DECONSTRUCTING ORIENTALISM:
CONTEMPORARY REPRESENTATIONS OF THE MIDDLE EAST ON THE
WESTERN STAGE

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WESTERN STAGE

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Abstract

DECONSTRUCTING ORIENTALISM: CONTEMPORARY REPRESENTATIONS OF THE MIDDLE EAST ON THE WESTERN STAGE

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This work analyzes three contemporary plays about the Middle East by western playwrights in an effort to discover whether those plays operated from an Orientalist viewpoint, based on centuries-old notions about the Arab and/or Muslim world and its complex relationship with the West. Or rather, did the playwrights take a deconstructive stance by way of post-colonial ideology and post-modern theatrical technique in an effort to dislocate the illusion of a Euro-centric Master Narrative? The methods used to determine the playwright’s sensibility are based on Edward W. Said’s Orientalism and post-modern feminist appropriations of the work of Berolt Brecht.

Chapter One deals primarily with an explanation of methodologies (Said’s ideas about pure versus political knowledge, strategic location, and binary opposition and Brecht’s theories on historicization, the alienation effect, and epic theatre; and an overview of feminist theatre scholars appropriation of Brechtian performance technique). Chapters 2, 3, and 4 are devoted to analysis of the individual plays: Timberlake Wertenbaker’s New Anatomies (1981), Tony Kushner’s Homebody/Kabul (2001), and William Mastrosimone’s The Afghan Women (2005).

This work argues that the way these plays are constructed helps explain whether they succeed in “deconstructing” Orientalist stereotypes and prejudices. More specifically, that in order to evade stereotypes, feminist and post-colonial playwrights alike have migrated toward non-realistic forms of theatre that in many ways resemble the kind of theatre Bertolt Brecht proposed as a pre-post-modernist.
For

Dr. Juanita Rice

"I can but no other answer make but thanks
And thanks"

-Twelfth Night, III.iii.16-17
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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

Discussing the idea that theatre acts as a mirror to society Jill Dolan writes, “We must make it clear that the hands holding the mirror up to nature have not been our own” (Dolan 10). Furthermore, we must resist the urge to fall back on old forms as, to paraphrase Dolan, our goals would inevitably be subverted by those means. While Dolan refers specifically to feminism here, she makes an important point about theatre’s place in society and the need for women and other subaltern groups to take hold of the mirror and help change the reflection we see so often in canonical texts of a world we do not recognize as one in which we would like to participate.

I am interested in the ways theatre mirrors both society and politics. Particularly after September 11, 2001, the Western theatre has witnessed a resurgence of plays dealing with the Middle East. The subject is timely, often controversial, and ripe for dramatic interpretation. While plays written by those playwrights from the Middle East are prevalent, I am curious about the ways Western playwrights write about the Middle East. The work that follows is not purely an analytical approach to three specific plays, though it does include in-depth analysis. Rather, I approach my subject with a deliberate political agenda, inspired by the post-colonial work of Edward W. Said, intent on discovering how a Western playwright’s handling of a Middle Eastern subject in his or her play might relate to the larger scope of Western involvement in the Middle East. More specifically, does a Western playwright’s theatrical treatment of the ‘Orient’ mirror the neo-conservative agenda reliant on re-mapping the entire Middle East? Or does s/he
offer a different image of the Orient, one that attempts to subvert the proverbial white, Western, male version of the Orient, and rewrite it with different hands holding the mirror?

In 2003, Edward W. Said wrote a “Preface” to the 25th anniversary edition of his groundbreaking and influential *Orientalism* (1978) in which he discussed the relationship between stereotypes, racism, and the 2003 War in Iraq:

> Without a well-organized sense that these people over there were not like “us” and didn’t appreciate “our” values...there would have been no war.

(Said xx)

Said argues that the 2003 invasion and the war itself can be traced to ‘Orientalism’, which he describes as the accepted interpretations of the Orient by Western scholars. In *Orientalism*, he traces the image of the Oriental in Western literature while linking the pervasiveness of a one-dimensional, primarily negative, Oriental image to Western goals of imperialism and colonialism. While formulating a thesis about Orientalism’s place amidst Western politics, Said ultimately examined the canon of Western culture and showed the extent and influence of the Orientalist myth. His work further illustrated the complicity of art in the myth’s formation and resilience and urged the re-reading of texts with a deconstructive sensibility.

Said’s work, noted by critics and supporters alike as “seminal” (Varisco xxi), ultimately dissects and deconstructs the ‘Orientalism’ working within much of Western literature about the Middle East since the time of Aeschylus. Equally groundbreaking and controversial, many post-colonial scholars cite the book as a “founding text” for their
field (Kamiya). In 1999, Stuart Burrows noted in his “Books of the Century” article for *New Statesman* that “it is almost inconceivable to imagine someone receiving a Humanities PhD today without having come to terms with Said’s legacy” (Burrows). Terry Eagleton, while maintaining that Said’s work may be flawed and one-dimensional at times, concedes that Orientalism’s power lies in its one irrefutable truth that negative images of an Orient always existed and continue to exist alongside Western imperialist goals (Eagleton).

*Orientalism* reaches across the Humanities due to the wide range of influence on Said’s work. His specific theories on the authoritative approach taken by Western writers about the Orient, one riddled with assumptions regarding their superiority, are interrelated with many theories and ideas that examine how prevailing ideologies rationalize relations of dominance and submission. Said’s discussion of discourse, hegemony and control not only relies on the works of Michel Foucault and Antonio Gramsci, but also evokes the post-colonialist writings of Aimé Césaire and Frantz Fanon. His concerns regarding the feminization of the Oriental male relate to feminist and queer theory. Finally his central point that the “very core of Orientalist dogma” relies on an “us versus them” (xx) mentality and that this mentality “effectively institutionalizes the Orient as the ‘other’” (Chatila), relates to every subaltern group that has thus far attempted to subvert or dislocate any discourse claiming the superiority of the White-European male.

Said’s work, especially in light of post-September 11th U.S. paranoia about the Middle East, raises questions for me about how Orientalism informs contemporary
theatre. Historically, Western theatre has represented the Middle East in the same Orientalist manner as novelists and travel writers from the colonial era. This work examines three contemporary Western plays written about the Middle East after the post-colonial movement began in the middle of the twentieth-century. Each of the three plays claim, in one way or another, not to be Orientalist: New Anatomies (1981) by Timberlake Wertenbaker, Homebody/Kabul (2001) by Tony Kushner, and The Afghan Women (2005) by William Mastrosimone. In approaching these plays, I first took an exclusively intellectual/ideological approach, using Said as a starting point. I examined the Arab and/or Muslim characters as well as the Arab and/or Muslim world presented in these plays through a Western lens. Not only does each of the playwrights identify as a Western playwright, but the protagonist in each play is a Western woman entering, living in, and/or coming to terms with the Middle East in one way or another. These descriptions alone relegate the plays to Said's model of Westerners writing about the Middle East from a Western perspective.

Using such an exclusive, ideological-content-based approach, however, limited my study as it did not immediately address the performative aspect of theatre. Analysis of the plays in production reveals that there is a crucial relationship between form and content in these three plays. Performatively, I argue that the plays must adhere to a post-modern style, as this style, like post-colonial ideology, refuses to rely upon Master Narrative notions such as empiricism, totality, and universality, often times represented on the Western stage by way of Realism. Historically, Orientalist discourse embraces these notions in order to maintain the superiority and hegemony of Western knowledge.
over the Orient. Thus, in order to evade the problem of Orientalism, I argue that the playwrights must not only embrace a post-colonial sensibility but also evade Realism altogether and embrace a post-modern form when representing ‘their’ respective Middle East’s (Algeria for *New Anatomies*, Afghanistan for *Homebody/Kabul* and *The Afghan Women*).¹

When I talk about post-modern form, it is important to understand that it is not some chaotic fluke of nature, but that we can link it to important features of the work of Bertolt Brecht, who was insistent that the forms of his plays supplement the content. By creating a new style of theatre he sought to challenge the very nature of mythmaking and Master Narratives – both concepts Said discusses in *Orientalism*. While Brecht considered himself a theatre practitioner rather than a theorist, his ideas correlate with later post-colonial, feminist, and post-modern theatre theorists who, like Brecht, are interested in the ways plays produce meaning via the form and content. This interest led to efforts in challenging the Master Narrative concept and structure by way of deconstruction. In this work, I show how the playwrights’ application of the techniques, theories, and/or methods of Said and Brecht successfully deconstruct Orientalist notions of the Middle East in their respective plays.

For the remainder of this chapter I want to look specifically at Said and his earmarks of Orientalism. I will then return to a discussion of theatre strategies and/or forms, specifically those of Bertolt Brecht, examining the ways in which contemporary

¹ While I am not suggesting Algeria is interchangeable with Afghanistan, I am suggesting that the imperialist situation in Algeria at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries does look similar to the neo-imperialistic situation for the United States in Afghanistan at the beginning of the twenty-first century.
theatre practitioners deal with issues of representation on the stage, and how many are breaking away from Modernist traditions in an effort to see the world from a wider perspective than through the traditional model of Western-ethnocentrism.

As a case study for my ideas I want to take David Henry Hwang’s *M. Butterfly* (1986) for the specific deconstructive approach he took with the play. In the process of writing this work, I was struck by the correspondence between Hwang’s stated intention to ‘deconstruct’ a stereotype and the curious structural turns he then took in the play. Admittedly, I first read the play as a sort of failed, homosexual, love story. But then I began to read the reviews, and to re-examine the play in light of Hwang’s statement: “I wanted to deconstruct *Madame Butterfly*” (Hwang 95). Exactly what that meant, why Hwang wanted and needed to do that, and how, explains the way the play is put together and is, to some extent, the subject of this research project. By answering those questions satisfactorily, I was able to address my real focus, which was, and is, to show how three other plays approach Orientalism which still attaches to American images of the Middle East and related cultures. I argue that the way these plays are put together helps explain whether or not they succeed in “deconstructing” Orientalist stereotypes and prejudices. More specifically, I argue that form affects a play’s capacity for undermining mythologies; that in order to evade stereotypes, feminist and post-colonial playwrights alike have migrated toward non-realistic forms of theatre that in many ways resemble the kind of theatre Bertolt Brecht proposed as a pre-post-modernist. In the following pages I will specifically define how I use all of these terms: Orientalism, feminism, post-colonialism, Brechtian theatre, Realism, non-Realism, and post-modernism.
I chose two methods by which to measure the appearance of deconstructing Orientalist notions based on those used by Hwang in *M. Butterfly*. The first method is an effort to discover a post-colonial perspective on the part of the playwrights. For this effort, I use three of Said’s ideas as my guide. These ideas are 1) The issue of pure versus political knowledge and its place in post-colonial studies, 2) His method of strategic location and authoritative approach, and 3) His specific application of binary opposition and the role it plays in the ‘Othering’ of the Orient by the West. My second method is an effort to discover a post-modern performance style in the plays. Here, I use three of Bertolt Brecht’s performance strategies, widely understood as ‘Brechtian’, as my guide. These strategies are, 1) Historicization and the playwright’s use of it to locate and highlight the Orient’s place in Western imperialist history, 2) The use of the alienation effect in order to distance an audience’s identification with a ‘real’ Orient as represented by a Westerner, and 3) An overall epic theatre goal by refusing to construct a Western Oriental myth.

Both Said and Brecht examine ways of breaking down the hegemonic location of Master Narratives in their respective works. I must be very clear, however, about two things. First, I do not follow the model of deconstruction Said employs in *Orientalism*, nor do I expect a deliberate evocation of his ideas by the playwrights. Rather, I chose these three specific Said ideas based on Hwang’s employment of them in *M. Butterfly* and argue that they are excellent indications of Hwang’s post-colonial intentions. Second, that the Brechtian strategies which I argue are present in *M. Butterfly* and two of
the other three plays are post-modern appropriations of Brecht by feminist theatrical scholars, a point I will return to at length further in this chapter.

I argue that Wertenbaker and Kushner's plays succeed in crafting post-colonial and post-modern deconstructions of Orientalism while Mastrosimone's, despite the best of intentions, does not. This work examines how and why a playwright's employment of post-colonial ideas, by way of Said, and post-modern strategies, by way of Brecht, leads to the successful deconstruction of Oriental stereotypes and disrupts the very notion of a Western Master Narrative about the Middle East.

Post-Colonialism, Orientalism, and Said

When I talk about post-colonialism I am referring to the situation since the end of World War II when the idea of a New World Order, as Franklin D. Roosevelt described it, meant an end to imperialism and colonialism (Range 102). This change did not happen seamlessly, nor could one argue that worldwide decolonization is complete. For the purposes of this work it is important to recognize that decolonization efforts brought in a new focus on representation. The Western powers were no longer deemed acceptable forms of representation in their colonies. By the middle of the twentieth century, colonies around the world wished to be free of imperialism – free to represent themselves. This freedom of representation and the efforts made by former colonies to represent themselves falls under the umbrella of post-colonial thought, writing, and theory. What also falls under this umbrella is the discussion of problems associated with two hundred years of Western representation and the recent efforts made by post-colonial
thinkers, writers, and theorists using various methods to deconstruct problematic ideas and images of the former colonies. Said's work is one example of these efforts.

In his book, Said contends that in order to examine the Orientalism working within Western culture one must first understand Orientalism's place as a hegemonic discourse. He argues the following:

My contention is that without examining Orientalism as a discourse one cannot possibly understand the enormously systematic discipline by which European culture was able to manage – and even produce – the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically, and imaginatively during the Post-Enlightenment period. Moreover, so authoritative a position did Orientalism have that I believe no one writing, thinking, or acting on the Orient could do so without taking account of the limitations on thought and action imposed by Orientalism. (3)

Here Said echoes Michel Foucault, who theorized that discourse "is at once controlled, selected, organized, and redistributed according to a certain number of procedures" (Foucault 216), meaning that discourse follows a set of established rules, and those rules are established by a certain group. Thus, the group in charge of the way knowledge is known in any given discourse, and furthermore in any given society, holds the power over that discourse, and ultimately, society. Said maintains that in terms of Orientalism, the group with the power was and is the West (Europe during the colonial era and the United States in modern times), controlling the discourse of knowledge about the Orient by the West.
Said further theorizes that this discourse of knowledge created a “cultural leadership”, or hegemony as Gramsci argued, over knowledge about the Orient (Said 7). Gramsci held that subaltern groups (literally meaning those of “inferior rank” who occupy lower statuses in any given society, in this case referring to the ‘Oriental’) remained unrepresented in history due to a lack of the access necessary to control their own representation; in the ‘Foucauldian’ sense, lack of access to the discourse. Thus, prior to the post-colonial movement, when one studied the history of a subject race – ‘Orientals’ for example - that history would come from the dominant power over that subject – Europe - rather than from the ‘Orientals’ themselves. The history, or representation, of the Orient would therefore come from a Western point-of-view, automatically relegating the Orient to the lower position of subaltern, and ultimately, ‘Other’.

Said maintains that it is always to the dominant race/class/sex’s advantage to acknowledge and classify its subjects as ‘Other’, in order to rationalize superiority and dominance over those subjects, much as Great Britain and France did with the ‘Orient’ throughout the colonial era and as patriarchal systems continue doing with women. The more knowledge the dominant race/class/sex acquires over the ‘Other’, the more superiority that race/class/sex can claim, and finally the more power the dominant race/class/sex can exercise over its subjects (‘Orientals’, women, and any other subjugated classes of the dominant discourse). For Orientalism specifically, Said writes:

Orientalism can be discussed and analyzed as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient – dealing with it by making statements about it,
authorizing views over it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it; in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient. (3)

Said maintains that this Western style for dominating ultimately constructed the image of an Oriental as a mythical antithesis against which Europe defined itself as superior during the colonial and imperial eras. He claims that this ‘Oriental’ construction as weak, corrupt, and savage, as opposed to a West, which claimed to be strong, just, and civilized, served the efforts of imperialism and colonialism by legitimizing the idea that the West was stronger than the East.

When one understands Orientalism as a hegemonic discourse through which Western colonial cultures constructed myths about an imaginary East, representations of the Orient by the West suddenly appear less benign. Said argues that Barthélemy D’Herbelot’s Bibliothèque des orientales (1697), a dictionary on all things Oriental, indicates that a European can open a book and learn anything and everything he needs to know about the Orient -- an indication that the Orient is simple and one-dimensional enough to be read about in one single book, however detailed that book may seem. Additionally Said suggests that Orientalist paintings by Jean-Léon Gérôme such as The Slave Market (1867) and Dance of the Almeh (1863) with all their exoticism and debauchery reaffirm the European notion of a depraved Orient in need of good Christian values.

While the idea of an Orient as described in a book gripped a Westerner’s imagination, the stage took Orientalism to staggering heights with “realistic” exhibitions
and dramatic stage-plays presenting seductive veiled Oriental women and dark, mysterious, and dangerous Oriental men “associated either with lechery or bloodthirsty dishonesty” (166-167). These depraved images of the Orient gained even further cultural strength in motion pictures during the early twentieth century. In fact, many films of the Silent Era focused on dark, brooding Oriental men (often played by Rudolph Valentino) and the beautiful Western women they either kidnapped or seduced (or sometimes both). Said does not focus on the history of Orientalism in film. However, Jack Shaheen undertook this exhaustive study in the book *Reel Bad Arabs* (2001), which examines how nine hundred and plus different films represent Arabs and Muslims in a negative, one-dimensional Orientalist light.

The consensus of both Shaheen and Said is that virtually every representation of the Orient made by a Westerner presupposes an existing idea about the Orient leaving little or no room for argument. During the race for global domination by Britain and France between the eighteenth and early twentieth centuries, travel and historical fiction writers, novelists, musicians and artists confirmed one another as they described and/or depicted an Oriental as an altogether different kind of human being than a Westerner. These persisting images of an Orient and the fact that Western Europe colonized nearly eight-five percent of the world by 1919 (Said 122-123) affirms Said’s theory that Orientalism was a systematic pursuit linked consistently with power and imperialism. Said further theorizes that many of the representations found in Orientalist writings helped form the basis of common modern-day stereotypes such as the wily Oriental and
the greedy Arab oil magnate or religious despot, the crazed Mohammaden and the Islamic terrorist, etc. (Said 286-287). In his 2003 “Preface” to Orientalism Said writes:

Today bookstores in the United States are filled with shabby screeds bearing screaming headlines about Islam and terror, Islam exposed, the Arab threat, and the Muslim menace, all of them ... recycling the same unverifiable fictions and vast generalizations so as to stir up “America” against the foreign devil. (xx)

A main point in Said's work is in fact that, particularly with regards to the United States, the present world superpower and, arguably, a neo-imperialist one, very little has changed in terms of representations of the Orient, or the modern Middle East.

Due to Said's argument that Western writers had little success and/or did not have an interest in debunking Orientalist stereotypes in mainstream canonical literature, travel, or political writings for close to two hundred years, it stands to reason that contemporary playwrights operating in or simply influenced by the mainstream canon may continue having the same difficulty. My hope is that the playwrights were not only aware of the problematic nature of their representing the ‘Orient’ through a Western lens, but also take both ideological and performative steps to deconstruct that problem. With the rise of post-colonial and post-modern studies such as Said’s in the mid-twentieth century, the very notion of falling back on age-old stereotypes of the Orient should be so obviously problematic that a Western playwright would avoid it. However, being aware of the

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2 I am suggesting here that Timberlake Wertenbaker, Tony Kushner, and William Mastroscione, as self-identifying members of Western countries, were at the very least in some way influenced by what we call the canon of Western culture. I am not suggesting that they were influenced solely by canonized culture.
entanglements between the Middle East and Western nations, particularly the United States and Great Britain, complicates issues of three-dimensional representations of a perceived enemy.

Post-colonial Methodology

For the purposes of my work, I am interested in the steps Said took when examining works of travel writing and literature about the Orient by the West and applying those methods to Western plays about the Middle East. I maintain that Said's ideas provide an exemplary model for post-colonial deconstruction and employ three of those ideas when examining if Wertenbaker, Kushner, and Mastrosimone take an Orientalist or deconstructive approach when writing about the Middle East. Let me begin with an outline of pure versus political knowledge.

Said argues that there was a time, particularly in the post-Enlightenment period, when it was believed that the work of someone from the arts and humanities field had "no direct political effect upon reality in the everyday sense," as opposed to the work of someone from the political or social science fields whose job it was to have political and/or sociological effects on reality (Said 9). The belief was that non-politically affiliated writing and art therefore could assume a 'pure' knowledge, one without any direct influence on or by politics and/or society.

Said's discussion of pure versus political knowledge is part of a philosophical argument in the post-colonial and post-modern era against the belief that ideas, knowledge, or any cultural phenomena can be 'pure' of political viewpoints. This
argument is important because it focuses on the ‘pure’ Master Narrative’s place in hegemonic discourse, a discourse dedicated to upholding the vision of the superior Western male.

For Orientalism specifically, Said argues that, because of the systematic and hegemonic implementation of Orientalist discourse in Western culture, none of the so-called ‘pure’ knowledge writers were ever without a political sensibility. He argues that “no one has ever devised a method for detaching the scholar from the circumstances of life, from the fact of his involvement (conscious or unconscious) with a class, a set of beliefs, a social position, or from the mere activity of being a member of a society” (10). This argument becomes important when looking closely at Orientalist works of the ‘pure’ persuasion such as theatre because it assumes that any Westerner writing about the Orient has some interest as a Westerner at stake, “that he comes up against the Orient as a European or American first, as an individual second... [which] means being aware ...that one belongs to a power with definite interests in the Orient” (Said 11). This awareness is political knowledge, understanding that one’s position as a Westerner automatically creates a politicized situation when one represents the Middle East.

