Afghan theatres since 9/11: from and beyond Kabul

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Abbreviations

3-D	Three Dimensional
ACKU	Afghanistan Centre at Kabul University
AHRDO	Afghanistan Human Rights and Democracy Organisation
AIDS	Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome
AK-47	*Avtomat Kalashnikova* (Soviet assault weapon)
AKDN	Aga Khan Development Network
AKTC	Aga Khan Trust for Culture
ALECSO	Arab League Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organisation
ANIM	Afghanistan National Institute of Music
ANT	Afghan National Theatre
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
BCE	Before Common Era
c	Circa (approximately around this year or date)
CD	Compact Disc
CE	Common Era
CEC	Citizen Exchange Corps
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
CUNY	City University of New York
DNS	Den Nationale Scene
DRA	Democratic Republic of Afghanistan
DVD	Digital Video Disc
FATA	Federally Administered Tribal Areas
FCCS	Foundation for Culture and Civil Society
ICOMOS	International Council on Monuments and Sites
ICTJ	International Center for Transitional Justice
IFA	Institut Français d'Afghanistan
IPSO	International Psychosocial Organisation
INGO	International Non-Governmental Organisation
ISPRA	Italian Institute for Protection and Environmental Research
IR	International Relations
ISESCO	Islamic Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
KNT	Kabul National Theatre
LSE	London School of Economics and Political Science
MMCC	Mobile Mini-Circus for Children
MoU	Memorandum of Understanding
MPR	Minnesota Public Radio
NatGeo	National Geographic
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organisation
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NOK	Norwegian Krone
NPR	National Public Radio
NUPI	Norsk Utenrikspolitisk Institutt (Norwegian Institute of International Affairs, in Norsk language)

NWFP	North West Frontier Province
ODA	Official Development Assistance
OIC	Organisation of Islamic Cooperation
PAJ	Journal of Performance and Art
PBS	Public Broadcasting Service
PDPA	People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan
TCG	Theatre Communication Group
TED	Technology, Entertainment and Design (Conference)
TEDx	Technology, Entertainment and Design (Independent Conference)
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
UNHCR	Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
US	United States of America
USD	United States Dollars
USIP	United States Institute of Peace

Foreign Expressions

ceteris paribus	(Latin) other things being equal; with other conditions remaining the same
ghossa	(Dari) harsh anger, cruelty
in media res	(Latin) 'into the middle of things', especially starting a narrative in the middle of an action
in-situ	(Latin) in the original place
khapa	(Dari) angry, annoyed, irritable, distressed, sad, worried, anxious, unhappy
shalwar khameez	(Dari) baggy shirt and trousers worn by Afghans and Pakistanis
loya jirga	(Dari) Great Council. The traditional meeting of tribal chiefs, *ulema* and other representatives that enact and regulate laws, including the choosing of Afghan kings
Mujahideen	(Dari) holy warriors fighting a jihad
Sharia	(Dari) the canon of Islamic law
tabula rasa	(Latin) an absence of preconceived ideas or predetermined goals; a clean slate
Taliban	(Arabic) 'talib' means 'student'; it is now a term to describe an fundamentalist organisation founded by Mullah Mohammed Omar who enforces a very conservative set of religious values
ulema	(Dari) Islamic scholars

Abstract

The two most visible representations of Afghanistan are arguably Steve McCurry's 'Afghan Girl' on the cover of *National Geographic* (June 1985) and Khaled Hosseini's award-wining novel *The Kite Runner* (2004). These two products laid the basic premise that images and ideas about Afghanistan have been circulated and commodified worldwide, especially qualities of the exotic, oppressed, and weak. Since print photography and literary works belong to the culture industry, this research seeks to enquire if performing arts, more specifically theatre, projected Afghanistan in similar ways. More precisely, this research asks how Afghan cultures and identities have been represented in the post-9/11 period. Borrowing the circuit of culture model (1997) from Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay, this research then examines ten specific theatre performances within Afghanistan and outside Afghanistan in a spatio-temporal framework illustrating dynamic tensions from, and beyond, Kabul. Case studies *from Kabul* illustrate that Afghan cultures can be owned and regulated by competing stakeholders, including the Taliban, within its geopolitical boundaries. Case studies *from/beyond Kabul* show the export of Afghan cultures and performances outside Afghanistan, underscoring tropes of impoverishment and suffering while inviting or inciting international interventions and conciliations. Case studies *beyond Kabul* tend to imagine 'Afghanistan' by offering an ambivalent, and sometimes, contradictory response to the war on terror. This thesis argues that *projective closure* – the act of filling in absences and gaps to make sense of an Afghan narrative – often circulates and entrenches Afghans in victimhood tropes. Because there are constant fluctuations and contestations at what 'Afghanistan' was, is, and should be, Afghanistan as an imagined entity – or a global cultural commodity – becomes more evident. Derek Gregory was right to observe in *The Colonial Present* (2004) that Afghanistan has been an object of international geopolitical manoeuvrings since the nineteenth century, and, as this thesis will show, even early twenty-first century. But the claw of the "colonial present" does not stem from hostilities enacted by imperial power, but a series of intimate engagements with non-government organisations, government agencies, embassies, foreign theatre directors, and even global audiences who uncritically celebrate narratives of Afghan heroism. This is further complicated by the readiness of local Afghan practitioners to consume and project themselves as victims of war who are in 'need' of foreign help. As such, the value that is being demanded and supplied in the global culture industry is still victimhood. Afghan cultures and identities are deeply embedded in contexts – situational, cultural, global – and unless these contexts are collocated and layered upon each other to add nuance to interrogate cultural practices, cultural workers and theatre practitioners continue to run the risks of reproducing conflicts, even if they are beyond the geographical space of Kabul – because the locations of the 'local' and 'global' are becoming increasingly intertwined.

Declaration

No portion of the work referred to in the thesis has been submitted in support of an application for another degree or qualification of this or any other university or other institute of learning.

Acknowledgements

The Author

Chapter One

AFGHANISTAN: LIGHTS, CAMERA, DEATH THREATS

While my mother hemorrhaged to death during childbirth, Hassan lost his
less than a week after he was born. Lost her to a fate
most Afghans considered far worse than death:
She ran off with a clan of traveling singers and dancers.
- Khaled Hosseini, ***The Kite Runner*** **(2003)**

Preamble

In Khaled Hosseini's novel, *The Kite Runner,* from where the above quote is taken, the protagonist Amir, a twelve-year-old Sunni Muslim, recounts the death of his mother while contrasting the loss of his best friend's mother: she "ran off with a clan of traveling singers and dancers" (Hosseini, 2003, p. 6). Hassan is Amir's childhood friend, the son of his father's servant. This quote refers to Hassan's mother becoming a performing artist. Running off suggests a disintegration of the family, but being an artist in Afghanistan seems to connote pejorative meanings: it is a fate "considered far worse than death". How and why are these representations and meanings negatively construed? What is the relationship between performing arts and Afghan cultures? What consequences might these representations have?

In reality, a notable number of playwrights, directors, filmmakers and actors had been given death threats and were forced to leave the country. In Jenny Kleeman's Channel 4 documentary *Lights, Camera, Death Threats* (broadcast on 27 April 2012) – a title I have borrowed for this chapter – Saba Sahar, reportedly

the first "female director, actress, screenwriter and all-round glamourpuss" (Sturgess, n.d.) has chosen to remain in Afghanistan despite the dangers. Similarly, a young Afghan actress who performed at The Globe in London during the Cultural Olympiad in 2012 is willing to face death threats (see *The Comedy of Errors* in Chapter 5). She remarks that if she becomes a victim of violence or death, "it will have been worth it. If we don't do this, then who will?" (Shakespeare from Kabul, 2012). If the perceived consequence of one's involvement in performing arts is a fate "far worse than death", then the above examples illustrate another assumption that being an artist can result in physical death, not just a symbolic one. If death is the ultimate cessation of life, what does a fate "far worse than death" represent? In this thesis, the premise is that the real and the representational are often conflated, causing confusion in the reproduction and representation of a 'violent Afghan culture', resulting in the disappearance of a local performing arts culture. This dire situation is juxtaposed by foreign (political) actors seeking to introduce, dramatise, or revive a 'forgotten Afghan culture', but I ask, at whose expense? What is 'our' complicity in 'their' disappearance? This thesis therefore aims to identify the social representations of Afghan identities and cultures; investigate the relationships between Afghan theatres and the wider society, as well as the contexts with violence; and analyse the local and global circulations of these representations.

Background and Research Question

Before outlining the objectives of this research study, it would be useful to contextualise the history of this project and, by so doing, comment on my own position as a researcher. As an upper-middle class Singaporean male with a Catholic upbringing, I am trained as an English Language and Literature teacher

who then specialised with a Master's degree in Applied Theatre as a prison educator. Applied theatre, briefly defined, is an umbrella-term that describes dramatic activities "that primarily exist outside conventional mainstream theatre institution" (Nicholson, 2005, p. 2) with the socially-engaged aim "to be a theatre that somehow balances the pragmatism involved in making itself relevant in difficult environments with the idealism of a belief in transformation" (Thompson, 2003, p. 16). Although the term 'applied theatre' has received debates within the discipline (see Prentki and Preston, 2009; Ackroyd, 2007; "Applied Theatre/Drama: an e-debate in 2004", 2006), it has generally been accepted to encompass a range of practices including theatre for development in African societies (see Epskamp, 2006; Byam, 1999; Banham et al, 1999; Salhi, 1998; Breitinger, 1994), drama in education (see Neelands, 1984, 2010; Taylor, 2000; Nicholson, 2000, 2011; Bowell and Heap, 2001; Wagner, 1999; O'Neill, 1995; Winston, 1998; O'Toole, 1992; Landy, 1982), community-based or participatory theatre (see Leonard, Kilkelly and Burnham, 2006; Cohen-Cruz, 2005; Saldaña, 2005; Boon and Plastow, 2004; van Erven, 2001; Haedicke and Nellhaus, 2001; Rohd, 1998), and prison theatre (see McAvinchey, 2011; Shailor, 2011; Balfour, 2004; Thompson, 1998; Kuziākina and Meerovich, 1995), the last of which became my specialisation with cross-fertilisations with my training in dramatherapy (see Johnson and Emunah, 2009; Dayton, 2005; Landy, 1993, 1994, 1996; Salas, 1996; Karp, Holmes, and Tauvon, 1998; Jennings, 1994).

Since then, I have utilised all forms of dramatic engagement, or applied theatre, in schools, psychiatric hospitals, communities, and prisons in Singapore and New York. Having seen the favourable outcomes in my Singaporean student inmates' social-emotional and artistic lives, I had planned to take applied theatre further

afield, out of the prison context. I wanted to extend my repertoire of applied theatre work now into conflict zones and to work with Afghan children in a refugee camp as part of my doctoral dissertation. This motivation inevitably stemmed from a Freirean praxis in "conscientização", a belief that citizens can learn "to perceive social, political and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality" (Freire, 2000, p. 35). I wanted to go into an area that required the *most* therapeutic need and use the arts as an interventionist tool for emancipation and social change – a humanistic and redemptionist position I was not fully critical of. With an Internet search on UNHCR's website, I found that Afghanistan topped the list for "source country of refugee" in 2010 and 2011, with nearly 2.7 million refugees in 79 countries, while Iraq, ranking number two, was almost half of that, at 1.4 million refugees (UNHCR, 2012).

As expected, my doctoral research project evolved. The more important question was raised with regards to the ethical repercussions of my initial proposal and intention. What am I *really* doing with Afghan children refugees, and why would I assume that they are oppressed and needed emancipation? Though the research topic was changed, I kept "Afghanistan" as my subject of study. In December 2012, I interrupted my doctoral studies to work for a local NGO in Kabul. I was supposed to be the project manager of a radio programme with Afghan actors. I felt it was my only avenue to get into the circle of theatre practitioners, so I took up that job. At that time, I was also writing up funding proposals to bid for projects and was surprised to find Request for Proposals asking for forum theatre to be implemented. Informally, one UN official invited me to create a programme where they went into villages, gather the girls, do a show, and tell them about

human rights – an initiative I felt totally uncomfortable with. My one-year-stay in Kabul was cut short by seven months due to security risks. Since my return, I have stepped back to re-evaluate my position as a researcher within applied theatre, especially in conflict zones, by asking difficult questions on the ethics of theatrical practices, the engagement and social change that practitioners in the field profess and promulgate (see Thompson, 2009; Kerr, 2009; Burvill, 2008; Gallagher, 2006; McDonnell, 2005). It is also at this stage in my critical questionings that made me interrogate the efficacy and ramifications of drama in culturally-specific contexts, including the adoption of theatrical forms by non-theatre practitioners in a conflict zone. I decided then to analyse Afghan performances with some ethical distance. A better way of distancing myself from my previous applied theatre training is to, therefore, situate the study through a different lens with a research question on the social representation of Afghan theatres and Afghan identities. This marks my first leap into, and contribution to, the field of Performance Studies.

Because of the 'disappearance' of Afghanistan's cultural practices, coupled with performing artists 'on the run', I am sometimes given anecdotes and traces of performance practices. At other times, I seek to make sense of lingering effects that can partially be part of my consumption, or part of my projection, but in the entire process, I seek to create new knowledge on Afghan cultural phenomena. Theoretically, this thesis takes the main points of inspiration and departure from Peggy Phelan, a performance theorist. I draw on Phelan's general arguments about the epistemological failure of the visible in representational politics, where she asserts that the refusal to be visible or to be marked is a way to resist hegemonic control. Within her theoretical framework are concepts of

"invisibility", "presence", and the "relation between self and other", all of which will be explored in greater detail. These will also be juxtaposed with the politics and economics of the culture industry inside and outside Afghanistan which have contributed to the production and consumption of violence – both real and imagined – to, of, and by Afghan peoples. This is where this thesis takes the second inspiration from – cultural studies. Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay's concept of 'circuit of culture' (du Gay et al, 1997) is provisionally understood as the interconnectedness of the global world responsible for the manufacture, distribution, and circulation of a product. The "product" in this thesis refers to Afghan identities, produced, transacted, and consumed in the market from inside and outside Afghanistan. To make sense of the mobility between the representational and the real, this doctoral study will investigate the range of artistic practices from and beyond Kabul, and will explore the meanings around Afghan cultures and identities in the post-9/11 period. I will then examine ten theatre performances. A central argument is that theatre-making has contributed to the commodification of an 'Afghan' identity. Steeped in complex motifs around victimhood, heroism, sacrifice, and redemption, 'Afghanistan' is represented *from and beyond* Kabul which, as the chapters will demonstrate, is at risk of perpetuating symbolic or actual violence.

Objectives, Framework, and Definitions

This research study is motivated by two objectives. Operationally, this thesis seeks to fill a literature gap. Much of the literature around Afghanistan has largely focused on conflict and peacebuilding (Thiessen, 2014; Ponzio, 2011; Brahimi and Pickering, 2011; Rotberg, 2007), diaspora and refugee repatriation (Oeppen and Schlenkhoff, 2010; Monsutti, 2008; Centlivres and Centlivres-

Demont, 1988), with sporadic mention of development issues, including women's rights, education and literacy, and agriculture (Baiza, 2013; Demirbüken, Mili, and Le Cussan, 2011; Samady, 2001; Howland, 1999; Rostami-Povey, 2007; Pain and Sutton, 2007; Christensen, 1990). Cultural development (see, for example, Barfield, 2010), on the other hand, has been severely under-researched not just because Afghan scholars had left the country since the Soviet invasions forty years ago (Monsutti, 2001, p. 11), but also because the Taliban had banned arts practices and destroyed research about cultures (ibid.) that were deemed unIslamic two decades ago, leaving behind a void of absent academics and practitioners. On one hand, this piece of research sets out to examine the impact protracted conflicts had, and still have, on the arts and cultural practices today in Afghanistan by a three-pronged process of identification, mapping, and understanding. I will be (i) identifying existing local infrastructure that support or challenge performance practices; (ii) mapping the range of cultural and performance practices in Afghanistan; and (iii) understanding the perceptions of 'Afghanistan' by practitioners and audiences, both locally and globally.

On the other hand, this study also aims to examine the impact surrounding these practices from the 'outside'. It is in the post-9/11 period that has deemed security risks relatively and mildly safer for people to engage in the arts, with intermittent growth of international non-governmental projects and foreign funding, to help Afghanistan rebuild its resources and infrastructure. The question to be asked is: "Have external influences and funding sources, sometimes for purposes of cultural diplomacy, changed local cultural practices and attitudes towards the arts, and in what ways?" The production of culture – what gets funded and

produced, for whom, and what impact it has for the local practitioners and society at large – forms one part of the cultural equation, but the other is on audience reception and attitudes, those who consume – both reject and demand for – these 'services' which contribute to the eventual circulation of Afghan cultures.

The second operational research objective is archival. I want to trace and map out certain arts practices within this period of research (2011-2015) in an attempt to describe and archive the work that is being done in and outside Afghanistan, to offer an alternative reality to people outside the country that the arts, however invisible they are, *do* exist in Afghanistan. But even within the existing infrastructure, a disparity can be observed where some organisations are fully funded by international donors, while others enjoy none of these privileges and suffer a closure of their operations. For that matter, local Afghans may also benefit from this research archival on the existing cultural practices today, which may not be sustainable tomorrow.

In terms of structure, Chapter 1 first establishes the purpose of this project, and then familiarises the reader with definitions of terminology and theoretical frameworks that underpin this study. Primarily focussing on mapping out performance practices about Afghanistan, not just from the country, but also from outside its geographical boundaries, I will outline the three basic arguments that Afghanistan, firstly, has been 'imagined'; that there is a demand for it becoming more 'visible' in the marketplace; and that to destabilise the hegemonic power of the representational, we would need to ascribe a 'collocation of contexts' to understand how multiple contexts are arranged to influence and determine what 'Afghanistan' is. I have borrowed "collocation" from linguistics to show the co-

occurrence of words in a phrase, but in my thesis, I refer to the arrangement and layering of contexts that can co-occur to produce different abstract meanings and interpretations. Following that, I will provide a literature review and describe the methodology to frame how this piece of research is done. Chapter 2 seeks to contextualise Afghanistan through a cultural and historical perspective. In identifying four periods in what I call exotica, renaissance, desertification, and redemption, I lay out the contexts in which 'Afghanistan' before 2001 have resulted in tropes of mystification, mythification, and myth-making. After 2001, these negative representations are repeated. But I will discuss these representations in various social, political, economic, academic, religious, institutional and personal-ethnographic contexts, both locally and globally.

The case study chapters (Chapters 3 – 5) are organised in spatial-temporal categories – 'from Kabul', 'from/beyond Kabul', and 'beyond Kabul'. These are meta-categories that illustrate the dynamic nature and mobility of the commodification and circulation of cultures across countries. Peggy Phelan's concepts of "in/visibility", "presence", and "representational and the real" are useful starting points to discuss the following: Chapter 3's invisible, unmarked contexts surrounding each performance, where various stakeholders seek to regulate aspects of Afghan cultures; Chapter 4's exchange value based on the presence and absence of a suffering nation, which leads to a commodification of victimhood and heroic discourses; and Chapter 5's 'imagination' of a 'real' Afghanistan, where theatre practitioners, in seeking to understand the geopolitics on the 'war on terror', have come closer to 'filling in' and closing the narrative gaps. In other words, there is a dangerous colonial possibility of non-Afghans speaking *for*, and *on behalf of*, the Afghan. Respectively, I will supplement

Chapter 3 with Homi Bhabha's "location of culture", Chapter 4 with Karl Marx's "fetish", and Chapter 5 with Merleau-Ponty's "imaginary texture of the real". In the concluding chapter, I will use Phelan's interpretation of Lacan's concept of the "relation between self and other" to problematise my own desires and projections, paradoxically marking my discursive representations of Afghanistan within the same identity politics that Phelan strives to avoid. In order to prevent real danger to Afghan artists, I take on Phelan's position in refusing to make cultural practices more visible. Throughout the thesis, references will be made to Afghan identity, Afghan culture, representation, production, and consumption. Next, I will define some of these terms and theoretical concepts before going on to contextualise the arguments that follow.

"Afghan Identity" and "Afghanness"

This study borrows from Stuart Hall's and Judith Butler's definition of *identity* and *identification* as points of entry into the formations and configurations of 'Afghan-ness' and, arguably, the global world's relationship with Afghanistan, respectively. Starting from Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic tradition, *identification* refers to the "emotional tie with another person" (Hall, 1996, p. 3), which often results in "the natural closure of solidarity and allegiance" with another person or group (ibid., p. 2). To a large extent, this is still the common understanding that sees the semantic variants of *identification* as 'empathy', 'sympathy', 'solidarity', and 'compassion', all of which have emotional overtones. The lack of this emotional quality – or the antonym of identification on the other hand – connotes 'apathy', 'cruelty', 'insensitivity', 'callousness', 'heartlessness' and the like. This study moves away from Freud's psychoanalytic tradition to Stuart Hall's socioeconomic tradition, which carefully manoeuvres

the identification to, and with, a subject by raising a Foucauldian scepticism on these 'interior' processes. As Hall observes, Foucault states that "[t]he subject is produced 'as an effect' through and within discourse, within specific discursive formation, and has no existence, and certainly no transcendental continuity or identity from one subject position to another" (ibid., p. 10). In other words, the subject is a social construction; the 'subject' is an "effect" produced through social practices, with identification being formed *during* that discourse.

In *Discipline and Punish* (1977), Foucault first explains that the subject emerges from the institutional, confessional regimes of power, in which the subject position of an individual is made absent, resulting in what he calls "docile bodies" which are disciplined and are self-policing. In his later work in *The Use of Pleasure* (1985), Foucault recognises that the Law cannot discipline, regulate, or produce the subject without first eliciting a response from the subject. Foucault has reassessed his earlier theories and expanded the concept of 'identity', not explicitly in those terms as Hall suggested, to investigate "how individuals were led to practice, on themselves and on others, a hermeneutics of desire" (Foucault, 1985, p. 5). It is the production of self as an object in the world, the "practices of self-constitution, recognition and reflection [in their] relation to the rule" (Hall, 1996, p. 13), Hall adds, that signifies 'subjectification'. This shows Foucault's shift towards a "centring" of discursive practice in the constitution of subjects, a theoretical position which Hall readily accepts, but only partially. Instead, Hall proposes to see identification "as an articulation", or a borrowed term from Stephen Heath referring to the joining of the subject in structures of meaning known as a "suture" (ibid., p. 6). Therefore, identity, as Hall explains, refers to:

the meeting point, the point of *suture,* between on the one hand the discourses and practices which attempt to 'interpellate', speak to us or hail us into place as the social subjects of particular discourses, and on the other hand, the processes which produce subjectivities, which construct us as subjects which can be 'spoken'. Identities are thus points of temporary attachment to the subject positions which discursive practices construct for us (ibid., pp. 5-6)

I would infer that these "points of temporary attachment" are the nodes on Hall and du Gay's "circuit of culture", which will be illustrated later. Basically, there are Afghan identities that are produced, consumed, regulated, and represented along the circuit. Because all the discourses and processes would "suture" differently, sometimes messily, based on the conditions and contexts around each of the theatrical performances, I propose examining multiple contexts, simultaneously, by the end of this thesis to help articulate some of these differences.

Continuing with his theoretical exposition, Hall characterises identity as a concept that is never unified. It is "increasingly fragmented and fractured" (ibid., p. 4) and is subject to a "radical historicization" (ibid.) in the process of change and transformation. But because identities are constituted within – rather than outside – discursive representation, it is possible to trace the fragments of Afghan identities through motifs and tropes over a period of time. Hall asserts that identity formations are part of the processes of globalisation and the processes of "forced and 'free' migration […] of the so-called 'post-colonial' world" (ibid.). He summarises it succinctly:

Though they seem to involve an origin in a historical past with which they

continue to correspond, actually identities are about questions of using the resources of history, language and culture in the process of becoming rather than being; not 'who we are' or 'where we came from', so much as what we might become, how we have been represented and how that bears on how we might represent ourselves. (ibid.)

Identity is, in Hall's words, always "becoming", rather than "being". As such, identity arises from resources of history, language and culture into what Hall has also termed "narrativization of the self" (ibid.). To him, the suturing of the story is "in the imaginary (as well as the symbolic), and is therefore, always, partly constructed in fantasy, or at least within a fantasmatic field" (ibid.). This thesis suggests that the narrativisation of the Afghan self is not a localised concept, but is dependent on others' construction as well. Subsequently, I borrow Hall's definition of "identity" and the subsequent "suturing" of an Afghan story in the "imaginary", which will be most evident in later chapters. It is my attempt to examine these points, both in history and in discourse, as "enunciative strategies" (ibid., p. 5) to critically analyse these representations that lead me to conclude that these narrativisations of Afghanistan oscillate constantly between Freud and Foucault/Hall, blurring how 'Afghanistan' "might become", in Hall's words.

