

Ortadoğu İle Karşılaşma: David Greig'in *Damascus* Oyunu | Encountering The Middle East: David Greig's *Damascus*

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ÖZET

Günümüz İskoçyalı tiyatro yazarı David Greig sadece İskoçya Tiyatrosuna değil, 21. yüzyıl İngiliz Tiyatrosuna da çok değerli katkılar sağlamıştır. Yazar, tiyatro eserlerinde günümüz dünyasının önemli siyasi, kültürel ve estetik akımlarını ele alır.

Bu çalışma, yazarın 2006 yılında yazdığı *Damascus* eserinde 'öteki' ile olan tecrübesini yansıtır. Oyunda Greig Batı ve Arap dünyası arasında meydana gelen ilişkilerin karmaşıklığını ve derinliğini anlatır. Yazar dünyanın en eski yerleşim yerinde 'öteki'nin gizemini ele geçirirken, aynı zamanda oyunun yer aldığı Şam şehri günümüz gerçekliğinde kök salan mistik bir yer olarak karşımıza çıkar. Oyunun kültürel çatışmayı anlatan bir komedi olmasının yanı sıra, hayal ve hakikat arasındaki ilişkilendirmeleri anlatan bir tarafı da vardır. Oyun, Batılı ve Arap karakterler aracılığı ile Batının ve Ortadoğunun birbirlerine karşı sahip oldukları önyargı ve klişe tutumları inceler. Bu açıdan, oyunun başkarakterleri karşılaştığı kültürel çatışma ile aslında, Batının Ortadoğu ile ilgili ve Ortadoğunun da Batı ile ilgili alışılmış anlayışına meydan okuyarak, önyargıları sorgular.

Edebiyat tarihinde 'Doğu' hakkında yazmak Batılı yazarlar için her zaman ilgi çekici olmuştur. Batılı yazarlar eserlerinde Ortadoğu'yu ele alırken genellikle seyahat anılarından faydalanırlar. Fakat Samuel Chew meşhur kitabında (*The Crescent and the Rose: Islam and England during the Renaissance*), iki grup seyahat yazarlarından bahseder: 'Doğuyu sadece hayal eden koltuk seyahatleri ve gerçekten Doğuyu ziyaret ederek bizzat tecrübe eden gezginler'. (Chew, 1974). Greig *Damascus* oyununu Şam'a yaptığı bir seyahatten sonra, önyargı veya hayalden uzak olarak yazmıştır. Oyunla ilgili bir notunda Greig oyunun, 2000 yılında Ortadoğu'da yürüttüğü tiyatro çalıştaylarının beklenmedik bir sonucu olarak ortaya çıktığını söyler. Yazar, oyunda Batı ve Arap dünyasının arasındaki ilişkilerin karmaşıklığını sergilediğini belirtir. Oyun Batı ve Ortadoğu değerlerinin özellikleri ile ilgili çelişkili fikirleri öne sürer. Greig özbenlik ve 'öteki' arasındaki ilişkiyi ve kültürler arası farklılıkları tasvir ederken aynı zamanda basmakalıp fikirleri ve önyargıları alt üst eder. Ana karakter aracılığıyla yazar sadece Ortadoğu karakterlerini veya meselelerini örneklemeyi aynı zamanda özbenlikle ilgili tanımlamalar sunar. Doğu ile Batının birleştiği çok kültürlü bir sahnede, karakterler ve izleyiciler birbirlerinin benzerliklerini ve farklılıklarını küresel ve ülkelerarası bir bağlamda keşfeder.

Anahtar Kelimeler: David Greig, *Damascus*, Orta Doğu, 'öteki', önyargı

Çalışmanın Türü: Araştırma

ABSTRACT

David Greig, as a Scottish playwright, has made a significant contribution not only to Scottish drama but also to the Drama of Britain in the twenty-first century. He is responsive to the key political, cultural and aesthetic concerns and movements of today's world in his dramatic work.

This paper investigates the playwright's experience of 'the other' in *Damascus*** (2006) – a play in which Greig explores the complexities of relations between the West and the Arab world. While the playwright seizes the mystery of 'the other' in the world's oldest inhabited city, Damascus becomes a mythical place rooted in a contemporary reality. Despite the fact that the play is mostly a comedy of cultural confusion, it explores relationships between illusion and truth, fiction and fact. Through its Western and Arabic characters, the play analyzes preconceptions and stereotypes that Western and Mid-Eastern people have for each other. In that sense, the play, for the most part, proposes a challenge to customary Western perceptions of the Mid-Easterners and vice-versa as its protagonist faces a large cultural divide.