While the argument that one working from a Humanities perspective maintains a ‘pure’ stance may feel obviously flawed, a point Said actually makes in his work, the ‘pure’ defense remains quite prevalent, particularly in controversial areas such as Middle Eastern Studies, due to the persistence of Orientalism in Western discourse. There is an almost epidemic refusal of conservative-minded scholars to acknowledge Orientalism as problematic. This refusal results in a tendency by these scholars to hide behind the ‘pure’
defense in an effort to shield political motivations. A recent demonstration of politicization trying to disguise itself as a pure pursuit of knowledge is the renowned Middle Eastern historian, Bernard Lewis. Lewis maintains that he has a benign scholarly interest in the Middle East (Lewis 8), after remaining at the top of Vice President Dick Cheney’s Middle Eastern policy advisors (Hirsh, Weisberg) not only under President George W. Bush, but also while Cheney acted as Secretary of Defense for President George H. W. Bush.

In 2006, the World Affairs Council of Philadelphia honored Lewis based on his contributions to President George W. Bush’s Middle Eastern doctrine. At the luncheon honoring Lewis, Vice President Cheney remarked on Lewis’ involvement in policy issues during the Gulf War:

No one offered sounder analysis or better insight than Bernard Lewis. He was an absolute standout, and I decided that day that this was a man I wanted to keep in touch with, and whose work I should follow carefully in the years ahead. Since then we have met often, particularly during the last four-and-a-half years, and Bernard has always had some very good meetings with President Bush. He is always objective, thoroughly candid, and completely independent.

(http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2006/05/20060501-3.html)

For the purposes of this work it is imperative to understand why Lewis’ continued insistence that his Middle Eastern views are non-partisan and independent, while he himself belonged to the Bush-Cheney inner-political circle between 1990 and 2008 where
issues regarding the Middle East were so prevalent, is problematic. Lewis claims that as a scholar in the Humanities his knowledge of the Middle East is pure and apolitical. Lewis seems unaware that his very participation in policy-making deems him a political, rather than ‘pure’, scholar.

For the purposes of this study, I was not concerned with whether or not the plays I chose have a direct affect on political realities. Rather I chose to focus on the issue of pure versus political knowledge because of its importance to post-colonial studies as a whole. Said and other post-colonial writers argue that the extent to which a work of literature, art, or theatre deemed ‘pure’ determined that work’s place in the canon of the timeless, universal, Master Narrative of Western culture- a Narrative historically used to further the superiority of the Western Male. Frantz Fanon alluded to the issue in Black Skin, White Masks (1967), when he argued about the role Western languages played in both the actual and cultural enslavement of Black Africans by White Europeans during the colonial period. In Playing in the Dark (1993), Toni Morrison deconstructed the ‘pure’ literature of Edgar Allen Poe and Ernest Hemingway, noting the manner in which they represented American ideals of freedom as the antithesis to their representations of Blackness and an “Africanist presence” (Morrison 6). Said uses the idea of pure versus political knowledge when examining ‘pure’ writers such as Chateaubriand and Byron, illustrating the manner in which their literary representations of the Middle East helped cement an image of the Oriental as ‘Other’ in the minds of Western Europeans. Further, that the continued persistence and acceptance of this Oriental image blocks any chance for the Orient to speak for itself. It is crucial, therefore, that a playwright writing from a
post-colonial perspective exhibits an awareness and acknowledgment that there is an inherent problem with the West's continual representation of the Orient.

I was specifically interested in whether or not Wertenbaker, Kushner, and Mastrosimone engaged in a post-colonial representation of the Middle East by acknowledging the problematic position their respective Western identities places them in as they write about the Middle East. Further, if this acknowledgement was present, how did they construct their plays to avoid taking a 'pure' knowledge stance?

Said's method of strategic location, "which is a way of describing the author's position in a text with regards to the Oriental material he writes about" and of examining "deliberate ways of addressing the reader" or audience (Said 20) is the second idea I used as a guide. Strategic location is effective because Said uses it in his work to locate the Western authoritative approach present in Orientalist works. Said argues that the goal of an Orientalist was to analyze the Orient for the Western reader and make it understandable. The Orientalist located himself as the translator, making the Orient identifiable for the Westerner and, Said argues, "is never concerned with the Orient except as the first cause of what he says" (21). Thus, the Orient exists because of the West and, by extension, for the West. Said applies his method of strategic location in order to deconstruct the authoritative approach taken by Westerners writing about the Orient.

An example of Said's concern with authoritative approach and strategic location is T.E. Lawrence, immortalized in Hollywood proportions and the hyper-realistic nature of Technicolor in the 1962 David Lean Academy Award-winning motion picture
Lawrence of Arabia (1962). Western history paints Lawrence as the hero of the Arab people, a man who claimed his life was destroyed by the post-World War I carving up of the Arabian Peninsula after fighting to unify the Arabian tribes. Lawrence took an authoritative stance when writing about the Arabs, an authority in line with other Orientalist writers of his time: "I meant to make a new nation, to restore a lost influence, to give twenty millions of Semites the foundation on which to build an inspired dream palace of their national thoughts" (Lawrence quoted in Tabachnick 96-97). Lawrence strategically located himself as the "Narrator" of the Arab Revolt and the one who lost in the end when the area was carved up by Great Britain, France, and Russia.

Said states that because of Lawrence’s claims of authority over the Arabs, Lawrence’s “vision became the very symbol of Oriental trouble” and that the Arab Revolt is "reduced finally to Lawrence’s experiences on its behalf" (243) instead of an Arab experience. Based on the success of Lawrence’s book The Seven Pillars of Wisdom (1922), a 1919 documentary in which he was dubbed “the uncrowned King of Arabia” (www.pbs.org), and later the 1962 David Lean film, the story of the Arab Revolt appears to belong exclusively to Lawrence rather than to the tribes of Arabia. I will return to a more thorough discussion of Lawrence in Chapter Four, but will say the following for now: The problem remains that Lawrence’s authoritative representation of the Arab Revolt leaves little or no room for the Arab tribes to speak for themselves.

Said’s work on Orientalist writings includes examining texts for evidence of “representations as representations, not as natural depictions of the Orient” (21). I contend that in order for a Western playwright to successfully deconstruct Orientalism in
a play about the Middle East s/he must disrupt any sense of Western authority claiming to represent the Orient. This may appear tricky as the plays I analyze are all written by Westerners, but that is precisely the point. I ask questions related specifically to whether or not there is a sense of this disruption: Are the playwrights aware that the Orients they constructed are mere representations, not “natural depictions” of the Middle East? Do they comment on or usurp Western authority in their plays? Do they allow the Middle East to speak for itself instead of strategically locating an authoritative Western voice over it? If the answer to any of these questions was ‘yes’, I conclude that the playwrights must have operated, at least in part, from a post-colonial sensibility.

Thirdly, I examine the three plays in terms of their application or deconstruction of binary opposition. At the core of Orientalist texts is the idea that the Oriental is different from the Westerner and must be defined in terms of binary opposition in order to maintain a valid argument for Western control. Binary opposition, as a principle of language, was defined by French structural linguist Ferdinand de Saussure “who held that signs have meaning not by simple reference to real objects, but by their opposition to other signs... where the Western man is strong, civilized, and just the Oriental is weak, savage, and corrupt” (Ashcroft, et al 23). Thus, Said argued that binary oppositional reasoning allowed the West to define itself by what the hypothetical Orient was not. When the Oriental is “irrational, depraved, childlike, ‘different’, the European is rational, virtuous, mature, ‘normal’” (Said 40). Keeping in mind the relationship between Orientalism and imperialism, one cannot overstate the presence of unexamined binary oppositions by the West when writing or speaking about the Orient. Ideas about
depraved Orientals led to widespread concepts of inferiority and, ultimately, savagery, which justified colonization on a global level by Western empires (Said 238).

These ideas about inherent differences between West and East resulted in the Oriental, and any non-European, being referred to and understood as the Other “as a means of establishing the binary separation of the colonizer and colonized and asserting the naturalness and primacy of the colonizing culture and worldview” (Ashcroft, et.al. 169). The term Other “implies a radical cognitive difference between the domestic and the foreign” (Vitkus 1), but quite often also refers to women, non-whites, and anyone existing outside the acceptable realm of Western male identity. By always defining the Oriental as Other, the Oriental is in fact illegitimated and incapable of constructing his own discourse. This idea of Othering becomes important in a discussion of Western lens and Western gaze because, as I stated above, the plays automatically come from a Western lens as Wertenbaker, Kushner, and Mastrosimone are, indeed, from the West. The question then is: do the playwrights deconstruct the western lens? Are the Middle Eastern characters in their plays written as Others, or do the playwrights deconstruct the notion of Othering by exposing and dislodging the binary oppositional thinking that results in Othering?

Said’s ideas help illuminate the ideological standpoint of the playwrights in question by examining the ways they approached the Middle Eastern content in their plays. In dealing specifically with theatre, however, it is not enough to study merely the content of a play. Theatre differs from a novel or a painting in that it incorporates real people on an actual stage in front of a live audience. When one examines the manner in
which Orientalism historically played out on the Western stage it becomes imperative to analyze the form and style of a contemporary work to discover whether that form and style reaffirm or deconstruct Orientalism.

In the late nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, many theatre practitioners used the stage to present the illusion of real life for an audience. This style, known as Realism, gave Western audiences an illusion of the Orient by representing it "realistically" as exotic and Other to the West in exhibitions and later in stage plays. In 1851 the first World's Fair in London cemented a formal, visualized Orient into the minds of Europeans where audiences could visit the Works of Industry of all Nations, "a mammoth undertaking... demonstrated in numerous panoramas depicting military routes to the East" (Ziter 23). Western audiences viewed panoramas filled with actual props and clothing from Eastern lands juxtaposed against Western strength in the showcasing of theatrical military routes through the Orient. This event offered English and European audiences a chance to see the Orient with their own eyes, or at least to see the Orient as pieced together by the Westerner on the stage.

Realism on the Western stage coincided with the Modernist period, distinguished by its focus on empiricism, in its quest for essential and absolute facts and truths. Modernism's touchstones, then, were "totality, reason, and universality" (Giroux 19). What this translates to is the belief in the reasonable truth and universal myth that Western - specifically European male - civilization is superior to any other. Though Orientalism began as a pre-Modern discipline, it found a home, as it were, in Modernism with its essentialist ideological underpinnings. Orientalist discourse relied and relies on
concepts of essentialism and universality when describing the Orient in opposition to the West. Thus, in order to deconstruct Orientalism on the stage, I contend that one must deconstruct any form relying on universal ideals.

Bertolt Brecht and Post-Modernism

The term “post-modernism” as I use it here was not in Bertolt Brecht’s vocabulary. Historically, Brecht’s theatre of the 1930s through 1950s is chronologically situated in the Modern Era amidst Realism on the Western stage and a continued reliance on the Aristotelian model of theatre. However, I contend that Brecht’s position as one of the most influential theatre artists in contemporary theatre is due to his indirect relationship with post-modernism via the shared goal of abandoning both the Aristotelian and Realist traditions. As this section will show, this relationship derives from Brecht’s insistence that neither the Realist tradition nor the Aristotelian model of theatre allowed for a politically engaged audience. Furthermore, that the steps Brecht took to politically engage his audience ultimately led to a deconstructive, post-modern style appropriated by feminists and other subaltern groups.

While formulating his thesis on epic theatre, Brecht wrote, “It is understood that the radical transformation of the theatre can’t be the result of some artistic whim. It has simply to correspond to the whole radical transformation of the mentality of our time” (Brecht 23). Notable examples of the ‘mentality’ to which Brecht refers were Modernist ideas about universality expressed on the Western stage via its reliance on the Aristotelian model of theatre. Brecht sought to break away from universals and look
closely at human beings and their respective realities as constructions, capable of change and movement. When Brecht came to prominence in 1930’s Germany, amidst a devastated post-war economy, the rise of Socialism in Russia, and the rising of the Third Reich, he proposed a theatre style that would not only be antithetical to the Aristotelian theatre but would also contribute significantly to a reconceived notion of Western theatrical performance. The strategies he imposed to help bring about this change ultimately led to what we see as a post-modern style, though Brecht himself pre-dates the theory by fifty years.

A working definition of “post-modernism” was not coined until 1984 when Jean-Francois Lyotard wrote about post-modernism as a “discourse of multiple horizons, the play of language games, and the terrain of micropolitics” (Giroux 19). Lyotard argued against Modernist “totality, reason, and universality” in that “grand Narratives do not problematize their own legitimacy, they deny the historical and social construction of their own first principles, and in doing so, wage war on difference, contingency, and particularity” (19). Brecht also resisted the idea of ‘grand’ or Master Narratives, an idea intertwined with both Modernist/Realist and Aristotelian ideals. While I am not suggesting an absolute correlation between Modernism/Realism and Greek philosophy, I am arguing a relationship based on their respective reliance upon myth-making and universality. Both the Aristotelian and Realist traditions share the Modernist reliance on the scientific nature of things being absolute – “things” meaning God, Man, Nature, and Humanity.
Brecht claimed that “plays of the Aristotelian type flatten out class conflicts” (Brecht 60) by focusing too much on the universal:

The bourgeois theatre emphasized the timelessness of its objects. Its representation of people is bound by the alleged ‘eternally human’. Its story is arranged in such a way as to create ‘universal’ situations that allow Man with a capital M to express himself. (96)

Like Edward Said and many post-modernists, Brecht dismissed the ideas of universal truths and timeless stories believing they legitimized the very notion of class divisions as natural. Issues were the vital element of Brecht’s epic theatre; he longed to use the theatre to discuss social issues, to force audiences to think about politics, and inevitably affect change. Because of his insistence on a politically engaged audience, Brecht proposed a theatre that resisted catharsis. Without catharsis, Brecht argued, an audience might be emotionally stable enough to come to their own conclusions, to form their own thoughts and feelings about the issues presented in a play. Over the course of nearly forty years, Brecht wrote about various ways to achieve his ideas of theatre. I discuss three of these ideas specifically here, 1) historicization, 2) verfremdungseffekt, or alienation effect, and 3) epic theatre, because of their distinct abilities to disrupt the Realist tradition of universal myth-making.

Brecht defined “historicization” in his description of how “historical incidents are unique, transitory incidents associated with particular periods” (140) and demands that his theatre “concentrates entirely on whatever in [a] perfectly everyday event is remarkable, particular and demanding inquiry” (Ibid). He called for the historicization
of his plays in an effort to highlight the social and historical conditions to which human beings fall victim, thus affecting all of their actions. In his 1947 “A Short Organum for the Theatre,” he wrote:

We must drop our habit of taking the different social structures of past periods, then stripping them of everything that makes them different; so that they all look more or less like our own...Instead we must leave them their disgusting marks and keep their impermanence always before our eyes, so that our own period can be seen as impermanent too. (190)

Historicization then is an effort to dislocate any semblance of universality, to focus on the particulars of a given historical moment and perform it as such. Historicization was a key component in the development of Brecht’s epic theatre.

Another element in Brecht’s work was his desire for verfremdungseffekt, or alienation effect, as I will refer to it in this thesis. The alienation effect is one of the most commonly debated of Brechtian techniques, for it is often misinterpreted to mean that an actor must literally alienate the audience (Esslin 139-140). Brecht describes the alienation effect in this way:

The efforts in question were directed to playing in such a way that the audience was hindered from simply identifying itself with the characters in the play. Acceptance or rejection of their actions and utterances was meant to take place on a conscious plane, instead of, hitherto, in the audience’s subconscious. (91)
Simply put, the alienation effect should be an artist’s effort to “appear strange and even surprising to the audience”. Brecht argued that Chinese actors had been producing the alienation effect in traditional Chinese theatre for centuries and that it allowed for a more actively participating audience. Brecht expands on these thoughts, stating:

Above all the Chinese artist never acts as if there were a fourth wall besides the three surrounding him. He expresses his awareness of being watched. This immediately removes one of the European stage’s characteristic illusions. The audience can no longer have the illusion of being the unseen spectator at an event which is really taking place. (Brecht 135)

Brecht called for the complete disruption of the European illusion of real life on the stage, or a “purging of the magical” (136), in order to keep his audiences alert and ready for action. He argued that the Western actor’s focus on psychological connection with the character caused a too intimate identification on the part of the spectator and that when this identification takes place followed by a catharsis, the spectator no longer has a reason to care about the story or characters in it. After catharsis, the spectator is appeased, indeed comforted by the release of tension, and thus incapable of further action. The alienation effect is an effort by the artist to distance himself from the emotions of his character, inviting criticism and analysis from an audience (92), thus enticing that audience to act politically.

Both historicization and the alienation effect are integral to Brecht’s larger theory of epic theatre. Brecht theorized epic theatre as everything Aristotelian theatre was not.
Epic theatre is meant to arouse the spectator to action rather than arouse their sympathies, to focus on the course rather than the finish line, to resist linear development and instead construct itself as an episodic montage. Finally, the epic theatre should make its audience think instead of feel (37). At various points in his writings, Brecht refers to the incorporation of all three elements – historicization, alienation effect, and epic theatre strategies - in the writing of plays, and at other times refers specifically to the actors’ performances and how to incorporate the elements there. But ultimately, many theatre practitioners attempting to follow Brecht’s theories of theatre via his implicit, and sometimes contradictory instructions, were left confused and misguided.

Many critics of Brecht argue that he never refined his theories clearly enough for anyone to actually practice them. Hilda Meldrum Brown faults Brecht in her “Modes of Perspective in ‘Epic Theatre,”’ “for leaving an argument so underdeveloped that it is hardly any wonder there is scope for misinterpretation” (Brown 68). Others feel that even with precise explanations some of his ideas were unrealistic. Brecht theorist Margaret Eddershaw states:

Brecht himself, even in the late stages of his career, was still trying to find an effective formulation of the immediacy of performance on the one hand, and the achieving of an objective understanding on the part of the spectator on the other. (17)

Eddershaw’s point may be the key to the problems associated with the pure Brechtian style, described by Brecht himself. Brecht had very large goals in mind. He wanted a complete revolution in the theatre and wanted it immediately. To dismiss Brecht based
on the immediateness and haste of his ideas and writings is to dismiss his larger place in post-modern theatre.

“Brechtian”: The Appropriation of Brecht by Feminists and Other Subalterns

In Marxist terms, Brecht’s epic theatre was and is an effort to break an audience out of a passive consumption of the art, to “pierce” the theatrical illusion. Part of the theatrical illusion for centuries was that the only stories worth telling were those by, for, and about White Europeans, and in the twentieth-century, White European or American males specifically. While the Red Scare of the 1950s and 1960s made certain to crush any serious Socialist movements in the United States, many Socialist ideals found their way into civil rights movements, as minorities and women typically occupy lower status positions in any given society, much like the theorized proletariat. Due in part to decolonization efforts of the 1950s, civil rights movements of the 1960s, the women’s movement, and the trend in theatre studies – along with academia and society in general - to include voices in addition to European or American white males in the canon of respected dramatic literature, it is understandable how Brecht’s ideas, grounded in anti-bourgeois sensibilities, found their way into theatre by, for, and about non-whites and non-males.

While not always explicitly crediting Brecht, the number of theatre practitioners from the years following World War II and especially since the 1960s onward using Brechtian-inspired methods is great. Epic theatre gave African-American theatre practitioners new possibilities with which to discuss and expose racism and myths of
white supremacy, as can be seen with Amiri Baraka’s (Leroi Jones) *Dutchman* (1964) where we enter the hyper-reality of a claustrophobic subway car in which Baraka presents moments of blatant abuse and racism amidst myth, symbol, and metaphor. In fact, in *The Poetry and Poetics of Amiri Baraka*, William J. Harris discusses Baraka’s feelings regarding white culture and criticism, that their “preoccupation with the universal and the timeless was irrelevant to black art” (Harris 88). Here, we see a theatre practitioner who does not specifically credit Brecht for his work, but who rejects notions of universality and essentialism, ideas developed by and that worked for White Europeans and Americans, but no one else.³

The Brechtian style was specifically appropriated by Brazilian theatre practitioner and theorist Augusto Boal in his work *Theatre of the Oppressed* (1979), Chicano playwright Luis Valdez in *The Shrunken Head of Pancho Villa* (1963) and *Zoot Suit* (1978), Chilean playwright Egon Wolff’s meditation on social and political injustice in *Paper Flowers* (1970), and the Chinese-American playwright David Henry Hwang in *M. Butterfly* (1986). But quite possibly the most direct descendant of the Brechtian model is Feminist theatre.