In this thesis, the 'Afghan identity' is defined here specifically as a collective cultural marker that makes one group possess a quality of 'Afghanness', or to have an affinity to Afghanistan as a country. Edward Said has posited in *Culture and Imperialism* (1994) that the existence of, say, Africanness, Jewishness, or Germanness are "both historically created and the result of interpretation" (Said, 1994, pp. 31-32). In the same way, this quality of Afghanness is endowed with

multiple meanings, and is interpreted differently by people, depending on their emotional, economic or political investment towards Afghans and Afghanistan, possibly manifesting as having a national unity, or a heightened sense of solidarity inspired by an agenda. Cultural stakeholders in the form of actors, theatre directors, producers, scriptwriters, and audiences are invested in the telling of *an* Afghan story, and in so doing consistently over time, identify with the Afghan identity, in what Judith Butler calls "sedimentation" (Butler, 1993). In *Bodies That Matter,* Judith Butler asserts:

> [I]dentification is the phantasmatic staging of the event. In this sense, identifications belong to the imaginary; they are phantasmatic efforts of alignment, loyalty, ambiguous and cross-corporeal cohabitation; they unsettle the 'I'; they are the sedimentation of the 'we' in the constitution of any 'I,' the structuring presence of alterity in the very formulation of the 'I.' Identifications are never fully and finally made; they are incessantly reconstituted and, as such, are subject to the volatile logic of iterability. (Butler, 1993, p. 105)

The plurality and inclusivity of "we" determines, through imaginations, the identity of Afghanistan. Words such as "phantasmatic" and "imaginary" now prepare the arguments that will follow in the next section, especially in my view on how Afghanistan is being (re)imagined as a nation-state, the stories of heroism and victimhood that are, in Butler's words, "incessantly reconstituted" throughout the circuit of culture. How this is constituted within discursive formation can be explained with Butler's concept of "iterability". Iterability is defined as the "regularized and constrained repetition of norms" (ibid., p. 95). Butler asserts that "this repetition is what enables a subject and constitutes the temporal condition for the subject" (ibid.), again resonant with Hall's "temporary attachment" that

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are associated with identity formation. Butler's iterability is synonymous with "performativity", as she makes clear the condition of constraints for a performance:

> This iterability implies that "performance" is not a singular "act" or event, but a ritualized production, a ritual reiterated under and through constraint, under and through the force of prohibition and taboo, with the threat of ostracism and even death controlling and compelling the shape of the production, but not, I will insist, determining it fully in advance. (Butler, 1993, p. 95)

In the case studies that follow, death threats and actual terrorist attacks will feature as real incidents or events in Afghanistan that continually put cultural activities under "constraint". Because of these iterations, the performativity of Afghan identities becomes sedimented as unstable, and when it is produced further afield with and by global audiences, the responses stabilise them and, in Hall's words, "hail [them] into place" (Hall, 1996, pp. 5-6), which is what this thesis seeks to problematise.

"Culture", "Circuit of Culture", "Culture Industry", "Commodification"

Since identities are porous, such a phenomenon can best be explained by how 'Afghan culture' is defined and understood. Referencing both Raymond Williams' and Stuart Hall's definitions of 'culture', Curtin and Gaither define it as the "process by which meaning is produced, circulated, consumed, commodified, and endlessly produced and renegotiated in society" (Curtin and Gaither, 2007, p. 35). Because culture is "threaded through *all* social practices, and [is] the sum of their interrelationships" (Hall, 1980, p. 58), it constitutes

meaning and often has competing discourses of truths which appear to be applicable here in the Afghan context. What does it mean to perform a piece of Afghan theatre? How is 'Afghanistan' perceived? What, and how, meanings are being shared and distributed, and to whom? In this research, the shared meaning systems belonging to the 'Afghan culture' are larger than the Afghan society's which is conventionally delimited by geopolitical boundaries. In fact, I maintain that the 'Afghan culture', together with the 'Afghan identity' or the sense of identification which I have termed *Afghanness*, is constructed globally through a system of exchanges. These exchanges involve a cyclical process of production and consumption of artifacts and experiences, which, I posit, result in the imagining and construction of a particular Afghan identity I call 'trope'. As will be highlighted, tropes of victimhood and redemption are particularly dominant, and in producing the former, the market requires that others intervene to help the victim.

Hall and du Gay do not define the term *circuit of culture* explicitly in their framework, but they illustrate it through the 'story' of Sony Walkman. As a cultural artefact in the "long line of new technologies" (du Gay et al, 1997, p. 40), the Japanese Walkman does not have intrinsic meanings. It is through language in advertising discourse, or the "practice of representation" (ibid., p. 4) that cultural meanings are ascribed or encoded, hence giving the Walkman a sense of *identity* (which is also a form of branding). Because groups of consumers also identify themselves with this object, this articulates *production* and *consumption* as two important nodes on the circuit of culture. As the corporation of Sony becomes more global as an entertainment giant, the Walkman is seen to regulate cultural life in modern societies in the late 1970s and early 1980s, challenging and

"break[ing] with established representations of public and private space" (ibid., p. 5). They state that in thinking about the *production of culture*, the *culture of production* – defined as the "ways in which practices of production are inscribed with particular cultural meanings" (ibid., p. 4) – needs to be considered too. As such, I have defined the *circuit of culture*, and alluded to earlier, as the "interconnectedness of the global world responsible for the manufacture, distribution, and circulation of a product". In summary, there are five nodes on the circuit of culture, each of which contributes to meaning-making. They are (i) representation; (ii) identity; (iii) production; (iv) consumption, and (iii) regulation (see Figure 1).
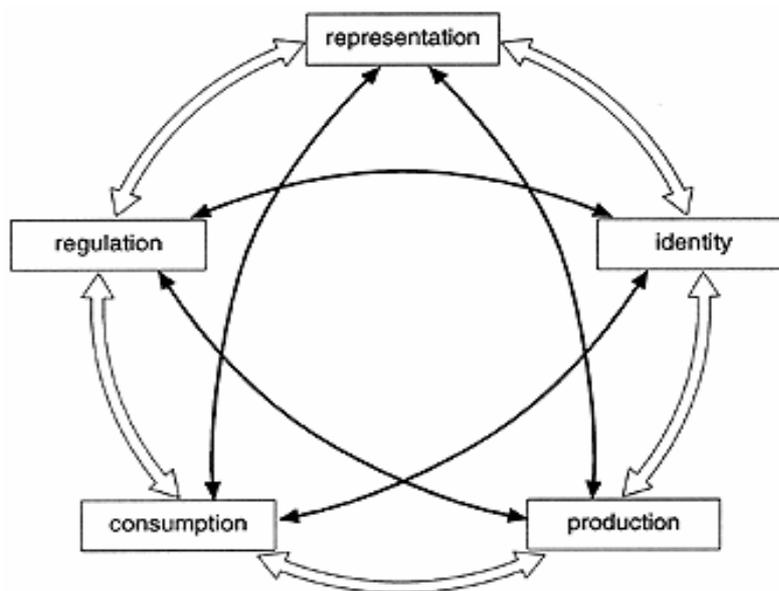
Figure 1. The 'Circuit of Culture' (du Gay et al, 1997)

Here, *production* refers to the process where products are "'encoded' with particular meanings" (du Gay et al, 1997, p. 4), while *consumption* refers to the decoding of these meanings by audiences or consumers of that cultural product. In this thesis, theatre practitioners and actors are usually construed as producers

of meaning while audiences are consumers. However, 'production' can also become actualised in and through 'consumption' (du Gay et al, 1997). This is especially true, I suggest, when audiences write theatre reviews of these productions, which emerge as productive interpretations in the circuit of culture that can then be taken up by other reviewers, practitioners, or academics. In other words, 'consumption' can be as productive as 'production' in ascribing meaning to a cultural product. In addition, *representation* in the circuit of culture refers to the form an object takes, together with the meanings already encoded in that form. In this thesis, it can mean the theatrical genre for a particular play, and also the form (or tropes) that signify an Afghan identity. *Identities* refer to meanings that accrue to all social networks, from nations to organisations to publics. In order not to confuse this word with earlier definitions offered by Butler in the "phantasmatic staging of the event" (Butler, 1993, p. 105) connected to *sedimentation* and *iterability*, and Hall's *narrativisation* of the self and the articulation of the *suture*, collectively resulting in what I have defined as *Afghanness*, all inscription of meanings would be seen as *production* of identity instead. Lastly, *regulation* comprises "controls on cultural activity, ranging from formal and legal controls, such as regulations, laws, and institutionalised systems, to the informal and local controls of cultural norms and expectations that form culture in the more commonly used sense of the term" (Curtin and Gaither, 2007, p. 38). Theatre directors and donors can be seen as enforcers of these regulations and controls, including the Taliban who deem themselves protectors or destroyers of a certain culture.

Because the circuit is a cyclical process (Figure 1), each of the five components of the commodity does not necessarily have a starting or ending point. The

arrows across the nodes do not signify causation, nor are these processes always transparent. This could also help explain *how* and *why* the definition of 'Afghan culture' and 'Afghan identities' change, for example, from 'graveyard of empires' to 'victimhood' (which will be explored in Chapter 2) by examining the articulations at different nodes in the circuitry, or *how* meanings are commodified and circulated throughout different time periods. In Chapter 4, the 'identity' will be further defined in relation to Karl Marx's 'commodity', 'exchange value' and 'use value'. Because of a perceived use value, *commodification* is therefore that process of exchange between the producer and the consumer, which may be seen to homogenise, glorify, or essentialise qualities that are used to define Afghanness, which can be associated with Marx's notion of 'fetish'.

The most convenient investigation of 'Afghan identities' is to isolate and demarcate it in spatial terms, namely 'locating' Afghan identities within the geopolitical boundaries separating Afghanistan from, say, Iran, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, China, and Pakistan (see Figure 2, Appendix 2). Arguments surrounding the artificial international border separating Afghanistan and Pakistan known as the Durand Line (see Figure 3, Appendix 2) are beyond the scope of this study, but it is imperative to acknowledge the contested geopolitical boundaries of these neighbouring countries, at least still in existence today in 2016. This is because 'Afghan identities' can easily be identified as people born *in* Afghanistan. But this definition proves to be problematic because people born outside the country may still consider themselves 'Afghans' by ethnic associations (for example, the Pashtuns, Tajiks, Uzbeks, and Hazaras living in Iran or Pakistan), or through tribal associations, one which the recently-

elected President Ashraf Ghani has dropped from his official name (World Post, 2014) to perhaps unite Afghans by nationality instead. In addition, non-Afghans who are working alongside Afghans, locally or globally, may have a vested interest in producing a collective national identity, and the non-Afghan may consequently be associated with, or by, a degree of Afghanness. I, for one, have been affectionately called "the Hazara boy" by one of my Afghan friends, or nicknamed "brother from another mother" by another while I was working in Kabul – terms of endearment which I presume reflect an emotional connection they have with me, and I with them. As observed, the circuit of culture is responsible for a porous identity, both for the Afghan peoples and for their nation state, which both reflect Freud's sense of allegiance and solidarity and Hall's sense of suture (temporary attachment) as identity marker.

Literature Review

Here, I shall first focus on the concept of *performance* within performance studies scholarship, followed by a review of literatures in war zones. Central to performance studies are contested concepts of "performance" (McKenzie, Roms and Wee, 2010), with the commonly understood one being the range of cultural practices spanning rites, traditions, ceremonies, theatre, sports, play, art, and rituals, and the other, a symbolic interpretation of events and actions "as restored behaviour" or "twice-behaved behaviours" (Schechner, 2002). The former "*is* performance*", broadly conceived as a display of skills received according to customs, cultural codes, and expectations (see Schechner, 2002; Carlson, 1996), whilst the latter identifies, potentially, all aspects of human activity "*as* performance*" (Auslander, 2008; Schechner, 2002; McKenzie, 2001; Carlson, 1996) such as listening to a lecture, driving a car, or playing the role of a mother

in a household (see Goffman, 1956). Much of the scholarship within performance studies straddles both these concepts, establishing "performance" as an *object of inquiry* and theorising it as an *analytical concept* (Auslander, 2008), so the analyses of cultural practices and theatre performances embedded within a larger sociohistorical context can result in debates around embodiment, agency, identity, action, and behaviours (Schechner, 2002). In the same way, this piece of research examines theatre and cultural performances as *objects of inquiry*, as well as through the *analytical and conceptual framework* of "performance" in general. What is most useful is McKenzie's declaration that "performance […] is the power matrix of contemporary globalization, and […] that we are entering an age of global performance" (McKenzie, 2003, p. 118). He is referring to the vast array of phenomena from annual performance reviews to high-performance missile systems, which can be "studied in terms of different, though historically related, performance paradigms" which are now becoming entwined. The reference to globalisation as a "global performance" reinforces the key premise underpinning the culture industry in this thesis, which prefaces an argument this study will take up in 'local–global contexts' (in a later section in this chapter), hinting at the collapse of known categories and binaries. Following this, McKenzie makes a cogent analysis of George W. Bush's speech in 2001 when Bush declared war on al-Qaeda. Bush announced:

> Every nation, in every region, now has a decision to make. Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists. From this day forward, any nation that continues to harbour or support terrorism will be regarded by the United States as a hostile regime (Bush, 2001).

McKenzie argues that the then-President's either/or ultimatum has divided the

world in two: us versus them; freedom versus tyranny; good versus evil. The demand for a decision, according to McKenzie, is a test of "democracy's performance in a new world order" (McKenzie, 2003, p. 120). Performance theorists have investigated the "performance" of politicians and the institutionalisation of the 'war on terror', for example, from the rehearsed performances of attack and defence to the ritualised torture of prisoners of war, including the theatricality of media footages demonising the aggression of opponents (Hughes, 2011; Brady, 2012; McKenzie, 2003). Even the World Trade Centre attacks have been construed as a "performance", as Schechner states that they were "planned, rehearsed, staged, and intended both to wound the USA materially and to affect/infect the imagination" (Schechner, 2009, p. 1825). In light of the theatricalisation of conflict in this new world order which sometimes employs the phrase "theatres of war" (see Thompson et al, 2009; or in the First World War context, see Kosok, 2007; or Napoleonic wars, see Russell, 1995), performance studies scholars have also examined the 'politics of performance'. Thompson et al (2009) have extended the debates and questioned the ethics and functions of performances that are linked to the continuation of conflict (see also Thompson, 2009; Hughes, 2007), even if performances had claimed to prevent, protect, and rehabilitate. Highlighting the "inflammatory potential" (Thompson et al, 2009, p. 2) of theatres to make war and the "ameliorative potential" (ibid.) of theatres to unmake war, one argument Thompson et al make is that this division is neither clear nor sustainable. There are performances *in place of* war, but they argue that they could equally be performances *of* war. Likewise, these complexities can be seen in the unintended effects of theatre-making in Kabul, as this study will show, where one female (among others who are not documented here) had to seek asylum after being involved in theatre because of death threats;

and two bomb explosions going off, one at the British Council compound in Kabul just before a rehearsal of *The Comedy of Errors*, and the most recent blast inside the theatre during the performance of *Heartbeat: Silence after the Explosion*.

Jenny Hughes (2011) highlights the potential of theatre to stage critical interruptions of the mimetic circulation of threat and frailty during the war on terror. After World War Two, observes Hughes, civilisation had "repeated attempts to control the world by propagating myths of man's sovereignty over nature" (Hughes, 2011, p. 23) as a way to reduce terror, unpredictability, and alterability. Mythologising a rational and knowable world order was their way for self-protection and self-preservation, and to cancel out what Adorno and Horkheimer have called "animation of nature". Accounts have also been made in Sri Lanka where satirical performances were permitted by the government during their time of terror (Obeyesekere, 1999); in Jewish ghettoes and concentration camps during the Holocaust where "creative resistance" and a sense of communitas were evoked, however temporarily (Rovit, 2005; Goldfarb, 1976); or in opera houses and stadiums in Germany and Italy during the Fascist regime (Balfour, 2001). Nonetheless, many of these performance researchers have chosen to construe artistic practices as "hopeful and inspiring" (Thompson et al, 2009, p. 3), or "hopeful and critical", "world-conserving", "world-creating", or "world-transforming" (Hughes, 2011, p. 31, and p. 29). The same "mythologising" is reflected in this study, where Afghan histories and identities are constantly being reconstructed into what I call "Afghan Imaginary", an argument I will explore in depth later in this chapter. As such, my study will complement performance theorists who have also written about wars and national

identities (Kuftinec, 2009; Thompson et al, 2009; Kosok, 2007; Barker 2007; McConachie, 2003; Taylor 2003, 1997) or more generally about theatre and nationalism (Sira, 2014; Sierz, 2011; Holdsworth, 2010; Wilmer, 2002).

This research study is also informed by specific scholarship on sites of terror and violence, for example in the Islamic world, more particularly in the Philippines, India, Rwanda, and South Africa (Bharucha, 2014); in Iraq (Brady, 2012); in Northern Ireland and Iraq (Hughes, 2011); in Iraq (Schneider, 2011); in the Balkan states and Middle East (Kuftinec, 2009); in Argentina (Taylor, 2002; 1997), in Poland, Germany, Italy (Balfour, 2001); in Sri Lanka (Obeyesekere, 1999); and Democratic Republic of Congo, Lebanon, Iraq, Palestine, Israel, Northern Ireland, and Sri Lanka (Thompson et al, 2009). It is accurate to say that European literatures have missed out on "places affected by conflict" (Thompson et al, 2009, p. 8), so my study on Afghanistan is an answer to Thompson et al's invitation to document theatres and performances that lie "outside the selective parameters of international media and critical commentary" (*ibid.,* p. 8), where Afghanistan has been left out in many of these literatures. Hopefully this study fills a scholarship gap in that part of central Asia to discuss "the role of culture in making and sustaining war" (*ibid.,* p. 11). Furthermore, my thesis focuses only on one country, which, I hope, provides a more in-depth study on the complexities of theatre in a conflict zone.

Most, if not all, of these performances in Thompson et al's *Performance In Place Of War* are motivated by politics, as part of resistance, as part of justice and reconciliation, as part of relief and entertainment, or as part of nationalism, which also reflect similar findings of aforementioned scholars. In this thesis, however,

all performance case studies documented herein do not share the same political motivations explicitly, except for the Afghanistan Human Rights and Democracy Organisation (AHRDO) which seeks to "promote human rights and democracy through engaging a variety of arts, and culture-based programs" (AHRDO, n.d., b). In fact, some of the theatres performed within the geopolitical boundaries in Afghanistan, and those moving *beyond* the country, are examples of cultural diplomacy (see later section on international relations) where states have offered monies to showcase these productions, some of which could be seen as "soft power". Some of these cultural exports reflect an unusual excess leading subsequently to a fetish value, a term which will be discussed later. This inevitably raises a different set of questions with the culture industry now enmeshed in the war matrix, although the bearing on violence and conflict is not as apparent as those highlighted in Thompson et al's voluminous work.

Conceptually, this thesis complicates Thompson et al's notion of "place" in *In Place Of War*. They present the cultures existing *within* a war zone, but this research undermines "place" because Afghan cultures do not exist in one place. As the case studies will illustrate, there is a version of Afghanistan in Kabul, a different Afghan "place" at The Globe in London, and another with *The Kite Runner*, just to name a few. In other words, there are Afghan cultures *from* and *beyond* the country, but it also moves to and fro in a circuitry, regardless where this identity is produced, and so this research further destabilises the concept of a war zone as a single, self-contained site of violence and conflict. Earlier references to Afghanistan and Afghanness had suggested a porosity of cultures and identities. In the same way, the collapsed boundaries *of* a 'war zone' now percolate the globalised world, adding complexities to earlier performance

theorists who had observed such a phenomenon. Similarly, Anderson and Menon propose to "situate violence within a network of conflict" (Anderson and Menon, 2009, p. 5) to make visible the complexities that might otherwise have been "forgotten in the binary language of domination and resistance" (ibid.). This is especially so when the terms "victim" and "aggressor" are no longer productive discursive labels to "fully explain the effects of violence" (ibid). Neither is the concept of 'local' or 'national' stable as "violence insidiously infiltrates the borders between self and society" (ibid., p. 13). Furthermore, this study resonates with Bharucha's latest publication, *Terror and Performance*, where he explores Islamophobia with sensitivity, documenting how Muslims "have been targeted, othered, and killed" (Bharucha, 2014, p. 71). As will soon unfold, some of the case studies in my thesis seek to "free terror from terrorism" in Bharucha's words (ibid., p. 3), but as claimed by Bharucha himself, it is also "not easy to dis-imbricate the diverse epistemologies and affects of terror from the larger rhetorical and political apparatus of terrorism in which it is subsumed" (ibid.). While the political apparatus of terrorism in Afghanistan has been widely documented (see Kilcullen, 2009, for example), these tensions are not obvious in the case studies that follow; the fears and uncertainties do underscore the lived experiences of Afghan cultural workers and theatre makers and it is imperative to acknowledge this at the outset. But, as I posit, these apparatuses operate differently in Afghanistan, in that the theatre makers' and audiences' have consciously distanced themselves from "affects of terror"; instead they have closed the gaps by making an *identification* with each other. Moreover, this study attempts to answer the challenge Bharucha poses: "If there is a 'global village', then how do local languages and forms of cultural expression incorporate and talk back to the Empire, or appropriate its state of emergency for their own

material purposes?" (Bharucha, 2014, p. 16). Afghanistan's position with regards to the colonial history and colonialism in contemporary times will be explored briefly in this chapter under postcolonial theories, but also in greater detail in Chapter 2. The point to be made, then, is that the performance of war in Afghanistan is not located *in situ*, but is constituted through the discourses of culture (see later section on Stuart Hall and Judith Butler).

Methodologically, my thesis is a deliberate attempt to distance away from the issues of war and conflict directly, partly because the corpus of empirical evidence does not start from that angle. While discussions of war and conflict cannot be divorced from this study, I have chosen to use a cultural studies lens within performance scholarship here. Motivated partially by Maurya Wickstrom's *Performing Consumers* (2006), I take her argument that customers have not only acknowledged the construct of the commercial experience – which she calls "brandscape" – but have also indulged in it, for example, by embodying the brand. More important to this study is Wickstrom's idea of theatre "slipping out from under the thumb of the real into identifications, or the abandonment of the experience of an original, real self into an experience of sameness with another" (Wickstrom, 2006, p. 5). This, I posit, is akin to the Afghanness explained in an earlier section, the excessive 'identification' of the global audience with Afghan actors, which attests to a consumerist model of understanding Afghanistan, than a peace and conflict model. Furthermore, I wish to better illustrate the "matrix of war" (Jabri, cited in Thompson et al, 2009, p. 12) as well as the "circuitries of power" (Ahmed, cited in Thompson et al, 2009, p. 19) to which they refer are borrowings from a cultural studies perspective. If the Afghan performers had wanted to distance themselves from war discourses,

but find themselves still enmeshed in that matrix, then this study offers an alternative view to envision change through the cultural studies lens.

The second interdisciplinary area this thesis contributes to is postcolonial studies, notably in the concepts of orientalism by Edward Said (1979, 1993), subalternity by Gayatri Spivak (2002), and nation by Homi Bhabha (2000, 1994). In Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1979), he observes in early writings that the "Orient was almost a European invention, and had been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences" (Said et al, 2000, p. 67). As will be made clearer in Chapter 2 and the other case studies, many of the representations of Afghanistan gravitate towards extremes – a romanticised and a treacherous one. But Said argues that this is not a "merely imaginative" (ibid., p. 68) project. Rather, because of its "contrasting image, idea, personality, experience" (ibid.), the Orient has "helped to define Europe (or the West)" and is, therefore, part of "European *material* civilization and culture (ibid., italics original). In other words, by constructing 'Afghanistan' as an oriental concept, the West is co-constructed in material relation with the exotic other.

In his first definition of orientalism, Said states that it represents itself "part culturally and ideologically as a mode of discourse with supporting institutions, vocabulary, scholarship" (ibid.). He says that this designation is an academic one, especially if the "person is an anthropologist, sociologist, historian, or philologist" (ibid.), which makes that person an "Orientalist, and what he or she does is Orientalism" (ibid.). The second definition of orientalism relates to "a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made

between 'the Orient' and (most of the time) 'the Occident'" (ibid., p. 69). For Said, this includes "a very large mass of writers, among whom are poets, novelists, philosophers, political theorists, economists, and imperial administrators" (ibid.). In this dissertation, I will be using "Orientalism" (uppercase) to refer to the systematic discipline of study of the Orient. I will also be making references to early "Orientalists" (used in uppercase to refer to, but not exclusively, pre-colonial or colonial scholars as Said has defined, who are often operating under, or on the behalf of, a scholarly institution or empire) and more contemporary "orientalists" (used in lowercase to refer to the second group of political or literary writers). These two strands, Said argues, give rise to hegemony, a "Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient" (ibid.). Said's critical positioning is key to postcolonial studies where colonial representations and relations are concerned.