In the history of literary production 'East' has always been an attractive topic to explore for 'Western' authors. Western writers have mainly produced texts about the Middle East based on their travel accounts. However, in his seminal book, *The Crescent and the Rose: Islam and England during the Renaissance*, Samuel Chew professes that there are two groups of travel-writers: 'arm-chair travelers who saw the East in their mind's eye, and those who actually visited the lands and spoke from personal experience'. (Chew, 1974). Indeed, Greig has written *Damascus* from first-hand experience, and not from prejudice or fantasy. He explains in a note on the text that *Damascus* is an unexpected result of theater workshops he has been leading in the Middle East in 2000. He notes that the play is his exploration of the complexities of relations between the West and the Arab worlds. The play envisions contradictory opinions on characterizing Western and Middle Eastern values. In *Damascus* Greig explores relations between the self and 'the other', illustrates the complexities of cultural differences, subverts clichés and challenges misconceptions. Through the main character, Greig not only objectifies and instrumentalizes Middle Eastern characters and issues but also projects definitions related to 'self'. In a multicultural setting where East and West meet, the characters and the audiences perceive each other's similarities and differences in a global/transnational context.

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** *Damascus* won a prestigious Fringe First Award at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival in 2007. After its Edinburgh premiere, the British cast performed the play at the 'Brits Off-Broadway' series in New York in 2008 and Tricycle Theatre in London for four weeks in 2009, followed by a regional tour that touched down in Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt, Tunisia and the Palestinian territories.

Greig as a practicing artist in Damascus attempts to give voice to a Middle Eastern community in the Bakhtinian sense in that it proposes a decentralized polyphony of the Middle Eastern world as opposed to centralized monological discourses. Indeed, at the play's end, the main character's presumptions about the Middle East change. Although the play with its volatile and restless Middle Eastern setting has political references to freedom of speech, defining 'the other' and transnational relationships, it explores the human condition in essence with the poet's care and vigour.

Greig clarifies that while the play is mostly 'a comedy of cultural confusion', it actually explores relationships between 'language and culture' (Jackson, 2009). Following his trips to the Middle East, the playwright feels an urge to write the play. He believes that most British playwrights do not experience the Middle East so there is a lack of plays that are set in that part of the world. He has experienced that there is not a great tradition of playwriting in the Middle East, therefore there are not enough plays available to be staged in Britain. Although the play is specifically entitled Damascus, the story could be set anywhere because the play is in fact a story of individuals, the choices they make, and how they treat one another. Indeed, the Westerners need to understand the relationships between individuals in order to grasp the complexity of Middle Eastern politics. Eventually, Western audiences together with the main character in the play have come to realize that Arab countries are not always ruled by fundamentalist values and that Western nations are not always superlative. In that sense the play is unique in terms of staging the world of the Arab intellectual on one hand and the Western presumptions on the other.

Keywords: David Greig, *Damascus*, Mid-East, 'the other', preconceptions

Type of research: Research

David Greig

Similar to Scotland's political relationship with Britain, Scottish literature has been a subordinate part of the superior British literature. In the previous century, Scottish plays were engaged in Scottish issues, presenting pastoral and idealized settings. Besides, Scottish drama was considered to be artistically unimportant outside Scotland, because only few Scottish dramatists have shown the capacity to move from documentation to metaphor. (Stevenson, 364). Likewise, Mark Fisher found it impossible to identify a Scottish theatrical tradition. (<http://www.theatrescotland.com/>). In the last two decades, however, a new generation of Scottish playwrights that includes David Greig, Liz Lochhead, Iain Heggie, John Byrne, David Harrower, Chris Hannan, Stephen Greenhorn, John McGrath, Gregory Burke, John Clifford, Rona Munro, Henry Adam, Douglas Maxwell, and Stuart Paterson have been crafting plays about Scotland not in the way that the nationalist myth inspires, but in a more forwardlooking manner that would reform Scottishness in a global context.

David Greig has swiftly become a well-known and exceptionally prolific playwright not only in Britain but also in Europe and elsewhere. He has been commissioned by the Royal Court, the National Theatre and the Royal Shakespeare Company and he is currently Dramaturge of the National Theater of Scotland. In 1990 he co-founded Suspect Culture Theatre Group with Graham Eatough in Glasgow in order to create a platform for innovative artistic practice in Scotland.

As a central figure in a new generation of Scottish playwrights who emerged in the 1990s, Greig has been exploring and redefining identity, belonging and citizenship in the new millennium in a total of more than forty plays. He has been engaged in scrutinizing place and non-places (a term coined by the French Anthropologist Marc Augé) from various standpoints. Greig's dramatic works are the representations of the modern world and they imply a sense of transnational space which signifies a 'contact zone' for the characters from different national, ethnic, or religious backgrounds. These geographically and historically apart characters find the opportunity to contact with each other in order to establish relations and negotiate their different positions, viewpoints and identities. Non-places have usually become a place where different cultures collide. He also notes in an interview that many of his plays are set in internationally anonymous places like hotels and airports because he is 'quite obsessed with the idea of belonging and not belonging, and being out of place.' (Jackson, 2009).