Patti P. Gillespie writes in her article, “A Feminist Theory of Theatre: Introduction”:

[Brecht’s] emphasis on a spectator as agent of political change, and on the inevitable contamination of both artists and critics by their own socially

³ Amiri Baraka specifically cites theatre theorist and practitioner Antonin Artaud, a contemporary of Brecht who was also committed to breaking audiences out of the theatrical illusion, as a large influence on his work (Greenwald, et al 1379).
constructed presuppositions, appealed to groups that sought to understand and explain both their exclusion from the great historical tradition of theatre and their relegation to the margins of today's theatre. (337)

Gillespie is referring to the need for feminists to create a theatrical space that speak to and about their own experiences. She writes from a very specific materialist feminism position, a position that argues for the deconstruction of the “mythic subject Woman to look at women as a class oppressed by material conditions and social relations” (Dolan 346). This element, again, brings us back to the dispelling of universal myths. Gillespie argues that feminist theatre scholars exhibit a strong inclination towards Brecht due to his and materialist feminism's relationship with material conditions and post-modernism (339). In After Brecht, Jenelle Reinelt echoes:

In their positions of opposition to closed systems of representation and bourgeois theatrical practices, Brechtian theory and materialist feminism sometimes seem to constitute post-modernist projects by virtue of shared critical tasks...they seek to 1) rupture the seamless Narrative wherever a tightly knit, closed system of causal connections implies the inevitability of events; 2) expose ideological assumptions carried in the terms or system of representation, whether this is the property system or the gender system; and 3) deconstruct integrity of “character” in order to show the subject as a site of contradictions, a position within an ideological field of social practices, neither unified nor stable and certainly not eternal. (83-84)
Here, Reinelt specifically locates materialist feminism and Brechtian theories within the larger realm of post-modernism. Reinelt, Gillespie, and Dolan all contend that in order to deconstruct mythical ideas about women a text, play, or performance must dislocate woman’s position as an ‘Other’ within the Western Male Master Narrative system. This contention indicates a link between post-modernism and post-colonialism as it not only echoes Brecht’s goal of disrupting seamless Narratives to expose oppressive social and historical conditions but also Said and other post-colonialist’s goal of dislocating the Oriental’s position as ‘Other’ within the very same Western Male Master Narrative system.

In order to make my case for a post-modern - post-colonial connection based on the shared goal of dispelling myths, I want to first look at the issue of “gaze” before delving further into feminist-appropriated Brechtian methods of deconstruction. For feminists, the question of gaze arises when we consider the manner in which we, the audience, participate in the construction of myth, one of those myths being Woman. Film theorist E. Ann Kaplan asserts that this myth of Woman is a sign created by and for an essentially male gaze. This means that a film is constructed both by and for the male point-of-view. While Kaplan deals specifically with film, Sue Ellen Case argues that the male gaze is evident in theatre as well because, like film, theatre is and has always been a male enterprise. Jill Dolan expands on these sentiments in her article “Gender Impersonation on the Stage: Destroying or Maintaining the Mirror of Gender Roles” when she writes that the stage, particularly the Western stage, “has historically placed women in a subservient position, as use-value, silenced, fringed and appropriated by a
male model” (6). She offers as evidence the fact that in those classic plays admitted into the Western canon from Greek Antiquity through the Restoration Era in England, women’s roles were not only written by and for males, but exclusively played by males.

Because males have typically been the subject of dramatic action and because they are the audience for whom the dramatic action is written, particularly in canonized texts, females are automatically relegated to the position of object, and, as Case concludes “women become fixed in the position of object of the gaze, rather than as the subject directing it; women appear in order to be looked upon rather than do the looking. In that sense, ‘woman’ is constituted as ‘Other’” (Case 342-343). Case’s words expose a link between the myth of Woman and the myth of the Oriental. Just as patriarchal societies define a woman by everything a man is not and what man wishes to be, the West has historically defined the East as everything the West was not using Orientalist stereotypes. The male gaze and the Western gaze are the points of view for which the discourses of patriarchy and Orientalism are constructed, thereby relegating those outside the Male or Western Male identities to Others, subject to the Western male gaze.

In Feminism, Post-modernism, and Gender-Skepticism, Susan Bordo argues that these definitions (for the purpose of my study: Man, Woman, Oriental) are in fact mere constructions, that “the duality of male/female is a discursive formation, a social construction. So too, is the racial duality of black/white” (Bordo 149). Said also describes the precariousness of such definitions as Woman and Oriental when he writes that the ‘Orient’ “corresponds to no stable reality that exists as a natural fact” (Said 331). If we can agree with Bordo and Said that both gender and Orientalist dualities are in fact
constructions, then it is reasonable to deduce that gender dualities serve a larger purpose for self-identification in patriarchal societies, as Orientalism did during the Imperial era. Thus, if we understand colonization as an “infiltration for propagandistic and strategic” purposes (Oxford 147) then we may argue that Woman is colonized by patriarchal systems just as the Orient by the colonial West. We may then conclude that Orientalism is inevitably linked to gender by its focus on Othering.

I contend that a post-modern style directly related to the feminist application of Brechtian technique is best suited to the post-colonial deconstruction of the Oriental myth because my study deals with not one, but two, subaltern groups historically subjected to Western male myth construction, the Oriental and the Western Woman. Furthermore, that feminist theatre’s specific applications of Brecht offer the clearest path to the success of whether or not the Western playwrights in question use post-modern performance technique to shatter the Oriental myth. Feminist theatre theorists and practitioners outline not only a “New poetics” as an antithesis to Aristotle based on Brechtian theory, in which Sue Ellen Case discusses the male gaze and ways to subvert it, but feminists also articulate specific ways to use Brechtian methods in an effort to subvert the entire canon. Specific ways to subvert the canon include “staging the historical conditions, relationships, and influences” that shape consciousness, the employment of cross-gender, cross-racial, and cross-generational casting, and finally theatre that acknowledges myths in canonical texts and seeks to debunk those myths via deconstruction (Cima 404-405). These three devices specifically evoke historicization, the alienation effect, and epic theatre in general. When employed these essentially Brechtian methods function as post-
modern theatre strategies to dislocate our expectations for a Master Narrative by disrupting that very form. It is this specific feminist appropriation of Brecht that I considered necessary in three plays about the Middle East to determine whether or not the playwrights applied post-modern theatre strategies in an effort to subvert the Oriental myth. For the remainder of my study I will use the term 'post-modern Brechtian' to identify this feminist appropriated style.

In terms of historicization, I analyze how Wertenbaker, Kushner, and Mastrosimone position their characters in relation to their specific moments in history and the larger political context surrounding the stories rather than promoting a universal truth. With the Middle East it is important to recognize that it exists not as a construct of the Western imagination but as a centuries-old vast geographical area that has a centuries-old complicated relationship with the West. Do the playwrights locate their Middle Eastern narratives away from the West, thus staging the specific historical conditions of imperialism and Orientalism from the point of view of Afghanistan and Algeria respectively, rather than the point of view of the West?

Secondly, I examine the plays for evidence of a post-modern appropriation of Brecht's alienation effect. Brecht's argument that an actor must "appear strange" to an audience directly relates to the oft-used feminist theatre performance technique of cross-gender casting. In her article titled "'Not...but'/ 'Not-not-Me': Musings on Cross-Gender Performance" Rhonda Blair, specifically evoking Brecht in the article's title, argues that feminist theatre practitioners "use cross-gender performance to challenge traditional representations, to illuminate gender-as-construction and to provide actors
with access to a broader range of roles than they would otherwise have” (Blair 361). Cross-gender performance functions as a way of subverting traditional roles. A woman playing a man onstage and doing it in such a way as to “show the wires” forces an audience to question the performability of gender. With cross-gender, cross-racial, and cross-generational casting actors cannot “disappear into the characters” as called for in Realism, they instead “[show the story] – performing rather than ‘being’ the character” (362). This is not to say that doubling and cross-gender casting are the only ways to achieve the alienation effect. Arguably any self-consciousness or meta-theatrical style or technique can be construed as Brechtian. Thus, in addition to doubling, cross-racial and cross-gender casting requirements to make my case for a post-modern appropriation of the alienation effect, I also looked for general evidence of whether or not the play acknowledged itself as a play, a performance, and did not revert to Realism.

For my third method of discovering whether or not a post-modern Brechtian style was present I analyze each play for an overall goal towards deconstruction, or in Brechtian terms, and, overall epic theatre goal. This may come in the form of a non-linear model, a focus on the political (related specifically to Said and a post-colonial sensibility), episodic structure, or an overall goal of breaking away from any form of universality, essentialism, or totality. Feminists use this model to disrupt sexism and patriarchy, African-Americans use it to disrupt racism, and in this case I use it to look for a disruption of the Oriental myth with regards to the Middle Eastern image in the West.

Brecht promoted his ideas for the cause of socialism specifically and for using the theatre to discuss historical economic conditions controlling everyday life. He dismissed
Master Narratives as no longer able to represent the world and argued that a radical new theatre was needed. For previously underrepresented and/or oppressed groups Brecht’s proposed theatre is a way to achieve a self-representing theatrical style by using it to re-examine and deconstruct Western theatrical traditions. A combination of Brecht’s performance goals and Said’s deconstruction goals carry the potential to disrupt a grand Master Narrative about the Orient. A definitive model of this task and the play that inspired my work on this subject is David Henry Hwang’s *M. Butterfly*. The play is an exemplary deconstruction of the Oriental myth in both its content and form because it follows the six strategies of post-colonial and post-modern deconstruction outlined in this section. I offer the play as a case study to show the effectiveness of my analysis.

Following my discussion of *M. Butterfly* are chapters devoted to Wertenbaker, Kushner, and Mastroisimone’s works as further evidence of my thesis. My primary objective is to discover whether or not the playwrights succeeded in deconstructing Orientalism by approaching their respective Orients with a post-colonial and post-modern sensibility. Because of the long history associated with the West representing the East, a consciousness of the problems associated with Western representation speaks to the intellectual credibility of the playwright regarding whether or not s/he is not only aware of this history but also whether s/he chooses to continue with that history. Did the playwrights succumb to the widely held Orientalist binary oppositional ideal put forth by Rudyard Kipling in 1889 that “East is East and West is West and never the twain shall meet,” (Kipling 234)? Or rather, did s/he choose to deconstruct Orientalist ideas and help further the notion that representations through a Western lens are just that—
representations through a Western lens and with a Western gaze, riddled with political ideas about East versus West, racial hierarchy, and neo-imperialism?

I found that two of the playwrights avoided the construction of an Oriental myth while one did not. The two successful plays follow a deconstructive model using post-colonial methods by way of Edward Said’s ideas and post-modern methods by way of feminist applications of Bertolt Brecht’s ideas. I argue that in order to successfully deconstruct the Oriental myth of the Middle East a Western playwright must engage in both a post-colonial and post-modern sensibility in order to avoid some inevitable pitfalls associated with the West attempting to represent the East, in this case the Middle East.

Case Study: David Henry Hwang’s *M. Butterfly*

“It’s one of your favorite fantasies, isn’t it? The submissive Oriental woman and the cruel white man.” – Song Liling, *M. Butterfly*

Hwang wrote *M. Butterfly*, a deconstruction of Giacomo Puccini’s *Madame Butterfly* (1904), after reading a *New York Times* article about the true account of a French diplomat sentenced to prison for spying with his Chinese Opera singer girlfriend, who, much to the diplomat’s surprise, turned out to be a man. Struck by the diplomat’s claim that he never realized his lover was a man because his lover had never been naked in front of him, Hwang states the following in his “Author’s Notes” to *M. Butterfly*:

[The diplomat’s] assumption was consistent with a certain stereotyped view of Asians as bowing, blushing flowers. I therefore concluded that
the diplomat must have fallen in love, not with a person, but with a fantasy stereotype. I also inferred that, to the extent the Chinese spy encouraged these misperceptions, he must have played up to and exploited this image of the Oriental woman as demure and submissive. (94)

It was around this fantasy stereotype that Hwang crafted *M. Butterfly*. I maintain that Hwang employs the six elements of deconstruction outlined in the previous sections to successfully disrupt the Oriental myth both ideologically and performatively in his play. Said’s theories offer an ideological framework by which to view *M. Butterfly* as a sociological study of Western ideas about the East and the politics of power involved in their relationship with one another, while Brechtian performance techniques vividly examine and comment on the politics involved with the performance of identity. I will first discuss Hwang’s employment of post-colonial technique by way of Said.

Hwang’s deliberate statement about wanting to deconstruct *Madame Butterfly* is the first example of Said’s idea regarding pure versus political knowledge. Had Hwang decided to write a play that merely updated the *Madame Butterfly* myth in a contemporary setting and kept Orientalist stereotypes in tact, he could have claimed his interest in the subject was “pure”, in the Said sense, and not political. However, Hwang was and is aware of the problems inherent in Western representation of the Orient, of the constructed Oriental myth both in Western culture generally and Puccini’s opera specifically, and sought to deconstruct the Oriental myth by self-consciously playing along with the myth through the first Act of *M. Butterfly*, then subverting that myth midway through the play.
The play begins with French Diplomat Rene Gallimard in a prison cell, recounting the tale of how he ended up incarcerated because he found the love of “the perfect woman” (4). Hwang paints Gallimard as a “wimp” and “socially inept” (4, 9). Gallimard is unsuccessful with women, a bore in his marriage, and inconsequential in his job with the French government. Hwang constructs him as a failure until Gallimard meets Song Liling, who is performing the death scene from *Madame Butterfly* at the Peking Opera House the night they first meet. Gallimard believes he has found the “perfect woman” because Song, as far as he knows, embodies the myth of an Oriental woman needing the love and control of a Western man. He likens the affair to Puccini’s tragic Butterfly and proceeds to tell us his story juxtaposed alongside the opera; what we find however is that the story is not as Gallimard believes. Song turns out not only to be a spy but also a man. Gallimard’s presumptions about Song based on race and a mistaken idea of gender create a sense of power within him as he abuses Song’s affections and manipulates his own standing in society because of their relationship. Whether or not Gallimard ever loved Song is not the point in the end. What remains is the fact that he benefited socially and professionally from keeping an Oriental mistress, was granted access to the inner circle of French colonial society due to his supposed *knowing* an Eastern woman, and was presumed to understand all Eastern relations due to his intimacy with one of the East’s own.

Throughout *M. Butterfly’s* first Act, Hwang employs Said’s strategy of deconstructing an authoritative approach. He strategically locates Gallimard as the Narrator, telling the events from Gallimard’s point of view and then subverting that
Western authority when, in Act II Scene Four, we realize that not only is Song a spy for Communist China, but also that Song is a man. From this moment on, Gallimard’s delusions are exposed to us, as well as the fact that he and the entire West’s presumptions of the Oriental not only allowed this long-standing and terrible deception to occur, but, enabled Song’s ability to deceive Gallimard by playing the role of the perfect submissive Oriental woman that the West, in fact, constructed.

The moment Song speaks to us for himself Hwang deconstructs the Oriental image and turns it on its head, switching the narrative to Song’s point of view. At the end of Act II, Song steps out of his role as Butterfly and asserts his control of the situation:

GALLIMARD. Why do you run away? Can’t we show them how we embraced that evening?
SONG. Please. I’m talking
GALLIMARD. You have to do what I say! I’m conjuring you up in my mind!
SONG. Rene, I’ve never done what you’ve said. Why should it be any different in your mind? Now split – the story moves on, and I must change. (78)

The story was never Gallimard’s at all; it was always Song’s. Hwang subverts notions of the Oriental by deconstructing the stereotype of the submissive Oriental woman in Song’s resistance to Gallimard, but also by strategically locating an Oriental male as the play’s narrator, usurping the role from the Western male. In this moment, the play deliberately
enacts post-colonial contested representations as the former “subject” – an Oriental – takes over as our narrator.

For the remainder of the play Hwang shows us how the deception of Gallimard took place due to a firmly grounded belief in the binary oppositional structure of the Oriental myth, based on centuries of European writings and presumptions about a wild, timeless, unpredictable, and inferior Orient. Song represents the Orient to Gallimard and, thus, Gallimard’s desire to dominate him, for he believes that Song is an Oriental woman needing and requiring his colonization. Gallimard presumes that Song plays right into his hands when Gallimard refuses to visit the Opera house or write for eight weeks, gambling that Song will eventually break and beg him to return, “I knew this little flower was waiting for me to call, and, as I wickedly refused to do so, I felt for the first time that rush of power” (32). Gallimard recounts to us that Song finally submits to him, bringing the realization that he can predict Song’s actions. Gallimard believes he has the power. His presumption of knowing her, of understanding her as a weak, timid Oriental girl grants power and ownership to him. What Gallimard does not realize is that Song Liling is pretending to be a woman and to submit to him, and performing the Western-conceived Oriental stereotype, all in an effort to gather information for the Chinese government.

By crafting Song as an actor performing the roles of the Western-conception of an Oriental and a woman, Hwang identifies the link between gender and Orientalism. The Western construction of the Oriental relies on the binary oppositional notion that an Oriental - male or female - possesses the masculine strength of the Western male, nor does s/he exhibit the reason, intellect, and power of the West. In Orientalist discourse the
Oriental male is feminized, thus locating him as weak, submissive, and irrational when compared to the Western male. Song is all too familiar with the Oriental myth and knows that by being an Oriental in Gallimard’s eyes means that Gallimard would never suspect that he, Song, was a man. The myth of the Oriental, whether male or female, is feminized for the West and for Gallimard specifically, making it all too easy for Song to don the costume of an Oriental girl and fulfill the myth of the Oriental for Gallimard. Even Song’s “modesty”, shielding Gallimard from learning the truth about his gender, is excused in Gallimard’s mind as a characteristic of an Oriental woman. Again, it does not matter if Gallimard truly knows that Song is a man; what matters is that his well-defined ideas of the perfect woman based on his acceptance of and belief in the Orientalist Madame Butterfly myth, are illustrated by Song’s every action.

Song’s deliberate enacting of the Oriental myth brings me to Hwang’s employment of performative deconstructive technique via post-modern Brecht. The first element of this technique is in the way Hwang locates M. Butterfly at a crossroads between French imperialism and decolonization, and makes a statement about constructed identities and hegemonic narratives in the process. Hwang refers to the technique of historicization through Gallimard, a man who believes he is living the timeless myth of Madame Butterfly. M. Butterfly is never a timeless, Master Narrative about love and deception, but rather the play offers what Jenelle Reinelt describes as “sociopolitical formation(s) underlying the actions” (Reinelt 11) between Gallimard and Song to historicize the situation. Hwang uses this post-modern Brechtian technique to expose the myth of Butterfly by revealing that Song is a man performing a Western-
conceived stereotype and by locating the affair amidst Cold War and post-colonial politics.

The second and most prominent Brechtian technique in *M. Butterfly* is Hwang’s evocation and employment of the alienation effect. The entire play is in fact an act of homage to the alienation effect with its focus on Chinese Opera – the theoretical foundation of Brecht’s theory. But more specifically, Hwang employs the feminist appropriation of the alienation effect through his requirement for cross-casting. One example of this is the actress playing the doting Oriental servant girl, Shu Fang, also plays Cio-Cio San’s friend, Suzuki, who criticizes Cio-Cio San for choosing Pinkerton instead of a Japanese prince, in the play within-the-play of *Madame Butterfly*. This actress also plays Comrade Chin, the superior to whom Song Liling must report with specifics on Song Liling’s spying. By cross-casting these roles in this fashion, Hwang constructs three very different versions of an Asian woman – Shu-Fang enacts the doting Oriental, Comrade Chin enacts the wiley Oriental, and Suzuki enacts an identity not usually proscribed to an Asian woman. Suzuki only appears in one scene, but in that moment she is strong and outspoken as she rationalizes the absurdity of Cio-Cio San’s obsession with Pinkerton.

The primary example of a post-modern alienation effect however is through Hwang’s commentary on the performability of identity and gender through Song. *M. Butterfly* presents a Chinese male opera star dressing as a woman both on the stage within the play and in the play itself. The audience sees a man playing Song, who in the play is “performed” by a man. Within the world of the play, Song enacts the role of the Oriental
woman in order to spy on Gallimard. Hwang argues that the Western illusion of the Oriental myth allows Song to perform the role and deceive Gallimard so successfully. Hwang illustrates this argument in Act III, Scene One, when Song, now dressed as a man in court, comments on his performance of the Oriental. The Judge presses Song on the details of his spying, of Gallimard’s involvement, and whether or not Gallimard was aware of his treason. The questioning turns to why it was possible for Song to fool Gallimard so thoroughly. Song replies, “One, because when he finally met his fantasy woman he wanted more than anything to believe that she was, in fact, a woman. And second, I am an Oriental. And being an Oriental, I could never completely be a man” (83). Here Hwang deconstructs the performance of the Oriental by allowing the mythic subject – the Oriental – to not only speak for himself in the play but also to enact the deconstruction of that myth for us, the audience, as Song comments on his performance in court.

Throughout the play, Song’s performance works to subvert what could be a Master Narrative created by Gallimard. While Gallimard’s audience addresses are not necessarily epic in form, Song’s are. Whenever Song addresses the audience he does so to usurp Gallimard’s authority. This epic theatrical technique is the final evocation of Brecht. Each time Song speaks to us he disrupts Gallimard’s attempt at constructing a myth. In fact, at the end of Act II we watch as Song speaks to us, disrobing from the Butterfly costume, removing his make-up, and taking on his true identity as a Chinese man. Each of these methods is an effort by Hwang to remind us specifically that the myth of the Oriental is a construction, capable of being performed and disrupted. Hwang
successfully deconstructs of the Oriental myth in the play by reinforcing time and again
the simultaneous deconstruction of the entire myth of theatrical illusion.

By deconstructing the Oriental myth both ideologically and performatively in *M. Butterfly* amidst Cold War politics, Hwang indicts the power assumed by the West over
the East based on constructed ideas about the Orient and indicts the West for its
presumptions. Hwang argues that Western belief in their Oriental myth allowed for the
gross miscalculations by the West in their involvement in Vietnam. After the failures of
both France and the United States in the country, as well as Britain’s loss of its colonies
after World War II and the general move towards global decolonization, it is reasonable
to conclude that policy-makers would rethink policies dealing with Eastern countries.
However, with the involvement of the United States in Iraq and Afghanistan, it is clear
that Orientalist attitudes and ideas remain prevalent in policymaking and that public
opinion is as easily manipulated by Orientalist ideas as ever, particularly in the United
States and Great Britain. Generalized attitudes about the Orient continue to influence
advisors, just as Song did with Gallimard.