In this thesis, I also use the word "orientalist" to refer to a style of writing that separates itself, or makes a distinction, from the West as a European construct. This is both a system of domination and submission, where the 'West' is possibly reducing or essentialising qualities and traits that continue to entrench romantic or treacherous tropes about Afghanistan, while acquiescing to this material and discursive form of control for these interventions to take effect. But Said warns that it is not merely "some nefarious 'Western' imperialist plot to hold down the 'Oriental' world. It is rather a *distribution* of geopolitical awareness into aesthetic, scholarly, economic, sociological, historical, and philological texts […that…] not only creates but also maintains […] an uneven exchange with various kinds of power" (ibid., p. 78). More specific examples will be given in Chapter 2 to illustrate these uneven exchanges of power, but so far postcolonial

discourses on Afghanistan tend to focus more on women's empowerment (see Khan, 2014; Gordon and Almutairi, 2013; Ayotte and Husain, 2005; Abu-Lughod, 2002), albeit infrequently on postcolonial representations in general (Monsutti, 2013).

Furthermore within the literature, state formation in Afghanistan is frequently discussed (see, for example, Hanifi, 2011; Nichols, 2013; Goodhand, 2009; Rubin, 2002; Friis, 2013, Gregorian, 1969), but Noah Coburn's *Bazaar Politics* is illustrative of the tension between state and local politics, which is particularly useful. For example, Coburn observed a potter who, wanting to open a pottery shop, found himself dealing with seven groups of political actors, who included the "qaums (patrilineal descent groups), religious leaders, a newly wealthy merchant class, former militia groups, the district government, the police, and international groups (particularly NGOs and the military)" (Coburn, 2011, p. 106). This resulted in a system where each group had contested notions of power and control, and when goods had to be redistributed, differences showed up. According to Coburn, many of these 'leaders' often emphasised the state "as a rational, bounded entity, even when the actions of people in town implied that the state had no such clear limits" (ibid., p. 182). In fact, he noticed that "group strength and solidarity did not exist" (ibid.), but they pretended it did, going so far as to be seen motivating their own 'networks'. Coburn stated that the people and "government officials reinforced this fiction precisely because it allowed political actors to take advantage of the masterly inactivity that masked the true tensions in the area and contributed to the continued flow of aid" (ibid.). Coburn surmised that it was "a useful fiction that disguised the government's failure to establish a hegemonic power" (ibid., p. 184). This "fiction" draws into Homi

Bhabha's *Nation and Narration,* which can highlight some of these discursive formations of Afghans' own (political) identity. Bhabha states that "it is from those traditions of political thought and literary language that the nation emerges as a powerful historical idea in the west" (Bhabha, 2000, p. 1), an image of the nation which he also calls "narration" (this concept will be taken up again in Chapter 3).

In seeking to raise the voice of the marginalised as part of a postcolonial project, the case studies will show that there is a constant speaking *for,* or *on behalf of*, Afghans, especially on women's issues (see *Memory Boxes* in Chapter 3, and *Homebody/Kabul* in Chapter 5). Other scholars have also written about women's 'voices' (see, for example, Wimpelmann, 2015; Khan, 2014; Gordon and Almutairi, 2013; Bezhan, 2008). However, all these are problematised, and cogently asked by Gayatri Spivak's question: *Can The Subaltern Speak?* (2002). She argues that "in the ideological construction of gender" (Spivak, 2002, p. 28), the postcolonial intellectual male will remain dominant. And in that context, the "subaltern has no history and cannot speak" (ibid.), which, in effect, becomes a form of neo-colonial domination and erasure. As will be observed, even the *speaking for* often results in essentialism, which is the oversimplification or homogenising of voices across all the tribes and ethnic groups in the Afghan society. This is especially so when the Pashtun voice tends to dominate – and becomes the 'voice' for *all* Afghans.

Next, the contemporary relationships between Afghanistan and the West after 11 September 2001 is characterised as a donor-recipient type, since the West is 'helping' Afghanistan in peacebuilding and development initiatives towards some

kind of reform. It may be argued that dependence on foreign investments and funding contributes to "what may be developed", endorsing the West's agenda for Afghanistan, but this is possibly a reciprocal relationship, not one of dominance and powerlessness that is often construed in oppressor-oppressed terms in Said's formulation of hierarchical power structures. Especially seen in the case studies *An Enemy of the People* and *Kaikavus* (see Chapter 3), the recipient of these monies can modify or reject conditions of the gift, but this is problematic in *The Comedy of Errors* (see Chapter 4) when the actress was not permitted to leave a controversial production that required physical intimacy with a male actor; she was told she had received her salary, so she had to stay. I will suggest that this relationship is not always characterised by dominance and acquiescence, but sometimes also of postcolonial resistance and outright defiance. This relates to the third area of study: international relations.

International relations (or IR) is usually conceived as the dynamic relationships between states that involve domestic and foreign policies, often seeking to analyse, understand, and interrogate global issues such as the causes of war and violence, poverty, and (trans)migration and the diaspora, but also processes of international cooperation and integration. Following Inayatullah and Blaney (2004), Robbie Shilliam advocates an IR-theory based on non-Western thought on modernity. He argues for "the *global*, rather than European or Western, context within which knowledge of modernity has been developed" (Shilliam, 2011, p. 4). To a large extent, my study contributes to the existing scholarship by continuing with this theoretical set of assumptions, that "imperialism and colonialism have from the start been co-constitutive processes of the typically understood routes into modernity, namely the development of the capitalist world

market and the system of states" (ibid.). Rather than focusing on IR concepts in general, this study digs deeper into a sub-component within IR, namely cultural diplomacy, where this area of investigation is relatively new and under-researched.

According to Cummings (2003), *cultural diplomacy* is defined as "the exchange of ideas, information, art and other aspects of culture among nations and their peoples in order to foster mutual understanding" (Cummings, 2003, p. 1). In one separate example, US archaeologists and cultural heritage experts were brought into Iraq to repair the damage done during their "war on terror" after the looting of treasures in museums and other cultural institutions was reported (see Stone, 2008; Luke and Kersel, 2013). In a different example, a specific dance programme was exported through President Eisenhower's Emergency Fund for Art from 1954 to 1960, in the hopes of presenting a favourable American culture to the world, to "win friends and influence policy" (Prevots, 1998, p. 8). Through that programme, the José Limón Company, Martha Graham, and other dancers from New York City were sent abroad to counter the immense fears tied in with communist ideology and beliefs during the Cold War because witch-hunts in America had created a repressive environment "hostile to dissent" (ibid., p. 8). It was later discovered that the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) had covertly funded the Congress for Cultural Freedom, which was directed by Nicolas Nabokov, an anti-Communist, who brought the "Masterpieces of the Twentieth Century" arts festival to Paris (ibid.). Black jazz musicians were also sent overseas to Africa, Brazil and Asia as part of the government's efforts to "counteract negative publicity about American race relations" (ibid., p. 5). President Dwight D. Eisenhower "saw the performing arts not only as an

important aspect of American life, but also as a powerful tool in the creation of world peace" (ibid., p. 7). In other words, the arts were mobilised in the political game of international relations and war even before the term "cultural diplomacy" was coined. Such a programme received resounding success in projecting a "powerful impression" (ibid., p. 8) of the US.

In addition, this form of cultural diplomacy is what Joseph Nye has termed "soft power". This is defined as "getting others to want the outcomes that you want", which "rests on the ability to shape the preferences of others" through co-option rather than coercion (Nye, 2004, p. 5). Nye further explains that there are three dimensions of public diplomacy. They are daily communications, strategic communications, and lastly, the "development of lasting relationships with key individuals over many years through scholarships, exchanges, training, seminars, conferences, and access to media channels" (ibid., p. 109). Even within performance studies, debates have questioned the instrumentalisation of cultures and the arts, but these performances have remained within the discourse of interculturalism and multiculturalism (see Lo and Gilbert, 2002 for fuller discussions), rather than overt agents of "soft power". Countries such as Israel (see Appel et al., 2008), Japan (see Ogura, 2009; Davidann, 2007) and China (see Li, 2009; Passin, 1963), for example, have engaged in cultural diplomacy programmes to project the 'right' image to other nations. Yet in Afghanistan, cultural diplomacy programmes have come from external sources including Great Britain, Germany, France, Norway and India. As the case studies on *An Enemy of the People* (Chapter 3)*, The Comedy of Errors* (Chapter 4) and *The Great Game: Afghanistan* (Chapter 5) show, all these other countries eagerly appear to 'help'

promote the arts in Afghanistan from outside-in, rather than inside-out. To extend it further, the issue this thesis seeks to address is neither the instrumentalisation of culture (see Yúdice, 2003, for example) nor the politicisation of foreign policy; rather, it is the messy interconnectedness of all of the above, the uncomfortable, unacknowledged positions that international relations, postcolonial re-imaginings, and cultural spheres share that make this study of Afghanistan's relationship with other nation states both rewarding and challenging.

Contextualising the Broad Arguments

In this section, I use two cultural products commonly associated with Afghan identities to briefly illustrate a phenomenon through the circuit of culture, namely *The Kite Runner* in the post-9/11 period and the National Geographic Afghan Girl in the pre-9/11 period, to put forward the broad arguments for this study. Both of these images and representations have had a global reach, and, although both are historically separate in terms of contexts and in aesthetic medium, they share a constructed meaning of Afghanness, which I believe is (re)produced through a process of commodification within the circuit of culture. Although a novel and a photograph have no direct relevance to theatre and performances in the strictest sense, these contemporary images are arguably the most visible cultural forms of 'narration' about Afghanistan. Hence I am using these two cultural products to show the broader arguments: (i) that these two products are themselves 'performing' an Afghan identity, both in projecting what *is* 'Afghan'*,* and so cause a corresponding response of consumers to purchase these products, either of the novel, and/or the 1984 issue of the National Geographic magazine; (ii) that the continued response of the global consumers towards Afghanistan has resulted in, and produced, either the fear of Afghans ('war on terror' rhetoric), or

'in awe' of their romanticised past, or possibly worse, the 'redemption' for their safety, security, or development, reflecting an unequal power dynamic. These meaning-making processes within the circuit of culture will be made clearer in the following chapters, but making preliminary observations using the most popular 'Afghan' commodities (i.e. Hosseini's novel, and Steve McCurry's photograph) that are possibly the most visible, and therefore most 'memorable' in the wider world's 'consciousness', will explicate the subsequent arguments in this chapter.

I will first discuss *The Kite Runner* in the 'production' of an Afghan 'identity', followed by 'consumption' through Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay's framework. As much as *The Kite Runner* is a piece of fiction, Khaled Hosseini bases much of his material on historical accounts and autobiographical memories, which could be interpreted as conditions necessary for identity-formation and production of his literary work. Some of the contextual meanings that are encoded in *The Kite Runner* may be interpreted and explained, temporarily, through the character Amir, which I believe are symptomatic of theatre performances as well. Following from the quote at the beginning of this chapter, Amir continues to reflect on this mother-child separation as a re-enactment of fictions in the mind:

> Hassan never talked about his mother, as if she'd never existed. I always wondered if he dreamed about her, about what she looked like, where she was. I wondered if he longed to meet her. Did he ache for her, the way I ached for the mother I had never met? (Hosseini, 2003, p. 6)

The above quote illustrates two instances of curiosity – if Hassan dreamed about his mother, and if he longed to meet her. Together with the rhetorical question if

Hassan had ached for his mother, these statements are clear examples of projection, which happens almost instantaneously for Amir. This occurs not because he *wants* to interpret Hassan's life on his behalf, as though he knew better, but it *is* a re-imagination of Hassan's to make sense of his own loss, to complete, I believe, his own life story. This re-imagination is a *projective closure,* which I define as the productive action of filling in narrative gaps in the mind to create meaning for the onlooker, the audience of someone else's story, who in this case is Amir, the novel's protagonist who speaks in the first person. This discursive act of 'filling in gaps', as will be made clearer in later sections through the concepts of 'territorialisation' and 'imagination', is also what happens when I, as a researcher, had to do to make sense of performance practices, just as well as playwrights and directors filling in *for* Afghans, not unproblematically though, and global audiences 'filling' the theatre seats to complete and *close* the 'gaps'.

It may be useful to note that *The Kite Runner* above is investigated from a literary point of view (novel) here, but in Chapter 5, the reader will appreciate it being adapted for the stage, another indication of the re-representations of Afghan identities. For now, *The Kite Runner* is used as an example, not just to illustrate a historical insight into the impact of the Soviet invasion or the deeply-embedded ethnic conflicts between the Pashtun majority and the Hazara minority in the novel, but also to map out the global reception of its reach, articulated as the 'consumption' node on the circuit. Conventionally, reviews of artistic works are part of the consumption, usually after the purchase or use of a particular product. One of Khaled Hosseini's reviewer writes:

An astounding and humbling story of corruption, guilt and redemption. Epic in scope and intimate in its emotions, this terrific novel opens a window into a devastated country and takes us deep into the hearts and minds of those pierced by violence. (Atlanta Journal-Constitution, cited in Hosseini, n.d., b)

The words "astounding", "epic", "terrific", and "intimate" are used above. There are also other reviews using these encouraging adjectives and superlatives, for example, "stunning" (Publishers Weekly), "extraordinary" (People), "powerful" (The New York Times Book Review), and "poignant" (Entertainment Weekly), all of which are found on Hosseini's website (see Hosseini, n.d., b), but more peculiar in these are the reviewers' perception of Afghanistan. Atlanta Journal-Constitution wrote that it "opens a window into a devastated country and takes [the reader] deep into the hearts and minds of those pierced by violence". Here, the images of reality and fiction intersect, producing a more 'literal' explanation of the historical-cultural contexts in Afghanistan, which is being read or consumed in that way. Even though the novel is a work of fiction, it has elements of historical facts, which contribute to competing discourses of truths. This complicates what is being projected or consumed as 'true'. One reviewer frames Hosseini as an archaeological discovery ("Here's a real find: a striking debut from an Afghan now living in the U.S", by Kirkus Reviews); another reviewer constructs the novel from a historical perspective ("the personal struggles of everyday people in the terrible sweep of history", by People); yet another reviewer reflects on Hosseini's people as "his people" under violence ("reminds us how long *his people* have been struggling to triumph over the forces of violence – forces that continue to threaten them even today", by The New York

Times Book Review, italics mine); and another reviewer contextualises it in contemporary politics ("a pivot point in the global politics of the new millennium", by Publishers Weekly), all of which encode new layers of meanings to the 'identity' and 'production' in this circuit of culture: Khaled Hosseini is no longer perceived as an author, but one who speaks *on behalf of* 'his people'. Furthermore, his novel is no longer a piece of literary fiction full of symbols, but (mis)construed as historical truth. The conflicts and violence in Afghanistan are now reinforced into the wider consciousness, which begins to function like a trope. Rory Stewart, former MP in the UK, who traversed through Afghanistan in 2002 by foot, lambasts these representations by cultural outsiders:

> [T]hey rehearse the same repeated images of beggars in burqas, women in burn wards, turbaned fighters, bombed houses, dust in the air, blood, and American weapons. It sometimes seems as though no photographer of Afghanistan has failed to shoot children fighting in the empty Shir Pur swimming pool. The black and white photographs portray a dark Afghanistan of violence and victims in chiascuro. Color, humor, incongruity, modernity, light, or the trivia of domestic life are apparently reserved for photographs of India. (Stewart, 2009, p. xii)

The meanings ascribed to Afghan identities are intermeshed in the circuit of culture, from producers to consumers alike, therefore giving Afghanistan a narrow reading.

The Kite Runner had won several book prizes including Borders Original Voices Award in 2003 and the South African Boeke Award in 2004 (Hosseini, n.d., a), has adaptations on screen, on stage (see Chapter 5), and in a graphic novel, all of which had also won critical praise. For *The Kite Runner* alone, 70,000 hardback

copies and 1,250,000 paperback copies were sold within the first two years before it became the New York Times bestseller (see Guthmann, 2005; Italie, 2012). In 2013, this classic was reported to be over 7 million copies in sales alone (NPR, 2013), notwithstanding the successes of Hosseini's subsequent novels, *A Thousand Splendid Suns,* and *And the Mountains Echoed.* The burst of celebratory reviews surrounding Hosseini's giftedness points to a phenomenon that is similar to the Afghan Girl frenzy fronting the National Geographic cover. In the next few paragraphs, I shall demonstrate the same fascination with the 'exotic' other as the National Geographic team searches for the Afghan Girl. Again, I am using the Afghan Girl to briefly illustrate that the images and ideas about Afghanistan have circulated and thus informed our opinions about the country, another example of the processes of commodification of a 'singular' Afghan narrative. Besides, as the next most visible icon of Afghanistan, especially before the Taliban period, this photograph is the clearest example to show trends (compared to post-9/11's *The Kite Runner*) on the kinds of representations global readers have consumed and (re)produced *about* Afghan identities.

In 1985, Steve McCurry's famous photograph of the Afghan Girl, Sharbat Gula, fronted the National Geographic magazine (Vol. 167, No. 6; abbreviated as NatGeo). McCurry who took this photograph in a refugee camp went back seventeen years later in search of this "incredible little girl" (National Geographic Search for the Afghan Girl Pt 2, 2010) in 2002 with a team of experts and a forensic pathologist (Zeiger, 2008). They took photographs of women who claimed to be the refugee girl and sent it to John Daugman, the inventor of automatic iris recognition, to use iris patterns, like fingerprints, to determine the

identity of the *real* girl. They wanted precision in their identification of the anonymous refugee girl, but also made a documentary on this search (see National Geographic, 2010). The use of sophisticated technology and repeated photographs with an identification board reduced the woman to a criminal, as if they were on a hunt for a suspect taking mug shots. Furthermore, as observed by Dinah Zeiger, a male optometrist was almost alone inspecting Sharbat Gula's eyes. Even if it was in the presence of her husband, this was still a taboo in Afghan culture. This leads to questions about NatGeo's role in this affair, their efficacy, as well as their ethics (see Zeiger, 2008). Zeiger also critiques how the photographs "frame a narrative of Afghanistan that conforms to an American ideological position that links Islamic fundamentalism and terrorism but ignores the historical and cultural roots of the 1979-88 Afghan-Soviet conflict and United States involvement in promoting it" (ibid., p. 271). I would further question NatGeo's emotional investments to Afghanistan. The documentary showed the team's desperation and frenzy in hunting her down seventeen years later, so what is the purpose, except perhaps it is one way to satisfy the West's own fetish?

Borrowing Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay's lexicon, is NatGeo 'regulating' an Afghan identity for what an Afghan refugee should look like? To illustrate this further, McCurry's reaction towards Gula in 1985 bordered on the representations of 'Afghanistan' and their refugees already 'in existence', which he interpreted as 'truth':

> I did feel there was something very special about her, *something very unique and disturbing* about her look. But in a way, that was exactly apropos to the story. *I think that she came to represent* this tragedy that was happening in Afghanistan. Her face in a way became sort of *a symbol of Afghan refugees*. And I think *she represented very well.* I think she

represented them with dignity, with a sense of fortitude. (National Geographic Search for the Afghan Girl Pt 2, 2010, emphasis mine)

Her "represent[ing] very well" what an Afghan refugee is, is to conform to an expectation of an already-formed image, or narration, of Afghanistan. To problematise this representation further, one scene in the documentary shows a woman identifying her daughter as the Afghan girl, and after learning her name, McCurry immediately remarks, "Her daughter's name, she's saying, is Alam Bibi. It means 'girl of the world'. *It couldn't be a more perfect name* for this girl who's representative of the plight of Afghan people for the past twenty years" (ibid., emphasis mine). To match a name to represent the Afghan situation and calling it a "perfect name" is problematic, bordering again on what Edward Said has called "essentialism", which is to "demote the different experience of others to a lesser status" (Said, 1994, p. 32). But that is exactly what is happening: he ascribed meaning to the Afghan refugee situation, filling in the gaps on what 'Afghanistan' represents, unchangingly for the last twenty years in a 'singular' narrative, similar to the *projective closure* Amir was doing on Hassan's behalf when he wondered about their mothers in *The Kite Runner.* It is a *filling in*, and a speaking *on behalf of*, that seems to describe the actions taking place within the circulation of cultures. McCurry had been photographing Afghan refugees for twenty years, so what he was doing in reality is reaffirming what he had been showing the world, what he had constructed to *be* the image of Afghanistan. Put simply, McCurry was responsible for 'producing' an Afghan 'representation' through his photographs which continue to re-circulate tropes of Afghan identities waiting to be 'consumed' by audiences, within this culture industry.

Both the Afghan Girl and *The Kite Runner* have penetrated the world's consciousness as identity markers of, and for, Afghanistan. Both artistic works are successful based on popularity (readership) and visibility (sales), so they demonstrate the politics and economics of a global consumption of a 'singular' representation of Afghan cultures. Yet this also underscores Peggy Phelan's critique of representational politics in *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (1993). In line with Lacanian psychoanalysis, Phelan suggests that there are limits to representations. While it is assumed that we only make sense of the world through the Symbolic (or the representational field), there are 'other' phenomena that cannot be articulated and represented through these symbols. She states in "[i]n framing more and more images of the hitherto under-represented other, contemporary culture finds a way to name, and thus to arrest and fix, the image of the other" (Phelan, 1993, p. 2). This has created a belief that "representations can be treated as 'real truths' and guarded or championed" (ibid.). The Afghan Girl in NatGeo, and Khaled Hosseini, the author, are thus seen to speak about or *represent* Afghanistan, but there is often a confusion between the real and the representational. Khaled Hosseini, the writer, is as much a representation as Sharbat Gula, the refugee girl. Can representations be read as historical truths? Or can truths be based on fiction, anecdotes, memory and imagination? If so, what is the relationship between Afghans' lived experiences and the symbolic? Phelan states that the "real is read through representation, and representation is read through the real" (ibid.). She asserts that the failure to represent (sexual) difference, for example, produces a binary effect – positive and negative, seen and unseen – which "frames the visual perception of the Woman, and leads to her conversion into, more often than not, a fetish – a phallic substitute" (ibid., p. 6). She explains: "This fetishization of the image is the risk

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of representational visibility for women. It secures the gap between the real and the representational and marks her as Other" (ibid). Because women are seen as Other, "*The Woman* cannot be seen" (ibid., italics original). So the ghost of the Other "continues to haunt the images we believe in" (ibid.). This can equally be applied to my analysis of Afghan theatres, where practitioners' (mine included) representations and projections of Afghans contribute to this visibility politics that commodify their victimhood statuses. Phelan's overarching theoretical framework is very useful here and will be looked at again in more case studies (supplemented with other theories), but three aspects from her theory – "invisibility", "presence", and the "relation between self and other" – will foreshadow the arguments that I am presenting in this thesis.

Imagining Afghanistan, or The Afghan Imaginary

The first argument this thesis makes is that Afghanistan is an imagined nation-state. From their struggle to find a coherent identity from their ambivalently-strained relationship with the international community to creating an Islamic nation-state based on shared values or ideologies (see, for example, Rubin, 2002; Gulzad, 1994; Nichols, 2005), the inhabitants are still contesting what makes Afghanistan 'Afghanistan'. In seeking a nationalist discourse, they often trace their glorious histories against imperial forces which have dubbed them the "graveyard of empires" (Bearden, 2001), a mythologising which I had alluded to earlier, but will continue to explain in Chapter 2. Imagination as a social practice is not new, especially in times of conflict, but as anthropologist Professor Johan Pottier writes, "the speed with which and the scale on which global media processes now produce imaginings and re-imaginings is unprecedented." (Pottier, 2002, p. 206). On one hand, according to Pottier, Rwanda is a 1950s story, a

highly simplified story "imagined by diaspora-scholars" that also suits "'beginners', one which many outsiders have come to own, reproduce and spread" (ibid., p. 207). On the other hand, Pottier also argues that the representations of Laurent Kabila, then President of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, were "*imaginings the world wanted to see* and the 'morally pure' post-genocide regime in Kigali wanted to promote" (ibid., p. 3, italics original): Kabila was both a person and an image. In the same way, many other post-conflict nations, including diasporic communities, have gone through a phase of imagining as a way to reconstruct their past to co-exist, or make changes in the present, which I suggest also include Afghanistan.

In Homi Bhabha's *Nation and Narration*, he states that "[t]raditional histories do not take the nation at its word, but for the most part, they assume that the problem lies with the interpretation of 'events' that have a certain transparency or privileged visibility" (Bhabha, 2000, p. 3). Bhabha continues to assert that studying the nation through its narrative not only draws attention to its language and rhetoric – and which, I insist, performances are also cultural discourses – but also alters the conceptual object itself. In other words, examining the multi-faceted discourses is to articulate partial meanings of the "nation-space in the process" (ibid., p. 3), which includes half-made histories, and the image of cultural authority as it is in the "act of 'composing' its powerful image" *in media res* (ibid.). To add another layer of complexity, Anthony Smith makes a distinction between *inventing* the nation, *imagining* the nation, and *reconstructing* the nation (Smith, 1998), two of which I will briefly mention. For him, "inventing" the nation is a pervasive form of social engineering where practices,

both rituals and symbolic, are repeated to inculcate norms and behaviours deemed appropriate by the authorities into what is known as traditions (see also Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983), which was most evident in Europe and America from 1870 to 1914. "Imagining" the nation, on the other hand, distances itself from ideology as in "invention" but focuses on religion and kinship as a form of community. To imagine a nation is to reinterpret its myths, symbols, memories and traditions and recombine them in an age of global nationalism (Smith, 1998, p. 17; read more about "Imagined Communities" in Anderson, 1991). This is especially relevant to societies experiencing human fatalities, such as death and linguistic diversity, as if the nation as a community "has become one of the main routes for overcoming human suffering and diversity of humanity and their general mutual incomprehensibility" (Smith, 1998, p. 17). In this sense, Afghanistan is undergoing a similar route for overcoming human suffering as the case studies will show, and so their form of imagining their nation is still emerging.