Indeed, in *Damascus*, the setting is mainly a hotel lobby, which is an example of a 'non-place': 'The play takes place in the foyer of a small hotel in Damascus' (Greig, 2007; 5). The setting suggests an international atmosphere with its dance floor with a glitterball and a small bar with drinks. The current situation in the neighbouring countries is presented with television images in the background in order to show the never-ending violence and the incessant tension which has always threatened the stability in the Middle East.

Damascus is the result of Greig's own experiences in the Middle East as part of the International Play Development Project. Although the play is not autobiographical, the main character stands for his author in depicting issues related to democracy, morality, human rights and fundamentalism. On one hand the

play observes a series of irony about language, translation and culture in English Language Teaching textbooks, on the other hand it introduces issues related to cultural divisions and educational censorship.

Greig has spent five years in the Middle East to conduct playwriting workshops, particularly in Syria and Palestine supported by The British Council. He has mentioned in an interview that the play ‘does explore a lot of themes and ideas which came from my experience over that period of time.’ (Jackson, 2009). As part of The British Council project, he has introduced young Arab writers to the techniques of new British playwriting. While teaching, he has also learned about the complexities of relations between the West and the Arab worlds. He has admitted that in due course he ‘felt compelled to write a play to explore those complexities’. (Greig, 2007). He expresses that he feels very ‘connected’ to the Middle East but he avoids writing about the political situation directly. Instead he wants to ‘hear stories from young Arabs’ (Jackson, 2009). The British Council has organized a regional tour of the award-winning *Damascus* in Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt, Tunisia, and the Palestinian territories. The tour has also explored the growing interest of UK theatre in the Arab culture. At the same time it has provided a prospect for the Arab viewers to see plays that address their image in the UK and to create platforms so that the audiences have the opportunity to debate about the plays with the UK playwrights, critics and journalists. Indeed, the project, facilitated by The British Council, has become an exchange of effective dialogue between the British playwrights and the Arab audiences.

Damascus

The play’s main character, Paul, a Scottish TEFL course-book writer is on a short business trip in Damascus in order to sell his textbook to a Syrian college. While Paul tries to sell an image of multicultural Britain in Damascus, to his surprise he encounters a lively, intricate and progressive Arab culture. As a comedy-drama the play deals with the universal themes of romance, culture and politics as Paul’s flight back home is postponed due to a terrorist bomb at Beirut Airport.

The story is told in flashbacks by Elena, the ever-present Ukrainian pianist, as she observes and comments on the hotel guests. She acts as ‘The eye of a little god’ reminiscent of Sylvia Plath’s mirror that has ‘no preconceptions’; Elena witnesses and ‘swallows’ whatever she sees truthfully as she ‘meditates’ in the foyer day and night. Her narratives have a chorus-like effect providing the audience with the necessary information. She boasts about being ‘here in the beginning and at the end’ (8) as she remarks about the events she witnesses. She identifies herself as a transsexual Ukrainian Christian Marxist cocktail pianist to emphasize Greig’s fascination with plural identities. The kind of music she plays varies according to the time of the day. She plays sentimental arrangements of European pop music ‘to accompany the negotiations of mediocre foreign businessmen’ (13). Her music is followed by the call to prayer. When many mosques all over the city are issuing the call, the stage directions emphasize a ‘Debussy’ effect, a term from impressionist music, to imply discordance but also comfort. Indeed, the feeling of Elena’s comforting music, and the soothing impression of the call to prayers is loaded with the forthcoming instability and tension in the play. In addition to Elena’s comments, the interactions among characters are persistently backed up with television news images of the current situation which is getting worse ‘with the Americans and the Israelis and what’s happening in Gaza’ (108). Paul’s first appearance, as he phones his wife and his boss, highlights a need for connection between people and places. Paul comes to ‘a war zone’ in lieu of his boss on Valentine’s Day, a day when he should really be at home. He tells his boss on the phone ‘Iraq and Gaza – the Gaza thing and Iran and...’ (10).