The conclusion I arrive at, then, is that if a contemporary work by a Western
playwright writing about the Middle East and/or Islam hopes to deconstruct Western
stereotypes about the Middle East and/or Islam s/he must follow not only an ideological
deconstructive framework but also a performative one. In the following chapters, I
demonstrate that the use of each of the three Said ideas and Brechtian techniques,
respectively, results in the successful deconstruction of the Oriental myth when a
Western writer represents the Middle East on the Western stage.
Chapter 2

TIMBERLAKE WERTENBAKER’S NEW ANATOMIES

“There have been many women, particularly Englishwomen, who have been enthralled by the Oriental legend; who have followed the beckoning Eastern star wherever it led.” (Blanch xi)

Timberlake Wertenbaker’s first published play, New Anatomies (1981) is a fictionalized account of the life of Isabelle Eberhardt, a young Russian-German woman at the turn-of-the-century in French-occupied Algeria, who flees her life as a Western woman, dresses as a Arab man, and lives out her life as a Sufi Muslim in the deserts outside of Algeria. Eberhardt’s struggle with identity is reminiscent of Wertenbaker’s resistance to identifying as a single entity even as a playwright. Being of French and American heritage, raised in the Basque country, schooled in Paris and New York, and residing for a long period in London and thus often defined as a British playwright, she does not identify strongly with the category of British, American, or French playwright (DiGaetani 263) stating, “I don’t know why you can’t be many things at once” (264).

While researching historical women who, like Wertenbaker, resisted the compartmentalization of their identities, she came across Isabelle Eberhardt. She was looking specifically into historical female figures who cross-dressed as men in order to gain access to male society. Influenced by British playwright Caryl Churchill’s use of cross-casting and cross-gender casting amidst issues of materialist feminism illustrated
specifically in *Cloud 9* (1979), Wertenbaker was interested in the deconstruction of
gender via cross-gender casting on the stage because "I was intrigued by the mental
liberation in the simple act of cross-dressing" (Wertenbaker vii). She began writing a
play dealing with Eberhardt as well as Amantine-Lucile-Aurore Dupin, a French novelist
and early feminist who wrote under the male pen name George Sand, and Ono Kamachi,
"a Japanese poet and courtesan" but decided to focus on Eberhardt alone after reading
Eberhardt’s travel journals. Wertenbaker was fascinated; she relates that Eberhardt "was
a woman in love with adventure, on a quest, and this was a theme that obsessed me" (vii).
From there, Eberhardt’s story became a play.

Wertenbaker writes her version of the Western woman’s encounter with the
Orient by focusing on the precise performative nature of identities both in the content and
form of her play. She deliberately frames her story dealing with questions about
Victorian womanhood amidst the colonization of the Orient in an effort to highlight the
similarities between the two and deconstruct any notions of Western male essentialism
and Master Narratives.

The oppressive Victorian standards of womanhood in the late nineteenth and early
twentieth centuries and the perceived exotic allure of the Orient which represented
freedom from that oppression for Western women is quite possibly the reason for the
Western woman’s historical fascination with, as well as the long tradition of her
immersing herself in, the Orient. Barbara Hodgesen, author of *No Place for a Lady* (2002)
and *Dreaming of East: Western Women and the Exotic Allure of the Orient* (2006),
theorizes, like Said, that the seventeenth-century French translation of *The Thousand and
One Arabian Nights led to romanticized notions of the Orient which, after reading, Western women felt the urgent need to experience and possess the Orient for themselves (Hodgsen 19-21). She writes, “Travel to the East offered a woman escape from convention and filled gaps in her education...to those of the East she formed a new category of gender, a being with the learning of a man and the appearance of a woman, to be treated with near equality” (3) by men. This was particularly true during the “constraints and contradictions” of the Victorian Era (2) when women, particularly English women, were expected to conform to very specific ideas about womanhood, specifically piety, purity, submission, and domesticity.4

Some, but by no means all, of the most noted women travelers of the period did in fact possess and/or illustrate some or all of these Victorian womanhood ideals, but their very actions as women traveling, sometimes unaccompanied to the East set them apart from Victorian Europe and allowed them a freedom unknown to women who did not travel. Women such as Isabella Byrd, Lady Isabel Burton, Anne Blunt, and Isabelle Eberhardt left the constraints of the West and traveled to the Orient for knowledge, excitement, and romance, or to write and make money selling their travel journals. The case for Eberhardt included all of the above, but she particularly longed to enter a world where she felt her identity as a woman would not confine and define her.

While Wertenbaker takes some liberties with Eberhardt’s story to construct New Anatomies, she does so with firmly established ideas about the politics of imperialism and

4 These characteristics make up what came to be known as “The Cult of True Womanhood”, a phrase meant to encompass turn of the century attributes of “domesticity, submission, siveness, piety, and purity” (Dickerson 110).
the application of deconstruction. Wertenbaker’s political knowledge, in the Said sense, operates from a very clear post-colonial standpoint. She herself resists the complete identification with any one particular identity or country, for, as she states in reference to fascism “we all know what [patriotism and nationalism] can lead to,” (DiGaetani 269).

As a whole, Wertenbaker’s works critique nationalism, hegemonic control (Our Country’s Good), and patriarchal societies (The Grace of Mary Traverse, The Love of the Nightingale). One statement in particular resonates with ideas Wertenbaker explores in New Anatomies, “I grew up in the Basque country of France where language was systematically eroded and destroyed; The French government told parents that speaking Basque was backward and would hold children back in society, while learning French was better for their children’s futures” (268-269). Wertenbaker’s statement critiques hegemonic interpolation, of the destruction of an indigenous culture by an imperial superpower under the guise of ‘the greater good’. Her stance against this destruction of indigenous cultures and languages is apparent in New Anatomies with its critique of the French colonization of Algeria, as well as the “digestion of Morocco” (Wertenbaker 49).

In terms of authoritative approach and strategic location, Wertenbaker chose a complicated and controversial subject with Isabelle Eberhardt. Reactions to Eberhardt’s life range from romanticized notions of her desert traveling to critical focuses on her promiscuity and drug addiction. One of the tragically romantic views is illustrated by Lesley Blanch in The Wilder Shores of Love, a book detailing the lives of four European women who found freedom and love in the Orient:
[Isabelle's] behavior was outrageous; she drank, she smoked hashish, but declassed, she remained raceé [sic]. She was the outcast, despised and rejected by French Administration and the colony in general. But she was General Lyautey's trusted friend. She was a writer who was almost unrecognized, and quite penniless till after her death, when, ironically posthumous editing of her books earned a small fortune – for others. Her death was the strangest of all, for she drowned in the desert. (Blanch 285)

Likewise, in a 1993 article in *Yale French Studies* titled, “Portrait of an Artist as a Young Nomad,” Hedi Abdel-Jaouad explores Eberhardt’s identification as an Other from Eberhardt’s associating her half-Russian ancestry with being as “Oriental” as the Arabs. Eberhardt once wrote:

> Like the Russian people, the Arab races survived by the force of an almost unchangeable inertia. Like them, they suffered in silence, bringing the same resignation, the same submission, the same tacit reproval [sic] of injustice to any dealings they had with authorities. (Eberhart quoted in Abdel-Jaouad 99)

Abdel-Jaouad also theorizes that Eberhardt’s identification as an illegitimate child further marginalized her from Western European society. Eberhardt was the only child from her mother’s relationship with Alexandre Tropimowsky, an ex-priest, Communist, and eventual Islam convert (Mackworth 10-11). While her mother and Tropimowsky eventually married, they were not at the time of Isabelle’s birth. By identifying as a
“bastard child”, in opposition to her brothers and sisters and to other children, Eberhardt always identified as an Other.

Once Eberhardt escaped to French colonial Algeria in 1897, she had an immediate longing to travel through the desert and learn about the Arabs, whose sense of them was constructed by their French colonizers as Others. Her feelings of discontent as a Western woman, Moerder’s death that same year, Trophimowsky’s death in 1899, and her brother Augustin’s marriage all contributed to Isabelle’s leaving her life as a Western woman and beginning her life under her Muslim and Arab male persona, Si Mahmoud (Abdel-Jaoaud 95-98).

In the “Forward” to the 1977 publication of Eberhardt’s diaries titled The Passionate Nomad, Rana Kabbani writes, “Like the majority of Europeans who made this voyage of self-discovery, she carried with her a great deal of mental baggage, especially the stereotypical notion of the East as a coffer of erotic delights and unlimited freedoms” (Eberhardt vi). Kabbani likens Eberhardt to the vast array of European travelers before and after her, including Arthur Rimbaud who, like Eberhardt, was an eccentric wanderer hoping to find solace in Africa:

Both [Eberhardt] and Rimbaud represented existential breakdown; they were a metaphor for depicting the moral collapse of the European in the East. Even though they both affected to despise the privatized [sic] world of the colons which rejected them anyway, and set up house with local spouses, they still functioned within and ultimately served the designs of colonialism. (Kabbani viii)
Kabbani proceeds to describe her as “too depressed or drugged or *distractive* to offer [a domestic or social or political dimension of her life]” (xi) and instead her journals focus on an “inward, not an outward” (x) journey through the desert. Kabbani is equally critical of Eberhardt’s refusal to engage with the Arab female community. By relegating herself to the inner circle of Arab male society Eberhardt alienated herself from identifying at all with females both in Europe and Algeria and, according to Kabbani, became “a mouthpiece for patriarchy, voicing traditional male views on sex, culture, religion and politics. Perhaps this position gave her a sense of power” (ix).

Wertenbaker’s play constructs Eberhardt as an amalgam of these different retrospective ideas of who she was and what she represented both in her time and in the years that followed. By taking the many views of Eberhardt into account she strategically locates a naïve, complex, and morally ambiguous young woman as the focus of her story rather than simply a “Passionate Nomad” or flawed European colonialist. Eberhardt’s story is vaguely reminiscent of other Victorian, female, travel writers, as well as T.E. Lawrence, in that all the European parties involved were deemed eccentrics who sought adventure abroad. But Wertenbaker makes concerted efforts both within the content and form of the play to disrupt our abilities to locate Eberhardt’s story within the realm of Master Narrative Victorian travel writing. By refusing to locate Eberhardt as either a Great White Savior or chastise her for her moral character she refuses to reduce Eberhardt to one-dimensional categorization.

This refusal to categorize is essential when considering how Wertenbaker constructs Eberhardt’s story. Wertenbaker takes us through Eberhardt’s life in brief
episodes and flashbacks, resisting the linear Master Narrative style and any semblance of Realism or Naturalism. Wertenbaker has in fact stated that, “My plays are an attempt to get away from the smallness of naturalism, from enclosed rooms to open spaces, and also to get ideas away from the restraints of closed spaces to something wider” (Chaillet 554). Her methodology is an epic style, a style that refuses to submit to ideas of essentialism and universality, is an effort to move away from these very restraints and that style serves as a metaphor for Eberhardt’s own resistance to such restraints. Wertenbaker’s Isabelle spends the entirety of New Anatomies seeking a place where she can be free from other’s expectations of her. Her actions are self-indulgent and narcissistic but Wertenbaker does not create a villain in the obviously flawed Isabelle, nor does she construct a hero. Instead, Wertenbaker shows us Isabelle’s sometimes fumbling and deflated efforts to construct her own desert as opposed to living within the constraints of either Europe or the constraints of the colonial-constructed desert, and thus strategically locates Isabelle as a deconstructed Westerner in the Orient.

The play begins with an inebriated and inarticulate Isabelle wandering the desert, looking “for a fuck” (6). Séverine, a journalist and Isabelle’s traveling companion, tries to make sense of Isabelle in an effort to write a story about her. Isabelle begins telling her tale through episodic flashbacks, and we see Isabelle in the position of outsider to European society even at the age of thirteen through a rejection of Victorian ideals of womanhood. Wertenbaker strategically locates Isabelle’s struggle with gender identity amidst the Victorian Era. It is here that we first find the deconstruction of binary opposites. Wertenbaker specifies in her Stage Notes, “ISABELLE is thirteen, dressed in a
man’s shirt and a skirt much too big for her” (8) and dreaming of traveling, even wanting to join her brother Antoine in the army. Isabelle stands in stark contrast to the other female members of her family, particularly her sister Natalie who embodies the Victorian ideal of womanhood by marrying, having children, and living a domestic life. It is through Natalie’s husband that Natalie and Isabelle travel to Algeria, where their brother Antoine is stationed as a French Foreign Legionnaire.

In Algeria, Isabelle is at odds with Antoine’s wife, Jenny, who exhibits typical negative Orientalist attitudes towards the natives. Isabelle is the only family member who speaks to their native servant in Arabic or refers to her as “Yasmina” rather than the generic Arab servant girl term Fatma. Jenny accuses Isabelle of “talking to the natives in their own language. There’s no reason not to talk to them in French” (18) and further claims that all Arab women’s names “are unpronounceable. We call them all Fatma” (21). Jenny’s words echo sentiments of Orientalism and are set apart from Isabelle’s actions as their binary opposite.

Isabelle’s acceptance and befriending of Yasmina is in opposition to Jenny’s conditioned colonialist response to the natives. Isabelle is further alienated from her family by both Natalie and Antoine’s equally negative sentiments towards the Arabs. Natalie returns from the market and exclaims, “It’s wonderful how stupid these people are. They give you things for nothing” (21), after which Isabelle refuses to accompany Natalie to the market any longer to be a part of her sister’s opportunistic disrespect for Arab bartering. Additionally, Isabelle is set apart from Antoine who in the scene sits “in a crumpled civil servant suit...smoking, tired and grey” (19), having lost all his childhood
dreams about galloping across the desert, “It’s not how we dreamt of it. It’s dangerous, uncomfortable, and most of it isn’t even sand” (20) and telling Isabelle “[Arabs] have no respect for human life. You see how dangerous they are” (24). While living in the desert was once a dream of Isabelle and Antoine as children, Antoine has succumbed to his role as a French imperialist – enemy to and betrayal of Isabelle’s free spirit.

The positioning of Isabelle in opposition to her family members is effective by locating her as an outsider to the West, and to the Victorian values of “ideal womanhood” and empire. However, Wertenbaker examines power relationships even further by positioning Isabelle in opposition to the only Arab in the scene, Yasmina. Yasmina is the only female Arab character in the play and she never speaks. Wertenbaker deliberately silences her, making a profound statement about both gender and Orientalism in terms of, arguably, the group most oppressed by Orientalism – the non-white female. Isabelle tells Yasmina’s story for her, “Poor girl, they tried to marry her to a cousin she hated. It was death or the degradation of becoming a servant. I’ll write about her” (19). Isabelle’s feelings about Yasmina are obviously far more positive than those expressed by Jenny, but Isabelle’s words still assume an authority over Yasmina when she speaks for her and intends to represent her in a story, thereby not allowing Yasmina a voice or identity of her own. Thus, when Wertenbaker plays with binary oppositions she not only shows Isabelle as alienated from European society but also illustrates that Isabelle remains in a power position in relation to the Arabs. While refusing to construct her as a mythic colonial voice for the Arabs she equally refuses to locate her as the mythic anti-colonial voice of a savior.
Isabelle’s alienation from the Arabs is further illustrated in Act II, Scene 2, when she is indoctrinated to the Qadria Sufi Order. As her sheik, Si Lachmi, tells Isabelle of the Qadria brotherhood his words are juxtaposed with Isabelle’s as she says “I wanted to possess this country. It has possessed me...[The desert] is my property: the extended horizon...the luxurious décor of the dunes: mine” (42). In a desire for more knowledge she presses Si Lachmi for more details about the order, including needing to know if “the word Sufi come[s] from the Greek sophos, wise?” (43). Si Lachmi encourages her to be patient and wisdom will come, but first she must “free [herself] from the vulgarity of the world” (Ibid). Isabelle is set apart from Si Lachmi and his two Arab companions, Bou Saadi and Saleh, by her gender – though they do not question her Arab male persona Si Mahmood and, as I will explore further in this section, Si Lachmi, Saleh and Bou Saadi are all played by women - but also by her impatient and relentless need for knowledge about “them”. Isabelle is opposed to European powers in the desert, as it represents yet another society she does not or cannot belong to – that of the Western male. But this does not preclude her from wanting possession of the desert for herself.

Susan Carlson noted in her article, “Language and Identity in Wertenbaker’s Plays,” that Isabelle “aggressively seeks admission to Arab [Bedouin/Sufi/male] society as she looks for alternatives to the European position of power she was born into” (Carlson 140). Wertenbaker problematizes this search by illustrating Isabelle’s position as an outsider to both European and Arab society. She does not fit in with European standards nor does she fit in with the Arabs, as illustrated by an attempt on her life by an Arab male because of her cross-dressing. She is marginalized by both societies and it
ultimately destroys her as she sinks further into alcoholism and drug addiction.

Wertenbaker deconstructs what could become a Western Master Narrative by highlighting the issues of representations that arise amidst colonialism and imperialism.

Up to this point I have examined Wertenbaker's deconstruction from a purely ideological standpoint. She took various ideas about Isabelle Eberhardt and pieced together a complex, deconstructed narrative with themes of post-colonialism, Orientalism, and feminism. But the true deconstructive power of her work comes through the performative application of deconstruction, or more specifically, her deconstruction of the performance of identity. Her methods illustrate the problems of Orientalism and the arbitrary nature of gender and race signs by showing how easily these very signs can be performed, disrupted and deconstructed.

In the play's "Note on Staging" Wertenbaker specifies, "Except for the actress playing ISABELLE, each actress plays a Western woman, an Arab man and a Western man" (4). The casting breaks down as follows:

- **Natalie plays Eugenie** (both Western women), **the Murderer** (an Arab man), **and the Judge** (a Western man)
- **Anna plays Verda Miles** (both Western women), **Si Lachmi** (Arab man), **Captain Soubiel** (Western man), **and Yasmina** (an Arab woman)
- **Jenny plays Lydia** (both Western women), **Saleh** (Arab man), **and Colonel Lyautey** (Western man)
- **Severine** (Western woman) **plays Bou Saadi** (Arab man), **and Antoine** (Western man)
Isabelle plays a Western woman dressed in Western male clothing and a Western woman dressed as an Arab man

Wertenbaker further exposes the performative nature of identity by requiring that the costume changes “take place in such a way as to be visible to the audience and all five actresses should be on stage at all times” (4). This requirement for costume changes is two-fold; it is meant to highlight the ease with which people can change from one identity to another simply by changing their clothes, thereby showing the signaling cultural effect clothing itself has on gender and race, and it is an effort to eliminate all vestiges to Realism in New Anatomies. In terms of the signification effect, the costumes are meant to stand for symbols of identity.

Because of Wertenbaker’s specific performance requirements, an actress in New Anatomies never “magically becomes” her character because we always see her change costumes which signal the changing of identities, genders, and races, and we recognize her as a previous character. The character changes are not ‘magical’; they do not happen safely behind a proscenium arch encouraging us to believe that what we see is reality. Each scene is disrupted by our witnessing the actresses change costumes and assume different characters and identities. The play is a process, a meditation on the construction and deconstruction of gender and racial identities, historicized amidst both the Victorian and Colonial periods, never becoming a Master Narrative on Victorian travel to the Orient.

The application of cross-gender and cross-racial casting and the performance of costume changes on stage are all elements of what I have explored as the feminist
application of the Brechtian alienation effect, to create a situation where we as the audience will question the idea of ‘natural’ identities such as Woman, Oriental, or Man. These questions allow for the deconstruction of the woman and Oriental myths specifically. The moments when we see this deconstruction take place are countless in *New Anatomies*. We watch an actress perform *boyness* as Séverine changes into Antoine, then perform *Arabness* and *maleness* after she changes into Bou Saadi, then perform Victorian *femaleness* performing *European maleness* when she dresses as a woman in men’s clothes at the Paris Salon. We watch Natalie change into Eugénie performing *maleness* in the Paris Salon, then change into *Arabness* as the Murderer and then again perform *Western maleness* by changing into the French Judge, and so forth. We watch as actresses performing in a play try on different identities throughout the play in a Narrative dealing with cross-dressing and the performance of identity.

What happens with the female and Arab roles in particular is a major subversion of traditional male roles. We have one Other – a woman – portraying yet another Other – an Arab – twice subverting the traditional male and Western gaze and calling attention to patriarchy as well as Orientalism. Thus, the questioning of the essence of Othering, which is to assign a describable identity to “Female” or “Oriental”, the subjugated or “enemy”, giving colonizers terms they can discuss with authority, power, and legitimacy. Wertenbaker shows us how every identity we assume is in fact performed and thus subject to disruption. If this is the case, then we can also deduce that blanket statements about women and Orientals on the basis of their complete opposition to men and the
West must also be constructions and not based on scientific fact. Here, Wertenbaker breaks from many theoretical links to Modernism via a refusal to engage in Realism.