Smith critiques Benedict Anderson's concept of 'imagined communities' as privileging text-based literary sources, which do not account for causal explanations of the "rise, content, form, timing, intensity and scope of a given nation and nationalism" (ibid., p. 19). Together with Herder, Smith stresses the importance of other cultural forms that express, create, and narrate the nation, including performing arts, ceramics, and architecture – which is where my thesis takes as a point of enquiry and research on "imagining" the Afghan nation-state, where carpet-weaving, jewellery design, poetry, dance, and music have been more prominent in their country than, say, theatre. Bhabha also argues that the

nation as a form of cultural elaboration in the Gramscian sense is "an agency of ambivalent narration that holds culture at its most productive position, as a force for 'subordination, fracturing, diffusing, reproducing, as much as producing, creating, forcing, guiding'" (Bhabha, 2000, pp. 3-4). If Bhabha's claim is true, the ambivalences around Afghan national identities and their claim towards Afghanness should be seen as "productive", rather than destructive, but the material conditions of war and conflict on the ground sometimes resist that optimistic reading. I take a more cautious and skeptical reading in the case studies that follow.

In the next chapter, I show that there is a constant struggle within the Afghan communities to trace a glorious past in the annals of Afghanistan's history and an acceptance of its fractured present (see, for example, Monsutti, 2013). This contributes to the mythification (see Chapter 2) of its own nationhood by locals and foreigners, evident as the case studies move away from Kabul, and towards the periphery and outside its geopolitical boundaries. The clearest examples in my corpus include *Memory Boxes* (Chapter 3); *The Comedy of Errors* (Chapter 4), and *The Kite Runner*, and *Homebody/Kabul* (Chapter 5) which, to a large extent, exercise tropes around heroism and victimhood. The theatre practitioners are seeking to recreate an Afghanistan that is free from war and violence, yet simultaneously, and paradoxically, reassume the role of 'victims of violence'. In other instances, the Afghan actors' sacrifices are imbued with meanings of heroism. This is consistently (re)produced and circulated for the global consumption of an often monolithic Afghan identity in the imaginations by producers and consumers, hence, producing an imagined Afghan state and her

peoples.

Permissive In/Visibilities

In the examination of protest performances surrounding the invasion of Iraq in 2002, performance scholar Sara Brady states that there exists a trajectory from a 'terror rhetoric' to cultivate fear to present-day performances made invisible by media outlets. She theorises the tension between the visible and invisible: "[t]he visible is only so if acknowledged and the invisible only needs to *not* be acknowledged" (Brady, 2012, p. 35). She argues that materiality in the practices of secrecy relies on its ephemeral existence – its absence from the map – and yet "it *must* have substance" (ibid., p. 36, italics original), for example, through the use of "smoke and mirror" – in Diana Taylor's (1997) account of disappearing bodies in the Dirty War in Argentina – by politicians and media to avert the eye and overlook the map. It is a form of public self-blinding, a denial of visibility. According to Brady, public protests against the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq are regularly erased by mainstream media outlets, rendering these events invisible. It could be argued then, through implicature, that the artists in Afghanistan who claim to show the outside world that their country is more than war and violence (see *The Comedy of Errors* in Chapter 5) is a testimony performance making visible what had been hidden, to revert the gaze past Bush's 'war on terror' rhetoric. Instead of military uniforms acting as "material" for protest performances in Brady's case studies, the Afghan actors at the Globe Theatre are performing their own protest against mainstream media, where their "'telling' becomes a performance of self" (Brady, 2012, p. 55), with their material representations of themselves – their presence, their bodies, their voices – as war

survivors. In fact, Jenny Hughes also emphasises the importance of human lives. She argues that "[p]erformance is a means by which we encounter and negotiate the troublingly intense, proximate presence of threatened bodies and worlds in a crisis-ridden context. To study performance in terms of crisis is to insist on the materiality of life, and the tangible, visceral costs of a world configured by violence and inequity" (Hughes, 2011, p. 17).

Similarly, smaller non-governmental organisations and theatre companies which employ theatre in Afghanistan, including shows which are self-funded (see Chapter 3), also suffer from invisibility within their own Afghan communities, which now points to invisibility not engineered by media outlets, but by 'mainstream' groups in Afghanistan. Invisible is also a dance form called *bacha bazi,* a cultural phenomenon (see PBS, 2010) that regularly gets denied for reasons of a moral and religious nature. Problematising this further, however, there are some performances that enjoy full public media coverage, ranging from a documentary by BBC Four on *The Comedy of Errors* during the Cultural Olympiad in London (see Chapter 5), to the strategic blowing up of Buddha statues in Bamiyan by the Taliban (see Chapter 4) which was broadcast around the world, and its aftermath of archaeologists trying to reconstruct Afghanistan's cultural heritage. Evidently, there is both a conscious and unconscious policing of cultural forms, permitting a viewing of some, and not others, which therefore constructs public and private realms of existence in what I call *permissive visibilities*. Visibility can be permissive depending on the contexts.

The theme of uncovering what has been made invisible is taken up by Thompson

in *Digging Up Stories* (2005), where he both critiques and admires the 'archaeologist' in discovering Sri Lanka's kolam performances. He states that "'tradition' is therefore captured, (re)created and preserved within complex histories linked to the Western 'fascination' with exotica, the orient, colonialism, tourism and international research" (Thompson, 2005, p. 208). This theme will be taken up in *Blowing Up Bamiyan Buddhas* (Chapter 4), *The Kite Runner* (Chapter 5), *Homebody/Kabul* (Chapter 5), where I will continue with Peggy Phelan's claim that performance "becomes itself through disappearance" (Phelan, 1993, p. 146). Phelan invites us, as did Rebecca Schneider in *Performance Remains,* to conceptualise performance as a medium in which "disappearance negotiates, perhaps becomes, materiality" (Schneider, 2011, p. 105). In other words, I posit that the disappearance – or the making invisible of – certain art forms is in itself the material performance. Phelan argues that performance is live and ephemeral and leaves no traces behind (Phelan, 1993), while Diana Taylor makes the claim that performance "makes visible (for an instant, live, now) that which is already there: the ghosts, the tropes, the scenarios that structure our individual and collective life" (Taylor 2003, p. 143). Taylor argues that these specters which are made manifest through performance "alter future phantoms, future fantasies" (ibid.). Then she raises the pertinent questions of power structures that allow for such visibility. She asks, "What conditions of visibility are needed to conjure up the ghost? Of all the many potential specters, why do certain ones gain such power?" (ibid.). Through an explication on the circuit of culture especially in light of globalisation, I believe these conditions and power structures will shape our understanding into why, and how, some visibilities are permitted in Afghanistan.

Throughout this thesis, there is a strong undercurrent that performance cultures in Afghanistan are taboo and that they should remain invisible or private, as some of which when made visible threatened the social fabric of their society. I contend that invisibility is an important religio-cultural position that foreign cultural workers need to appreciate and respect. The privileging of private affairs within Afghan cultures should not be seen as a repression or even oppression. Under the metaphorical veil exist artistic practices that are completely private, performed to an all-male, or all-female, audience group whether in weddings with separate rooms, or in secret gatherings and parties. Yet, paradoxically, there are groups exporting certain practices and making Afghan cultures more visible, including the Taliban's public beheadings and blowing up of the Buddha statues (as well as INGO work), which then leads to human rights issues and interventions that further complicate the nature of private-public selves, and the circulation of (cultural) violence. This is in contrast to Jürgen Habermas's theory (1989) that the "public sphere" in a bourgeois society is where public discussions take place, distinct from a feudal society where public and private spheres are conflated. The majority of Afghans operates on tribal kinship networks, with the occasional exception by the government to assert a democratic authority, so the public-private spheres do not abide by the same structural transformation in Habermas's framework. To anecdotally illustrate the layout of an Afghan home, guests are often ushered into the drawing room, which is an extended room that is completely separate and far away from the residents' bedrooms, living rooms, or kitchen. This drawing room is an extension of a 'private' sphere that has been made temporally 'public' for entertainment purposes, but when guests leave, this space is reverted to its 'private' status. When locals and foreigners forget this complex private-public configuration and assume that a cultural performance

could be made public and visible, personal privacy is compromised. This thesis seeks to make a claim for these 'public' performances without denying some of these 'private' ones, hence *permissive visibilities* as a concept has resulted from it.

Questions about visibility or permissibility that interrogate the ontological paradigm on how things really are, objectively, are deeply entrenched in interpretations of Islamic teachings, which sometimes run counter to the epistemological paradigm on the different forms of (cultural) knowledges produced as a result of interdependent relationships inside and outside Afghanistan. In other words, what is considered 'religious', 'social', or 'cultural' can be difficult to disentangle. Even within Muslim societies, notions of private-public spheres, interpretations of the Sharia, and other cultural factors are often distinctly different (see Zubaida, 2009). Therefore, an insistence on 'insider's knowledge' or 'ground up approach' is, in itself, inadequate because an understanding of local contexts tends to privilege the other through isolation. In other words, arguing purely from the locals' perspectives without locating them in the wider global context is to, using the same metaphor, see the veil, and not the woman, or see the Muslim, and not the politics surrounding Islamophobia and international affairs. A more productive approach and method to investigating cultural practices in conflict zones would be a deep understanding of local and wider contexts, and the in-between (see Chapter 6). Throughout the case study chapters, and especially in Chapter 6, I propose analysing and critiquing power structures by examining the exchanges 'from', 'from/beyond', and 'beyond' Kabul. The situation in Afghanistan is, to a large extent, an echo of Diana Taylor's argument of a performance model when she examined the Dirty War in

Argentina. She discusses the interconnected globalised world which cannot be seen in either/or binary categories: "It attempts to 'look at' history through a performance model that, I hope, will illuminate fractures and tensions that more traditional 'readings' will not recognize. It questions the economic versions of the social production of reality that fail to recognize spectacles as the product and producer of group fantasies and desires" (Taylor, 1997, p. xi). The 'from–beyond' analytical framework brings production, consumption, regulation, and representation of global cultural practices together more visibly, which, I hope, offers future researchers a language to analyse how performances circulate.

These three key arguments will be fleshed out in greater detail when the case studies are analysed within the framework on the circulation of culture. These arguments, however, did not emerge from the empirical evidence alone, but are developed in light of other literatures in several disciplines, as already outlined in the literature review section. In the next section, I outline the methodology to explain how the research data is collected and analysed.

Methodology

This qualitative study adopts a mixed methods approach involving performance analysis, phenomenological research, and ethnographic research. I have taken on a more conservative approach of examining theatre as (scripted) texts performed for an audience to better align my case studies with how Afghans might construe and define performance arts, as this also raises the concerns on the complex relationships theatre-making has with the representations of violence. However, out of the ten performances examined in this thesis, two are not theatre pieces in the pure sense. They are *Memory Boxes* (Chapter 3) and *Blowing Up Bamiyan*

Buddhas (Chapter 4). The former is a result of theatrical processes that culminated in a visual arts exhibition that reflected the horrors of war, while the latter is the demolition of Buddha statues, where the Taliban have used props, scheduled times and specific audiences to enact a performance of destruction. Both are nonetheless visual with varying degrees of theatricality and audience engagement, hence their inclusion. For some of these performances, the texts will be scrutinised; for others, the surrounding contexts related to the production and consumption of the performances (including theatre reviews, funding, and political agenda) will be discussed.

The corpus included live and recorded performances, DVDs, documentaries, and published play scripts. These sources were then selected based on their availability in the English language – whether spoken, or supplemented by English subtitles. From the narrower selection, I conducted interviews with the ensemble or audience members which comprised live face-to-face recordings, Skype calls, Facebook messages, and emails. With English language as my first level of access (sometimes with the use of interpreters), many performances were thus eliminated. The ten performances are performed primarily in English, with the exceptions of *Kaikavus* and *Heartbeat: Silence after the Explosion* where scenes were interpreted or scripts translated. While this became my biggest methodological limitation, this process of selection was most efficacious as I could verify data and voice recordings at a later stage. Developing this partial phenomenological approach further, I sought to identify common themes and clusters of meanings in all ten productions. These themes were informed by preliminary performance analyses and deconstruction of the play scripts in light of the politics and contexts surrounding these shows. More crucially, these

themes emerged from a partial 'performance ethnography' and my set of participant observations which included anecdotal evidence when I lived in Kabul for five months. From December 2012 to April 2013, I was in Afghanistan managing a radio drama project for women's empowerment for a local non-government organisation (NGO) involving local actors and producers. Though I was not collecting data there, I made contacts with theatre practitioners, had conversations, and even volunteered my time during the rehearsals of one production, *Kaikavus* (see Chapter 3). Anecdotes have been used sparingly in my thesis, not just because Stuart Hall has argued that subjects are produced within "specific discursive formation, and has no existence, […] or identity from one subject position to another" (Hall, 1996, p. 10), but also, as previously presented in Chapter 1, identities arise from a "narrativisation of the self" that includes a form of "suturing" in the imaginary realm – me and Afghans in a "temporary attachment". My conversations with Afghans, and the way these anecdotes have been used can be seen as a social process. Subjective insider knowledges(s) used here can frame the risk factors in the environmental and social context. On one hand, my official work at the NGO provided me insights on an institutional level such as funding, employment, women's issues, and governance. On the other hand, my informal involvement and participation with local Afghans' activities complemented my experiences with a rich social and religious dynamic that could not have been felt if I had stayed indoors, in Kabul, after work. I saw, questioned, and reflected on Afghans' attitudes towards life, women, culture, and war in general, all of which informed my cultural understandings. It was a form of immersion where I allowed the pores of my skin to 'feel' and 'sense' the cultural codes and practices that guided my later analyses. Dwight Conquergood positions this as a mode of inquiry "rooted in embodied experience, orality and

local contingencies" (Conquergood, 2002, p. 146). This is a strategic form of separation from purists' empirical observations, objective knowledge and scriptocentrism as a consequence of Western imperialism. Borrowing Frederick Douglass's call for participative epistemologies, Conquergood also puts forward this approach, saying that to know the deeper meanings associated with contexts, one should listen to their communal singing riddled with "tones loud, long and deep" (ibid., p. 149). In other words, this ethnography privileges "particular, participatory, dynamic, intimate, precarious, embodied experience grounded in historical process, contingency, and ideology" (Conquergood, 2003, p. 362).

After that, the knowledges I had 'acquired' living in Kabul were then triangulated and mapped onto my remaining corpus to identify an overarching theme that resonated with my experiences in Afghanistan. In other words, even though there were initial performances and interviews that were eliminated afterwards as the selection criteria become more focused, they did inform my choices, especially in the differing ways private and public spaces were interpreted. Finally, I rearranged the selected ten theatre pieces in a framework that supported my claims on the circulation of cultures. I developed the 'from–beyond framework' to methodologically identify geospatial movements 'from Kabul', 'from/beyond Kabul', and 'beyond Kabul'. Its seeming incoherence represents a complex exchange of 'local' and 'global'. I also developed the 'collocation of contexts' to explain the (in)visible contexts in the production and consumption of Afghan cultures. Though I have previously highlighted that Peggy Phelan's representational politics and Stuart Hall's circuit of culture would be the more useful theoretical framework for my study, I will use a separate set of theories to supplement each case study. Throughout this thesis, I also take on a reflexivity to

critique my own political positioning in this discourse. In the next chapter, I will immerse the reader into a historical reading of Afghanistan, evidencing the various stereotypes and tropes that have taken much of this chapter's theoretical discussion, followed by a brief development of theatre history in Afghanistan to better contextualise the subsequent case studies in the post-9/11 period.

Chapter Two

HISTORICAL BRIEF: TROPES ABOUT AFGHANISTAN

> *What I would propose in place of these conceptions of construction*
> *is a return to the notion of matter, not as site or surface,*
> but as a *process of materialization that stabilizes over time*
> *to produce the effect of boundary, fixity, and surface.*
> **- Judith Butler,** *Bodies That Matter* **(1993)**

In seeking to identify the various narrativisations that constitute 'Afghanness', Chapter 2 traces the 'glorious' past of Afghanistan in the annals of Afghan history through a cultural and historical lens. Primarily, I ask: "Is there an 'Afghan' identity, or are there multiple identities, and consequently, what meanings have been ascribed for the Afghan 'nation state'? How are these identities constituted and regulated, and by whom?" These are questions of identity, but they are framed around the 'production' (coding of meanings) and 'consumption' (decoding of meanings) of Afghanistan by people who have written and spoken *about* Afghanistan, usually from first hand experiences as ethnographers or historians. In the above quote by Judith Butler, the "materialization that stabilizes over time to produce the effect of boundary, fixity" is a process, which, I suggest, can manifest as 'representation' in the circuit of culture. In line with Butler's notion of sedimentation as raised in Chapter 1, I also investigate how this 'materiality' of 'Afghanistan' "as a given presupposes and consolidates the normative conditions of its own emergence" (Butler, 1993, p. 10). By asking how Afghanistan is being imagined, this chapter further seeks to identify the ways it is regulated and 'normalised' that have

resulted in tropes which have defined its own identity and representation. I also isolate these processes that have stabilised over time to produce Afghanistan as a country and a 'nation state' as a fixed concept, to argue that throughout the major historical periods, the colonial past endowing 'Afghanistan' as both an exotic place with enchanting, yet equally barbaric people, is being recirculated even today (see discussions by Monsutti, 2013; Khan, 2014; Hopkins and Marsden, 2011), but with a new inflection on the "colonial present", indicating the classical tension between the coloniser and the colonised – a term Derek Gregory used to describe "post-Imperial Britain […] enter[ing] into the global production of a colonial present" (Gregory, 2005, p. 369). He argues that the "'war on terror' not only activated the dispositions of the cold war […], but also […] activated the dispositions of a colonial past" (ibid., p. 370). In fact, a reviewer of Gregory's book of the same title notes that the "post-9/11 representations of Afghanistan […] in the colonial mind […] are depicted as 'fabrications' […] with the chilling outcome of turning those 'spaces' into 'a theatrical stage,' and more accurately into 'killing grounds,' justifying a 'war *of* terror' in the disguise of a 'war *on* terror' (Ghazal, 2006, p. 462, emphasis original).

Edward Said asserts that Orientalism does not exist in an archival vacuum, but is a cultural and a political fact. He argues that "it can be shown that what is thought, said, or even done about the Orient follows (perhaps occurs within) certain distinct and intellectually knowable lines" (Said, et al, 2000, p. 79). He further criticises the "three great empires – British, French, American – in whose intellectual and imaginative territory the writing was produced" (ibid., p. 81). In Afghanistan, these three great empires have had, and still have, a 'colonial'

presence. The British had waged wars three times in Afghanistan between 1839 and 1919 and had a colonial influence on foreign affairs (refer to official Agreement between Amir Abdur Rahman Khan and Sir Henry Mortimer Durand; see Sykes, 1940, p. 352), even though in Chapter 1, it was hinted that the Afghans did not imagine themselves to have been colonised by the British Empire (see example below). The French imperial reach, as this chapter will illustrate, is more indirect, enacted through education and culture. The Americans' occupation after 2001 leans towards counterinsurgency initiatives, including cultural diplomacy programmes. In addition to these "three great empires", the influence of the Soviets in their occupation in Afghanistan for more than a decade is also a consideration. Therefore, to examine the processes of materialisation that had stabilised over time to produce, in Butler's phrase, the "effect of boundary, fixity, and surface" (also Said's "knowable lines"), I will chart and locate 'Afghanistan' as a subject by examining the common meanings ascribed to it by investigating the historiography of Afghanistan as "narration", in Bhabha's formulation.

According to Homi Bhabha, the connection between nation and narration is one produced by a system of cultural signification. He cogently introduces the concept that "[n]ations, like narratives, lose their origins in the *myths of time* and only fully realize their horizons in the mind's eye" (Bhabha, 2000, p. 1, emphasis mine). "Myths of time" in the above quote will be isolated and given greater insight, as concepts of mystification, mythification, and myth-making in this chapter are discussed in light of Afghanistan's "coming into being" (ibid.). To uncover these narrations that have become "a powerful historical idea in the west" (ibid.), they have to be "renegotiated at the *sites* where they were initially

produced and hardened into essentialized positions" (Ling, 1998, p. vi, emphasis mine). These "sites" generally fall distinctly under four knowable lines: (i) cultural exotica in pre-colonial and colonial times before 1920s; (ii) cultural renaissance from 1920-70s; (iii) cultural desertification from 1980s-2000; and (iv) cultural redemption from 2001. I have used *exotica*, *renaissance*, *desertification*, and *redemption* as the keywords to depict the time periods to contextualise some of the case studies in later chapters dealing with post-9/11 theatre performances. Also, within these four historical periods, three narrations or tropes are evidently materialising 'Afghanness' into essentialised positions: (i) mystification; (ii) mythification; and (iii) myth-making. Below is a definition of these terms, and I will follow up with some historical examples afterwards.

Mystification, Mythification, Myth-Making

In *Karl Marx's Theory of History*, G. A. Cohen connects the idea of mystification to commodity fetishism. To make a fetish of something, he writes, is "to invest it with powers it does not in itself have" (Cohen, 1978, p. 115). He explains that, similarly, in religious fetishism, "an activity of thought, a cultural process, vests an object with apparent power", but the "fetish then manifests itself as endowed with a power which in truth it lacks. It has the power not in the real world but in the religious world, a world of illusion" (*ibid.*). In other words, distortion occurs as a result of fetishism, contributing to a quality of mystification. This sense of power can also be further explained by Erving Goffman's concept of mystification between performer and audience, where the maintenance of social distance between the two groups of people "provide[s] a way in which awe can be generated and sustained in the audience" (Goffman, 1956, p. 45). In other words, the more inaccessible a performer is, the more mystery there is around

him. Goffman also states that "the limitation and regulation of what is shown is a limitation and regulation of contact" (ibid., p. 44). Drawing on Cohen and Goffman, I am proposing that the continued narration of Afghanistan as an inaccessible landlocked land full of mysterious, exotic qualities leads to its own *mystification*. The more unknown it is, the more mystical its charm − and so the closer anyone wants to get to Afghanistan in order to experience the 'original', 'authentic' and 'timeless' history. For example, the Rigveda which is the "oldest preserved religious book known to mankind" (Werner, 2005, p. 87) had made references to the rivers (e.g. Kubha) and tribes of the inhabitants (e.g. Gandhāra, Gandharis, Paktha) in Afghanistan (see Majumdar, 1952, pp. 247-8). According to *A Popular Dictionary of Hinduism,* Werner states that the Rigveda contains "several mythological and poetical accounts of the origin of the world […with…] cryptic references to many mythological stories and legends in existence at the time, hymns of praise directed to the gods, some of them of great lyrical beauty, indications of the search for immortality" (ibid.). Immediately, these deictic relations of Afghanistan being part of an ancient civilisation, or being associated with the divine, or connected to "lyrical beauty" contribute to an awe-inspiring heritage with an immense mystical quality to it. Further supporting these are the archaeological artifacts dating back to the Bronze Age and Stone Age which unveil a different cultural history of Afghanistan (see Simpson, 2012). One of the arguments in Chapter 1 was the mythologising and (re)imaginings of Afghanistan, a trope of mystification which is repeated (see *Homebody/Kabul* in Chapter 5), here sedimented by both archaeological finds and mystical constructions, but in the section on 'cultural exotica', I will illustrate some of the recounts by Emperor Babur, founder of the Mughal Empire, who described Afghanistan as a paradise. Also closely related to mystification are concepts of

aura (see *The Kite Runner* in Chapter 5) or *fetishism* (see *Homebody/Kabul* in Chapter 5) which this research study will build on in later chapters.