Overall the play exemplifies assumptions that people of different nationalities have for each other: Elena’s first impressions of Paul characterize a typical Englishness which is seen through the outsider’s eyes: ‘The suit was not pressed. The shirt was not completely clean. There was hesitation. The body language spoke of distraction and weakness.’ (14). Similarly, as an Englishman Paul does not maintain any lineaments between ‘the other’ thus he simplifies the conflicts in the Middle East as ‘the Gaza thing’ broadly. Contrarily, Elena distinguishes herself from the East-West clash altogether: ‘The English are terrible negotiators. That is why they so often end up in wars. Scottish, English, it is the same thing. I don’t care what you think. I am from the Ukraine.’ (14). While the play highlights a jumble of opinions and presumptions among different nationalities, there are moments in the play where the audiences notice

the playwright attempting to demolish the Western prejudices against the East. Contrarily, the very same moments may also serve as a means for developing preconceived opinions indeed as the play's reception in the Middle Eastern countries reveal. At times the play becomes a platform for undoing the stereotypical assumptions. When Paul orders Arabic coffee, Muna is surprised; as she knows from experience that 'English people usually ask for cappuccino' (19). Or instead of the Syrian Desert, Paul finds snow in Damascus. The city of Damascus is portrayed in a manner to oppose Paul's and audiences' expectations. Both parties find a culturally prosperous city, not a warzone.

In addition to undoing the clichés and preconceptions in a multicultural milieu, the play draws attention to another cross-cultural issue: the impracticalities in TEFL industry. Paul advertizes his publisher's English course-book, *Middleton Road*, as a completely integrated English language learning system which is a comprehensive introduction to spoken and written English as well as a working knowledge of contemporary British culture. He uses the intact terminology of TEFL business which has been making enormous profit worldwide. While Paul is in Damascus publicizing the course book, his boss is at a conference in the Caribbean possibly for the same reason. Paul explains the Dean's secretary the 'modular' feature of the course book as a well-trying and established system 'which means that the teacher or individual learner can learn at their own pace, but it is also linked into a wider web of knowledge resources so that the learner can pursue their own interest trail throughout the whole resource package' (15). Paul's nonstop instructive explanations about the 'user-friendly' book are disassociated and disturbed by regular 'Beats'. He points out that *Middleton Road* stories reflect a contemporary and multicultural Britain. It is well established that UK has been marketing TEFL books abroad and thus contributing to its imperial tradition through English as a global language. However, the problem for Muna and the Syrian Education Department is not the English language itself but the British culture that is exposed in the course-book. Cultural issues in the book are certainly objectionable and inappropriate in Arab culture. Paul remarks that for the younger learner, they characterize two primary schoolboys in the course-book who get themselves into 'universal' scrapes such as 'setting off bangers, petty shoplifting, ring-bell-run' (15). He continues to explain the module for older learners characterized by teenagers in the book who have 'on-again off-again romance in a comprehensive school environment.' (15). For the advanced learners, Paul goes on, The Frobishers represent the typical activities of married couples in Britain: The husband is engaged in absurd projects like trying to make cider or re-enacting battles with his historical society; the wife goes to the theatre and sings in a choir; husband and wife have those conversations in bed exploring the past tense. Paul becomes sarcastic that 'The Frobishers practice 'Past imperfect. Perfect. Pluperfect'. (16). Here Paul speaks for his author: 'Through him, Greig is actually critical of the clichéd assumptions and all the impracticalities in TEFL course book writing. Paul ridiculously mentions that he likes the Frobishers and when he impersonates Mrs. Frobisher's utterances 'I *was* having a good day. I *had* sung in a choir when we *were* interrupted by a phone call' (17), he actually declares the whole pointlessness of TEFL course books which mostly consist of false pretences for the sake of authentic English language and life-like situations. Here Greig intends the fact that there are controversies on how British culture is integrated in English language teaching in the Middle East and elsewhere.

While issues related to cultural misconceptions are revealed, and negotiations are adjusted, Muna and Paul are accompanied by Wasim, the Dean from the Syrian Education Department. It is ironical that Wasim does not know any English and yet he is the person in charge who will make the final decision about the English course-books that should be studied at schools in the country. As Wasim does not speak or understand any English, Muna translates his utterances to Paul. Wasim speaks Arabic and some French but the audience hears him speak English. In an unfriendly manner, he speaks in French to tell Paul that his grandfather killed an English soldier in Jerusalem during the British Mandate and he mimes shooting at Paul. However, struggling with his own language skills Paul feels uncomfortable as he cannot speak French properly.

Because of its inappropriateness, Wasim remarks that The Ministry of Education will never let them teach *Middleton Road* series and he wants to be brief with Paul. However, Muna takes the issue more seriously; she insists that the students need decent textbooks not the old Russian system books that they use at schools presently. Contrary to what Wasim asks her to tell Paul, she confidently denotes to Paul

that the Dean wants him to update the English-language learning systems they use at the Institute. Unaware of Wasim's malicious opinions, Paul agrees to help Muna and negotiate on the changes. His escapist fantasies are juxtaposed to Paul and Muna's business dialogues. As Wasim speaks in Arabic, Paul does not understand him thus he is dependent on Muna's fabricated translations which mainly provide humorous moments.