The performance not only of Arabness but also Orientalness is illustrated in Captain Soubiel’s interaction with Si Mahmood, Saleh, and Bou Saadi. Bou Saadi, who exemplifies wise mysticism, suddenly “caricatures ‘oriental servility’” (27) the moment Captain Soubiel, a Western male, enters the scene. This moment points specifically to the fact that the Orientalist persona is not innate, but performable. Bou Saadi acknowledges the performance by saying, “It’s not a good idea to irritate Europeans. It’s best to pretend you’re stupid and keep laughing” (31). Bou Saadi knows what the French ‘expect’ of him and gives them what they want in order to ensure his own safety. But what accentuates the performance of identity in this scene even further is that Bou Saadi is played by the actress playing Séverine as well as Antoine; the actress playing Saleh also plays Jenny, and later Lydia, the Salon owner, and Colonel Lyautey; Isabelle is dressed as an Arab male, and the actress playing Captain Soubiel also plays the Verda Miles, Anna, Yasmina, and Si Lachmi.

Quite possibly the most profound statement on the performance of gender and Orientalism occurs in Act II, Scene 1, when Isabelle visits a Paris Salon, a scene which Ann Wilson wrote, “clarifies the performative nature of gender, and toys with threatening inversions to the status quo” (Carlson 140). At the Salon, Isabelle meets a group of women who share the act of cross-dressing with her. Here she meets Eugénie, the eccentric traveler reminiscent of Isabella Byrd (who never cross-dressed), Lydia, the Salon owner, who, while dressed in the scene as a woman, admits to frequent cross-
dressing, Verda Miles, the performing male impersonator, and Séverine, the sharp-tongued lesbian journalist whose character is based on the French socialist, journalist, and feminist, Caroline Remy de Guebhard. Up to this point we have watched all of the women perform various identities on the stage, but in this scene in particular we witness all of the women, save for Lydia, performing the European woman dressing as, performing as, a Western man, and Isabelle performing an Arab man via her Si Mahmood persona.

At the top of the scene, the women watch Verda as she performs her trousers’ role music hall song. The women gossip about Verda’s importance to women because of her trousers’ role performances and about the “colorful Oriental costumes” around the Salon. After seeing an authentic-looking waiter in Oriental costume, Séverine notes that an acquaintance of hers actually has an Oriental servant at home, but that he is “not as convincing” as the waiter (33). It is here that Eugénie discovers Isabelle, or Si Mahmood, sitting alone. Here Wertenbaker writes Séverine noting, “It’s even an Arab that looks a little like Rimbaud” (35), a reference to Rimbaud’s immersion into desert life after escaping oppressive European society. Séverine believes Si Mahmood is the product of Lydia’s careful costuming and placement in her Salon to accentuate the stylishness of Oriental fashion at the time. Eugénie, who also played Natalie taking advantage of the Arabs at market, greets Isabelle in “an exaggerated Arab salutation” (34) and proceeds to tell the women how well she appreciates and understands the Oriental

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5 The scene bears striking resemblance to the first scene in Caryl Churchill’s Top Girls (1982), in which powerful and historic women throughout history come together at a 1970s dinner party, resulting in a gossipy, catty, and dialogue overlapping display of one-upmanship on the part of the women, a commentary on women assuming male competitiveness and spite when achieving positions of power.
mind, a comment that once again illustrates the European idea that knowledge of the Orient paralleled a perceived superiority over it. Eugénie’s sentiments echo those of other Orientalist women travelers of the time, women wishing to show a social superiority over the Orient, superiority they could never achieve in Europe due to their second-class position as women. In the Orient, a European woman could enact the role of colonialist and, though she remains inferior to European men, she can be superior to the Orientals. As Eugénie relates stories of her own travels she speaks of the Orient as a quaint, dreamlike place “Why didn’t we discover it before? All those trips to Athens and Rome staring at ruins when we had the real thing all the time in the Orient” (36). Her tone suggests ownership. Eugénie will next play the Murderer who tries to kill Isabelle and the French Judge who condemns Isabelle’s “perverted nature” (49) and demands that she return to Europe.

Verda joins the women and remembers fondly the moment she began performing as a man, “I saw [my father’s] hat and cape and put them on. I went to the mirror and when I saw myself I suddenly had hundreds of exciting roles before me. I’ve been a male impersonator ever since” (36), to which Lydia echoes that “in order to write well I must dress as a man” (38). The implication here is that as a woman Verda would not have had the same opportunities afforded to her as a performer. She would have instead been relegated to female characters who existed merely as objects of the male gaze. Male roles on the other hand were exciting, complex, and heroic. Verda’s sentiments are equally powerful when we realize that the actress playing Verda, a women who performs as a man to gain access to the stronger and superior nature of male roles, also plays
Captain Soubiel. Soubiel is the man who tries to convince Isabelle that traveling with the Arabs is dangerous, that she requires his protection, and nearly rapes her in the desert after she tells him she prefers to travel with the Arabs. Wertenbaker’s cross-gender casting further disrupts expectations when Captain Soubiel becomes Si Lachmi, sheik of the Sufi Qadria order and the trusted Muslim brother and confidant to Isabelle’s Arab persona Si Mahmood.

The character Verda, based on the historical male impersonator Vesta Tilley, is arguably the most profound statement on the alienation effect in *New Anatomies*. Including the Salon scene, the play calls for three moments when Verda sings for the audience, once at top of Act I, Scene 2, just before Verda becomes Isabelle’s mother Anna, second at the bottom of Act I, Scene 6, when Verda, as Verda Miles, having just transformed from Captain Soubiel, sings dressed as a French soldier, and finally the top of Act II, Scene 1, as Verda sings as Verda Miles dressed as a man, at the Paris Salon for Isabelle and the other cross-dressed women. Each of these three performances function on three levels to remind the audience that what we are seeing is in fact a performance, 1) we see Verda, the female singer *performing a female*, 2) we see Verda assume the role of Isabelle’s mother Anna, then *perform female Arabness* as Yasmina who dresses up in a French uniform for play, then perform *European maleness* as Captain Soubiel, and finally perform Verda *performing European maleness* as a French soldier, and 3) we see Verda the character *performed by an actress*, thereby achieving the intended alienation effect.

By the time we meet her in the Paris Salon scene we are immersed in a dialogue
regarding the performance of identity and are anxious for Wertenbaker to use the scene to allow us further understanding of Isabelle. But, Wertenbaker does just the opposite.

Isabelle is in a precarious position in the Salon scene. She does not join in the women’s banter regarding their reasons for cross-dressing. Instead she sits, drunk, silent for the most part, with an occasional burp or spit. She is not like Séverine, who identifies as a lesbian and cross-dresses for practicality nor is she like Verda who pointedly tells the women that, even though she performs as a man, she has a husband who thinks she is “the most womanly woman he has ever known” (38). Isabelle is ambiguous and once again, defies categorization, “I’m not a woman. I’m Si Mahmood. I like men. They like me. As a boy, I mean. And I have a firm rule: no Europeans up my arse,” (38). This crude remark serves as evidence of Isabelle’s marginalized place outside of categorization. Séverine sums up Isabelle’s place in the world when she says, “We’re destined for the curiosity shops, labeled as weird mistakes of nature, the moment of God’s hesitation between Adam and Eve, anatomical convolutions, our souls inside and out and alone, always alone, outside those bars” (37).

We watched during Act I as Isabelle donned a jellaba and turban and adopted her Arab male persona, Si Mahmood. We know that her reasons for cross-dressing may be just as, if not more, opportunistic than the women with whom she shares the Salon scene. All of the women use the act of cross-dressing as a means to gain freedom – freedom for better roles, freedom to write, freedom to have coffee without men bothering them, or freedom to travel. All of the women are subjected to the myth of Woman and seek to deconstruct that myth in their cross-dressing. Yet Isabelle takes this a step further in her
assumption of an entire Arab male identity, an identity that is also subject to a myth constructed by the very society she abandoned. She claims to be completely separate from the women in the Salon, completely separate from European male society, and yet she also remains marginalized by Arab society, particularly Arab female society, illustrated by Wertenbaker’s choice to silence Yasmina. Isabelle does not have and cannot give us any answers. She dies at the end of the play, never having finished her story for Séverine or for us.

With *New Anatomies*, Timberlake Wertenbaker creates a post-colonial and post-modern epic play that dislocates not only historical Orientalist notions of the Middle East but also historical notions of gender, which are wrapped up in the very same identity politics as Orientalism. She problematizes historically accepted Western ideas about Victorian travel writing, Victorian womanhood, the race for Africa between imperial powers Britain and France, and Arab stereotypes prevalent in contemporary Western popular culture. She exposes the arbitrary nature of signs used to signal gender and nationality, and shows us how easily those signs can be manipulated to deconstruct gender and nationality. This very deconstruction disrupts and dislocates ideas of absolute binarisms separating West and East, as well as male and female.

Since its 1981 premiere, no other playwright has attempted to deconstruct both the female and Oriental myths with regards to the Middle East as effectively as Wertenbaker does in *New Anatomies*. By resisting any formal content or styles that suggest universality or totality, she crafts a critical statement on the Othering of females and Arabs. And even over twenty-five years later her play is challenging and revealing.
Chapter 3

TONY KUSHNER’S HOMEBODY/KABUL

“Where stands the homebody safe in her kitchen, on her culpable shore, suffering uselessly watching others perishing in the sea... The ocean is deep, and cold, and erasing. But how dreadful, really unpardonable, to remain dry.”

-The Homebody, Homebody/Kabul

Tony Kushner is in every sense of the word a political writer. He exists not merely as accomplished playwright but also as a prolific writer, speaker, and activist for peace as well as political issues such as gay rights, women’s rights, and the necessity of a peaceful and equally agreeable resolution between Israel and Palestine. Kushner’s opus includes the two-part Pulitzer Prize-winning Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes (1992), which deals with liberal and conservative identities, relationships, and politics amidst the AIDS epidemic in the face of 1980s neo-conservatism, A Bright Room Called Day’s (1994) meditation on socialism and individualism versus community amidst the rise of the Third Reich in 1930s Germany, and the political musical Caroline, or Change’s (2004) focus on the 1960s Civil Rights Movement. His writings are well-informed political statements inhabiting their own

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6 "I am an American and a Jew... I deplore suicide bombings and the enemies of the peace process in the Palestinian territories and in the Arab and Muslim world... I deplore the occupation, the forced evacuations, the settlements, the refugee camps, the whole shameful history of the dreadful suffering of the Palestinian people... Israel must not be destroyed. The Palestinian State must be established. Peace talks must resume. An international peacekeeping force should take hold of the situation, a condition Israel must accept” (Kushner 146).
space in his political sensibility as a self-proclaimed socialist arguing that socialism “is simply the idea that people are better off if we work collectively, and that the economic system we live in is made by people and therefore can be controlled intelligently rather than let loose. There’s no way that can’t be true” (Vorlicky 37).

Kushner’s tendency towards socialist themes is in fact where Bertolt Brecht’s influence on him began. In an interview with Carl Weber, Kushner recalls his first impression of Brecht:

It was the first time I believed that people who are seriously committed political intellectuals could have a home in the theatre, the first time I believed theatre, really good theatre, had the potential for radical intervention, for effectual analysis. (Vorlicky 106)

This Brechtian influence is apparent in all of Kushner’s works, often in highly stylized choices, such as his stage directions in *Angels in America, Part I: Millennium Approaches* to, in effect, “show the wires” (Kushner 5) as the Angel descends on to Prior, the episodic narrative, and particularly with the cross-casting and cross-gender casting of various roles. Kushner also employed episodic and cross-casting tactics in *A Bright Room Called Day*, along with the Brechtian use of slide and movie projections to further historically locate and historicize the narrative. Finally, in terms of political theatre, no other play offers a better glimpse into Kushner’s feelings about the War on Terror and the West’s relationship with the Middle East than *Homebody/Kabul*, the story of a young British woman’s search for her mother after her mother abruptly leaves for Afghanistan. Kushner is known for his critical stance against United States’ policies in
Afghanistan, specifically the CIA supply of weapons to the Mujahideen during the Cold War to fight the Soviets, the initial backing of the Taliban by the United States via the CIA in a fight to keep weapons out of the hands of Iran, and the American oil company Unocal’s continued business and political relationship with the Taliban in order to secure a Caspian pipeline between 1996 and 2001 (Coll 336-338, 350-351). Yet despite the overriding political themes, Kushner made the interesting choice to locate his Brechtian methods in a much subtler fashion than in his previous works. The choices are still apparent, particularly in The Homebody monologue, but for the rest of Homebody/Kabul the choices are far more ideologically-based than are his custom. The Brechtian methods in Homebody/Kabul, I believe, work their way into the Narrative in a similar ideological manner as the post-colonial/Said ideas.

Tony Kushner wrote Homebody/Kabul two years before the September 11, 2001 tragedy and states in the play’s “Afterward” that “I didn’t imagine, when I was working on the play, that by the time we produced it the United States would be at war with Afghanistan” (Kushner 144). That being said, he also states that if the play feels “eerily prescient” (Ibid) there must be reasonable proof to suggest that it was only a matter of time. If his play did and does feel prophetic Kushner poses this:

We ought to consider that the information required to foresee, long before 9/11, at least the broad outline of serious trouble ahead was so abundant and easy of access that even a playwright could avail himself of it; and we ought to wonder about the policy, so recently popular with the American right, that whole countries or regions be cordoned off and summarily
tossed out of the international community's considerations, subjected to sanction, and refused assistance by the world's powers, a policy that helped blind our government to geopolitical reality, to say nothing of ethical accountability and moral responsibility. (144-145)

Kushner's knowledge in *Homebody/Kabul* is unmistakably political. The time of the play is August 1998, just days after the bombings of the American Embassy in Tanzania. Al-Qaeda claimed responsibility for the attacks and the United States responded by bombing what they believed were al-Qaeda terrorist training camps in Afghanistan (Coll 408-412), where the Taliban were allegedly hiding al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden.

Kushner is writing as an American within the context not only of the American bombings but also with the knowledge that his country supplied weapons to the Mujahideen with whom Osama bin Laden fought during the 1980s Soviet occupation. This knowledge is further complicated when his position as an American also locates him as a citizen of the world's latest super power joining the ranks of earlier superpowers such as Great Britain, France, and Russia, each of which struggled for control of Afghanistan over the last two centuries. Kushner's political knowledge is conscious and he deliberately acknowledges his own position of power as a Western writer writing about the Orient. Because of this position, Kushner knows he must dislocate himself from any positions of power and does this in two specific ways by 1) engaging in non-Orientalist research on Afghanistan prior to writing the play, and 2) distancing himself from any position of authority on Afghanistan. In doing so, Kushner creates a Brechtian alienation effect for himself in relation to both his subject matter and his audience.
Kushner’s first tactic in deconstructing himself as what could be perceived as an Orientalist is by immersing himself in research about the country via non-Western, non-male, and non-Orientalist sources. In his “Acknowledgments” Kushner credits conversations and research performed with an Afghan refugee, his translator Nisar Ahmad Zuri, who provided “invaluable information about Afghanistan” (vii). By employing Zuri as his translator and dramaturge Kushner allowed a person identifying as an Afghan to speak for himself.

Kushner credits an Iraqi poet, Hussein al-Amily, for much of the inspiration behind the play’s focus on Esperanto and the world’s need for a “mother tongue”.7 Kushner also cites The Vagina Monologues’ (1996) author Eve Ensler for sharing “tales and photographs of her hair-raising adventures in Afghanistan” (Kushner xiv).8 The play is heavily researched, but at no time does Kushner suggest that his understanding of Afghanistan is the final word on knowing Afghanistan. Kushner employs the tactic of acknowledging and respecting the source of information to remove himself from any association as a Western writer forcing his own sensibilities upon Afghanistan. In fact, Kushner’s intention is not to explain Afghanistan to us, the West, but rather to expose a chaos that the United States and Great Britain played a part in creating. In a Brechtian sense Kushner alienates the Western idea of the Orient by making/keeping it strange

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7 Much of Homebody/Kabul deals with complications arising from language barriers. Martha Lavey, Artistic Director of the Steppenwolf Theatre in Chicago, discusses the importance of the play’s references to The Tower of Babel from The Bible and The Homebody symbol as a lost mother tongue (Kushner xi) in the play’s “Foreword”.

8 Ensler is known for her dedication in the fight to stop violence against women and wrote a monologue titled “Under the Burqa” for The Vagina Monologues which takes the words of various Afghan women and turns it into a poem about “a time when women had no choice” but to wear the burqa in Afghanistan (Ensler).
rather than simplifying it for us in Western terms. The point for Kushner is the chaos, rather than the making sense of the chaos.

Kushner's second tactic of deconstructing himself as ever appearing to be an authority on Afghanistan is in his own writings about *Homebody/Kabul* that further illuminate his intentions and political knowledge. In the play's “Afterward” Kushner writes:

*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, and 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 its about human catastrophe, a political problem of global dimensions. (142)

In this statement, Kushner acknowledges not only Othering but also the narcissism involved in Othering. In the history of East-West relations, the West has never been interested in the Orient for the Orient's own sake. Rather, the Orient was always a place to know, to understand, and to conquer, whether that meant militarily, culturally, or intellectually. Kushner understands this and realizes that even he may be guilty of representing an Other as he is a Westerner representing Afghanistan. He tackles the play with a self-consciously deconstructive style, deliberately locating it within the historical context of the large scope of Asian history and Western imperialism, determined to avoid any “booby traps” along the way. He furthermore historicizes Afghanistan itself as a
crossroads for centuries of warfare, invasion, colonization, and imperialism in the play’s opening monologue.

In addition to dislocating his own position of power as a Westerner writing about the Orient with *Homebody/Kabul*, Kushner further dislocates this power position with his writing of the character, The Homebody. The play begins with a monologue consisting of just The Homebody, a British housewife in her early forties, sitting on stage with merely a table, a lamp, and a shopping bag talking directly to us, the audience. The Homebody, whom we never know by another name, reads to us from Nancy Hatch Dupree’s 1965 *An Historical Guide to Kabul*, “A city which we all know has...undergone change” (Kushner 9). The Homebody reads about and envisions an Afghanistan so exotic and beautiful that she would give up everything to immerse herself in its mysteries, “My reading, my research is moth-like. Impassioned, fluttery, doomed... it’s almost perverse, in libraries, secondhand bookshops, I invariably seek out not the source, but all that which was dropped by the wayside on the way to the source” (9). The Homebody knows what she reads is a representation of Afghanistan and not the country as its own people know it -- before the Russian invasion, before the Americans supplied the guns to the Mujahideen to overthrow the Russians, before the Taliban robbed women of the right to read, speak, or think. She understands that Afghanistan’s place as a crossroads, touched by hundreds of peoples and cultures over the last five thousand years, has corrupted its very history, “All must be touched. All touch corrupts. All must be corrupted” (11), robbed the country of its ability toward self-representation and is thus subject to representations of itself by its conquerors.
Right away, Kushner positions The Homebody as a reflection of the West. As she breaks the fourth wall and talks to us, The Homebody holds up a mirror to our own narcissistic desires to hear about something as exotic and “Other” as Afghanistan. The Homebody longs to know and understand Afghanistan. Yet while this woman is intelligent, eloquent and verbose, she apologizes for herself throughout the piece. It seems that she apologizes not only for her use of language and her many digressions, “I speak...I can’t help myself. Elliptically. Discursively. I’ve read too many books” (12) but also for simply existing, standing “on her culpable shore” (28) as part of an imperialistic system which helped create the current state of affairs in Afghanistan. Kushner positions The Homebody in this manner in order to call attention to our own presumptions about Afghanistan and perhaps our own involvement, like The Homebody’s, in the part the entire West plays in Afghanistan’s fate.

The Homebody is aware that the Taliban control Afghanistan, that the country has “one of the world’s most decimated infrastructures” (22). She is aware, as a British citizen, of her country’s own participation in and manipulation of The Great Game. Kushner strategically locates The Homebody as his narrator for Act I, Scene 1, and dislocates any position of power she may inhabit by having her acknowledge that very position, and ultimately renounce it by deconstructing it. Yet the manner in which he does this is not merely an adherence to Said ideas but also to Brechtian ones. Kushner historicizes the whole of Afghan history by self-consciously viewing it through a Western lens, knowingly painting a Western exoticized picture of Afghanistan and having his narrator deconstruct that image during a seventy-five minute monologue where she defies expectations by
simply talking to us. Furthermore, by creating The Homebody as a character who actually dislocates herself from any position of power, Kushner is in effect employing an element of the alienation effect. Kushner first uses the alienation effect by disrupting the idea of a Master Narrative by violating the fourth wall and having The Homebody talk directly to the audience, occupying a space that seems both inside and outside the world of the play. Further, The Homebody alienates herself from any association with British Empire or imperialism by inhabiting her own strange position of Otherness as not only a woman, but a woman who thinks too much, who is not proud of her superior position as a Westerner, and who has quite likely taken far too many of she and her husband’s anti-depressants.

The Homebody’s monologue does not operate in a linear structure. The Homebody wanders, interrupts herself and then interrupts her interruption, she twists and turns and fantasizes. During one of her interruptions, The Homebody tells us about a party she was throwing and how the party needed “festive hats” (10). She found the type of hats she wanted at an old shop on an unnamed London street. Kushner deliberately leaves out the name of the street, explaining in his Notes “Instead, where the name would fall in the sentence, she makes a wide, sweeping gesture in the air with her right hand, from left to right, almost as if to say: ‘I know the name but will not tell you’” (Kushner 5). This is an example of Kushner not only playing with our expectations but also placing the ideological within the performative. The Homebody will keep the name of the street a mystery, unable for us to touch, unable for us to corrupt.