The second trope is *mythification*, which is derived from the Greek word, *mythos*, to denote "stories about divine beings, generally arranged in a coherent system […] endorsed by rulers and priests" (Simpson and Roud, 2000, p. 254). Borrowing from the etymology *mythologia* to indicate "a body of myths" (Harper, 2001), mythification or mythologising has to do with a "sense of interpreting or annotating the fabulous tales" (Williams, 1976, p. 211). But instead of focusing on fables that depict "what could not really exist or have happened" (ibid.), I am focusing on Roland Barthes' conception of myth as a type of speech and a semiological system. He states that myth "lends itself to history in two ways: by its form, which is only relatively motivated; by its concept, the nature of which is historical" (Barthes, 1991, p. 137). By inference, I define *mythification* as a process of forming an anthology of heroic tales (mythology as *form*, as well as a system) that are connected to a historical past (myth as *concept*), many of which will be glorified and exalted throughout generations in oral traditions. For example, David B. Edwards' book on Afghanistan focuses on the "three great men from Afghanistan's past", the "stories Afghan people tell one another about the past – stories in which men of quality are tested and, by dint of their single-mindedness, their courage, and their capacity, demonstrate the qualities of person and action by which greatness is achieved" (Edwards, 1996, p. 1). He goes on to write about a tribal khan (Sultan Muhammad Khan), a Muslim saint (Hadda Sahib), and a royal prince (Amir Abdur Rahman Khan). Another anthology of exalted stories is the *Shahnameh: The Persian Book of Kings* by Abolqasem Ferdowsi (Ferdowsi, 2006), akin in classical worth to the Homer's

Iliad, or *The Odyssey,* but held more in religious regard and veneration to Indian epics such as the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana.* This epic poetry recounts a pre-Islamic Iran, from the time of creation to the Arab invasion in the seventh century, out of which fifty monarchs are named and described in delicate detail, with the most famous tragic heroes Rostam and his son, Sohrab, chronicled in battle (see *Kaikavus* in Chapter 3). The mythification of heroes forms a continuing mythology of Afghan greatness. In a more contemporary autobiographical novel, Tamim Ansary describes his difficulties in identifying himself when he is with his Afghan relatives, debating on words such as "family", "extended family", "tribe". But he eventually writes, "It was more like a loose network of extended families tied together by a mutual sense of having descended from a great someone in the past – or a string of great someones" (Ansary, 2002, p. 18). This is a trope steeped in traditions and lineages of warriors, kings and heroes which Ansary terms as "a string of great someones".

The difference between *mystification* and *mythification* is that the former is more intangible, focusing on the land, nature, and its timelessness (for example, on Afghanistan's antiquity in religious and historical books; or in Chapter 4, there is a shift from the supposedly ugly Buddha statues to the tranquil surroundings of Bamiyan), while the latter is more present and tangible in real historical persons, both living and dead. It should be pointed out at the outset that mythification can lead to mystification, and vice versa. For example, in the massacre at the First Anglo-Afghan War, it created a mythology of heroic – or ruthless – Afghan tribal warriors, resulting in Afghanistan being further mystified as a "graveyard of empires" (Bearden, 2001). A frequently-cited fact of that war is that 12,000 British and Indian soldiers were slain, with Dr. William Brydon as the lone

survivor, recounting this horror (see, for example, Blank, 2011, p. 158; Morton, 2006, p. 18; Holt, 2003, p. 30; Khyber, n.d.; see also Stephen Jeffrey's play *Bugles at the Gates of Jalalabad*, in Tricycle Theatre's *The Great Game: Afghanistan;* and contested narrative by Yapp, 2001, p. 179). Duncan Bell writes that a nationalist myth is a "story that simplifies, dramatizes and selectively narrates the story of a nation's past and its place in the world, its historical eschatology: a story that elucidates its contemporary meaning through (re)constructing its past. Furthermore, myths do not encompass only war; they subsume all of the various events, personalities, traditions, artefacts and social practices that (self) define the nation and its relation to the past, present and future" (Bell, 2003, p. 75). He adds that myths are "constructed, they are shaped, whether by deliberate manipulation and intentional action, or perhaps through the particular resonance of works of literature and art" (ibid.). This perhaps suggests that when *mythification* (peoples) is combined with *mystification* (the land), a "nationalist myth" of 'Afghanness' is being constructed and essentialised into position.

The third trope is *myth*, which, in one of many Raymond Williams' definitions, is the "common sense of a false (often deliberately false) belief or account" (Williams, 1976, p. 212) that occurs in everyday parlance. By inference of "false belief", this phenomenon typically suffers from logical fallacies such as hasty generalisations, cause and effect, false dilemma, straw man arguments, and appeal to pity. For example, on 17 November 2001, Laura Bush, then First Lady of the United States, gave a radio address to her American nation:

The brutal oppression of women is a central goal of the terrorists. Long

before the current war began, the Taliban and its terrorist allies were making the lives of children and women in Afghanistan miserable. Seventy percent of the Afghan people are malnourished. One in every four children won't live past the age of five because health care is not available. Women have been denied access to doctors when they're sick. Life under the Taliban is so hard and repressive, even small displays of joy are outlawed – children aren't allowed to fly kites; their mothers face beatings for laughing out loud. Women cannot work outside the home, or even leave their homes by themselves. (Woolley and Peters, 2001)

According to Lila Abu-Lughod's article *Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving?* (Abu-Lughod, 2002), Mrs Bush's rhetoric is deeply problematic because her address "collapsed important distinctions that should have been maintained" (ibid., p. 784), constantly slipping between the Taliban and the terrorists and creating "a kind of hyphenated monster identity: the Taliban-and-the-terrorists" (ibid.). Furthermore, Mrs Bush blurred the "separate causes in Afghanistan of women's continuing malnutrition, poverty, and ill health, and their more recent exclusion under the Taliban from employment, schooling, and the joys of wearing nail polish" (ibid.). In short, Abu-Lughod argues that these resonate with "earlier colonial and missionary rhetoric on Muslim women" (ibid., p. 783). Here, I see Mrs Bush as myth-making, fabricating unsubstantiated statements that are neither sound nor accurate. *Myth-making* in this sense can also occur in Orientalist texts reflected in early gazetteers, diplomats, or anthropologists when, in the veneer of academic and ethnographic observations, makes convenient relationships of cause-effect. For example, in *The Northern American Review: Volume 55* magazine published in 1842, titled 'The English in Afghanistan', the Pathan man's supposed anti-colonial response had become representative of Afghans' attitudes towards the foreigner:

Mr. Mountstuart Elphinestone, in his account of his mission to Caboul [Kabul] in 1809, says, he once urged upon a very intelligent old man, of the tribe of Meankhiel, the superiority of a quiet life under a powerful monarch, over the state of discord in which they were sometimes plunged. The reply was, "We are content with alarms, we are content with discord, we are content with blood, but we will never be content with a master!" (Sparks, J., et al., 1842, p. 52)

This trope gets repeated, though, by Afghans themselves. For example, President Najibullah, in his 1989 address to his parliament and council members, reminds them that they have never been defeated (Dr. Najibullah's speech to representatives of Kabul (english sub), 2013); see also *Miniskirts in Kabul*, Chapter 5). While this chapter elucidates the imaginations and narrations that have sedimented as tropes, it does not purport to argue for a 'true Afghan identity'. In fact, what this chapter hopes to raise is a critical reflexivity to interrogate "the result of cultural hegemony […] that gives Orientalism the durability and the strength" (Said, et al, 2000, p. 73) as opposed to accepting the narrations as 'true' Afghan identities. As much as Edward Said's critiques of Orientalism have been helpful as an initial discursive point of departure, this chapter seeks not to take on sedimented positions within the academia that perpetuate further binaries, between orientalism and postcolonialism, between East and West, or between liberalism and conservatism. In fact, I would argue that highlighting the Orientalist tropes which had configured Afghanistan in mixed narrations and images that are not only powerful and exotic, but also barbaric and fragile, is unproductive and, worse, parochial. The interrogation of this chapter will further propose, as would Homi Bhabha, an alternative reading of 'Afghanistan' existing within larger global networks of power that resist

fixities and boundaries. Bhabha writes:

> The boundary is Janus-faced and the problem of outside/inside must always itself be a process of hybridity, incorporating new 'people' in relation to the body politic, generating other sites of meaning and, inevitably, in the political process, producing unmanned sites of political antagonism and unpredictable forces for political representation. (Bhabha, 2000, p. 4).

The examples that follow will show that Afghan identities had first been sedimented through Orientalist readings and have circulated within the circuit of culture, even until today. I will conclude this chapter by drawing on Bhabha's location of culture at the borders, the interstitial space where intersubjectivities and collective experiences of "nationness, community interest, or cultural value[s] are negotiated" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 2) as a strategy of resistance. This interstitial space is a liminal space that "opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy" (ibid., p. 4), producing "unmanned sites of political antagonism and unpredictable forces for political representation". This is especially true in the cultural exchanges Afghanistan has with other nation states, which I will go on to illustrate. Here, I will also draw on Baz Kershaw's concept of "edge phenomenon" to explicate these "sites of political antagonism". Using an ecological metaphor to explain the dynamic relationship between performers and audiences, where audience members are, in fact, encouraged to be "unruly" – a visible sign of democratising audience participation and to resist the passivity imposed by the institution of a theatre – he notes that "[e]dge phenomena are places, such as riverbanks and seashores, where two or more ecosystems rub up

against each other to produce especially dynamic life-forms and processes"
(Kershaw, 2001, p. 136). These metaphorical riverbanks are the cultural
exchanges taking place from and beyond Kabul that "rub up against each other".
In other words, my strategy of resistance in this chapter is to acknowledge these
"dynamic life-forms and processes" that are synonymous with Bhabha's cultural
hybridity – but these differences in identities can only be 'produced' and
'consumed' in "unruly" (Kershaw), "unmanned sites of political antagonism"
(Bhabha) which can potentially subvert the overall sedimentation of Orientalist
readings of 'Afghanistan'.

Imaginations of 'Cultural Exotica' (1800s-1920s)

Often described as the "crossroads of Asia" (Simpson, 2012) or "crossroads of
east and west" (McCauley, 2002), Afghanistan shares geographical affinities with
present-day regions such as India, Pakistan, China, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan,
Tajikistan, and Iran. Nancy Hatch Dupree, an American historian who has been
living in Afghanistan since the 1960s, compares Afghanistan to the size of France
or Texas (see Dupree, 1977) stretching over 700,000 square kilometres, and is
situated at the intersections of Asia, Middle East, and Europe – what Ashraf
Haidari, the Deputy Chief of Mission of the Embassy of Afghanistan in India,
calls the "backbone of the Old or New Silk Road" (Haidari, 2013). The
metaphorical backbone underscores its geographical importance: it is either east
and west, or neither east nor west, but it is a central trading route. Because it sits
uncomfortably in the liminal space, Afghanistan becomes a boundary marker, a
symbolic interstitial space where a hive of "unruly" activities could take place.
Not only is it landlocked by these neighbouring countries, but it is also enveloped
and dominated by the massive Hindu Kush mountain ranges which are the

western extensions of the Himalayas, that eventually peter out in the western province of Herat (see Dupree, 1977). It is seen as dangerous and perilous, as told by Babur who invaded Afghanistan in the early 16th century.

Babur, the founder of the Mughal Empire, describes manoeuvring through the mountains in the winter during a "blinding snowstorm" (cited in Dale, 2004, p. 217). It was said that "[a]t each step they would sink to their waist or chest while trampling the snow" (ibid.). As such, this evoked "a warrior ethos" (ibid.) in Babur himself and he protected his men in an act of comradeship. Despite its dangers, Kabul is also affectionately termed "Eight Paradises" (ibid., p. 52) – *hasht bihisht* – by Babur. This is a phrase that is also reproduced in Dale's book, *The Garden of the Eight Paradises*, another testament to the exotic narrativisation of Afghanistan as having mystical charms despite its 'treacherous' terrains. To build on Kabul's enchantment, the city where Babur was buried, Dale states that Babur's name "evokes nostalgic memories where his neglected and now damaged gravesite reminds inhabitants of better days and picnics on its beautiful hillside location" (ibid., p. 2). Not only is Afghanistan revered as having dangerous and charming qualities, Kabul city now houses the first emperor of the Mughal Empire, a narration of royalty and grandeur, thus mythologising Babur as one of her adopted heroic 'sons' since he had been buried there.

This romanticism is further accentuated through the line of conquests by great empires throughout its history. From the Aryans and the Achamenids (c. 1500 BCE – 330 BCE), to Alexander the Great (330 – 327 BCE), and from the Mauryans and Graeco-Bactrians (305 BCE – 48 CE) to the Kushans (c. 135 BCE – 241 CE), followed by the Sasanian-Samanid empires, the Ghaznavids (962 –

1186), the Ghorids (1148 – 1202), the Mongols (1220 – 1332), the Timurids (1369 – 1506), and the Moghuls and Safavids (1504 – 1709), Afghanistan has been known to be "ageless", a term uncritically proliferated and reproduced in fiction, non-fiction, and scholarly literatures (see, for example, Dyke and Crisafulli, 2006, p. 4; Holt, 2005, p. 163; Bell Jr and Pisani, 2000, p. 24; Stark, 2010, p. 41; Bocharov, 1990, p. 112). It is a land that had amassed a rich history of previous civilisations and empires, invasions and trades. Besides the ancient quality associated with Afghanistan, it is also the perceived inaccessibility and impenetrability that produce and maintain its mystification.

This mystification is further intensified by the outsider's imperialistic egotism, as illustrated with being the "first" of a kind to see or visit Afghanistan. In the introduction of *The Garden of the Eight Paradises: Babur and the Culture of Empire in Central Asia, Afghanistan and India (1483-1530)*, Stephen Dale writes, almost as a matter of fact, that "nothing would be known about Afghans or events in this region" (Dale, 2004, p. 6) if Babur had not written about his experiences. Dale adds that Babur is the "first eyewitness or historical account of the region" (ibid.) in the early sixteenth century. Sir Olaf Caroe who published a comprehensive book *The Pathans: 550 BC – AD 1957* (Caroe, 1958) gave a memorial lecture in 1960, where he valorised Mountstuart Elphinstone as "the first and without doubt the greatest of our race to have dealings with them [Afghans]" (Caroe, 1960, p. 937) in 1809. A more contemporary example cannot escape the "first" imperial type of a boastful project. Former British Member of Parliament, Rory Stewart OBE, has written an autobiographical book about Afghanistan which won the Royal Society of Literature Ondaatje Award, the Spirit of Scotland Award, and was shortlisted for the Guardian First Book Award,

the John Llewellyn Rhys Memorial Prize and the Scottish Book the Year Prize. In the first few pages, he explains to the Afghans who were questioning his presence:

> "I am planning to walk across Afghanistan. From Herat to Kabul. On foot" I was not breathing deeply enough to complete my phrases. I was surprised they [Security Service in Afghanistan] didn't interrupt. "I am following in the footsteps of Babur, the first emperor of Mughal India. I want to get away from the roads. Journalists, aid workers, and tourists mostly travel by car, but I… (Stewart, 2004, pp. 5-6)

There is a certain heroic quality in Stewart wanting to walk through Afghanistan in 2002 by foot, upon paths that are not commonly trod. He continues with his anecdote, with the security service officer saying: "There are no tourists. […] You are the *first* tourist in Afghanistan. It is midwinter – there are three meters of snow on the high passes, there are wolves, and this is a war. You will die, I can guarantee. Do you want to die?" (Stewart, 2004, p. 6, emphasis mine). He survived to tell the tale. The mythification and romanticism continue to be perpetuated, for example, with *The Guardian*'s review of his book, stating on the cover of *The Places In Between*: "On foot through the Afghan winter, with only a toothless mastiff for company, Stewart is so far off the beaten track that his evocative book feels like a long lost relic of the great age of exploration" (The Guardian, 2004). Repeated and regularised, these 'ancient' mystifications around Afghanistan's aura due to its inaccessibility – and therefore the cultural 'identity' of the nation state according to Orientalism – become sedimented, reified norms.

But 'cultural exotica' is not only romanticised notions of the land and its enchanting associations to antiquity, but also to what Edward Said says the "imaginative demonology of the 'mysterious Orient'" (Said et al, 2000, p. 91), referring to barbaric stereotypes of oriental peoples. There is that constant oscillation from awe to horror. For example, Captain Sir Alexander Burnes, who was from Scotland, served in the East India Company in the 1820s. In his book *Travels into Bokhara* (1835)*,* the editor wrote that Burnes "loved Afghanistan and its people" (Burnes, 1835, p. 231) and the "rugged magnificence of its scenery" (ibid.). It was only in later editions that commentaries are added to say that Burnes' exoticisation was a "startlingly rose-tinted assessment of the national character" (ibid.). The editor, Kathleen Hopkirk, elaborates that "Afghans could be exceedingly cruel and vengeful, and were quite capable of hiding their real feelings under a duplicitous mask of friendship" (ibid., pp. 231-232). Other writers, perhaps influenced by Hopkirk's orientalist interpretation, then explain that Burnes, together with his brother and members of his staff, was hacked to death by a mob in Kabul on 2 November 1841 (Yeoman, 2011; Murray, 2011). But this contrast between awe and horror is made possible because an editor in contemporary times interprets an older Orientalist's account, emphasising the negative stereotypes of Afghans in hindsight. The Afghans have, in these narrativisations, become their own myths in an oriental mythology. But who are these 'Afghan' peoples represented in these accounts?

In the Preface to *The Races of Afghanistan* published in 1880, Henry Walter Bellew states that "to know the history, interests, and aspirations of a people, is half the battle gained in converting them to loyal, contented, and peaceable subjects, to willing participators and active protectors of the welfare of the

Empire towards which, from position and self-interest, they naturally gravitate" (Bellew, 1880, p. 6). In his explicit admission of an imperialistic mission to convert Afghans into "loyal, contented, and peaceable subjects", Bellew continues to denigrate the populations by further ascribing the Afghans' "anarchy and instability" to their "origin". This Orientalist trope becomes repeated also in contemporary scholarly works. In *Heroes of the Age: Moral Fault Lines on the Afghan* (1996), David B. Edwards, Professor of Anthropology at Williams College in Massachusetts, states that Marxism, Islamic fundamentalism, ethnic and sectarian loyalties, and personal ambition were factors in the conflict, but there is something at work here "that has to do less with ideology, identity and anarchy than with certain deep-seated moral contradictions that press against each other like tectonic plates at geological fault lines below the surface of events", which he terms the "moral incoherence" (Edwards, 1996, p. 3) of Afghanistan. He writes:

> This incoherence goes back to the rise of Islam, but it has been greatly exacerbated since the end of the nineteenth century, when the expansion of colonial empires into South and Central Asia led to the fabrication of a nation-state framework on the unstable foundation of Afghan society. (ibid.)

In the above quote, Edwards blames this moral incoherence – inferentially dubbed as immorality – on the "rise of Islam" and the formation of an unstable "nation-state" under colonialism. Edwards adds that the "diversity of race and the antagonism of tribal interests among a heterogeneous and barbarous people, who have been only brought together as a nationality by the accident of position and the bond of a common religion" (ibid., p. 11) is "of a fanatic kind, owing to

the blindness of their ignorance and the general barbarism of their social condition" (ibid., p. 12). Here, the narrations and constructions of Islam as the cause of Afghans' barbarity and savagery as tribal peoples of the pre-colonial times, and hence a "moral incoherence", reproduce the anti-Muslim hatred (or Islamophobia) that is arguably witnessed around the world today.

Imaginations of 'Cultural Renaissance' (1920s-1970s)

In the earlier sections, the cultural construction of 'Afghanistan' as a polity has focused primarily on the land and the peoples as a broad brushstroke of orientalist interpretations with tropes of mystification, mythification, and myth-making. Nancy Hatch Dupree, the American historian I had referred to previously, has observed a different set of tropes in literary works by Afghan authors and says that the period from 12th to 20th century was marked by an age of humanitarianism. She goes on to demarcate other periods as follows:

Phase I	Humanitarianism	$12^{th} - 20^{th}$ Centuries AD
Phase II	Political Awakening	1900 – 1929
Phase III	Romanticism	1930 – 1940s
Phase IV	Sentimental Realism	1947 – early 1950s
Phase V	Scientific Socialism	1953 – 1960s
Phase VI	Revolutionary Activism	

Table 1: Six Periods of Literary Themes (Dupree, 1985, p. 73)

Nonetheless, I have decided to call the period from 1920s to 1970s the 'imagination of cultural renaissance' – closely tied to various permutations of modernity – where culture, fashion, and the arts take on more visibility in the public sphere. Dupree claims that in the early 1900s, Mahmud Beg Tarzi was

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"the first to advocate prose as a viable medium for literature" (Dupree, 1985, pp. 74-5). According to Dupree, Tarzi's vision for the future was concerned with a "revitalization of Islam, idealistically combining modernism with Islam, including a scientific and ideological rationale for reform within Islam" (ibid., p. 75). In practice, it was a "political awakening" that condemned the "obscurantist religious monopolists who retained a suffocating grip on Islam by preaching against education and social reforms, such as the emancipation of women" (ibid.). King Amanullah who ruled from 1919 to 1929 was greatly influenced by Tarzi. He put in place reform programmes which eventually angered the conservatives to revolt. King Nadir Shah who ruled from 1929 to 1933 had "measured modernization programs" (ibid.). His son who succeeded the throne from 1933 to 1973 "reigned, but did not rule" (ibid.). Hashim Khan, his uncle, controlled both domestic and foreign policies instead, and "sought to bring about a cultural renaissance" (ibid., p. 75), still influenced by Tarzi's vision. This meant that the literary works at that time succumbed to "romantic esthetics and the glorification of nature", as well as valorising "patriotism, education, dignity of work and an equitable social order" (ibid., p. 76). With the abolition of a long tradition of monarchy and the establishment of the Republic of Afghanistan by the first President, Muhammad Daoud Khan in 1973, Afghanistan was becoming modernised in western ideals. Today, one of the narrations of Afghanistan constantly reminisced and spoken about is its development in the period from 1940s to 1970s. Photographs of women wearing fashionable clothing (see also *Miniskirts of Kabul* in Chapter 5), attending university classes without head scarves, together with images of a clean, organised city with recognisable transportation systems are being circulated today on the internet, nostalgically reconstructing a nation state that was independent and thriving. Culture was

reportedly flourishing, even in many aspects of life.

Alexandra's film, *Afghanistan: Reconstructing Through Theatre* (Paraboschi, 2008), which showcases some theatre footages in the 1970s, claimed that the Afghan National Theatre was a cultural mecca during the Soviet regime under the administration of Dr Mohammad Najibullah, the same man in David Greig's play (see *Miniskirts of Kabul* in Chapter 5). The stage managers of that time were interviewed, and they boasted about foreign artists coming to Kabul to perform in a sophisticated performance space that had mechanical capabilities on the ceiling that enabled the change of set, which could also raise and lower the curtains − a feature supposedly ahead of its time. It was also reported that in the 1970s, Kabul Nanderi Theatre employed 140 staff, and its training programme spanned from dramatic art to ballet, attracting promising young actresses and actors to public cultural life. According to Shafie Rahel, "Afghan Nanderi is the pace-setter for plays that are being performed throughout Afghanistan" (ibid.), together with the Municipal Theatre of Herat producing over eighty plays in 1974. The National Theatre had also toured the provinces "to bring drama to the people" (ibid.), as well as to neighbouring countries, which proved to be a hotspot of Afghan arts (Rahel, 1975, p. 33).

An analysis of Paraboschi's film indicates a valorisation of western modernity: male audiences in formal suits and ties (see Plate 1, Appendix 2), women audiences adorned with accessories and cosmetics (see Plate 2, Appendix 2), and theatres performing adaptations of classical work from Shakespeare (England), Molière (France), and Chekhov (Russia) (see Plates 3-5, Appendix 2). Paraboschi interviewed Mohammad Ali Raonaq who was a prominent figure in the 1950s to

1970s. Because Raonaq had an education in France, his fluency in the language prompted him to translate the works of Molière into Dari, the first of its kind in Afghanistan's theatre scene. Raonaq recounts, "This was so appreciated and applauded, that prime minister, at this time Prince Daoud said: 'Now the Afghan theatre progressed a lot, the place where you work is too tight. You need a suitable and spacious house'" (Paraboschi, 2008). According to Raonaq, this marked the birth of Kabul Nanderi (or Kabul National Theatre), where he served as their theatre manager from 1953 to 1959. For more than twenty years, his translated works of Molière were studied and performed by high school students run by the French, namely Istiqlal High School for boys, and Malalai High School for girls. Around the same time, a teacher at the French-run school (from 1970 to 1977), Guy-Michel Carbou, founded a pupils' theatre company, perhaps an indication of the first formal drama education in Afghanistan. In the documentary, Carbou recounts:

> I, at once, founded a first and at the time, the only pupils theater company, and more incredible for this time, with the contribution of both, boys from the Esteqlal High School and girls of the Malalai High School. In a society where boys and girls lived permanently separate, *we've got a kind of alchemy, something healthy, very healthy.* We had to make up our mind: Let them play in French and therefore the audience will shorten, or play the Molière's comedies in the Dari translation. We choose this last solution. In this situation, the only person to be contacted was Mr. Raonaq. (Paraboschi, 2008, emphasis mine)

Not only is theatre now seen as progressive by the Afghan government, but the French are also now construed as redeemers, partaking in a magical performance of "alchemy" to bring the boys and girls together in a cultural activity and to save

them from isolation, an act uncritically perceived as "something healthy, very healthy". In other words, social segregation of genders in Afghan society is, according to the French, a feeble and diseased condition that is in need of 'medical' attention. This salvation trope is again repeated and reproduced in a later case study when French director, Corinne Jaber, who directed *The Comedy of Errors* in Kabul (see Chapter 4) gets flustered when she could not 'get' the women actors to be more present and dynamic on stage; she says the men have more energy and, by inference, blames the women for being weak. She tried to bring them together, but the "alchemy" was not working in her favour.