Paradoxically, Wasim, as the decision maker, is not interested in establishing a business connection with the British course-book representative, instead he is interested in an escapist fantasy with his secretary, Muna. The hotel setting as a non-place evokes a world of fantasy for Wasim: 'Hotels. ... Away from home. Sitting on your bed with a bottle of whisky from the minibar waiting for the soft knock of a beautiful woman on your bedroom door. Hotels are sexy'. (24). Theatre critic Martin Denton, too, identifies a sense of elusiveness and romance and summarizes the play as an: 'escapist romance in the midst of a war zone' (Denton, 2008). While Wasim is engaged in expressing his flight of imagination, Muna draws Paul's attention to the education system in Syria. She emphasizes the fact that they have a free education system of a very high quality and that the Arab world wants to ensure that they have young people who are able to make their way in a globalized marketplace. She declares that learning English 'means independence of mind' but it must be 'combined with a strong respect for Arabic values' (25). She informs Paul that they need to change issues related to cultural and political understanding in the textbook before they can purchase *Middleton Road*. She suggests that they start the adaptations after which the Dean can present the course-book to the Ministry of Education.

Having learnt that his plane is cancelled because of a bomb at Beirut Airport, Paul and Muna meet at the foyer to make the necessary corrections in the textbook. Muna is careful at noticing how the Arabs are dressed in the book. She reminds Paul that the Institute is secular and that they are trying to achieve equality for the women in all the civil services, and in education sectors. In one episode in the *Middleton Road*, Muna notices that Mrs. Mohammad is wearing a full niqab to which the Institute would object severely. Muna also criticizes the way the covered woman is portrayed as moderate and tolerant, whereas the uncovered woman is depicted as aggressive and difficult. Paul assures Muna that there is nothing wrong to be covered and that it is an issue of faith, however, she disagrees with him and argues that it is 'an issue of patriarchy' (42). She clarifies her point by emphasizing that they are trying to educate girls and teach them that they are equal. She explains that there are plenty of communities in Syria where women are suppressed by religion or tradition: 'If a woman teacher is in the classroom using this material, her position will be undermined.' (42). Paul finds Muna's opinions as overreaction. However, she alerts him to the gravity of the issue. She talks about the old days in the seventies when her mother and other Arab women in Egypt, Palestine, and Iraq used to wear the latest Paris fashion, when the women made progress and when they dressed as they pleased. She mentions that today the women are threatened for being uncovered. Therefore she finds it confusing 'to link tolerance and fundamentalism' (43). She goes on talking about a piece of news she has heard on the BBC related to honour killing in Britain and the Muslim school pupils in Britain were talking about honour. She believes that these are the words of fundamentalism and they are the codes of patriarchy which they want to get rid of in Syria. Thus they never want to have these fundamentalist and patriarchal attitudes in their textbooks. So she urges that the illustrations related to niqab outfit change into a modern one.

For British audiences and readers the play becomes an opportunity to correct their clichéd views of the Arab world. Especially TEFL course-book writers intend to be sympathetic to cultural differences from a very banal point of view. However, the actuality may be somewhat intricate and quite the opposite, as it is clear in Muna's expressions, which indicate that imposing assumptions is unacceptable and that objectifying and illustrating 'the other' is a more complicated issue than the *Middleton Road's* instructors have imagined.

In another episode, Muna finds the relationship between a mother and son disrespectful, which would be inappropriate and unacceptable to read in classrooms in Syria. She continues to criticize other episodes in which individualism and materialism are praised. She emphasizes that these are not in line with their values in Damascus. She has accounted fourteen instances in the *Middleton Road* where individualism is promoted. Similarly, plots related to sexuality are also inappropriate as teachers in Damascus are very

conservative. However, it is beyond Paul's comprehension to appreciate Muna's worries about innocent romance.

Paul shows absolute reaction when Muna asks him to change the names of British political parties in one episode in *Middleton Road*. He disagrees with the idea of simply changing the names of political parties to simply Socialist Party and Nationalist Party, as he admits that they do not have a Socialist Party in England, so it would be absurd to give a name to a party which does not exist in England. Encircled by her requirements, Paul accuses the Syrian government of censoring free expression and being a dictatorship to which Muna responds in an in-her-face manner, emphasizing the fact that the government is at war:

Our country is surrounded by war in Iraq, Palestine, Lebanon...Israel occupies our land. America calls us evil. We have many minorities here and we all live in peace and stability. There is very little crime. There are schools and universities and all the time there are fundamentalists trying to – you have to understand the context in which we are living. (48).