The Homebody remembers seeing the barrel full of hats “made of tough brilliant dyed wools and scraps of elaborate geometrically arabesqued carpet” (15) through the
shop window - Afghan hats she presumes. The hats represent the people of Afghanistan, dislocated from their country and their culture by Western imperialism and capitalism, “Beautiful as dislocations are, and sad as dislocations are. Always bloody” (18). The hats are among many other artifacts from various cultures across the globe, “as if a many-cameled caravan, having roamed across the entire post-colonial, not-yet-developed world... gathering with desperate indiscriminateness” (20) had set up shop in London.

The Homebody ironically refers to the artifacts as “third world junk,” further acknowledging the manner in which the West has taken these artifacts of other cultures, acquired them for quaint collective purchases, and “having waved our credit cards in its general direction, having made into junk” (17). She is consumed by guilt and also fascination for the part she believes she has played in Afghanistan’s chaos and is drawn to the Dupree guide book because it represents an Afghanistan before it was “touched” and “corrupted”.

Upon taking the hats to the counter The Homebody tells us she suddenly and fluently speaks the Afghan language Pushto and finds herself conversing with the Afghan hat merchant behind the counter, who is missing three fingers on his right hand. This moment is what Kushner’s biographer refers to as a “typically Kushnerian imaginative leap” (Fisher 191), referring to Kushner’s penchant for dream sequences in many of his works, particularly Angels in America, Parts I and II. This technique further disrupts the Master Narrative by allowing The Homebody to enter her imagined Afghanistan. Once again, Kushner’s tactic is a self-conscious representation of an Oriental fantasy, or The Homebody’s “boarders being broached” (13). The Homebody fantasizes about the
Afghan proprietor telling her romanticized tales of losing his three fingers, “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...” (23), fantasizing about taking his hand and following him through Kabul, “…mountains, unreal as clouds; it is shamelessly sweet, the wreckage rack and ruination all there of course…but the gardens of Babur Shah are there too,” (25), about making love with this strange exotic man beneath a chinar tree, and yet suddenly coming to when the hat merchant hands her the hats and smiles “to indicate that we are done and I should depart” (26). Like the character Harper in Kushner’s *Angels in America, parts I and II*, The Homebody, with some pharmaceutical assistance, escapes her daily reality by whisking off onto adventures she will never know unless she breaks free from her identity and existence as a homebody.

To The Homebody, even the knowledge of the reality of Afghanistan – the possibility of death should she travel there – is appealing because of its exoticism yet painful because she knows the Afghanistan she reads about no longer exists. She knows the dangers, but she wants to go regardless. She wants to be corrupted. The Homebody’s monologue begins with such hope as she sits alone at her table with only the company of her fantasized Afghanistan. Her tale slowly spirals downward as she talks of her husband Milton, her antidepressants, her “affected” relationships with other people, and the withholding of her touch for her daughter Priscilla for fear of corrupting her, leaving Priscilla “starving”. She recounts her despair alongside the glorious beauty of Afghanistan spiraling downward as well from touch and corruption as one invader after
another marches in to control the land. After her monologue The Homebody puts on her blue raincoat and departs. We never see her again nor do we see such overt Brechtian performative choices by Kushner in the play. Instead, Brecht’s ideas work into the play ideologically with Said once Kushner takes us to Kabul.

Throughout the remainder of the play The Homebody is the object of an episodic quest by Priscilla and The Homebody’s husband, Milton, who go to Afghanistan to find her. Instead, Milton and Priscilla are told by a doctor and local Mullah that she was murdered in a minefield, but also that her body is missing. While Milton struggles to accept this, Priscilla ventures outside to find answers. But even Priscilla who may appear to take over as the strong Western leader is deconstructed for us. Priscilla also suffers from emotional problems, culminating in a suicide attempt after she aborted her unborn child. She cannot pick up where The Homebody left off because Priscilla, too, is lost.

Upon going out into the city of Kabul, Priscilla meets a Tajik Afghan named Khwaja who tells her that her mother is alive, has converted to Islam, married a Mullah, and never wishes to see Priscilla or Milton again. Khwaja tells Priscilla that in exchange for helping her find answers about her mother she must take a package of Khwaja’s poems to London with her. The poems are in Esperanto, an artificially constructed language created by Ludvic Lazarus Zamenhof in the nineteenth-century in an effort to unite the world in one common language.9

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9 The language Esperanto was “proposed ... as a second language that would allow people who speak different native languages to communicate, yet at the same time retain their own languages and cultural identities” (Esperanto-usa.org).
Khwaja tells Priscilla the story of how he learned the language during his time at Pol-e-Charkhi prison, how he traveled to London believing Esperanto was the only language spoken universally throughout the world, and his devastation when he realized that "no one could understand me" (58). In one of his poems he speaks of a woman waiting in a garden, "her voice ravishing; and it is fatal to us. We may seek her, or spend our lives in flight from her. But always she is waiting in the garden, speaking in a tongue which we were born speaking. And then forget" (118). He refers to the language as "homeless, stateless, a global refugee patois" (58). With this, Kushner references not only the fact that Khwaja, a Tajik, is homeless for being a persecuted ethnic minority in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan, but also the idea that all of humanity is homeless without a common language, a mother tongue, thus rendering humanity incapable of communication or peace. 10

Just as Kushner strategically locates The Homebody as the narrator he dislocates the Master Narrative when she disappears, literally in the world of the play, and as our protagonist, never allowing another character to completely assume her place as a the narrator. We lose our guide in a sense. The closest character we find in Acts II and III to The Homebody is Mahala, the Afghan woman and former librarian who is the first wife of the Mullah whom The Homebody allegedly married. Mahala has "lost" her language under the Taliban laws forbidding women to work or even read. Where The Homebody 10

Kushner's inclusion of Esperanto in his play is a reference to the Tower of Babel, a story that claims God punished the people of Babel for building a tower to Heaven and cursed humanity with different languages, enabling humanity incapable of communicating with and understanding one another.
was imprisoned by too many words. Mahala is in a prison without words. The effect is that neither woman can communicate with those around her.

Khwaja tells Priscilla that Mahala wishes to go back to London with Milton and Priscilla. In the ensuing chaos, Mahala becomes the voice of the play, but Priscilla cannot understand her because of the language barrier. Mahala screams at Priscilla in the Afghan dialect Dari, in French, and broken English, in a desperate attempt to punish her for the atrocities Britain and America have brought to Afghanistan, but also to make Priscilla understand that she must help Mahala escape Afghanistan, “To leave is a terrible thing. But I must be saved. Yesterday I could not remember the alphabet. I must be saved by you,” (87). Mahala personifies the problem that she must be spoken for by someone else as an Afghan woman who has been silenced by the Taliban and robbed of the freedom to read a simple book, but also as an Other to Priscilla, one whose words must be translated for someone to understand her. Kushner does not suggest that the West is the answer to Mahala’s prayers, but because the West helped destroy her country, she has no other choice but to leave. Kushner locates Mahala as the voice of chaos, “Women are dying all around me, I can hear the sounds from the houses when I peek out the window, when I walk in the burqa” (86) and does not offer us a voice of reason to alleviate it.

In refusing to locate the West as the voice of reason, Kushner refuses to succumb to any semblance of universality or essentialism. He refuses to give us an answer. He further refuses the incorporation of binary opposites when writing his Afghan characters, once again applying post-colonial and post-modern methods of deconstruction. Amidst a
climate of fear over Muslim terrorism, Kushner upsets expectations by writing Afghan characters that do not fit into a defined category. Jamil Khoury praised the playwright’s efforts by stating, “That Kushner resisted the temptation to concoct exoticized ‘others,’ knowing perfectly well how effectively Orientalism titillates, is testimony to his integrity” (Khoury). None of the Afghans in *Homebody/Kabul*, not even the Mullah or Taliban guards, remotely resemble wily and scheming Oriental men or submissive Oriental women. Khoury notes the complexities with which Kushner wrote the characters Khwaja and Mahala specifically, arguing that Khwaja conveys “an image of Afghan masculinity that is gentle, thoughtful, introspective, and wise,” and Mahala shows “an Afghan womanhood rife with agency, victimized but not a victim. Her powerful indictment of state-sanctioned misogyny and anti-intellectualism signals despair and rage, but never defeat” (Khoury).

Not only does Kushner refuse to construct Orientalist caricatures of the Afghans, he further calls attention to the very idea of such stereotypes at specific points in the play. Upon hearing the rumor that his wife may have married a Mullah, Milton exclaims “And, and, she...married a Muslim? Which, allow me to point out, she might have just as easily done in London, and a nice Western sort of Muslim too, not one of these...barbarians” and furthermore tells Priscilla, “These people who are ruthless creatures of a culture, if I may call it that, a culture of betrayal and brutality and disassembling, are practicing on you” (Kushner 58). If Kushner had constructed Milton

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11 Jamil Khoury is the Artistic Director of Silk Road Theatre Project in Chicago, dedicated to producing works by members of and about the former Orient, and one-time instructor of Middle Eastern Studies at the University of Chicago’s Graham School of General Studies.
as the antithesis to these remarks, as the superior Western male, the scene may play quite differently. But instead, Kushner paints a picture of him that suggests, through The Homebody's words and Milton's own, distance and weakness. Milton was too distant to recognize that his wife was trying to tell him she wanted to leave, "She could be so preposterous, so yes in a sense I always expected her to do something, something disagreeable..." (40), without even acknowledging how "preposterous" it is for him to make light of the situation. Milton further reacts to his wife's death by saying "Jesus Christ. I am unmarried" (42). Milton is clearly wrapped up in the larger world of appearances, of the "affected" relationships his wife disliked so much. In addition to his distance and weakness, amidst the chaos of Afghanistan, while his daughter risks her life searching for answers about his wife's death, Milton gets drunk and smokes opium with their British liaison Quango, yet another example of Kushner's refusal to construct strong and heroic Western men.

Because Kushner refuses to locate Milton as the strong, rational, British savior and instead portrays him as a frightened, confused, and very human, man, and because we have already met Khwaja who is not at all written as a "barbarian", Milton's racist remarks based on an Orientalist vision are exposed for what they are: ignorance. We cannot fall back on evil Muslims and Western heroes because Kushner does not give us either one. Kushner knows that this falling back on stereotypes is what a Western audience is programmed to do. Not only will he not let us fall back on these notions in Homebody/Kabul, he upsets these very notions even further when his Afghan characters point out the fact that the West created the chaos, the same chaos which, to the West,
creates savagery. Khwaja tells Priscilla “What have you ever brought us besides misery? The West? [sic] And many among us would like to give your misery back to you... You have to take home nothing but the spectacle of our suffering. Make of it what you will” (115). To further the point, during Mahala’s desperate tirade to Priscilla she screams, “You love the Taliban so much, bring them to New York! Well, don’t worry, they’re coming to New York! Americans!” It does not matter to Mahala that Priscilla is British and not American, to Mahala it is all the same just as she and the rest of the Orientals are all the same to the West. Yet even after September 11th, Mahala does not inhabit the space of the play as a crazed Muslim terrorist. She is enraged, heartbroken, and desperate, yet also knows as Kushner does, that desperate measures arise from desperate times. She has watched the destruction of her country and can no longer bear it. Her rage does not exist in a vacuum and Kushner, again, does not offer a solution in the body of a Westerner or anyone else.

Kushner’s final point which points to a dismissal of binary opposition occurs in Act III, Scene 2, during a conversation between Mahala and Milton as they struggle to communicate with one another. Milton tries to explain his work as a communications engineer, but Mahala does not understand until Milton says “In a sense, strange languages is [sic] what networking is all about. Languages expressed as binary code” (125). Mahala, a former librarian, understands and relates it to the Dewey Decimal System, the only true international language. She then remembers the philosopher John Dewey who argued that “Religion and, um...reason, the mind-the soul and the mind he says are not [sic] in...opposition with one another but... [conjoined]” (126). Mahala and
Milton help one another understand this idea of duality, “these which is [sic] seem not alike, you shall make a single thing! To, to [sic] communicate” (127). The chaos of Afghanistan and our kinship at the micro level as well as Kushner’s very political sensibility is expressed in a few mere lines as Milton discovers, “Precisely! Afghanistan! That’s the metaphor! Armies, and, and [sic] gas pipelines and even Islam, communism, tribes, East and West, heroin, refugees, moving chaotically, and each is a language” (127). Mahala understands Milton’s place as a Wester all too well when she, through Kushner, asks how Milton intends to build a machine “to banish confusion” (127). Milton is speaking specifically about an internet search engine for library catalogues but Mahala’s question invokes the idea of the West inventing a way to banish the confusion of Afghanistan. Mahala and Milton’s entire exchange is a deconstruction of binary opposition, suggesting the idea that “Pairs of two things which are alike but also opposite” (120) might eliminate the need for Othering. Kushner exposes the very nature of binary opposites in Orientalist discourse when he locates Milton and Mahala in the common space of longing to communicate and understand. The basis of the debate for Orientalism is that West and East are not only different, but that the East is everything the West wishes to believe it is not. By creating three-dimensional Afghans and far less than heroic, yet very human, Westerners, Kushner shatters the Orientalist myth.

As the lights dim after Act III, Scene 2, and Kushner takes us from Kabul back to London, Kushner specifies in his stage directions that Mahala “adjusts her hair and clothes, becoming a modern English woman. She looks very different” (136) as she takes The Homebody’s place in her chair. Here is the first time since The Homebody
monologue that Kushner truly “shows us the wires”. Kushner illustrates Mahala’s Western assimilation in one quick moment, the physical traces of her Oriental-ness gone. This is not a happy-ending. Rather, Mahala is a sad dislocation from Afghanistan, no longer a “source, but all that which was dropped by the wayside on the way to the source” (9) and now “safe in her kitchen, on her culpable shore, suffering uselessly watching others perishing in the sea” (28). Will she become trapped like The Homebody, unable to communicate with anyone around her? She tells Priscilla she is learning English. She is free to read at last. The only choice left for Mahala was to go West, after the West destroyed Afghanistan. She may or may not be sleeping with Milton now that she has taken The Homebody’s place. Khwaja is most likely dead, murdered by the Taliban for their belief that his Esperanto poetry was code for a Northern Alliance contact in London. And Priscilla may have found some peace. Priscilla tells Mahala “In the space she’s left...some...joy? Something unpronounceable inside is waking up...In this house I knew...I could hear her still” (139). But chaos remains.

We never know what happened to The Homebody. We do not know if Mahala will “succumb to luxury” as so many of the conquered have before her when given a choice between two evils, or if she herself remains in chaos. All Kushner tells us with any certainty is that Afghanistan is what it is because we, the West, made it that way. No catharsis. For what good would it bring if he made the world right again for us before we left the theatre?

One of Kushner’s fondest Brecht quotes when thinking about late twentieth-century/early-twenty-first century politics is “there is injustice everywhere/and no
rebellion” (146). It seems fitting that one of the most telling plays about the War on Terror was written before the war officially began. Kushner sensed the injustice and wrote about it long before al-Qaeda and Afghanistan became household names. Kushner employs an understanding of imperialism, colonization, and Orientalism to 
*Homebody/Kabul*. Without ever having to mention the name Edward Said, Kushner evokes him in *Homebody/Kabul* by deconstructing the Oriental ideologically and performatively via Brecht. He understands the manner in which Brecht has been applied, through cross-casting, disrupting linear narratives and showing the wires, and can be applied, through intellectual and ideological means, to a play. And for Kushner, Brecht is always his touchstone, because for him Brecht forms the basis of his understanding of political theatre. Before *Homebody/Kabul* premiered in New York in December 2001, Kushner was asked to prepare a press release for the play. In the statement, Kushner wrote the following:

> We have been profoundly alienated from our “dailyness,” from a certain familiarity and safety without which life becomes very difficult. It seems to me that one of the hardest challenges we face is to keep thinking critically, analytically, compassionately, deeply, even while angry, mourning, terrified. We need to think about ourselves, our society – even about our enemies. I have always believed theater can be a useful part of our collective and individual examining. (143)

Kushner charges us all with keeping our eyes on a course rather than a finish line, just as Brecht theorized in his outline for epic theatre. Kushner’s interest with *Homebody/Kabul*...
lies within the chaos of human communication and interaction, and that without the conscious effort to rethink history, to acknowledge the legacy of imperialism, and the need for a post-modern deconstruction of historical East versus West notions then that chaos will never change. His point, like Brecht’s, is a refusal to locate Afghanistan in an “inescapable fate” (Brecht 57) predetermined by the West’s Orientalist knowledge of what Afghanistan can and cannot be. He furthermore refuses to place Homebody/Kabul within the realm of Romantic Oriental myths, ignoring the part the West has played in the country’s fate. The result is a complicated and, he hopes, on-going, conversation between West and East.
Chapter 4

WILLIAM MASTROSIMONE’S THE AFGHAN WOMEN

“The Orientalist surveys the Orient from above, with the aim of getting hold of the whole sprawling panorama before him—culture, religion, mind, history, society.”

-Edward Said, Orientalism

One strategy in post-modern and post-colonial studies is the re-reading of canonized texts in an effort to locate problematized representations of former colonies by their colonizers. There are countless examples of this from Aime Cesaire’s *A Tempest*, the re-telling of Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* from the perspective of the monster Caliban to, as mentioned earlier in this work, David Henry Hwang’s *M. Butterfly*, a deconstruction of Puccini’s *Madame Butterfly*. Based on these two examples it seems reasonable to assume that William Mastrosimone’s *The Afghan Women* (2005), a play he claims is a modern retelling of Euripides’ *The Trojan Women*, should follow a similar model of post-modern/post-colonial re-reading/re-telling. If so, the possibilities for this re-reading/re-telling are endless. Euripides’ *The Trojan Women*, the story of the women of Troy as they are divided up as spoils of the Trojan War for the generals and lords of Greece, continues to resonate as an anti-war anthem. Euripides was a man writing before his time, heavily criticized for his pacifist and anti-Greek values sentiments in many of his works as he continually “showed the hideousness of cruelty and the pitifulness [sic] of human weakness and human pain” (Hamilton 24). It is worth noting that while war
was always and remains a topic of discussion and exploration in drama and literature such outright criticisms of war as seen in Euripides’ play would not be seen in mainstream theatre again for over two thousand years. A contemporary deconstruction of the play from the perspective of Afghanistan in a post-September 11th world would appear timely and promising in terms of deconstructing Western ideas about Afghanistan and the American occupation of the country.

In a 2003 interview with Simon Saltzman of Theatre Scene online journal, Mastrosimone says he composed The Afghan Women after spending two months in Afghanistan during the 1980s Soviet occupation and wanted to write something that brought attention to the war-torn nation. He was inspired by Euripides’ The Trojan Women while writing The Afghan Women, but instead of writing about “passive women...who accept their fate” he wanted to write about women who took action (Saltzman). He spent close to fifteen years brainstorming the play before his ideas culminated into The Afghan Women (2002). Once complete, Mastrosimone decided to keep the play unpublished and have theatre companies obtain the rights directly through him to avoid his agent taking the usual ten percent commission, requiring that all proceeds for the play go directly to charity. Companies and schools may produce the play provided that one hundred percent of the proceeds go to International Orphan Care, a 501(c) (3) nonprofit, nonpolitical, nonsectarian organization dedicated to establishing

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12 Greek classicist Edith Hamilton notes in “A Pacifist in Athens,” that “In our Western world Euripides stands alone” as an overt critic of war and the devastating effects to human existence it caused, adding that “people who feel in [Euripides’] way do not submit to the inevitable, or even really perceive it. But they perceive intolerably what is wrong and under that tremendous impetus they are ready to throw all security aside, to call everything into question, to tear off the veils that hide ugly things, and often...to give up forever peace of mind” (Hamilton 23).
and maintaining orphanages in Afghanistan (www.orphanproject.org). According to the International Orphan Care website there are “over seven hundred thousand orphans living in sub-poverty conditions” in Afghanistan (Ibid). The organization uses donations to provide food, housing, clothing, and education to the orphans they care for.

The story of *The Afghan Women* feels familiar. An Afghan-American doctor volunteering at an orphanage in Afghanistan begrudgingly offers shelter to a chorus of three Afghan women, Wajma, Gulalai, and Nahid who have lost their way literally and spiritually, “We use to sing the ninety-nine names of God, but does God hear us now? (Mastrosimone 8). The orphanage is taken over by an Afghan warlord, Mahmood, who holds them hostage demanding food and shelter for his band of fighters. The Afghan-American doctor Malalai uses the warlord’s son Omar to find out that Mahmood’s true purpose is to use the children as shields against government gunfire. She convinces the chorus of women to help her kill Mahmood and keep themselves and the orphans safe. In the end, Malalai succeeds by wounding Mahmood and convincing Omar to kill him so that Omar will be free to marry and live a peaceful life, thereby restoring peace to the orphanage and renewing the Afghan women’s faith in God. This simple summary however barely touches on what the play is truly about.

Mastrosimone had a specific agenda when writing this play. In every interview found with him expounding on the subject, Mastrosimone recounts his near-death experience in Afghanistan. He was traveling with the Mujahideen and fell ill with malaria. Because Soviet troops were closing in on them, Mastrosimone was left by his travel companions to die in a village. He was saved by an Afghan woman who
slaughtered her last goat to make soup that would nurse Mastrosimone back to health. This act was a display of an ancient code of Pashtunwali, or the gesture of hospitality honored by the Pashtun tribes of Afghanistan. Mastrosimone never saw the woman again but wished to repay her somehow. He did so by first writing the play *Nanawatai!* (1986), a play intertwining the points of view of a Soviet soldier and Afghan rebel during the Soviet occupation, as told by a group of Afghan women chorus members, which was adapted to the screen in the 1988 film *The Beast* directed by Kevin Reynolds. Much of *Nanawatai!* reads like a first draft or prequel to *The Afghan Women* as the two plays have many lines in common as well as several character details. Mastrosimone went on to write *The Afghan Women* as a charity piece for International Orphan Care, while serving on its Board of Trustees and eventually adopting a little girl from Afghanistan.