As if to further underscore the redemptionist qualities the French had exerted on the Afghan actors, the documentary filmmaker continues to interview the actors who were part of the French pupil theatre company founded by Guy-Michel Carbou. For instance, Farida (Raonaq's daughter) who played Molière's *Scoundrel Scapin* (see Plate 4, Appendix 2), alongside three other girls in 1976 at the High School Istiqlal studio, exclaims, "For us it was quite fantastic to play." Her co-actor, Hafiz Assefi, also reminisces in French, stating that the modern theatre in Istiqlal High School was opened in 1972, and had the perfect fittings with audio and lighting equipment. He also remarks that they "had everything [they] needed to play specially [sic] the Molière's comedy: dresses and properties" (Paraboschi, 2008). Some of the costume sketches are reproduced in Appendix 2 (see Plate 5). Assefi adds, "This enabled us to make acquaintance with Molière, his language, his wit and believe me it fitted perfectly the Afghan taste. […] Some nights we had full audience and people were bent with laughter. That worked perfectly" (Paraboschi, 2008). Raonaq also recounts an audience member saying, "I don't know how you wrote the Geronte's dialogue, but in our street

there is a person quite alike in words and acts" (ibid.). The appeal to Molière's classical comedies, according to Raonaq, is because they are "beyond space and time" (ibid.). He states, "You can find a lot of Geronte in France as well in Kabul" (ibid.).

The documentary interviews, therefore, appear to be a celebration of the arts, influenced by the French, which had a huge resonance with Afghan audiences in the 1970s: it "worked perfectly" and it was "beyond space and time". Even though these were articulated in the late 20th century, the mystification of Afghanistan is reproduced again by Afghans themselves, referring to their universal timeless and ageless qualities. Paradoxically, and more poignantly, the actors and audiences in the documentary showed surprise that there was a "perfect" fit between Afghanistan and other societies. It was as if Afghanistan had never 'seen' an outside world nor encountered global cultural exchanges. This perpetuates and produces the mystification of the landlocked land, exoticised and separated from the world – located neither east nor west – and symbolically diseased, waiting to be saved, or interrupted, by an outside force (in this example, the French). This is problematic because not only are the redeeming tropes produced by western colonial powers, but it is also consumed and reproduced by the locals themselves.

Subsequently, a document was drawn up by the Minister of Information and Culture in Afghanistan in 1973 for cultural relations, indicating that Afghans needed financial and cultural help and again perpetuating an archetypal victim who was in need of salvation. The Minister, Professor Dr Rahim Nevin, admitted that "as a developing nation, [Afghanistan] receive[d] foreign aid in developing

its cultural and information services". He iterated that "continued aid will make it easier for the ministry to attain a higher level of cultural achievement" (Rahel, 1975, p. 9). According to Rahel, some of the terms and conditions of the Cultural Policy of the government at that time included sending students abroad "for further education in acting, film editing, scenario writing, archaeology and restoration"; sending and receiving "artists who give public performances"; receiving "experts to help in the design and supervision of projects in all activities which are the responsibility of the Ministry of Information and Culture"; and receiving "technical and financial assistance from foreign countries for the restoration of historical monuments" (ibid., p. 47). The actions undertaken represented and projected Afghans as either undeveloped or in need; there was an over-reliance on 'receiving' external help. In 1974, twelve cultural agreements were made, or had already been made, with France, England, India, Poland, the Soviet Union, the People's Republic of China, Bulgaria, Egypt, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, Japan, France, Kuwait, and Turkey – all of whom were presumably sending help to Afghans. Evidently, the disengagement and transfer of local power to "experts" in "all activities" related to the Ministry is deeply problematic, even though this was allegedly the period of cultural renaissance with a hive of activities in the arts. If Kabul National Theatre was thriving, how is it then that their growth was economically unsustainable? Here, the Afghan government conceived itself to be a long-term beneficiary of foreign aid and donation even in the midst of perceived modernisation, a trope that continues to be circulated within the circuit of culture after 2001 when NGOs are set up to offer assistance – a trope of salvation – to develop its cultural sectors after the fall of the Taliban.

Even though there are two agreements indicating "reciprocal exchange" with foreign relations in the 1973 cultural policy document, it had already sedimented an unequal power relationship with the West. By relying on poverty tropes by the Afghan government to garner financial support, they are directly complicit in what Lisa Lau calls re-orientalism (Lau, 2007), the perpetuation of Orientalism by orientals themselves. It is an identity produced, consumed, and circulated by Afghans themselves. But this phenomenon does not exist independent of the matrices of power in the global circuit of culture. As illustrated thus far, even the more perceptive of writers critiquing orientalism in some of the discourses around Afghan narrations (such as Dupree) are themselves embroiled in the rhetoric of mythification. Even though the arts in the 1970s enjoyed high visibility status, this 'renaissance' becomes a ready foil for 'cultural desertification' in the 1980s-1990s, a trope which is again used to justify foreign interventions to rid 'terror' and save needy Afghans from 'harm'.

Imaginations of 'Cultural Desertification' (1970-2000s)

When President Daoud Khan was killed in a Marxist coup in 1978, Noor Mohammad Taraki became the president for a year before he, too, was assassinated. In 1979, Hafizulla Amin became the President. His communist government was threatened by Muslim rebels, so Soviet troops entered to lend support – but poisoned Amin instead. Babrak Karmal was installed in three separate roles as the General Secretary of the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA), the President of the Revolutionary Council, and the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan (DRA) Prime Minister when the Soviets invaded Afghanistan, and was immediately seen as a "Soviet puppet" by the populace (Sinha, 1980, p. 354). Observing the political and literary climate,

Saaduddin Sphoon who is a poet-in-exile condemned the Soviets and their puppets by stating that "[n]ot a single original work in poetry, prose, song or drama has been created since the Soviet takeover; most writers merely chew the cud of what they produced before" (cited in Dupree, 1985, p. 85). By inference, then, literary works produced prior to the 1980s were perceived to have originality. There was the pride of a 'glorious' past, a form of nostalgia – but these better days have been mythified and sedimented in the cultural consciousness of Afghans. This mythification is also, ironically, circulated and reproduced by the Soviets themselves, even though they had been condemned by Afghan writers. For example, according to Dupree, the Soviets at international conferences claimed that the "primitive state of Afghan culture" and "the inability of the Afghans to bring about a renaissance by themselves" (ibid.) enabled "the beneficent assistance of the Soviets" to uplift the Afghans "above woeful backwardness" (ibid.), reinforcing the salvation tropes of an external redeemer and a victim in need of rescue.

When I visited Kabul in 2011, the Director of Kabul Nendari (or the Afghan National Theatre), Shahpoor Sadaqat, showed me two theatre spaces: one, the ruined roof of a large theatre that had been destroyed by rockets; and second, a smaller auditorium which was undergoing construction works. Sadaqat claimed that they had no money to repair the main theatre, but his statement seemed to undermine the construction works that were happening in the adjacent room. When he showed me the ruins, he looked indifferent but with a tinge of sadness. Perhaps there is an obsessive myth-making around their 'poverty' trope to an extent that they are seen preserving the ruined theatre as a spectacle. I suggest that this state of impoverishment is used to evoke sympathy and justify

international funding. To further sediment the narrations of cultural 'desertification', the Taliban purportedly destroyed all cultural forms and artifacts when they took over Kabul city in 1996.

In a speech given by Naim Majrooh at the First Freemuse World Conference in 1998, he stated that music in Afghanistan was already censored in April 1992 by the Taliban (Majrooh, 1998). Even though Majrooh argued that there were some groups within the Taliban's ranks that were not against music, they had to "try their best to maintain unity and avoid division and differences in order to achieve the final goal which is total victory over the opposition" (ibid., p. 28), so they banned all forms of cultural expression, even hanging television sets from electric poles on major road intersections. He added that one of the major justifications for such an adverse reaction to music by the Taliban was that the "Afghan traditional, classical as well as folkloric music [had been] negatively affected by Indian and Pakistani movies" (ibid.), as well as to the Communist regime earlier for "implementing the Soviet style of music and dance for the sake of pleasure and not as an aspect of culture" (ibid.). His understanding suggested that culture and pleasure were separate distinct spheres of human activity that did not intertwine. Majrooh further observed:

> Under the Communist regime and so-called Mujahideen government, music and dance was misused for immoral and improper purposes. Thus, they brought music and national dance from a position of being an important part of tradition and culture to being instruments of improper pleasure. However in relation to music the Taliban should re-consider their position. Because there is no clear indication pro or against music in Islam. (ibid.)

The attitudes towards music, both by the Taliban and the general populace, reflected a new set of narration tropes of 'protection' and 'preservation'. The former group wanted to protect the 'true' culture of Afghans away from contamination from non-Islamic influences, whilst the latter group saw that music was part of the Afghan culture, regardless of origins or intent. Both groups, nonetheless, felt the need to protect what was deemed 'true' and 'original'.

In *Taliban* (2000), Ahmed Rashid added that the Taliban "did not recognize the very idea of culture" (Rashid, 2000, p. 115) and banned the following:

> They banned Nawroz, the traditional Afghan New Year's celebrations as anti-Islamic. An ancient spring festival, Nawroz marks the first day of the Persian solar calendar when people visit the graves of their relatives. People were forcibly stopped from doing so. They banned Labour Day on 1 May for being a communist holiday, for a time they also banned Ashura, the Shia Islamic month of mourning and even restricted any show of festivity at Eid, the principle Muslim celebration of the year. (Rashid, 2000, pp. 115-16, emphasis mine.)

By stating afterwards that the Muslim world "declined to take up the task of condemning the Taliban's extremism" (ibid., p. 116), including Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and the Arab Gulf states, Rashid's shock (alongside what most Afghans were feeling) resonated with the need for a 'redeemer'; if there was no intervention, at least a vocal pronouncement or condemnation from the other nations would have lessened their sense of isolation and suffering. But it was not just cultural festivities that were banned, the strict observance of religious piety also encroached into everyday lives as well. For example, the Taliban had in place the Department of the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice (or

Amar Bil Maroof Wa Nahi An alMunkar in their local language), whose head preferred to call it the Department of Religious Observances. They walked around in the streets with "whips, long sticks and kalashnikovs" (ibid., p. 105), and in the summer of 1997, issued another edict forbidding women from working, wearing high-heeled shoes, and wearing make-up. But as can be seen from this above, Rashid's reducing these forms of cultural expressions to a complete eradication of culture seems to be a hasty generalisation. Decorative and performance arts may have been banned, but the whitewashed walls, covered bodies of women, and the pious calls for prayers are equally, and arguably, important cultural expressions too, albeit strictly and violently enforced by the Taliban. In fact, the Taliban's emphasis was on a particular, hierarchical and exclusive expression of what might be termed 'true' Islamic culture. It was a cultural performance of specific rituals. On one hand, this has allowed redemptionist rhetoric such as the speech given by Laura Bush to justify saving the Afghan women and children from terrorists, collapsing identities between Muslims, Pashtuns, and the Taliban. On the other hand, it has also produced a group of audiences responding in the rhetoric of cultural relativism – which, in Abu-Lughod's words, is a "relativism that says it's their culture and it's not my business to judge or interfere, only try to understand" (Abu-Lughod, 2002, p. 786). Abu-Lughod further asserts that cultural relativism is "an improvement on ethnocentrism and the racism, cultural imperialism, and imperiousness that underlie it: the problem is that it is too late not to interfere" (ibid., p. 786). Making references to the burqa, she argues that we need to "work against the reductive interpretation of veiling as the quintessential sign of women's unfreedom, even if we object to state imposition of this form" (ibid.), or be wary of reducing "the diverse situations and attitude of millions of Muslim women to a

single item of clothing" (ibid.).

As much as western audiences have been essentialising identities and proliferating myths and lies, it appears that the Taliban themselves have also consumed and reproduced the same rhetoric for their own manipulative uses. By invoking their Pashtun identities, for example through what the Taliban leader Mullah Umar had said (see Laub, 2014), the Taliban are themselves invoking their indigenous Afghan culture, which arguably gives them more credibility. In *How the Taliban Won the Cultural War*, Tafhim Kiani writes:

> From a religious stand point, the Taliban were able to strike a major public relations victory when Mullah Umar, in a particularly difficult period in 1998, appeared in public and shrouded himself in the cloak of the Prophet Muhammad. […] For the ordinary Afghan, this gave Mullah Umar an unquestionable religious authority, and for the Taliban activists, it earned him the title of Amir ul-Momineen, or commander of the faithful, offering him a status that was far beyond that of any national or tribal figurehead. […] Thus the Taliban are able to portray themselves as distinct from other mujahideen factions and yet as having an essentially Afghan religious character, which is more likely to have resonance with a people who tend to be religiously conservative and suspicious of outside interference. (Kiani, 2014)

This dual identity of Afghanness embodied by the Taliban has also been written about. For example, three military officers at the Naval Postgraduate School Major report that they were "[s]imultaneously hailed as saviors and feared as oppressors" and they were "an almost mythical phenomenon that seemed to embody the very essence of Afghan cultural beliefs, especially revenge for transgression, hospitality for enemies, and readiness to die for honor" (Afsar et al,

2008, p. 58). Firstly, this reaffirms the argument that Afghan identities are being (re)imagined, for example as having "mythical" qualities. These are, unfortunately, identical to the mythical tropes valorising heroes of the past in Afghan mythology. The reader would recall from Chapter 1 that this study borrows from Stuart Hall's "narrativisation of the self" – a suturing of identity that is both in the imaginary and phantasmatic field – as well as Judith Butler's "sedimentation" and "iterability", hence the act of re-imagination here is to argue for an incessant reconstitution, in Butler's words, of multiple, yet fractured, Afghan identities throughout the circuit of culture, including the Taliban's.

Secondly, the Taliban representing the very "essence of Afghan cultural beliefs", in Afsar et al's words, adds to the complex identification and blurring of boundaries. Since they represented the Pashtun majority, their religious and cultural beliefs are so closely intertwined that polarising societal values would prove unproductive for them. Hence, collapsing identities as Pashtun-Taliban-terrorist (which Laura Bush did) makes identification and representation tenuous and ambiguous. In the same way, as inferred from Kiani's argument, many Afghan communities arguably embody the same strand of religiosity as the Taliban, hence it is difficult to separate the 'Pashtun' from the 'Taliban' in terms of conservative belief systems. While the majority of Afghans condemn the physical acts of the Taliban, the symbolic acts performed by ordinary Afghans (for example, in their attitude towards women or the arts in general) are perceived to be equally ambivalent. However, there is no ambiguity for the Taliban: locally, they are enacting religious observances (which may be construed as repressive), but globally, they try to project themselves as progressive. For example, in a 1998 statement made by the Taliban to the international community, the

Taliban's aims appear as follows:

(i)   restoration of full security of the citizens;

(ii)   pursuance of honest and sincere negotiations;

(iii)   support for UN and OIC peace efforts;

(iv)   respect for UN rules and principles;

(v)   search for mutual respect and friendly relations towards all countries;

(vi)   protection of human rights and liberties;

(vii)   restoration of women's safety, dignity and freedom;

(viii) observation of Islamic 'hejab' or the veil;

(ix)   women's education in the Islamic state of Afghanistan;

(x)   establishment of representative government on the basis of Islamic Shariah;

(xi)   efforts to combat production and consumption of illicit drugs; and

(xii)   establishment of a credible and accountable Islamic regime. (Ekanayake, 2004, pp. 113-4)

In *The Foreign Policy of the Taliban*, William Maley claims that the Taliban's foreign policies broadly seek to win acceptance as a government; to obtain revenue from international sources; and to raise revenues from opium. But they decided to call for a ban on opium later to win international favour (Maley, 1999; for opposing view, see Roy, 1998, p. 210). In other words, the Taliban are projecting and perhaps myth-making a 'cover' for both sides of the cultural exchange. Visibly, there is a local production (for Afghan audiences) and a global production (for international audiences) of 'cultures', both of which represent two distinct Afghan 'cultures' regulated through religious and economic contexts,

respectively. Hence, when 'desertification' is associated with the late 1990s, it is both a reality and an imagination (a trope).

The Emergence of a 'Singular' Afghan Identity

Immediately after the 9/11 World Trade Centre attacks in the United States, coupled with the Taliban's refusal to hand over Osama bin Laden, coalition forces invaded Afghanistan in the north with the help of anti-Taliban militias under the name of Northern Alliance, some of whom were from the earlier mujahideen sponsored by the US in their fight against the Soviets in the 1980s. These warlords behaved "not so much [as] an army [but] as a collection of feudal barons who have banded together" (Baker, 2001). Keith Stanski critiques these orientalist constructions around the Taliban and other warlords. He reports that one Time magazine journalist was drawing again on the exotic with "hordes of fearsome warriors on horsebacks dominat[ing] the battlefield" (Stanski, 2009, p. 77), where he stated in 2001 that "[i]n the dead of night, horses poured from the hills. They came charging down from the craggy ridges in groups of 10, their riders dressed in flowing shalwar kameez and armed with AK-47s and grenade launchers" (Ratnesar, 2001, p. 32). Stanski adds:

> Or, in slightly less dramatic terms, "Northern Alliance soldiers, launching the initial offensive on Mazar-e-Sharif, came pounding down barren hills on horseback" (Sennott & Barry, 2001). These Orientalist accounts cast the otherwise diverse Northern Alliance as a distinctly antiquated, non-Western fighting force, with indistinguishable and innumerable fighters employing rudimentary weaponry. (Stanski, 2009, pp. 77-8)

It is not so much that mythification and myth-making are taking place in these salvation tropes that is problematic, but it is the pervasiveness in using these

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violent archetypes of Afghan peoples with rudimentary technologies in contrast with the superiority of Western modes of warfare that, according to Stanski, "deflected attention away from liabilities in the battlefield, affirmed US military supremacy and validated an increasingly troubled intervention in Afghan politics" (ibid., p. 91). In other words, instead of focusing on the failure of US and British campaigns in Afghanistan, or the faltering interventions by NATO, the rhetoric constructing the mythification of Afghan warlords became a convenient veneer, deflecting people's attention away from misguided policies. As a result of these orientalist influences, it re-narrates "Western attempts to claim greater political, economic and moral authority over the Global South" (ibid., p. 89). Here, Derek Gregory's formulation of the "colonial present" is evidenced very clearly in the way the West is reasserting its imperial reach.

In November 2010, Hillary Clinton, the then US Secretary of State, was interviewed by ABC News Nightline. When asked by the TV host Cynthia McFadden about US Congress' support of $2 billion to Pakistan, where it had been alleged that the Pakistani Taliban are supporting Al-Qaeda, Clinton hedges around the causal relationship. But she confesses that US had created the mujahideen, who are essentially the Taliban today:

> Part of what we are fighting against, right now, the United States created. We created the Mujahideen force against the Soviet Union. We trained them, we equipped them, we funded them, including somebody named Osama Bin Laden. And then when we finally saw the end of the Soviet Army crossing back out of Afghanistan, we all breathed a sigh of relief and said, okay, fine, we're out of there. And it didn't work out so well for us. (ABC News, 2010)

In other words, the complicity in creating the initial group of mujahideen that have now overturned against the coalition forces, who are now blamed for the increased violence, is a highly complex phenomenon: what was produced initially (mujahideen) has taken on a new representational form (Taliban), and that which produced it (United States) is now consuming the new production (NATO's war with the Taliban). Yet on another level, the US and NATO have now re-construed these Afghan warlords characterised by violence, who use exoticised, rudimentary means of war – a representation that has been used to justify the nature and degree of interventions by NATO, as well as to deflect and excuse the policy-makers' unsound judgements, as Stanski has noted. In other words, the representation is constantly shifting, creating mixed identities that deny singular categories such as Muslims, Afghans, Pashtuns, Mujahideen, Taliban, and the like, which I refer to as hyphens.

Jennifer DeVere Brody states that "hyphens locate intermediate, often invisible, and shifting places between what often are supposedly oppositional binary structures" (Brody, 2008, p. 85). Brody continues to add that hyphens "mark a de-centered if central position that can present readers with a neither-nor proposition. The hyphen is a sign that both compels and repels: it is not a fixed point, but rather a joint – a shifting positionality – a continually collapsing structure" (ibid.). The phrase "continually collapsing structure" is an apt description to explain the current realities in the circuit of culture, now seen as a messy exchange with temporal representations. To avoid essentialising racial stereotypes that contribute to myth-making, perhaps the strategic resistance that this chapter seeks to propose is to see hyphenated identities being formed-and-erased, very much like Kershaw's banks rubbing up against each other to produce

"edge phenomenon" which can be "unruly". In other words, the sense of Afghanness as a narration and Afghanistan as a nation is constantly shifting, rather than being fixed in a specific mythology. This is similar to how Selcuk R. Sirin and Michelle Fine have described about Muslim American youth, who belong to a "vibrant, liminal zone for trying on new freedoms" (Sirin and Fine, 2008, p. 195). Possibly, the "trying on new freedoms" from 2001 in the arts and cultural sectors after the fall of the Taliban are promising, but as will be evidenced below, salvation tropes are reproduced again, but, this time, causing an unruly emergence of new forms.

Imaginations of Cultural Redemption in post-9/11

Derek Gregory, in *The Colonial Present* (2004), states that 'culture' is not a "cover term for supposedly more fundamental structures – geographies of politico-economic power or military violence – because culture is co-produced with them" (Gregory, 2004, p. 8). He adds that "culture underwrites power even as power elaborates culture" (ibid.). Gregory argues convincingly that culture "involves the production, circulation, and legitimation of meanings through representations, practices, and performances that enter fully into the constitution of the world" (ibid.). He also calls this genealogy linking to the past as the "colonial present". In the post-9/11 period where this thesis situates all the case studies, there will be reiterations and critiques of earlier tropes, but, by and large, the imaginations now turn towards those of redemption and salvation.

In 2005, the renowned French theatre director Ariane Mnouchkine, together with forty-two members of her company *Théâtre du Soleil*, conducted workshops in Kabul from 16th June to 10th July. In her account, there is a sense of 'redemption'

in the work that she introduced to the Afghan students at Kabul University. She says:

> I don't know why, but I had this idea that we would do mask work and nothing else. I knew that in three weeks we wouldn't have time to do more, and that masks would be the instruments that would create theater as quickly as possible. I could have been wrong, but apparently I was not: they had never seen masks in their lives. Never. They had never heard of Harlequin, or commedia dell'arte, or Noh, or Kabuki, or anything like that. (Mnouchkine et al, 2006, p. 70)

The ignorance and naiveté ascribed to Afghans in the above quote, especially placed in contrast to Mnouchkine's knowledge of theatrical forms, illustrates what Edward Said calls the "hallmark of imperialist cultures" (Said, 1994, p. xxv), when the "us" and a "them" results in, possibly, dehumanising constructions of "them". This representation of Afghan students – and hence, narration of Afghanistan as an impoverished nation – is reinforced by Mnouchkine's 'colonising' mission, and her final phrase justifying Afghans' extreme ecstasy in receiving the gifts of "personhood", as shown below:

> When we first showed them the masks, it was really as if something was being recalled from an ancient memory. They recognized the masks without ever having seen any before. It made me think that theater is probably the first art form, along with painting, that humankind practiced—and even if tradition or religion forbade these arts for a period of time, it remains inside us. When the Afghan actors became familiar with these masks, they were deeply happy, because masks are shades of personhood. (Mnouchkine et al, 2006, p. 70)

Here, Mnouchkine makes allusions to an "ancient memory" which she claims the Afghan students possessed – "They recognized the masks without ever having seen any before" – a trope which is related to Afghan antiquity and its mystification. Without necessarily critiquing Mnouchkine as a colonial master, this example seeks to illustrate the reaches of empire, for instance of France, in what Edward Said calls "structures of attitude and reference" (Said, 1994, p. 52) within cultural topography. Said defines this phrase as "the way in which structures of location and geographical reference appear in the cultural languages of literature, history, or ethnography, sometimes allusively and sometimes carefully plotted, across several individual works that are not otherwise connected to one another or to an official ideology of 'empire'" (ibid.). With these ideologies, Said attests, come attitudes – "about rule, control, profit and enhancement and suitability" (ibid.) – from the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries. In the context of Afghanistan, many nation states, including France and Britain which are considered the two major empires, have sought to rejuvenate the cultural scene after 2001.