Here Muna as a 'partly feminist, partly orthodox Muslim' (Bassett, 2007) reveals impacts related to political progression in the country and how democratization is prevented or controlled by not only political regimes in the country but also by external power. Paul accepts to adapt some changes but not the ones related with democracy. She acknowledges that she is irritated by British democracy which has invaded Iraq. She also finds it ridiculous when the British embassy hosted a conference on human rights in Damascus. Muna finds Britain's endless support for Israel unfair. And she finds it even more inequitable when British come to Damascus to tell them how to live. Paul is bombarded with information about the transnational relationships in the Middle East when Muna requires the last adaptation related to the Israeli flag on a badge on one of the character's jacket. She emphasizes that they cannot discuss Israel without giving it a proper context. She suggests an example context such as 'explaining the illegal Zionist colonization and campaign of occupation against the people of Palestine' (51), just for the sake of being practical. Paul is unable to grasp Muna's meaning and he explodes to stop her demands: 'Just for a moment – let's imagine there were no practicalities. Imagine there was just you and me and the youth who want to open their arms to the English-speaking world. Would you edit the text then?' (52). He creates an opportunity for Muna to question her own values as an individual. Then he goes on to praise a Jewish neighbour. Nevertheless, the use of a Jewish character as a means to explore future tense is distracting and unrealistic for Muna. She admits that 'The beach along which Rabbi Samuels *will* walk with his mother *will* be a beach along which my mother *will* never walk because even though she was born in Jaffa in 1942 she was expelled by the Israelis in 1948 and she *will* never be allowed back in. And I am never *going* to see the house in which she was born. Maybe Rabbi Samuels *will* live in it. That's the truth.' (53). Paul realizes the miseries of people in the Middle East, and the consequences of hatred among people who live next to each other. He confesses that 'It must be annoying. Having a ... me – come here and – Blabbering on about truth – You're right. It's just language'. (53). At the end of their discussions and negotiations, he promises to talk to the boss to mark up the changes for the Damascus edition. In discussing possible changes to the textbook, Lyn Gardner, too, emphasizes the treachery of language and the cultural confusions that occur when we fail to understand each other. (Gardner, 2007).

Unexpectedly, however, when Muna recalls the Dean's instructions from her undergraduate years she changes course on the adaptations she has been insistent on. When Wasim was her teacher, he taught them 'to live as if we were citizens of a country of the imagination' (54). He used to lecture them about the importance of a free mind refrained from any kind of censorship. At this point, Muna changes her mind and insists that they go to the Dean's poetry reading programme and persuade him to take the book to the Minister unchanged for the sake of freedom. On the contrary, Wasim is not the libertarian, idealistic Professor he used to be and has changed his political beliefs to become the Dean of the university. He is tired of the political disorder of the Middle East. Under the present circumstances, he does not have the passion for change and progress that both Muna and Paul have. Wasim reminds the audience of the sad history of the Middle East - an area that witnessed many uprisings, resistance, and riots. He talks in nostalgia about Jaffa, the oldest port city in the world, which has been integrated in the Arab state and then Jewish state: 'Olive trees and oceans lapping Jaffa's forlorn shore and martyrs killed for justice and the moon shining silver on the endless road to Jerusalem' (58). Wasim questions whether the martyrs are killed for beautiful justice or are they just killed by the bullets on Jerusalem's infinite road. He has lost

belief in reconciliation in the Middle East and he has started interrogating justice and human life: ‘And as they die what thoughts go through their heads? Thoughts of beautiful justice? Or shock at the taste of their own blood? (58). Hearing Wasim’s thought-provoking claims, Paul lectures Wasim on ‘truth’ and morality by using the old city as a metaphor. He observes that the old city has been formed by layers and layers of accretion growing slowly over time. But to his amazement, the centre of it all, the foundations upon which everything else has grown, is the mosque: ‘The mosque which they tell me was once a church and once even a Roman temple’ (63). Paul comes to a resolution that the old city, with all its interconnections and its accretions, was in fact, a very human space: ‘A very comfortable space in which to live. A place of infinite possibility.’ (64). He refers to the literary gathering that he witnessed tonight and likens ‘writing’ to ‘an old city’, and finds relationship between ‘literature’ and ‘truth’. He emphasizes that ‘literature follows the same pattern, built of accretions and extensions, bits piled on top of each other, some parts crumbling away and others restored’ and that ‘Writing is like an old city, and in its centre there is not a mosque or a temple, but something like a mosque or a temple - ... The truth...The desire to tell the truth’ (64). For Muna it is hard to translate Paul’s remarks to Wasim. When Paul rephrases his ideas about truth, literature and the old city, he pronounces that ‘Writing is like Damascus’ that ‘Your students have the right to live in Damascus. A Damascus of the mind’. (64). Muna paraphrases Paul’s words to Wasim:

He’s saying our students have a right to access writing built on the truth. He suggests that if you start off with that principle, then writing and teaching can layer itself around the truth to make something like a city – a world which the student’s mind can inhabit and explore. Wandering far and wide but always coming back to truth. But if you build your writing around politics – if you start off with expediency – then...then the city will be full of illusion and the students will get lost. (65).