This leads me to Said’s ideas about pure versus political knowledge and strategic location. Mastrosimone’s knowledge is certainly political. He is keenly aware of his position as a Westerner involved with Afghanistan, particularly as an American involved with Afghanistan. He never hesitates to let his audience or readers know that he, an

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13 This specific code of Pashtunwali is known as “Melmastia” which means “generous hospitality” and is considered one of the primary codes of honor in Pashtun society. It can consist of offering food, shelter, or both to any visitors requesting it ([Afghanland.com/culture/pashtunwali.html](http://Afghanland.com/culture/pashtunwali.html)).

14 Both plays include the line about “The Afghan who took revenge after one hundred years and said ‘I acted quickly’” (*Nanawatai!* 26, *The Afghan Women* 27) and both plays incorporate a group of Afghan women peasants who resemble a Greek chorus.

15 It is worth noting here that Mastrosimone’s adoption act was disputed by the Director-General of Afghanistan’s Finance Ministry, Seema Ghani, as adoption of an Afghan child by any non-Afghan is against the law. Ms. Ghani had been in the process of locating a doctor to perform heart surgery on the child, Zanzama when she returned to the child’s home to find her gone. Mastrosimone paid Zanzama’s mother US $300.00 to take Zanzama out of the country and allegedly paid an additional US $5000.00 to secure “legal” documents that would satisfy US Immigration in order to bring Zanzama into the country. Mastrosimone denies knowledge of breaking any laws and claims he was misled by his Afghan contacts regarding the adoption. The child Zanzama remains with Mastrosimone’s family in New Jersey, a situation that Ms. Ghana feels will be detrimental to the child’s understanding of her heritage as an Afghan ([Satchell](http://Satchell)).
American and Westerner, is trying to help the Afghan people and that he believes the Afghan people consider him a hero. Herein lies a problem because from his perspective the subject people remain dependent on his experience. While his knowledge is political, Mastrosimone maintains that his intentions are pure. Evidence about his lack of knowledge of the problems surrounding his representation of Afghanistan are apparent because of his authoritative approach to the subject. He strategically locates himself, a Westerner, as the authority on Afghanistan.

Edward Said wrote that, “Every writer on the Orient...assumes some Oriental precedent, some previous knowledge of the Orient, to which he refers and on which he relies” (Said 20). Mastrosimone constructs his Afghan characters based on a Greek myth, which implies a Western Master Narrative style, which implies a reliance on the myth of the Oriental and the idea that the West has always been the most adept at representing the East. In fact, when asked whether or not he was concerned with how actual Afghans cast in his play might portray his characters his response was troubling, “It's ironic that sometimes non-Afghans play Afghans better than real Afghans” (Mastrosimone). Based on his plays and interviews it is clear that Mastrosimone believes he has the best of intentions when writing about Afghanistan, but more importantly to this study that he is unaware of the problems associated with his representations of Afghanistan as a Westerner because of the Oriental myth that permeates Western culture. Thus, Said’s ideas of pure versus political knowledge place Mastrosimone among Orientalists rather than with those attempting to deconstruct Orientalism. I shall
elaborate with a brief discussion of one of Mastrosimone’s well-intentioned predecessor’s
T.E. Lawrence.

Lawrence’s fascination with Arabia began with a job as a British Museum
Assistant during the excavation of the ancient city of Carchemish on the River Euphrates
from 1910 to 1914, after which he joined the British Army and was posted to Cairo in the
Military Intelligence Department (Wilson). Due to Lawrence’s interest in Arab affairs
and superior officer’s confidence in his understanding of the local nationalist movements,
Lawrence became the chief British liaison of the Arab Revolt against Turkish rule,
orchestrated by Sherif Hussein of Mecca and led by Hussein’s son Emir. The Revolt
turned into a major battleground during World War I as the Allied Powers – Great
Britain, France, and eventually the United States – used the opportunity to push back the
empire of the Ottoman Turks who at the time aligned with the Central Powers –
Germany, Austro-Hungary, and the Kingdom of Bulgaria (Fromkin 173-180). These are
the basic facts of the beginning of the Arab Revolt of 1916; what followed depends on
writer Suleiman Mousa claimed that the Arabs “understood the Revolt to be a purely
Arab endeavor carried out by Arabs to achieve Arab objectives. The participation of the
two British and French military missions in the Revolt mainly took the form of technical
advice and demolition work,” (Mousa viii). Yet, the popularized story of the Arab Revolt
is in the form of the Lawrence of Arabia myth.

The Lawrence of Arabia myth was originally perpetuated by American journalist
Lowell Thomas in his documentary film, *With Allenby in Palestine and Lawrence in*
Arabia (1919), in which Thomas claimed Lawrence was “The uncrowned king of Arabia” (www.pbs.org). The Lawrence of Arabia myth further cemented into Western minds everywhere with the David Lean film version mentioned in Chapter One. Thomas’ depiction of Lawrence and the film showcase the same photo of Lawrence dressed in flowing white Arab robes and standing among his Arab friends as he lived and traveled with them, all images which appear innocently artistic yet contribute to a much larger political myth of the Great White Father. The “Lawrence of Arabia” myth claims that Lawrence loved the Arabs and preferred life with them to life as a British citizen in Great Britain or even Cairo. The irony of these claims of love and devotion is in Lawrence’s own words:

They were a limited, narrow-minded people, whose inert intellects lay fallow in incurious resignation. Their imaginations were vivid, but not creative. There was so little Arab art in Asia that they could almost be said to have had no art, though their classes were liberal patrons, and had encouraged whatever talents in architecture, or ceramics, or other handicraft their neighbors and helots displayed. Nor did they handle great industries: they had no organizations of mind or body. They invented no systems of philosophy, no complex mythologies. They steered their course between the idols of the tribe and the cave. (Lawrence 38)

According to his memoirs, The Seven Pillars of Wisdom, Lawrence led the Arab tribes to their victory in the desert against the Ottoman Empire because of their own limited abilities. In his books, he positions himself as superior to the Arabs by his
constant reminders to his readers that the Arabs needed him. Though he lived with and fought alongside them, he always positioned himself as their leader, a patriarch. He loved the Arabs the way a father loves a young child who does not yet understand the world around him and still needs his father’s guidance to survive in that world, “They were as unstable as water...one such wave I raised and rolled before the breadth of an idea, till it reached its crest, and toppled over and fell on Damascus” (Lawrence quoted in Said 242). He likens them to an ocean wave – beautiful yet wild and passive, needing his guidance. He was the Great White Father who could bring civilization and order to the wild, albeit noble, savage.

Keeping Lawrence’s words in mind, let us look at William Mastrosimone’s “Notes from the Playwright”, required as part of the program for any company producing The Afghan Women. Mastrosimone writes the following:

[The play] is a wish-fulfillment of the Afghan people [and]...is inspired by the Afghan people themselves – a proud, self-reliant people who would lift themselves by their own bootstraps, if they had bootstraps. They look to us as heroes who have liberated them from the iron grip of the Taliban and al Qaeda. (Mastrosimone)

In an interview with Margo Harakas published by the Afghanistan Peace Organization, Mastrosimone reiterated this claim, “Women and children will go down the drain if the Americans leave [Afghanistan]” (Harakas). Regardless of the political overtones, William Mastrosimone believes his intentions are pure. Like so many Orientalists before
him he believes that he, as an American, is the best suited to help the Afghan people and save them from themselves.

Just as he positions himself as a hero to the Afghan people, Mastrosimone brings this sensibility directly into his drama when he positions the West as the hero of his play. Mastrosimone strategically locates Malalai, an Afghan-American doctor raised in America, as his protagonist, the one who speaks for Afghanistan with authority and makes it identifiable to a Western audience. By locating Malalai as an Afghan-American, Mastrosimone positions her as a half-breed in an effort to legitimize her by being an Afghan and keep her accessible by being an American. The other five characters in the play are all Afghans, born there and raised there, embodying Afghan personalities and sensibilities as seen through the eyes of Mastrosimone via Malalai.

Malalai is strong, brave, rational, and just. She “had a wonderful life in America, [she] had everything” but decided to volunteer at the orphanage after traveling to Kabul to reclaim the destroyed family estate and watching a boy die in her arms after he picked up a butterfly mine. Malalai claims throughout most of the play that being born in Afghanistan to an Afghan father gives her the right to speak for the Afghan people, even if the majority of her life was actually spent in the safety and comfort of America. Yet, throughout most of the play Malalai comes from an extremely pro-Western, neo-imperialistic standpoint. For example, upon meeting Wajma, Gulalai, and Nahid for the first time she refuses to give them shelter in her orphanage. When they remind her of the code of hospitality she tells them her “only obligation is to [her] children” (Mastrosimone

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16 The character Malalai is based on an French-Afghan female doctor working with the organization Doctors without Borders (Saltzman).
11). If this sentence existed within the vacuum of the play, amidst the circumstance that Malalai just found these women digging up bones in a graveyard to sell at market, it might not carry the weight that it does under a different lens. However, when read with Malalai’s strategic location as the Western, rational hero in mind her claim takes on an air of superiority, insinuating that a basic and revered code of Afghan honor is beneath her. Malalai changes her mind only after the women sing their choral song of devastation and mourning, appealing to her desire to help people as a doctor and Westerner.

The Afghan women’s choral song raises yet another point about Mastrosimone’s strategic location of Malalai versus the women. The Afghan women speak as a chorus, with each woman’s line relying upon the other, much like the women found in Nanawatai! They embody one voice and are constructed one-dimensionally as opposed to the three-dimensional protagonist Afghan-American Malalai.

Mastrosimone continues locating Malalai as the Western voice of reason as she and the warlord Mahmood,17 each representing a different Afghanistan – the Western-minded future and the terrorized past respectively -- are the focus of the play as they spend most of Act I waxing philosophic about religion, politics, and East versus West. As they argue Mahmood insults Malalai’s intellectual father for fleeing to the West after the Soviets invaded rather than fighting with the Mujahideen as Mahmood did. Malalai responds by saying “When you speak of my father, speak of the man who went to America with many other Afghans to petition for, not daggers to stab Russians in the heart, but Stinger missiles. That’s how the war was won” (35). Once again,

17 The character Mahmood is based on the warlord and one-time Afghan Prime Minister Gulbuddin Hekmatyar with whom Mastrosimone met and had lunch during his two months in Afghanistan (Saltzman).
Mastrosimone locates America as the hero and disregards the Afghan people’s role in the Soviet withdrawal.

As a final note on strategic location, the playwright positions Malalai as the catalyst for any course of action on the part of the weaker Afghans in the script – the Afghan women and the son Omar. The Afghan women and Omar experience significant changes throughout the course of the play while Malalai and Mahmood do not. Yet, these changes only occur when Malalai propels them to action. This is a perfect illustration of Mastrosimone’s political sensibility that Afghans cannot act on their own, unless they act to their own detriment, without American intervention. In Act II, Malalai must convince the Afghan women to murder Mahmood for the sake of her children and to save their own lives. Wajma, Gulalai, and Nahid refuse. Malalai reminds them that Mahmood is the man who martyred their husbands, brothers, and sons, and when the women still refuse, Malalai makes one last effort to change their minds by painting her fingernails red. Under the Taliban women were prohibited from wearing cosmetics of any kind, especially red nail polish for it insinuated that the woman wearing it was a whore. There are documented cases of women having their fingers cut off in public for wearing red nail polish. The script calls for the women to “look on with schoolgirl fascination as Malalai paints her fingernails red” (70). After Malalai likens the women to kicked dogs “you slaver and fawn and roll on your backs. You kicked dogs won’t even think badly of your tormentor, let alone turn to bite” (70) Wajma agrees to let Malalai

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18 Out of twenty-nine specific restrictions placed on women under the Taliban number ten was a “ban on the use of cosmetics. (Many women with painted nails have had fingers cut off)” (“Taliban Restrictions on and the Mistreatment of Women” Rawa.org/rules.htm).
paint her fingernails, with Gulalai and Nahid following. Each woman recounts a particularly violent moment in her life, the only time in the play we see three-dimensionality from the Afghan women, followed by a rapturous frenzy as the women agree to help Malalai.

In the final scene after Malalai stabs Mahmood in the stomach, followed by Wajma, Gulalai and Nahid stabbing him repeatedly, Omar rushes in to stop the killing. In a heated argument Malalai and Mahmood fight for their lives and Omar turns the gun back and forth on each of them. In this moment Malalai and Mahmood fight for Omar’s soul and for the future of Afghanistan, “The young man can follow through with his bloody intent, upholding the ancient code of honor, ‘which means Afghanistan will live in the past. Or he can lay aside his rifle and be part of a new Afghanistan,’ explains Mastrosimone” (Harakas). Omar finally shoots Mahmood and tries to flee, but Malalai stops him at the door, offering him shelter in the orphanage. As a member of his father’s tribe and after spending the better part of his life killing at Mahmood’s order Omar feels he no longer has an identity:

OMAR. What will I be without my tribe?

MALALAI. Afghan. (92)

In one sentence Malalai disregards centuries of Afghan tribes fighting off foreign invaders, from Alexander the Great to the Soviets. She alone decides that Afghan tribal codes represent the past and that Afghanistan must embrace the future.19 As the symbol

19 This moment takes on an entirely different dimension when viewed from an Islamic historical context. Its theme of throwing off tribalism bears close resemblance to the hijra, or Great Emigration, which marks the beginning of the Muslim calendar, when followers of the Prophet Muhammad abandoned their tribes to follow him to Medina (Elias 33-35). Whether Mastrosimone intended such a correlation is unknown, but
of the West, Malalai is the lone voice of reason in the play, the savior. She, as the Afghan-American, is responsible for Omar’s throwing off of the past and embrace of the future and for the Afghan women’s renewal of faith as they sing:

   NAHID. Who can fathom God’s will or works?
   WAJMA. That woman, perhaps.
   GULALAI. God has laid a heavy hand on her.
   NAHID. She feared God’s hand more than man’s....
   GULALAI. Give thanks for the rough road that led us to this place.
   NAHID. And sing God’s ninety nine beautiful names all the days of our lives. (93-94)

Mastrosimone locates Malalai, the only American in a play about Afghanistan, as the hero, and locates the other Afghans in the play as inferior to her intellectually, politically, and personally. This portrayal of the Afghan characters as inferior is in fact Mastrosimone’s use of binary opposition, or “Us” verses “Other”. By locating Malalai as Afghan-American and as the strong and rational character, he positions all of the other characters in opposition to her. Where she is strong, the Afghan women and Omar are weak. Where she is rational, they are irrational. Where she is an intellectual, they are ignorant. Mahmood also occupies space as Malalai’s binary opposite, though he is far more complex and differentiated than the other four characters, but I will return to this momentarily. Where she is just he is corrupt, where she is liberated he is a chauvinist, and where she educated he is ignorant. While there may be differences in Mahmood and

the implication in the scene that Malalai is likened to not only a prophet, but the Prophet in Islam, is yet another example of Western cultural imperialism.
the other characters they all embody some notion of the Oriental as historically seen through the eyes of the West.

The first example of this binary opposition is in Act I, Scene Two when the Afghan women ask Malalai about microwave ovens. The women, having never seen one, ask questions about the device only to have Malalai mock them.

MALALAI. Of course. If you want chicken, you push the chicken button. There’s beef, lamb, goat. *(with a subtle other-worldly lilt)* And then the chosen meat appears in the oven.

WAJMA. God be praised!

MALALAI. Then you push a button for spices. Garlic, rosemary, whatever your taste. And these appear in the oven.

GULALAI. Clearly this micro-thing is of the devil.

MALALAI. Then you push another button for tomatoes, rice, vegetables, fresh hot naan.

GULALAI. Can you push these buttons everyday?

MALALAI. You can push another button for maast, fresh strawberries and cream, tea with fresh mint and lots of sugar.

GULALAI. But where does the food come from? *(9)*

The scene positions Malalai as educated and the women as ignorant. This continues throughout the play as Malalai attempts to convince the women to help her get rid of Mahmood. The women are too frightened to act so they try to convince Malalai to use her womanhood to persuade Mahmood not to endanger the orphans. They implore her to
“don the burqa” to get whatever it is she needs from the warlord. Once again, the strong Malalai is positioned against the passive Afghan women as she refuses to wear the burqa claiming “Better a bullet than a burqa” (53). All three Afghan women don the burqa and fawn over Mahmood when he enters a room. Mastrosimone uses them to represent the women of Afghanistan, women positioned as ignorant, weak, and submissive in comparison to the liberated Western Malalai.

Malalai’s strengths are accented once again in Act II Scene Two as she bandages one of Omar’s wounds and manipulates him for information on his father. Omar comes off as backward and ignorant when she tells him that the putrefaction of his burned arm could mean amputation and he simply tells her “If God can’t heal it what can a doctor do?” (57). Omar is positioned as the simple-minded Oriental who does what he is told by his father Mahmood and never asks questions. Malalai must educate Omar if Afghanistan is ever going to change. Once again, Malalai is positioned as the savior when Omar reluctantly shoots Mahmood at Malalai's insistence at the end of the play.

Mastrosimone’s use of binary opposition is never more apparent than in the scenes between Malalai and Mahmood. As stated above, the two spend the majority of Act I either arguing or gently sparring intellectually about East versus West. This exchange is culminated in Act I, Scene Three, as they attempt to one-up one another by reciting poetry, Malalai quotes the verses of her favorite Afghan poet, the Sufi mystic and pacifist Rumi, and Mahmood quotes the verses of his favorite, the Afghan warrior poet Khushal Khan Kattack. Rumi’s verses focus on peace and finding solidarity with God by abandoning the self while Kattack’s focus on force and Afghan pride. In one quote
Malalai sums up the difference between herself and Mahmood and West and East as she quotes Rumi’s passage about how one’s “hand opens and closes… if it were always a fist or always held open you would paralyzed” (41). Malalai insinuates here that Mahmood’s Afghanistan is a closed fist, refusing to open itself to the changing world around it, while she the enlightened Westernized Afghan knows how to open and close the hand to allow for change. Malalai is Rumi struggling for peace and Mahmood is Kattak the savage warlord.

Mastrosimone’s positioning of Malalai versus Mahmood creates another problem in terms of negating post-modern trends in political theatre. I have looked at the problems associated with Mastrosimone writing *The Afghan Women* through his lens as an American. But another problem occurs with Mastrosimone’s writing through a Western male lens for essentially a Western male gaze. In Act I, Scene Two, Malalai tells the Afghan women that her carrying a Kalashnikov makes her man “All men have a Kalashnikov, I have a Kalashnikov, therefore I’m a man” (6). For a moment it seems that Mastrosimone will offer his audience a deconstruction of gender by positioning Malalai as a cross-dresser, offering a look into gender relationships in Afghanistan. This sensibility is fleeting however as Mastrosimone immediately positions Malalai as an object of his and Mahmood’s gaze in Act I, Scene Three. Malalai is immediately sexualized once Mahmood enters the orphanage and he realizes that although she is dressed in men’s clothing (as opposed to wearing a hijab or even burqa) she is still very much a woman. Their word-play is a seduction of sorts as Mahmood tries to win her over with his charms, particularly when quoting the poet Kattak, “Take her mouth
Khushal, in secret” (40). Mahmood begins to respect Malalai for being different than the submissive, veiled women he is accustomed to while Malalai is equally charmed by the warlord’s softer side. This glimpse fades quickly however when he learns that Malalai lied to him about there not being rice or tea in the orphanage. It becomes apparent that Mahmood’s charms were only fleeting as he verbally explodes, accusing Malalai of being one more foreign invader meant to take over Afghanistan, and slaps her to ground when she insults him back.

What is interesting here is that Mahmood’s speech makes a great deal of sense when viewing it from an anti-American intervention point of view, “Men like me, we are Afghanistan. Our misery comes from invaders like you who come to save us from ourselves” (45). But as Mastrosimone positions Mahmood as the antagonist the moment feels strangely out of place unless we are to take the male gaze into account. Mastrosimone, as a male, inevitably writes a more sympathetic male in Mahmood than he perhaps intended simply because he identifies more with Mahmood’s gender than with Malalai or the Afghan women. Likewise, by writing the strong, rational Malalai in opposition to the three chorus women of widows Mastrosimone constructs Malalai with a masculinity associated with the West, thus his need for making her half American and half Afghan.

While Malalai exhibits ‘typical male’ traits throughout most of the play Mastrosimone chooses a different tactic for the play’s climax. After attempting to reason with Mahmood and talk him out of taking the orphans Malalai takes the Afghan women’s advice by using her womanhood, her sexuality, to trap Mahmood and pretends to submit
to his charms. Just before she plunges the dagger into Mahmood’s stomach she lays her head on his shoulder in submission, throwing aside all attempts at reasoning with him. In this moment Mahmood believes he has won and Malalai stabs him. As Mahmood dies he warns his son Omar that “She knows the words that move men! How do you think I am so fallen?” (91). Malalai is likened to Eve, the beginning of sin and the destroyer of Eden.