One example of a local NGO with international funding is the Mobile Mini-Circus for Children (MMCC). It is one of the more successful non-profit theatre-based NGOs that has been in existence in Kabul since 2002, frequently bringing in professional theatre practitioners from overseas to train the more talented pool of youths for public performances. While this Copenhagen-initiated NGO boasts of taking performances and workshops to 2.7 million children audiences since 2002, they do incur an estimated annual budget of USD $500,000 that helps it extend its outreach to other provinces outside Kabul (MMCC, n.d.). Bond Street Theatre, which I have mentioned briefly, has been in Afghanistan since 2003.

Primarily funded by donors from the United States such as the Embassy, the United States Institute of Peace (USIP), the US Department of State Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, Theatre Communications Group (TCG), CEC Arts Link, and the Riverside Church Sharing Fund, the Bond Street Theatre's mission is "to introduce theatre-based educational programs in Afghanistan, especially targeting women and girls who have few outlets for creative expression, and to help revitalize the performing arts after years of cultural repression" (Bond Street Theatre, n.d., a). They have extensively engaged in Theatre for Social Development projects, conflict-resolution projects, educational projects, and creative arts prison programmes in provinces such as Kabul, Herat, and 23 other provinces with an approximate reach of 32,000 people in the whole of Afghanistan (Bond Street Theatre, n.d., b). More recently in 2011, an Australian-based charity, The Yellow House Jalalabad, was established in the south of Afghanistan where the Pashtun majorities live. It is "the *first* sanctuary of its kind in a region where the Taliban have targeted artists, filmmakers, musicians and those who exhibit and distribute their work" (Yellow House Jalalabad, n.d., emphasis mine). With a mission to create peace and positive social change through creative media strategies, Dr George Gittoes and Hellen Rose-Schauersberger teach media skills to children and adults, take performances into the community, make films, record book readings and music that can be sold in the market or broadcast on radio, and hold theatre workshops for "children with a focus on girls coaching and non-gender bias" (ibid.; see also Crane, 2014). The number of people that these NGOs reportedly impact as a result of their work is far-reaching and extensive and is, in fact, very encouraging, but it also appears too convenient a statistic tied to these performances as if to show that the 114,202 audience members in total from MMCC and Bond Street have all enjoyed them,

or is equivalent to social impact. How does one measure the number of people coming to watch a performance when it is performed in a village? How long do they need to remain in the space to be considered an audience member? If a child comes again for a repeat performance the next day, is this considered a new audience? This questions NGOs' methods of data collection and basis for measurement, since many NGOs require quantifiable statistics to justify further funding to 'help' impact the communities (see, for example, Inter Media, 2013; Roeder and Simard, 2013). Nonetheless, it could be argued that these theatre initiatives by foreign NGOs have contributed to a thriving cultural climate after the 'desertification' period from the 1980s to 2000. For example, from Mnouchkine's workshops in 2005, the students had come out of it forming Aftaab Theatre (Aftaab Theatre, n.d. a). In 2009, students from other puppet theatre workshops also came together to form another company, the Parwaz Puppet (see also Plates 6 - 7, Appendix 2), this time with some funding from Goethe-Institut Kabul. These are very clear examples of new life-forms that have emerged from the "rubbing up against" of various eco-systems. Some people from Parwaz Puppet Theatre left to form Parwana Puppet Theatre, another indication of an emergent company, albeit with intermittent sustainability.

The redemptionist trope construes women and children as target beneficiaries of external help. But put it in another way, they are seen in more negative light: victims. For example in 2010, a mutilated woman, Bibi Aisha, fronted Time magazine (Stengel, 2010). Shahnaz Khan observes the proceedings and states that this "narrative leads to a logical conclusion: NATO and the United States should stay in Afghanistan to continue to *rescue* women from the Taliban who want to brutalize them. Logically, Western forces are set up as *saviors* of the Afghan

woman" (Khan, 2014, emphasis mine), a trope that I have already discussed. Bond Street Theatre, whose work with women in Afghanistan had claims towards empowerment, states that "Afghan girls find their voice", and "[o]nce they find their power, there's no going back" (Sherman, 2014). There is the rhetoric of freeing women – and once they are freed, it is the end of violence or repression, which possibly becomes a myth when making simple cause-effects such as this in the context of war. Furthermore, Leila Ahmed defines this as "colonial feminism" (Ahmed, 1992), a process which employs the rhetoric of women's rights to propagate the interests of colonialism. In the same way, foreign interventions, often disguised as cultural diplomatic missions, are set up to increase knowledge about Afghanistan so as to critique, but also justify, military actions.

But this act of redemption is further complicated when "[c]ulture [is used] as a weapon" (Hakimi, 2012, p. 7), especially in advancing military action. Aziz Hakimi states that culture could "play a useful role in the counterinsurgency efforts by supplying knowledge (validated by research) to the US military and other NATO forces" (ibid.). He gives examples of Thomas Barfield (who was referenced in Chapter 1) and David Edwards (who was referenced in this Chapter) who advocate that having a deep knowledge of the social context can help defeat the Afghan insurgency. In Chapter 5, Tricycle Theatre's *The Great Game: Afghanistan* has been criticised for educating military and intelligence officers in the White House and, hence, supporting war efforts. In that sense, culture is not only seen to save, which in itself is a problematic trope, but is used as part of war, which then brings Derek Gregory's concept of the "colonial present" as a critical and cautionary point for cultural workers to note.

So far, this chapter has sought to examine the representations of Afghanness through the narrations of both Afghanistan as a 'nation' and Afghans as a group of peoples. Using Judith Butler to frame the discussion, I asked what regulatory norms cause 'Afghanness' to materialise, and how such normative portrayals have resulted in the emergence of a 'single' narrative. In the segmentation of Afghanistan's brief history into knowable lines, I described the four periods of 'exotica', 'renaissance', 'desertification', and 'redemption'. Afghan identities have been essentialised as barbaric people in pre-colonial days, yet are construed as needy people in the 1940s-1970s; or treacherous and rudimentary in need of redemption from 1990s onwards, causing a deflection away from failed and misguided military interventions by the US and NATO. The war-making machinery which Laura Bush and Hillary Clinton have pointed out further complicates the relationships between the west and the Orient, for example in the formations of mujahideen warlords and the Taliban. I have also suggested that instead of conflating identities and reducing Afghan qualities to those orientalist constructions, hyphenated identities can be strategic acts of resistance to illustrate the temporality of such narrations. These hyphens are emergent phenomena which can change according to the social circumstances. In the next chapter, I seek to identify the 'location' of these changing circumstances by 'locating' theatre performances *from* Kabul.

Chapter Three

'FROM KABUL':

LOCATING AFGHAN CULTURES

Social differences are not simply given to experience through an
already authenticated cultural tradition; they are the signs of the
emergence of community envisaged as a project – at once a vision
and a construction – that takes you 'beyond' yourself
in order to return, in a spirit of revision and reconstruction,
to the political conditions of the present.
- Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (1994)

As the first of three case study chapters, Chapter 3 seeks to analyse theatre performances *from* Kabul. 'From' is a spatial category indicating cultural practices *within* Afghanistan in clearly defined boundaries and roles. Homi Bhabha has stated in *The Location Of Culture* that culture exists in interstitial spaces – past and present, inside and outside. These spaces provide the "terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood […] that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself" (Bhabha, 1994, pp. 1-2). While it is not the purpose of this chapter to chart cultural practices as a historical project (see timeline in Appendix 1), the temporal dimension in the post-9/11 period offers another context to better understand Afghan identities and cultures across time and space. Bhabha adds that the "emergence of community" is both a "vision" and a "construction" (ibid., p. 3), hence in a "spirit of revision and reconstruction", this chapter takes us to the "political conditions of the present" (ibid.). As evidenced by the case studies here, the Afghan identity is not entirely stable, fixed, nor singularly 'located'.

The production and consumption of the Afghan culture and, therefore, identities influence, and are influenced by, a variety of contexts – religious (Taliban's regulation); economic (NGO's regulation); political (NGO's production); social (practitioners' circumstances); situational; and methodological. This gives rise to my proposed concept of 'collocation of contexts' as a way to identify and problematise the hegemonic powers involved in the production, consumption, and circulation of Afghan cultures. The productions analysed in this chapter include *Kaikavus* (2013); and *An Enemy of the People* (2014), both of which were directed by Haroon Noori; *Memory Boxes* (2013), a Theatre of the Oppressed exhibition facilitated and curated by the Afghanistan Human Rights and Democracy Organisation; and *Heartbeat: Silence after the Explosion* (2014) by Azdar Theatre.

'Kaikavus' (2013) and 'An Enemy of the People' (1882/2014)

The first case study is a comparative study of two plays. The first is a Persian play *Kaikavus* (2013), and the second is a Norwegian play *An Enemy of the People* (1882/ 2014). These plays are chosen specifically because Haroon Noori, a young twenty-nine-year-old Afghan man, is the same director for both plays. In 2008, he gained popularity and visibility within the theatre scene in Afghanistan for winning the Best Play Award at the 5th Afghanistan National Theatre Festival for Concept, Dramaturgy, and Director with his play, *Kapochee*. After receiving his Bachelor's degree in Theatre Arts from the California State University (East Bay), he started teaching Theatre Directing at Kabul University. Secondly, he was instrumental to the running of theatre festivals in Kabul. For example, when the Afghanistan National Theatre Festivals stopped in the years 2010 and 2011 because of funding issues with Goethe-Institut, and its eventual cessation in 2014,

Noori started the Students' Theatre Festival in 2014 in Kabul University. As a faculty member, he curated eight student plays in the inaugural year and eleven in 2015. According to Noori, the sponsors in 2015 included Goethe-Institut (who paid for the printing of materials and banners), Daf Records (who did the design and coordinated the festival), Martin Gerner Funding (who started a crowdfunding page and raised USD $1813), The Den Nationale Scene (who supported the event with another USD $2000), and Kabul University and Dramatic Arts Center (who rented out the auditorium space). Extrapolated here, the production of 'Afghan culture' is split between all of these partners, a microcosm of some of the contestations and regulations of the performance culture that I shall explore further. The two plays included in this case study are not part of these theatre festivals, but because Noori has had an independent 'right' to *Kaikavus* as he, together with his partner at Daf Records, directed and funded it himself, this play is in contrast with *An Enemy of the People* which had donors' support, so this underscores some of the tensions between theatre practitioners' and donors' sense of control.

Kaikavus was performed by Azdar Theatre on 24, 26, and 27 October 2013 in Kabul at the Institut Français d'Afghanistan (IFA). The cast comprised five men and two women, all of whom were graduates of the Theatre Department at Kabul University. *Kaikavus* is one of the tragic stories found within the Persian classic, *Shahnameh: The Persian Book of Kings*. Written by Abolqasem Ferdowsi between 980 and 1010 C.E., the *Shahnameh* is a collection of 50,000 couplets steeped in myths and legends chronicling the Persian empire from the creation of the world to the Islamic conquests in the 7th Century, including the fall of the Sassanid Empire, the subsequent rule of the Arabs and Turks, and the invasion by

Alexander the Great. In this performance, the main protagonist is Rustam, King Kaikavus' favourite warrior who hails from Iran. Rustam and Princess Tahmina, daughter of King Samangan, fall in love. After their consummation, and before Rustam leaves, he hands Tahmina two tokens. If their child is a girl, Tahmina has to plait her daughter's hair with the jewel pendant. If their child is a boy, Tahmina has to take the seal and bind it on her son's arm. In Noori's adaptation, the seal is represented by a bracelet.

Without Rustam's knowledge, Tahmina gives birth to a son – Sohrab – nine months later. Years pass and a war breaks out between Persia and Turan, with Rustam and Sohrab representing each country respectively. Both do not know each other's real identity (Rostam as father, Sohrab as son). So far, all these have been dramatised with the use of shadow puppets with a storyteller seated on a raised platform as narrator (see Plate 8, Appendix 2). The present story begins with Kaikavus, King of Iran, becoming angry with Rustam for not helping him defeat Sohrab. Rustam refuses to enter into war and coldly retorts that if it were not because of him, Kaikavus would not have been the King. Other wrestlers and warriors known as *pahlawan* speak with Rustam to fight Sohrab, to which he finally agrees. In the battle, Sohrab defeats Rustam, and throws him on the ground (see Plate 9, Appendix 2). While on the ground, Rustam tricks Sohrab and stabs him with a poisoned knife. The injured warrior lies motionless, but it is now that Rustam sees the bracelet on Sohrab's arm, which reveals the truth of their father-son relationship. Soon enough, Sohrab dies with failed attempts in saving his life. This drives the father insane. He turns into a naked drunkard (see Plate 11, Appendix 2), and that story ends. The storyteller takes over the narrative and recounts Rustam cradling his dead son, yelling and crying, then kissing him and

giving him love. The tragic play ends with an evocative message by the narrator, "Don't get attached to this world; there is no benefit in doing so" (Noori, 2015, personal communication).

This play received tremendously favourable reviews. One audience member, Ali Abassi, said it was "very amazing for [him]" (Chow, 2013) to watch an ancient text being performed. He also commended Azdar Theatre and Noori for giving the story of Rustam and Sohrab a different twist – from the angle of King Kaikavus – which, according to him, caused curiosity in the eyes of the public and therefore wanted to watch the performance. This being his first time watching a theatre performance, Abassi recounted, "I thought theatre would be very boring. […] But when I watched this theatre, the acting of the actors and actress was very real, very natural. It was very amazing for me, and I like it" (ibid.). For example during the battle scene, both Rustam and Sohrab were each supported by two other crew members to carry them in mid-air, before they engaged in a stylised, slow-motion fight, which was accompanied by "pretty creepy music" (Noori, 2015, personal communication) from two provinces in Afghanistan, Pamir and Badakhshan. The stage crew also doubled as shadows who were engaged in the fight by showing emotions, reacting "to what happens to real characters" (ibid.). Furthermore, for the portrayal of Rustam, whenever the actor spoke on stage, his voice was mildly delayed, but amplified through the auditorium's public address system creating a booming effect. Shadow puppets were used and, as seen, the gestures of actors were predominantly angular, strong, and aggressive, with clenched fists and flailing elbows (see Plate 10, Appendix 2), cumulatively contributing to an experimental style Noori calls "fantasy" (Noori, 2015, personal communication). It may not be in line with his

earlier vision of a musical, as was shared with me during their rehearsals (I was in Kabul and was involved in the rehearsals), but it was still "something we have not seen in Afghanistan" (Noori, 2012, personal communication). Probably because of these aesthetic effects, Abassi remarked that if the same theatre were to perform again, he would watch it because "their quality was very good" (Chow, 2013).

The 'consumption' and reception of the show grew rapidly. Noori did not expect "such an educated audience" (Noori, 2013, personal communication) to turn up, of whom were people from the government ministries, parliament, teachers, professors and poets (ibid.). Immediately within the next few days, the popularity of the group soared. Noori added that responses from television channels, including Voice of America, and BBC were overwhelming. "They came, they wrote about us. Our pictures were like everywhere," he recalled. "Then they invited us to their studios for their radio shows, for their TV shows" (Noori, 2013, personal communication). The show had been successful in their theatre makers' and audiences' perspective as the theatrical engagement was very high, style was adventurous and innovative, and it brought a familiar tale to life on stage. The effects of the show also went *beyond* the production itself. During the eleven-month period, two of Noori's actors were dismissed from work as they had sacrificed much of their working hours to the rehearsal process. These actors were not paid when they first agreed to perform in *Kaikavus.* But Noori responded to the situation immediately. He intervened and appeased their employers, who, fortunately knew Noori, and so gave the jobs back to them despite their absenteeism. As seen, acting was not an economically viable option as these actors still had to support their families. For the majority, to pursue

acting means a sacrifice of their main economic means. As such, the sustainability of theatre in Kabul is still very much dependent on the actors' financial circumstances.

The other play, *An Enemy of the People* (thereafter *An Enemy*), is a Norwegian play written in 1882 by Henrik Ibsen. Ibsen was one of the more important proponents of realism in the European tradition in the nineteenth century (for discussions on naturalism and realism, see Pizer, 1995), whose classics also include *Peer Gynt* (1867)*, A Doll's House* (1879)*, The Wild Duck* (1884)*, Hedda Gabler* (1890), and *The Master Builder* (1892). According to Christopher Innes and Frederick J. Marker, Ibsen, among others, was "search[ing] for new theatrical forms to express a new consciousness" (Innes and Marker, 1998, p. xv). Ibsen's theatrical style aimed to oppose "the commercialism and pomposity of the boulevards" (Schechner, 2003, p. 135) and "the pretensions of the bourgeoisie" (ibid.). In this tradition, acting is often characterised as realistic, but Simon Williams observes that "in order to play the character fully, the actor had to anticipate action toward the end of the play while acting early passages" (Williams, 1994, p. 174) in order to give depth and nuance to interior processes. Ibsen's influence on modernist thinking and dramatic realist traditions is important in Europe, just as Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh* is to Persia. *An Enemy* was performed once on 10 August 2014 at the Department of Fine Arts in Kabul University, and repeated on 27 October 2014 at the IFA. The play had a cast of eight members, two of whom were women. The ensemble comprised theatre lecturers in three major character roles and five theatre undergraduate students in other roles (two from the fourth year of studies, and three from the third year). The performance lasted between ninety minutes and two hours. Sponsored by the

Norwegian embassy, this play was the result of a collaboration with the University of Bergen, The Den Nationale Scene (DNS), and Kabul University.

The synopsis of *An Enemy* is not as crucial to my case study as the politics and economics behind it. But to summarise it briefly, Noori's adaptation is set in Kabul, with Dr Stockmann, the protagonist, discovering pollutants in the water. The Mayor of the town convinces the townspeople to oppose Dr Stockmann's discoveries. At one town meeting which "takes place on a bridge, known to the citizens of Kabul as a place where everyone may come forward with their opinions" (Programme sheet), Dr Stockmann accuses the public administration of tyranny and corruption. The irate town and family ostracise him. The play ends with Dr Stockmann making a final discovery, alluding to himself, that the strongest man in the whole world is the man who stands alone. As compared to the experimental or "fantasy" style shown in *Kaikavus,* Noori's directorial conception for *An Enemy* was starkly different. Movements and gestures here were more natural, free-flowing, and casual in line with the realist movement of the 19th Century. To reflect the contemporary era, props such as bamboo furniture, computer, clothes hanger, and carpet were placed on stage to create 'real life' (see Plate 12, Appendix 2). However, Noori deviated slightly from realist acting styles. For example, he broke the fourth wall – the imaginary wall separating actors and audiences – by inviting audiences to throw food items at the actors if they did not like any scene. Noori explained that this was how people in Kabul showed anger – by throwing "tomatoes, potatoes, eggs, and onions" (Noori, 2015, personal communication). "People responded exactly on time to those actors who were trying to kick Dr Stockmann out of the town", added Noori (ibid.). From the performance, the actors had to duck and cover themselves

from the volley of food arrows (see Plate 13, Appendix 2). Lines from the characters were interrupted and the angry crowds had to be quietened down. To a large extent, paradoxically, the actors were realistically responding to the circumstance even though it was a break from a pure 'realist' model of acting.

An Enemy was pulled together "in 25 days including time for rehearsals, costume, stage lighting and set design" (Haidari, 2014). The performance review for *An Enemy*, though scarce, was encouraging. A BBC correspondent wrote: "For 90 minutes the audience is spell-bound forgetting the heat, life outside and the ever-present fear of insurgent attack" (ibid.). BBC reported that *An Enemy* had taken "on [a] new resonance for an Afghan audience" with the play weaving in "issues affecting city life in the new Afghanistan – widespread corruption, illegal construction and poorly-planned drainage" (ibid.). This was possibly because one of the actors playing Stockmann (Abdulhaq Haqjoo) had donned a green and blue striped costume that resembled former President Karzai's trademark robe and hat (ibid.), which could be interpreted as Noori's direct critique of those in political power. According to Noori, the Norwegians loved it too, but Haqjoo thought otherwise.

Weeks after the production, The Den Nationale Scene (DNS), their donor, did not provide feedback on their acting, scenography, and directing. So, Haqjoo approached them and realised that "the Norwegian people were not so happy with *An Enemy of the People*" (Haqjoo, 2015, personal communication). After a private conversation with the donors, Haqjoo said that the donors were unhappy that Noori went home immediately during the opening night after the performance of *An Enemy*. As the director, Haqjoo said, Noori should "stay with

the group, and speak with the Norwegians because he was responsible for the play" (ibid.). Hence, there were expectations that were not met. Possibly because Noori did not network with them socially, to thank them, or to seek their feedback, the funders also 'disappeared' from view. It was only when Haqjoo found out these sentiments that he understood where the funders were coming from and what they wanted, so the donor-recipient relationship was 'salvaged'. Though this was an anecdote told by Haqjoo whose accuracy could not be verified, it reflected his perceived need and affirmation, which produced in his mind representations of identities, cultural differences, and expected behaviours. Haqjoo was then told to direct another Norwegian play the following year – *Someone Is Going To Come* written by Jon Fosse – which was performed on 1 April 2015 at Kabul University where, according to Haqjoo, the donors "were very, very happy" (Haqjoo, 2015, personal communication). The donors told Haqjoo they might even bring the show to France and Norway. This appeared that diplomatic relations with the donors, as perceived by Haqjoo, was something they appreciated. *Someone Is Going To Come* was again performed on 11 November 2015 at the 2nd Students' Theatre Festival, an event which was also funded partially by DNS. But it should also be noted that the DNS funding was targeted at production costs only, said Haqjoo, and no form of remuneration ever went to the actors, which made it difficult for him as he had to travel very long distances in the winter to the rehearsal space at his own expense. Seemingly tenuous and anecdotal, these accounts by Noori and Haqjoo respectively symbolise a flailing relationship local artists have with theatre-making. It points to the difficult livelihoods of theatre-makers in Afghanistan, reinforcing a 'dearth' of culture and identity. But more importantly, invisible to the consumption and reception of theatre are the economic forces of production that

regulate what is to be seen as 'Afghan' culture.

Contesting Sense of Ownership

Kaikavus started without any financial support, but afterwards received partial funding from the Institut-Français d'Afghanistan (IFA) and Daf Records. Daf Records is Haroon Noori's own commercial practice dealing with film and video production, but Noori's business partner agreed to finance some of the costings that went into the stage production, totalling approximately USD $3000, which was primarily Noori's personal project. When Noori played pieces of recorded music through the sound system (instead of having live musicians), he was faced with the issue of copyrights violation. According to the recording artists owned by the Aga Khan Group, they claimed that one of the pieces of music indigenous to Badakhshan, a province in Afghanistan, belonged to them, and Noori had no licensing rights to use it.

The Aga Khan Group – more accurately known as the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN) – are a group of development agencies including the Aga Khan Trust for Culture (AKTC). They are private, international and non-denominational. They seek "to improve the welfare and prospects of people in the developing world, particularly in Asia and Africa, without regard to faith, origin or gender" (AKDN, 2007a). One of their many programmes includes the Aga Khan Music Initiative. With an impressive list of donors and expenditure, including many major banks and governments, AKDN's "annual budget for non-profit development activities is approximately US $600 million" (AKDN, 2007b), presumably used for humanitarian purposes. They threatened Noori with lawyers' letters, but Noori responded that he had no time to deal with the legal

issues since there was barely one week left to the opening of the show. In fact, following from the publicity poster Noori's theatre group had posted on Facebook, Noori added a disclaimer immediately to show their resistance towards Aga Khan: "The team had added the logo of AKTC on the posters/brochures, it was a mistake on our side, they are not affiliated to the performance" (Kaikavus, 2013). Noori explained that the Aga Khan Group had not funded the production in any way. He added:

> Actually in here [Afghanistan], that's not an issue. Number one, you can definitely use it because we don't have any copyright laws. And number two, their music belongs to like, you know, 500-old [sic] history of Afghanistan that is not something that belongs to a specific person. Like if a singer sings a song, okay, the rights belong to that record company. Fine. But if there's something that's been there for like 500 years, and then you record it, and you think the rights belong to you, then I don't think so. That's pretty crap. (Noori, 2013, personal communication)

As evidenced here, Aga Khan and Noori were contesting on their (legal) rights on a piece of indigenous music, which, according to Noori, had always been part of Afghanistan's cultural history. If Noori had acceded to Aga Khan's request, it would signify to others in his community that the indigenous music indeed belonged to this organisation. But his tussle was a form of political resistance. Symbolically, Aga Khan could be construed in the same unequal way the West appropriates folk music. According to Kembrew McLeod, a performance artist and professor of Communication Studies, he states that copyright laws and "restrictions on musical production place copyright owners at an advantage, and the existence of these centuries-old cultural practices means little more to owners

than something that interferes with their profit margins" (McLeod, 2003, p. 249). It can be argued that Noori denied Aga Khan's rights to the pieces of music, and hence regulated the private ownership and distribution of their culture for commercial use. While this action might have minimised the commodification of an aspect of Afghan culture, it can also be argued that Noori's directorial choices in using indigenous music in support of a postmodern "fantasy" style in *Kaikavus* also hinted at his desire to show 'Afghanness' in the production. This, I suggest, is a particular strand of Afghanness that dates back to ancient histories, possibly lending itself to romanticism and exoticism as discussed in Chapter 2. While the consumption of Afghan cultures could be construed as the "emergence of community envisaged as a project" (Bhabha, 1994, p.3), it can equally be said, albeit not unproblematically, that both allow the audiences an "experience through an already authenticated tradition" (ibid.).

