune with the *Homebody's* loss of identity.

Finally, like the Homebody and her daughter, the audience is immersed in the Other—not only through scenery and attire (which are, after all, mere representations of otherness) but above all through language. In this respect, the immersion is quite radical because many of the Afghan characters speak in their native tongues, which range from Pashtun to Dari to Tajik to Arabic, pointing to the heterogeneous ethnicities composing the Afghan population. The dialogue is often left untranslated, creating a Babylonian confusion for the audience, who thus meets an Afghan people whose supposed homogeneous identity projected through historical narrative and Orientalist discourse is dissolved by the play, just as the Homebody's identity is dissolved in conflicting narratives. In the move from the familiar setting of the British home to the radical linguistic confusion in the Afghan scenes, the audience experiences the face-to-face encounter with (multiple, heterogeneous) alterity, which is likely to challenge its certainties about the identity of the Other, with its concomitant repercussions on the identity of the self. This challenge of identification, the uncertainty created by the Homebody's loss of identity, and the traces of systemic and subjective violence present throughout the Kabul scenes are sure to turn the watching of the play into a shattering experience.

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