Nonetheless, despite all the clarity in Paul’s explanations, Wasim disagrees with him and implies a sense of demagoguery in what Paul has declared about ‘truth’: ‘You know nothing about the country I live in. You know nothing about how it has been formed. You know nothing of its complexities and conflicts. You come here with all the shine of your English education, so certain of your values and you lecture me about truth’ (66). Contrarily, Wasim believes that freedom of speech is only a rhetoric which is coined by Western democracies. He maintains in Arabic that ‘There is no such thing as freedom of speech. What you are defending is simply your English power to describe the status quo in whatever way you like.’ (66). He accuses Anglo-Saxon idealism of bringing blood to the Middle East. He rages at Paul ‘You make your own accommodations with your regime and I will make my accommodations with mine.’ (66). However, Muna hesitates to translate Wasim’s accounts exactly and she acts as a catalyst; she briefly tells Paul that the Dean is not keen to accept *Middleton Road*. Accusing Wasim of being a hypocrite, Muna knows very well that the Dean does not actually believe in ‘the struggle, the regime, the glorious motherland’. (67). She conveys a common statement that they just pretend although everybody knows that ‘it’s fiction’ (67). Still, the play metaphorically reveals the deception in bureaucracy where mostly the truth is veiled under rhetoric, which Wasim supports as ‘tactic’. He specifies that if Muna wants to be Dean one day, she needs to learn to navigate because ‘these waters that look calm but are in fact reefs’ (92).

The play underlines important issues about the power of education. The decision-makers can either tell the truth or fall in the trap of illusion. As a novice education consultant at the institute, Muna is worried about state control in school books. She rises to oppose to too much centralization and wants students to reach the truth. She believes that the students are under their responsibility so they need to be careful about what to teach them, what to offer them in the education system. As the system is fragile and easily destabilized by the fundamentalists ‘who tell them to dress in a certain way’ (94), the mass media that ‘tell them their republic is a functioning democracy’ and by the Americans who ‘tell them their government is evil’. At this point Wasim as an experienced lecturer and a bureaucrat denotes that ‘Doubt, hesitancy, timidity, uncertainty – these are the ways we go towards the truth. Slowly. Unsure of ourselves...And through the darkness we go. Slowly we walk forward putting out our hands to feel the damp walls of the cave. Looking for the light. That is what we tell them’ (95).

However, the darkness has become a fatal trap for the ordinary young generation that is represented by Zakaria, the hotel receptionist who is after a career as a script-writer in Hollywood. He has a strong interest in meeting Western girls to break up his life. He expresses his distorted vision of life to Paul: ‘If I

am not away from here, I am dead. I am dead inside.' (55). Zakaria finds Paul as a prospect who may support and promote his script. He believes that Paul can save him from his desperation and help him realize his dreams. However, Paul thoughtlessly fails to understand Zakaria's desire to leave Damascus. Zakaria finally kills himself when he sees that Paul fails to help him achieve his last desperate hope of becoming a writer in the West. For some young Syrian audiences Zakaria is an 'iconic figure'; while other Arab spectators condemn him as a hopeless stereotype of Arab victimhood.

Overall Paul's visit to Damascus has been an experience of enlightenment for him. He thanks Wasim for inviting him to Damascus. His stay has been a unique incident in which he has had the opportunity to encounter with 'the other' and to feel the other's proximity and distance. Greig expresses a problem of authenticity in British theatre. He insists that he is obsessed with the representation of 'the other'. And while he represents 'the other' he needs to tell stories in which he hears Arab voices in a mythical city - a Damascus of the mind - so that 'the stage becomes Damascus, a place for change'. Greig believes that mythical lands of theatre are rooted in a contemporary reality. (Greig, Audio, Theatre Voice). Indeed, Paul makes impermanent contact with a new society; he is seduced by the old city, while at the same time he becomes more sensitive to Arabic issues. According to the French philosopher and intellectual Emmanuel Levinas relation with the other is in fact 'a relation without relation'. It is a relation because an encounter does take place; but it is 'without relation' because that encounter does not establish parity or understanding, the Other remains resolutely Other.' (Davis, 1996). Indeed, although Paul and Zakaria appear to establish a friendship, eventually Zakaria always remains 'the other'. Similarly although Muna tries hard to act as a mediator between Wasim and Paul, between the West and the Mid-East, she cannot succeed. Greig is aware of the fact that although there are more similarities than differences, 'on a certain deep level, the cultures can never truly come together'. (P. Fisher, 2007).