In one of his earlier plays, Extremities (1984), Mastrosimone attempted to tell the story of a woman who is nearly raped during a home invasion. The victim, Marjorie, gets the upper hand and imprisons the would-be rapist, Raul, in her fireplace, leading her onto a bizarre morality struggle when deciding whether or not she will kill him. Marjorie’s female roommates arrive home and chastise her for taking Raul hostage, beginning a “you must have asked for it” line of questioning. When asked about this creative decision, Mastrosimone claims that he “is only the messenger” (Mastrosimone) of too many truths in our society about women crucifying other women. Whether he is correct at all is not the issue, but rather that he views the situation through a male lens, places a male gaze on the situation, and claims it is an exemplary tale of what women would do in this situation. Such claims are the basis of much of his rational for the Afghan women as well. In fact, in one interview he acknowledges the similarities between the two plays and that Extremities formed a basis for The Afghan Women’s tone and style.

Mastrosimone also claims that The Afghan Women is a “wish fulfillment” of the Afghan

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20 Extremities brings up another example of Mastrosimone’s apparent inability to recognize problems with his Western gaze when he claims that Raul “represents no social class or ethnic group. He only represents the men who know the law and how to beat the system” (Mastrosimone 72). Yet Mastrosimone gives him the name “Raul”, a typically Spanish-language name, who says lines such as “Say you’re my puta” (14), “puta” being a Spanish slang word for “whore” or “slut”. 
people, particularly the women. He does not make any attempt to locate the problems associated with his writing of gender, just as he refuses to acknowledge problems associated with his writing of the Orient with Afghanistan. Instead, he relies, again, on accepted tenets of the Master Narrative. Mahmood is Raul the rapist and Malalai is Marjorie, having to defend herself against the Afghan women doubting her and taking Mahmood’s side, who come off many times in the script as the Stygian Witches instead of the women chorus of Troy bearing witness to Hecuba’s suffering.  

Mastrosimone has said that what interests him as a writer are “politics, ethics, and morals” (70). He has a penchant for wanting to put didactic and provoking material on the stage that causes his audience to think. With this in mind it would appear that he should have an interest in Bertolt Brecht, at least from a politically charged theatre standpoint. Yet with *The Afghan Women*, he writes a politically charged piece without a politically minded post-colonial sensibility. He falls back on historical notions of the Orient and Orientals in his positioning of Malalai against all of the Afghan characters in the play, and contrary to his ideas of promoting a political theatre, Mastrosimone neglects handling the play theatrically with a post-modern sensibility. As stated in Chapter One, it feels intellectually and artistically irresponsible to deal with a post-colonial subject yet attempt applying an Aristotelian Master Narrative style that relies on ideas of universality and totality. Instead of dispelling negative images about the Middle East, these tactics effectively aid in the construction of myths to an already problematic text. But

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21 The Stygian Witches, or Graaeae, were three underworld deities in Greek Mythology hailing from the underworld and personified as three bickering old women sisters fighting over a single glass eye (*The Theoi Project. Theoi Greek Mythology Web base. Theoi.com/Pontios/Graiai/html)*.
Unfortunately this is just what Mastrosimone does with *The Afghan Women* with his reliance on a closed linear model dealing with the triumph of good over evil.

To take a canonized text like *The Trojan Women* and place it in Afghanistan post-September 11th would appear to be a first step towards Brecht’s idea of historicization. Mastrosimone effectively takes a well-known critique of war and tries to apply it to a specific historical moment from a specific perspective – women in Afghanistan during and after the Taliban. But instead of keeping his focus on the title’s implication – Afghan women - Mastrosimone instead locates an American as the protagonist with Malalai, immediately negating any post-colonial sensibility. A simple alteration in exposition might have positioned the story differently and thus historicized the situation in a post-modern style.

Mastrosimone might have positioned the Afghan women as the women of Troy, chastising the Western world for allowing their country to become a “wasteland not fit for weeds” (17). Wajma may have been our Afghan Hecuba, tearing out her hair and crying out “What sorrow is there that is not mine...glory of all my house brought low” (Euripides 35), Gulalai our Afghan Andromache and Nahid our Cassandra. In fact, there are brief glimpses of this in Act I Scene II when the Afghan women grieve for their martyred men and babies, “Crying...like evil music all day...for they know their baby is next” (Mastrosimone 14) sounding much like the Trojan women singing “At the gate they are crying, crying, calling to us with tears” (Euripides 78). The Afghan women engage in a mourning ritual that involves wailing and beating their chests – specific not only to Islam but also in Ancient Greece and various other cultures where the
performance of mourning is culturally acceptable. Wajma, Gulalai, and Nahid tell a story reminiscent of the women of Troy, watching as their men are murdered in front of them by invaders. The women recount not only the days when the warlords marched into their villages after the Soviet withdrawal but also when the “savage students” (Mastrosimone 12), or Taliban, took over the country and drove out the warlords. The moment is a critique of the warlord’s tribalism and the Taliban; essentially a critique of Afghanistan itself.

While claiming to give voice to the women of Afghanistan, Mastrosimone neglects to criticize the United States for numerous bombing campaigns throughout the 1990s and especially since September 11, 2001. To offer a truly historicized look at the war-torn nation of Afghanistan from the perspective of women he needed to call the invaders of the last one hundred years into question – the British, the Soviets, the warlords, the Taliban, and the United States. Wajma, Gulalai and Nahid could have been widowed just as easily by American bombs or landmines rather than Mastrosimone indicting only the Afghan warlords and Taliban. This in no way means to undermine the devastation brought on by the Taliban in Afghanistan, rather it is a question about the problems involved with The Afghan Women not containing any criticism whatsoever of the United States’ occupation of the country.

Mastrosimone’s handling of the script exemplifies an effort to meet an audience’s expectations rather than upset those expectations as a Brechtian take on the script might have. Instead of keeping his focus on the Afghan women and their experiences with war and devastation, Mastrosimone moves them aside as the chorus, occupying only one third
of the entire play while Malalai and Mahmood take center stage to illustrate the inherent and unchangeable differences between West and East. Even from this perspective, Mastrosimone might have stayed his course, so to speak, on putting a political problem onto the stage by examining the problematic role of Americans in Afghanistan. He could have written Malalai as simply an American, yet made her question her own power position by calling attention to it via the alienation effect. By using alienation either in the script itself or calling for it performatively Mastrosimone might have at least examined and at best deconstructed her position as an American working in a country that her own country currently occupies, calling into question ideas of pure intentions. He could have written Mahmood as a flawed anti-hero rather than the villain in order to truly historicize Mahmood’s speeches about imperialism’s effect on Afghanistan.

Mastrosimone obviously wishes to help the people of Afghanistan, as does the character Malalai. But neither Mastrosimone himself nor Mastrosimone as the voice of Malalai acknowledges the problems associated with Western intervention in Afghanistan and the fact that, as Mahmood argues, it is this very issue of intervention and invasion that created all of the internal problems Afghanistan faces in the first place.22

Perhaps another tactic in complicating his story rather than falling back on Orientalist ideas would have been locating Malalai simply as an Afghan, keeping all of her strengths, intellect, and sensibilities intact and thereby dislocating an audience’s expectations about submissive Afghan women hidden beneath the burqa. All of these ideas are speculative of course, but in looking at ways Mastrosimone might have used

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22 Mastrosimone stated in his interview with Simon Saltzman that most of Mahmood’s speeches came directly from conversations with Gulbuddin Hekmatyar (Saltzman).
post-modern methods to deconstruct Orientalist myths it becomes clear that Mastrosimone’s play is neither post-colonial nor post-modern.

Essentially, Mastrosimone writes a Master Narrative that is more Aristotelian than Euripides’ *The Trojan Women*. *The Trojan Women* focuses on a group of women retelling their tragic story rather than an actual plot, the audience is faced with a horrible situation rather than simply involving them in a story, and there is no catharsis and no resolution. One might argue then that Euripides’ Greek tragedy had more epic elements than a twenty-first century drama. Mastrosimone relies upon all of the traditional elements of Western drama when writing *The Afghan Women*. There is a linear plot with exposition, obstacles, revelations, complications, a climax, and resolution. In the end, the audience – particularly an American audience – can walk away feeling good that they have done something for the poor people of Afghanistan by attending the play and feeling for them for two hours. Mastrosimone is not attempting an updated version of *The Trojan Women*, he is in effect doing what Euripides never did – he gives his audience catharsis and makes the world right again by Malalai guiding the backward Afghans to the democratic ways of the West.

None of this is meant to argue that a playwright must pay direct homage to Brecht in order to write a contemporary play, but it does point out that a disregard of any post-modern technique allows for the reliance on a style of theatre that has a tendency to subjugate both women and minorities as the Other. What results is an absence of not only of a post-modern sensibility to Mastrosimone’s work but also a post-colonial sensibility. By relying on an Aristotelian model and constructed ideas of Afghanistan
based on Orientalist notions, Mastrosimone inevitably constructs yet another myth of East versus West, with the West triumphing once again.
CONCLUSIONS

Timberlake Wertenbaker, Tony Kushner and Willam Mastrosimone reflect very different methods of representing both women and the Orient in their respective plays. Wertenbaker and Kushner, like David Henry Hwang, employed both post-colonial and post-modern techniques to their plays, successfully dislocating many associations with historical Orientalist writers, myth, or Master Narratives. They did this by bringing a post-colonial sensibility to their plays but also by refusing to adhere to Realism. Conversely, Mastrosimone’s reliance on both the Oriental stereotype and a Master Narrative structure resulted in his construction of a myth. A serious gap in this study remains however. Hwang’s play inspired me to find a play about the Middle East that functioned as a fitting parallel to American intervention in the region, as M. Butterfly did for the Vietnam War. My first ‘discovery’ was Homebody/Kabul. Yet regardless of Kushner’s post-colonial and post-modern take on the play, he remains a Westerner representing the Middle East.

Recognizing that Kushner’s work was set apart from Orientalist writings, I hoped to find a play by a Middle Eastern playwright to use as a positive comparison. It was during this quest that I discovered just how difficult it is to find a play, let alone any theatre information, on the Middle East and/or Islam written by someone from the region or practicing the religion. This is not to suggest that it does not exist, but rather that the readiness of such material to the average student of theatre is lacking due to a glaring gap of Middle Eastern and/or Islamic theatre material.
In *The History of the Theatre, 9th edition*, theatre historians Oscar Brockett and Franklin Hildy write that, “In the history of theatre, Islam is largely a negative force” (Brockett and Hildy 69). Brockett and Hildy do not offer any citation with this claim, but instead offer a brief summation of Islamic laws against representational art. As Islam is the largest growing religion in the world with 1.6 billion Muslims making up over one-sixth of the entire world population this statement feels terribly prophetic for the future of world theatres. If Islam is in fact a negative force in theatre history, by that rationale it must be acceptable not to devote chapters in a theatre history book or anthology to any country with an Islamic majority in their population, as they probably do not have theatre history to speak of, or at least not one worth noting. This is not actually the case. Theatre history books leave the Middle East out not because there is a complete lack of theatre. Rather, the gap is due to large-scale ignorance about facets of Islamic law.

The widely accepted perception as to why the Middle East is absent in theatre history is because these countries are largely Islamic and it is Islam itself that contributes to the problem. By the Middle East I refer to the Islamic lands stretching from North Africa (Morocco, Libya, Algeria, Egypt), through Turkey and Syria, the Arabian peninsula (Lebanon, Jordan, the Palestinian territories, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Kuwait, United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Oman, Qatar), Iraq, Iran, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Afghanistan, and Pakistan. While this is a vast area with numerous different cultures, traditions, and languages these countries not only share the common bond of

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23 I am excluding Israel here simply because it is not predominantly Muslim. Additionally, the study of Israel from the perspective of Orientalism is a much larger study in and of itself. Similarly, I am excluding India, though it has one of the largest populations of Muslims in the world, for its location farther East and the fact that it does have representation in theatre history books.
Islam but also the lack of representation in theatre history texts. Whether the country is made up primarily of Sunni or Shi’a Muslims, the belief regarding the absence of theatre in these regions is that it is the nature of Islam itself that creates the problem of studying theatre in this region.

The standard belief amongst scholars of theatre history is that Muslims do not have surviving theatre traditions due to the Islamic law known as shirk — “To associate others with Allah;” can also refer generally to idolatry and polytheism. Dependent on how literal the interpretation, shirk can refer to the Muslim belief that because Allah is the one true creator then to represent anything suggests that Allah can be represented or that one can represent what only Allah has the power to do, and this is against Islam. Thus the law of shirk potentially means the outlaw of all forms of representation, including photography, representational painting, and theatre. Through my research, I found that locating evidence to corroborate this claim quite difficult. Some sources claim the law of shirk is directly from the Qur’an, while others claim it is merely an accepted tenet of Islam. In actuality, the idea of shirk is based on the Sunna, or the records kept regarding the Prophet Muhammad’s way of life and his teachings, also known as hadith literature. One of the major hadith collections known as Sahih Bukhari recounts the following tale regarding representations during the Prophet’s life:

24 The two major sects of Islam, Sunni and Shi’ia, differ in their beliefs on the rightful predecessor, or caliph, to the Prophet Mohammed upon his death. Sunni’s believe the leadership rightfully passed to the Prophet’s close companion, Abu Bakhr; while Shi’as believe the Prophet’s son-in-law, Ali Hussein, was the rightful caliph. Bitter and bloody feuds have persisted since the split in the 7th century between Sunni and Shi’a Muslims. While there are other sects such as the Sufi’s, Sunni and Shi’ite are the most prominent sects (Elias 35-39).
25 Cited from Uscedu/dept/MSA. University of Southern California Muslim Students Association Compendium of Muslim Texts.
26 An example of the West’s ignorance of the law occurred in 2006 when a Dutch cartoonist’s rendition of the Prophet Muhammad resulted in violent reactions by Muslims across the globe.
We said, "O Allah's Apostle! Who is there amongst us who has not done wrong to himself?" He replied, "It is not as you say, for 'wrong' in the Verse and 'do not confuse their belief, with wrong means 'SHIRK' (i.e. joining others in worship with Allah). Haven't you heard Luqman's saying to his son, 'O my son! Join not others in worship with Allah, verily joining others in worship with Allah is a great wrong indeed'. (31.13)

While meaning is often confused in translation, what the above passage clearly indicates is a prohibition against polytheism. Yet, because this law comes from hadith literature and not the accepted word of God as told to the Prophet Muhammad, and believed to be written verbatim in the Qur'an, the law of shirk is always open to many degrees of interpretation.

The argument that the law of shirk is related to the suppression of theatre traditions is certainly valid, as a non-representational sensibility is present in Islamic art and architecture (Elias 22-23). In fact, when strictly interpreted the law of shirk has been known to suppress all forms of representation, as seen with the fundamentalist Taliban regime in Afghanistan between 1996 and 2001 (Mansoor). Afghanistan and parts of the Sunni Middle East specifically tend to be the countries where there is a stricter

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27 This was significant during Muhammad's life in the seventh-century BCE as the tribes of Arabia where he lived and received his revelations were largely polytheistic, thus the importance of Muhammad's preaching of Islam as a monotheistic religion and references to shirk cannot be overstated (Stiles).

28 Hadith literature is also problematic because certain forms, including most dealing with shirk, are followed closely by Sunni Muslims rather than Shi'a Muslims, while others are followed closely by Shi'a. Thus, a blanket statement regarding strict adherence to the Sunna by both sects is never completely valid (Usc.edu/dept/MSA).
interpretation of *shirk*, giving credit to the misinformed notion that the Middle East as a whole is without theatre traditions. However, the idea that theatre never existed or no longer exists in the Middle East, or that new plays are not available by those writing in Muslim countries or by Muslims writing in exile thereby leaving theatrical representations of these countries in the hand of Western cultures is simply not true.

Due to the widespread ignorance in the West of Middle Eastern and/or Islamic theatre history there is a great deal of difficulty locating Middle Eastern and/or Islamic theatre history information, texts, and plays. Without access to plays by those of Middle Eastern descent and/or the Islamic faith, the Western world continues to only have access to representations of the Arab or Muslim as seen through the eyes of the West. My contention remains that this situation is extremely problematic. In the West, and the United States specifically, there are certain notions of the Arab or Muslim that permeate through our culture. There are enough books written about the “Arab Mind” and “Problem of Islam” that contribute to an overall fear and hatred for Arabs and Muslims. These images are available to us in bookstores, on the nightly news, on television and in the latest Hollywood blockbuster (*Rules of Engagement* -2000, *The Mummy* - 1999, *Raiders of the Lost Ark* - 1981). As a whole, these images of the Arab and/or Muslim

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29 For example, the West African country Senegal has a much less strict interpretation of shirk as all representation, seen in their worship of a local saint named Amadu Bamba. Artwork featuring Amadu Bamba’s likeness are found all over Senegal and are not considered idolatry by the local population. In fact, locals claim Bamba’s visual presence in their lives offers citizens an exemplary model of a muslim, one whose faith they can aspire to emulate (Roberts and Roberts 21-28).

30 I am referring specifically to Raphael Patai’s *The Arab Mind*, Bernard Lewis’ *What Went Wrong? The Clash Between Islam and Modernity in the Middle East*, Fouad Ajami’s *The Foreigner’s Gift: Americans, Arabs, and the Iraqis in Iraq*, all of which purport a very pro-Western Intervention view of United States involvement in the Middle East.
tend to be one-dimensional and negative, and furthermore are representations constructed by the West.

From the time I began this study to its completion I have come across two examples of Middle Eastern plays that, when held up to the Said and Brechtian modes of deconstruction, conform to the very methods I argue are necessary and essential to engage in a post-colonial and post-modern-minded discourse about the Middle East and Islam. The plays, *Nine Parts of Desire* (2003), by Heather Raffo, and *Back of the Throat* (2006), by Yussef el Guindi, each incorporate questions regarding Orientalist stereotypes, the Orientalist tradition, and Brechtian strategies of performance.

With *Nine Parts of Desire*, Iraqi-American playwright Heather Raffo wrote, and continues to perform, a one-woman show based on conversations with her Iraqi female relatives and friends. Inspired by the performances of Eve Ensler and Anna Deveare Smith, Raffo performs various roles ranging from an artist residing in Sadaam Hussein’s inner circle, an aging exiled Communist, a little girl describing different bombs, and a pregnant doctor discussing radiation sickness in Baghdad to name a few. She uses a simple black abaya as a prop or costume piece to signify changes in character, each change occurring on stage and in full view of the audience. What results is a didactic, episodic, non-linear performance of Iraqi women’s voices amidst love, loss, pain, and war.

Likewise, Egyptian-American playwright Yussel el Guindi wrote *Back of the Throat* in response to the September 11th attacks when constructing a story of a young

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31 An abaya is “a traditional black robe-like garment” widely worn by both men and women in Iraq (Raffo 2).
Arab man questioned by authorities regarding any involvement he may have had in the attacks on New York City. The play is a meditation on post-September 11th fear, paranoia, and racism towards the Arab community, a situation with no relief in the end. El-Guindi paints an almost Absurdist situation in which anything the young Khaled says to the government officers deems him a terrorist, all the while being “visited” by people and situations in his life as a young Arab intellectual that may have unconsciously betrayed him.

Based on only three self-representational models it feels imperative to restate that for a Western playwright to engage with the historical Orient and not account for Orientalism and take post-modern performative steps to deconstruct it results in an inevitable step backwards towards outdated Modernist ideals and, thus, becomes academically irrelevant. Yet on a larger scope, it also reinforces the very notions that Kushner, Wertenbaker, Raffo, and el-Guindi, to name only a few, are trying to dispel. For these notions inevitably feed larger ideas about the Middle East and Islam in general. Mastrosimone is not guilty of a crime. He is simply unaware of the larger scope of his work and the sociopolitical place it takes when he refuses to acknowledge the complicated history between Afghanistan and the Western world. One need not be a self-representing individual from a historically subaltern group as Raffo and el-Guindi, or as articulate an intellectual and activist as Kushner, or as dedicated a post-modern feminist as Wertenbaker to engage in the discourse of post-colonial politics. What one does need, however, is the willingness to deconstruct one’s own ideals, identity, and politics, and this, it seems, has always been and always will be, the challenge.
What I feel is essential to understanding why playwrights must continue deconstructing Orientalism is because the myths that the discourse perpetuates work to promote vast degrees of cultural misunderstandings between West and East that further promote Western racism towards the Middle East. Tony Kushner once wrote that the first step towards violence is the reduction of one’s status to second class due to state-sanctioned racism. He argued that this was the first step towards the Holocaust when the Jews were first stripped of certain rights before slowly being deemed less than human by the Nazis and thus, expendable. Since September 11th, the United States has witnessed widespread paranoia about Arabs and Muslims, paranoia that manages to excuse racism on a national level. In the name of patriotism and national security, the country relegates Arabs and Muslims to second-class citizens, unworthy of the same rights and privileges afforded to non-Arab or non-Muslim citizens of the United States, rights such as due process of law and innocent before proven guilty. This attitude is even more pronounced when Arabs or Muslims living outside of this country are not even afforded the right of humanity, as seen with the civilian death toll since the invasion of Iraq and the seemingly continued support of the invasion and occupation of Afghanistan. Images of the Arab and Muslim in American culture, including American theatre, can either feed these notions of less-than human, notions promulgated by Orientalist scholarship, or it can seek to deconstruct those images.

If there is in fact a mirror, as Jill Dolan theorized, why would we not want it to reflect our compassion, acceptance, and humanity, rather than our fears and the steps we take to destroy that which frightens us? Perhaps with a better cultural picture of the Arab
and Muslim world we as Americans and Westerners would not be so quick to wish to destroy it and rebuild it in our own likeness.
WORKS CITED