Correspondingly Levinas wants to grasp the mystery of 'the other' in his ethics. Paul learns from his Damascus visit how much he is ignorant of other cultures, and how vague the western politics are. His apparent Western power in fact has annoyed and offended his Arab hosts. Anyhow the play suggests contemporary urgent issues to be discussed. Undeniably, Greig not only has helped Arab writers to realize that they need to find their own voice, rather than see themselves and their society defined through western eyes' (McMillan, 2009), but also through Paul he displays a realistic perspective on how Scotland or the West in general relates to the Middle East.

The play has received both respectable and hostile criticism from the Middle Eastern audiences, while UK audiences see the play as a self-criticism directed against the well-intentioned unsuccessful Westerner abroad. While some critics accuse Greig of 'neo-colonialism', insults to Arab womanhood, and grotesque stereotyping, the leading Egyptian critic Mehna Al-Badawi, of Al- Ahram in Cairo, argues that the playwright clearly expresses the situation of many who are struggling for self-expression in societies full of cultural tension and political uncertainty. (McMillan, 2009). Some Arab audiences emphasize grievance at the play's attempt to give an outline of their entire culture, represented by three troubled characters. Theatre critic Joyce McMillan evokes the debate between former colonizing powers, and the countries they once used and manipulated for their own ends. She asks how far the whole western model of civilization - with its alluring dreams of freedom and self-fulfillment - can and should be extended across the globe. (McMillan, 2009). A number of theatre critics deservedly emphasize that the play acts as a challenge to cultural stereotypes. Charlotte Higgins (Higgins, 2009) and Mark Fisher (M. Fisher, 2007) argue that the play hopes to challenge received Western notions about people from the Arabic world. While Laura Collins Hughes highlights a sense of an inescapable Iraq war drama reflected on a television screen in the set's hotel lobby, (Hughes, 2008), Jackie Donohoe underlines a sense of 'diversity' (Donohoe, 2010) in a place that acts as a junction where Eastern and Western cultures collide. As for Philip Fisher the playwright uses 'wit and subtlety to explore an alien culture, as seen through the eyes of an ignorant outsider who gets too involved' (P. Fisher). Similarly, for the Arab critic Sakhr Al-Makhadhi the play really means to 'poke fun at the disorientation of the Brit abroad. But some Damascenes in the audience saw it as mocking their culture'. (Al-Makhadhi, 2009). The play has toured the Arab world with the support of the British Council. The UK's cultural organization insists it is promoting healthy dialogue between Britain and the Middle East.

Intentionally, Greig uses Paul's interactions with the Syrians to embody the careless way the West deals with the Arab world. During a post-performance discussion Greig has pointed out that he has tried to be absolutely honest with Paul in a way that he is sometimes 'arrogant, callous and unfeeling'. Greig argues that Paul does try very hard in order to make a connection, an act that reflects a broader current in Western society. 'Not the West as a whole, but a liberal metropolitan European West'. (Al-Makhadhi, 2009). Although the play has a comic mood especially when staging cultural confusions, it actually explores the ways how 'language can fail' people. (Gardner, 2007).

Conclusion

Whether Western or Mid-Eastern, Greig articulates his characters' hopes and despairs in a world where language and love, meaning and misconception collide. Zakaria, Wasim and Muna's utterances dismantle the supposed prejudices about the Middle East. Eventually, Paul has come to realize that Damascus is a progressive city, and severely opposes fundamentalism. While he is engaged in familiarizing with 'the other', he also introduces his own culture and Western values. The city Damascus has become an intersection where the protagonist finds the opportunity to gather information about 'the other', to transmit Western demeanor, and at the same time acknowledge his own individuality and identity. At times he feels dislocated, uprooted and alienated but most of the time he considers himself as a superior Westerner.

Certainly, while Greig has experiences of the foreign, through Paul he attempts to criticize and ridicule colonial narratives for their efforts to civilize foreign lands. Paul fails to impose his ideas in adapting any changes to *Middleton Road*. What is more, his deceitful acquaintance with Zakaria causes the Arab man's tragic ending. Paul also reflects a sense of loss in a foreign land which is symbolically represented by his 'loss of smell' (9). The city of Damascus has become mazelike in both physical and mental senses. He is also being mocked by the Dean which shows that Paul as a Westerner cannot experience an authentic sense of belonging in the Middle East. Greig gives voice to Arab characters in Damascus. While Greig challenges any cultural stereotypes, it is innovative in a way that a Western playwright embodies the Arab intellectual and their views of Western and Eastern values. The play has created a platform to contact with the geographically and historically distant characters so that they can settle their different positions.

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