Furthering this argument on the economic contexts affecting the production of 'Afghan culture', *An Enemy,* in contrast, was funded completely by the Norwegians, but it was part of a much larger, longer-term project – 'Kabulproject' – by The Den Nationale Scene (DNS), which is the National Stage in Bergen. In 2002, according to Dr Arne Strand, Research Director from Chr Michelsen Institute, DNS formed an ongoing relationship with the Afghan National Theatre (Strand, Skaanes and Bjarkø, 2011). In 2007, a one-year staff exchange programme between the two companies was organised. In 2008, a five-year collaboration project was agreed upon. In 2009, the Kabulproject began under a three-year plan 'Continued Cooperation with Afghan National Theatre'. One of their aims was to "contribute to quality improvement of the Afghan National Theatre (ANT) by building of competence within the theatre with a

special focus on female actors" (ibid.). More specifically, the main objectives included "build[ing] the professional capacity of ANT actors, establish[ing] a theatre for children and youth, strengthen[ing] Afghan dramaturgy and increas[ing] the number of female staff at the ANT" (ibid., p. 2). The ANT also saw a facelift, with a refurbishment of the Bahresh Restaurant that was owned by the theatre, and the building of a theatre stage with professional light and sound equipment, as well as an upgrading of the different theatre departments (ibid.). All of this, they soon realised, had to be complemented with the Theatre Department at Kabul University, which was how *An Enemy of the People* fell under the ambit of DNS's Kabulproject. The fully-funded projects were scheduled to end in 2012, but are still ongoing today. In total, the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs had spent a value of NOK 4,500,000 which is equivalent to more than half a million US dollars (ibid.) during the period from April 2009 to March 2012 in these refurbishment and developmental works. But this does not discount the fact that Norway has granted Afghanistan close to USD $2 billion since 2000 as "Official Development Assistance" (ODA). According to Open Aid Data, the ANT received approximately USD $948,057 from 2007 to 2013 (Open Aid Data, 2015). As seen, the Norwegians have invested heavily on the cultural sector in Afghanistan, but what impact does this have on the production and consumption of Afghan cultures?

In a separate report by the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (known as NUPI, or Norsk Utenrikspolitisk Institutt in Norsk), former Foreign Minister Jonas Gahr Støre states that Norway's participation in Afghanistan is to advance the "goals of establishing security and stability, preventing terrorism, and fostering development in a manner appropriate for Afghan society" (Friis, 2013,

p. 3). The article also claims the following:

> A leading principle for Norwegian donor funds was that they are dispersed without earmarks or conditions and in close collaboration with local authorities and major international actors (like the World Bank and United Nations Development Program) and to Norwegian and international NGOs. […] Furthermore, Norwegian foreign aid strategy did not "buy stability" or "reward instability" in the sense that it was being spent in the parts of the country where the insurgency was the strongest. (ibid, pp. 5-6)

The phrase "without earmarks or conditions" within the framework of a foreign aid policy that neither buys stability nor rewards instability somehow puts Norway's partnership with Afghanistan in a seemingly altruistic position.

Here, I borrow the theory of gift exchange as first proposed by French social anthropologist Marcel Mauss to understand the complexities of these altruistic donations. Mauss observes that in many archaic societies, there is a social phenomenon exhibited, where there are the obligations to give, receive, and repay. In the circulation of the gift, Mauss argues that "social life can never remain at rest. We must always return more than we receive; the return is always bigger and more costly" (Mauss, 1966, p. 63). To a large extent, social relations and power hierarchies are maintained because of these inequitable exchanges between the donor and the recipient, with the recipient feeling more obliged to reciprocate. Hence, if I were to interpret Norway's donations "without earmarks or conditions" in light of Mauss's formulation, it is possible to argue that there were indeed conditions. According to Abdulhaq Haqjoo, the drama lecturer who played Dr Stockmann in *An Enemy*, the Norwegian funders had initially

requested that the play be performed only by faculty members of the Theatre Department (for reasons not made available to me). As the Department was understaffed and that the production was in the middle of the semester, there were many teaching commitments and clashes with other lecturers' schedules (The director, Noori, was also on the faculty). They then suggested opening it up to third and fourth year acting students, a suggestion the Department and the donors finally agreed upon. They held an audition and selected the best candidates for the roles. This prevented any rumours of preferential treatment as it was based on talent and role appropriateness. Making reference to the more elitist ways of rehearsing previously practised within the Department, Haqjoo said, "It's arts, it's not like other knowledge [subject]. We can use everyone. We can learn from everyone, everyone can learn from us" (Haqjoo, 2015, personal communication). So, instead of having closed-door rehearsals, Noori and Haqjoo decided to allow undergraduates to watch them rehearse. This open-door policy generated more interest with those wanting to pursue a professional career, and for others wanting to see what the final production might look like. Despite the donors determining certain outcomes for the project (for example, which Norwegian play to perform and when), the local theatre practitioners seemed to be democratising the processes in innovative ways. These examples may appear peripheral to the theatrical project with little bearing on the artistic practice, but I argue that the theatre-makers' responsiveness to these situations highlight the complexities, both constraints and permissions, of making theatre in Kabul. It might even be suggested that these acts of resistance (while they keep the Norwegian donors appeased) are the situational contexts that are invisible to the production.

Helen Nicholson, in *Applied Drama: The Gift of Theatre,* states that a gift "can be seen simultaneously as both a present and a poison, [that] it is sometimes worth remembering the unpalpable truth that a present, however well intentioned, may be thought to be poisonous by those who live in a different context and whose vision of a good life differs from our own" (Nicholson, 2005, pp. 161-2). It is the paradox of the gift. I would add that a gift is the most visible symbol depicting the nature of the relationship between different parties. As such, the "consumption" or reception of the giving is most subjected to interpretations, projectons and representations. Instead of seeing the gift as a present or a poison, this episode highlights the kind of "spectatorial identification" (Phelan, 1993, p. 75) Phelan talks about between the one seeing and the one being seen. She explains that "[s]ince the given to be seen is always exclusionary, subject positions must attend to the affective consequences of the failure to be recognized. This failure implies that subject positions are always related to the negative, to that which cannot be or is not developed within the visual field" (ibid., p. 90). This 'invisible' or 'unmarked' situational contexts in this sense is the reason why I have chosen to articulate them, so as to destabilise the exclusionary gaze of the gift or the giver. In a separate analysis of Norwegian cultural policy, Bjørnsen had criticized the Norwegians for its "civilizing" effect (see Bjørnsen, 2012), but, I argue that the local directors and performers had 'space' to reinvent and test the boundaries of what was permissible and hence reassert aspects of their otherwise 'invisible' identities according to their own needs and contexts.

Throughout the comparisons, I raised the complexities of economic contexts – including conditions of work, labour, the paradox of a donor culture, and the

politics of ownership – that had an impact on the production, consumption, regulation, and representation of Afghan cultures and identities, all of which are, in turn, embedded in international and local circulations of economic and political power. To broaden the interpretations on the 'locations' of Afghanness, in the plural form, I proposed the concept of the 'collocation of contexts', which means the placement of one context (for example, economic context) beside another context (such as cultural context), and still beside another one (such as global context). This helps to articulate the complex narrations and intersections within the circuit of culture, as well as helps to identify and disentangle the invisible forces in the production and consumption of a said culture. In the next case study, I shall explore an applied theatre project to investigate other collocations, namely the social and political contexts around victimhood discourses. I also seek to theorise the relationship between the 'real' and the 'representational' – in what I call 'site' and the 'psychic' – so as to rethink the cultural reproduction of 'visibility politics' in Afghan war discourses.

'Memory Box Initiative' (2013)

In January 2013, the Memory Box Initiative was held at Ibn-e Sina University in January 2013 for two days (specific dates not recorded), facilitated by a local non-governmental organisation, Afghanistan Human Rights and Democracy Organisation (AHRDO). Open to members of the public, this exhibition was a Theatre of the Oppressed project inspired by Augusto Boal's model for community participation (Boal, 1974). Already in use in many sectors including education, conflict resolution, and gender rights, AHRDO believes that Boal's methodology will "contribute to social change by empowering local communities

to take part in the definition, interpretation and transformation of their community conflicts" (AHRDO, n.d., b), which will eventually lead to the "democratisation and stabilisation of Afghanistan" (ibid.).

The Afghanistan Human Rights and Democracy Organisation (AHRDO) was founded by Hadi Marifat and Hjalmar Joffre-Eichhorn in 2009. Marifat is a local Afghan who has a degree in Politics and International Relations from the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE), while Joffre-Eichhorn is of Bolivian and German parentage, holding a double Master's degree in Peace and Development Studies, as well as Educational Management (AHRDO, n.d.). He is also a well-known Theatre of the Oppressed practitioner, often using theatre for emancipatory purposes in conflict zones. The AHRDO is an independent, non-partisan, non-profit organisation "with a strong commitment to work with the most marginalized sectors of society" (AHRDO, n.d., a). Their mission is the "promotion of participatory democracy, a culture of non-violence and the respect for human rights in Afghanistan and the region, principally through employing a variety of arts and theatre-based programs that create spaces for dialogue, peace-building, social justice, public participation and consequently societal transformation from the grassroots up" (AHRDO, n.d., a).

Besides employing Theatre of the Oppressed methodology, AHRDO also uses Playback Theatre, founded by Jonathan Fox, as the other theatrical model "in which the audience is invited to tell personal stories or anecdotes from their own lives and watch them enacted on the spot by a group of actors" (ibid.). According to AHRDO's understanding of Playback Theatre, they posit that "human beings have the need to tell their stories in order to construct meaning in their lives"

(ibid.). By having these stories shared, AHRDO believes that "radical social encounters in which issues of conflict, reconciliation and forgiveness can be explored" (ibid.). Throughout these years, some of the more prominent projects by AHRDO include touring a play, *AH7808*, which is an adaptation of Derry playwright Dave Duggan's *AH6905*; creating a documentary play *Infinite Incompleteness* in 2010 (see Chapter 5); and *The Memory Box Initiative* (2013) which I will analyse more fully here, drawn from documentary videos and reports by AHRDO.

While there is no mention of donors sponsoring the Memory Box exhibition in January 2013, the Embassy of Canada in Afghanistan hosted a similar exhibition a year earlier from 3-4 March 2012 during International Women's Day (International Women's Day celebrated in Kabul, 2012). For the exhibition at the University, the space used was a large classroom. All the twenty memory boxes had Afghan colours – green, red, black – painted on them. Most of the individual boxes were positioned in the far corner of the table which was draped with a black cloth. Its contents were placed on the table, with typed descriptions on it. On one particular table which I have called Exhibit A (see Plate 14, Appendix 2), there were at least fourteen photographs of deceased, or missing, members of the family, all of whom were either wearing the traditional *pakul* hat or a turban around the head. Paintbrushes were placed beside two small bottles of poster paints. Another table, which I call Exhibit B (see Plate 15, Appendix 2), had clothes and scarves neatly folded, with a thin strip of paper on the collared *kameez* shirt. On that strip of paper is a long description with inscriptions. A glass cup is placed between the *kameez* and a black and white chequered scarf, while a metal bowl was placed on the right, below the scarf. The fork and spoon were

separated from the bowl by another piece of linen on top of an object wrapped in plastic. Some papers were placed on the left of the clothes. Two framed coloured photographs of very young men leaned against the memory box. In Exhibit C (see Plate 16, Appendix 2), a close up of the documentary video showed the two objects on top of one memory box. On the right was a "memory flag". The Afghan national colours were painted vertically, with an insignia that resembled the Afghan national emblem over the red stripe, except that this one was painted with yellow and green instead of white. Beside the memory flag, there was an "ideal flag" with horizontal stripes of green, red, blue, yellow, black. This aesthetic display is resonant with Boal's methodology, where the ideal (political) situation is imagined and aesthetically created − a transformative act in itself (Boal, 2006). These were the material objects from Afghanistan's theatre of war. Here I used the phrase "theatre of war" to refer to military operations being carried out during war times which spanned vast areas (see also definition of military "theatre" by Bowyer, 2007, p, 244). This is also because the project intentionally brought up and 'stored' stories of deaths across several provinces in Afghanistan as evidence of the effects from theatres of war from the Soviet invasion, to the civil war with warlords, and to the Taliban. Khodadad Bisharat, Executive Director of AHRDO, stated that "Memory Boxes offer a window into the lives of war victims and their families by exploring personal histories through a reflective creative process" (AHRDO, n.d., c). The boxes became the "'public spaces' contain[ing] the objects and personal belongings of those who lost their lives to Afghanistan's recent conflicts − collected, arranged and carefully presented by their families" (ibid.). This exhibition "aim[ed] to document the violence and human rights abuses of the past, thereby contributing to a public memorialization process that will prevent these cycles of violence from

reoccurring" (ibid.).

According to AHRDO's report, this exhibition was "a big success" (AHRDO, n.d., c) because more than one thousand people visited this exhibition, including international and national journalists, victim's families, members of Parliament, and representatives from the Kabul Municipality. The documented responses were positive. For example, one University professor, Mr Aslam Jawadi, remarked that the exhibition provided a "different perspective on the Afghan conflicts" because it focussed "on those that have been excluded from public discussion during all these years" (The Memory Boxes, 2012). Dr Sima Samar, Head of Afghanistan Human Rights International Commission, stated that the "implementation of transitional justice in Afghanistan cannot be achieved individually. It is only through collective endeavours such as the Memory Box Initiative that this can be done" (ibid.). Mrs Sheema Sashimi, member of the High Peace Council, also congratulated AHRDO's efforts, remarking that "documentation and evidence collection contributes to peace building. Without documentation, there can be no peace" (ibid). Similarly, Mr Balochzada, a human rights activist, said, "In Afghanistan, we have not yet learnt the lessons of the past. On the other hand, in the West, a tragic war such as World War II has led to attempts to unify Europe, remember the past and prevent future conflict from happening" (ibid.). Additionally, Mr Naiem Khogman Ulomi, Deputy of Kabul Municipality, stated:

> I am concerned that one day all the witnesses of the past conflicts and tragedies will be gone and that we will end up confusing the victims with the criminals. We need to preserve the victims' memories. The truth is

that *almost everyone in Afghanistan is a victim*. In fact, *this country could be called the country of victims*. And those who killed should finally apologize for what they have done. (ibid., emphasis mine)

In his TEDx Hague Academy talk on 9 September 2013, AHRDO co-founder Marifat iterated that this initiative was "extremely popular and important for the ordinary people of Afghanistan" (Marifat, 2013), and that many people were asking for these initiatives to be repeated in other provinces. In fact, multiple exhibitions took place over the next three years. There was a general consensus among the visitors interviewed that the Memory Box Initiative had raised awareness of their past and had collected evidence of war crimes, but as Ulomi had claimed, there seemed to be an overwhelming sense of victimhood throughout the country where "almost everyone […] is a victim", with narratives of loss that needed to be heard. This will be discussed later, but AHRDO's process of reconciliation – the social context – needs to be articulated for a richer interpretation.

In early 2011, AHRDO invited about ten female victims from various ethnic and religious backgrounds who had lost family members in the conflict to "tell their personal stories of loss and suffering" (Memory Box – Making Afghan victims memories and stories matter: Hadi Marifat at TEDxHagueAcademy, 2013). Following that, they chose specific images and objects left behind by the deceased (or missing persons) to represent those moments. In the short documentary by AHRDO, Afghan women were seen drawing human stick figures with coloured markers and adorning the illustrations with poster paints, some of which included flowers and houses. These drawings depicted their

individual life journeys (see Plate 17, Appendix 2). They were then invited to walk around and observe, without interpreting, what the other women had drawn. They then placed objects the deceased or missing family member had left behind on the large canvas, in relation to the artwork, apparently creating a visible narrative for memorialisation. They were also encouraged to "produce further artistic artifacts related to their life stories, and these often include[d] written poems, declarations of identity, photos, drawings and paintings" (ibid.). Mrs Afghani, one of the participants, introduced herself as being "a member of the victim's family" (The Memory Boxes, 2012) and recounted that in 1979, her husband was "imprisoned on political charges and consequently disappeared" (ibid.). Similarly, Mrs Basira, in introducing herself as a "victim" – almost automatically like a label or title – said, "I lost 9 family members in a single day. Three years later, I lost three more family members" (ibid.). Likewise, Mrs Nargis Hedayati said she was unemployed, had five children, but that she had lost her husband in 1999. As seen, most of the participants' stories were identical, primarily focusing on someone they had lost. After remembering the more specific moments of pain, the process became more abstract as the participants were invited "to make specific images of war and peace" (Memory Box – Making Afghan victims memories and stories matter: Hadi Marifat at TEDxHagueAcademy, 2013). This proved to be difficult for them as they had never experienced peace. Marifat recounted one participant's admission: "Don't expect us to make something that we have never experienced it [sic] in our life. I did not see peace in my entire life, so how can I make image of it?" (ibid.). Subsequently, these individual images of war were combined with other images of war to form a collective "beautiful image of peace" (ibid.).

Apart from the artistic outcome of making objects and eventually memory boxes, the other outcome as seen from the workshop was community building, another social context surrounding the 'production' of culture and identity. According to the facilitator, Saleem reported that the participants were initially distrustful of each other, thinking "of the other as the enemy of the past" (The Memory Boxes, 2012). But after all the group theatre activities, they overcame that barrier and trusted each other more. In the TEDx talk, Marifat also explained that the workshops had given the participants the opportunity "to share their knowledge and experience as it's through the sharing that they see how similar their lives have been, regardless of what ethno-religious identities they have" (Memory Box – Making Afghan victims memories and stories matter: Hadi Marifat at TEDxHagueAcademy, 2013). He added that the "people realize[d] the futility of fighting over ethno-religious identity and the importance of addressing issues collectively" (ibid.). The workshop context, as highlighted above, pointed to the importance of transforming painful stories into hopeful stories, which, in turn, built up a community of likeminded individuals with shared narratives.

In Maurice Halbwachs's formulation of *mémoire collective* (collective memory), he states that "[o]ne cannot in fact think about the events of one's past without *discoursing upon them*. But to discourse upon something means to connect within a single system of ideas our opinions as well as those of our circle" (Halbwachs, 1992, p. 53, emphasis mine). Halbwachs adds that "the framework of collective memory confines and binds our most intimate remembrances to each other" (ibid). In other words, while memories construct identities, individual memories only make sense to individuals in the context of "discoursing upon them" while connecting with other people's memories. As memories are formed, so is the

community that affirms that aspect of their identity. As seen from the way the women represented or identified themselves, it is possible to argue that the social context bound them in intimate ways – with a collective memory from historical events. Even though the individual stories of loss were different, collectively, they formed a unified memory of being victims of war. If Halbwachs's claim that preserving stories can constitute collective memory, then it is possible that these victims' stories can fossilise in place. This means the constant iterations and claims of their identity statuses can reinforce and circulate tropes for redemption, and, in the overarching argument of this chapter, show where these Afghan victims 'locate' their identities: in victimhood.

Because the memory boxes contained objects such as books, CD, prayer beads, clothes, and photographs left behind by the deceased, I draw on performance scholar Diana Taylor's formulation of the "archive and repertoire" to discuss the production and reproduction of specific memories. In Taylor's definition, an 'archive' refers to "enduring materials (i.e., texts, documents, buildings, bones)" (Taylor, 2003, p. 19). Here, the memory boxes do function as an archive, a repository of objects that documented war crimes and unreported stories of loss. Khordadad Bisharat, the Executive Director of AHRDO, stated that there were two ways to handle these memory boxes after the exhibition: to "return them to the victims' families or convert them into a national strategy plan to make sure that the memories of those who died become part of [their] official history" (The Memory Boxes, 2012). The latter sought to make memories visible, tangible and permanent. This sentiment was also echoed earlier in March 2012 by Tristan-E Landry, Counsellor and Head of Public Diplomacy at the Canadian Embassy in Afghanistan, who said that they were "very pleased to host this particular

exhibition" (ibid.). He added, "It's a very important initiative. We feel that it sends a very powerful message, especially on reconciliation. […] Down the road, in the future, there could be a place to host this exhibit permanently" (ibid.). Here, one of the conjectures of converting these memory boxes into a "national strategy plan" is to turn them into architectures of memorials, reminiscent of Holocaust Museums, a permanence these organisers and funders are interested in creating. For them, these memorial monuments could be sites to memorialise the dead in Afghanistan since, as stated earlier, Ulomi was worried that the next generation might forget the past and confuse the perpetrators with victims. Marifat asserted that the "so-called peacebuilding process [had] brought all the perpetrators of violence back to power, including the Taliban, the former Mujahideen groups, and some of the communists, which will further institutionalise the already existing culture of impunity" (Memory Box – Making Afghan victims memories and stories matter: Hadi Marifat at TEDxHagueAcademy, 2013). More importantly, the Memory Box project can be seen to counter dominant 'military' narratives of insurgency by the Taliban, to provide alternative accounts based on victims' stories.

Though fragmentary, memories can invoke a powerful presence and possibly complement, or even counter, 'institutionalised' narratives, such as that found in a museum. I use the word "invoke" – rather than "evoke" – because I want to now discuss and problematise the psychic relationship between self and object in the reproduction of culture when layered with political intent. As a point of departure, I refer to an anecdote from Peggy Phelan's *Unmarked* to highlight this potential. In Sophie Calle's works about the stolen paintings at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston, Phelan describes how visitors and staff were

interviewed about these stolen paintings, and their transcribed scripts were placed next to the photographs in the gallery. For Calle, these "descriptions and memories of the paintings constitute[d] their continuing 'presence,' despite the absence of the paintings themselves" (Phelan, 1993, p. 146). Calle had also asked "the ghosts of memory be seen as equivalent to 'the permanent collection' of 'great works'" (ibid., p. 147). Phelan predicts that if the same people were asked over and over about the same paintings, they "would describe a slightly different painting" (ibid.), which then demonstrates "the performative quality of all seeing" (ibid.). Seeing is a form of perception (rather than representation), so the implied meaning here is that perceptions can 'perform'. In the same way, memory, as speech act, is performative. Phelan then goes on to suggest that a performance cannot be saved, recorded, documented, or that no traces are left behind. She argues that because the "affects/effects […] are always changing (ibid., p. 165)", the "varied and resolutely unstatic objects" (such as the performatives in Calle's work) "cannot be absorbed by history" (ibid.). Conversely, from Bisharat's suggestion to make the Memory Boxes into a national strategy plan, or to become part of Afghanistan's official history, AHRDO appears to be storing and making permanent the "ghosts of memory" in Calle's words. Instead of resisting representation and reproduction as Phelan has proposed in her ontology of performance, AHRDO and the Canadian Embassy, I argue, have sought to regulate and control the archive. It can be interpreted that AHRDO is plunging the memory from the invisible to the visible – and asks that they 'perform'. Yet, the performance of memories is psychical.

Roger Bastide posits that "[s]ince memories are *psychic* by nature, if they are to survive they must *survive in something durable*; they must be attached to a

permanent material base of some kind" (Bastide, 2011, p. 161, emphasis mine).

He clarifies further that while the "permanent material base" for psychologist resides "in the brain", sociologists "seek it in nature", the latter of which is an emphasis on an exterior space rather than an interior one. Bastide adds that the "localization of memories in material objects that endure in social time is the exact equivalent […] of cerebral localizations in psychological theory" (ibid.). Likewise, Halbwachs states that people locate their memories in space, and that people have an entire symbolic geography of street patterns around the family home which are sustained by group landmarks, which he calls the "localisation of memories" (Halbwachs, 1992, p. 52). From a sociocultural perspective layered with a psychical context, I suggest that Bastide's "material base" could be seen as the memory box itself, the 'site' from which the memories of the deceased have been conjured up and 'stored'. The memories have been given a material base, contained within the structure of a locked box. Because these memory boxes are transported from place to place over the three years in various exhibitions, this 'journey' reflects, to a large extent, the "topography of sanctified places" (Fowler, 2007, p. 27). Where the boxes have 'stopped', it marks another topography in the 'location' of another set of collective memory in Halbwachs's term, for example, from the Canadian Embassy to the Ibn-e Sina University, and many more. But even for the arrangement of boxes in any location, it represents another symbolic set of topography. As Bastide's quote suggests, collective memory is materialised from, and mediated through, a "permanent material base". It is the 'site' where the box serves as an archive, from where a body of memories continue to be locally inscribed and transcribed. In other words, the 'site' is constantly shifting. The transport of these memory boxes without a final destination problematically reflects a physical displacement of participants'

memories, but it also suggests a performance constantly waiting to be staged. Referring back to Taylor's "archive and repertoire", this archive refers to the boxes only, the 'site' that moves. To stage the performance, the actors must be present, which is where I suggest that the embodied energy in these material objects take centre stage. Because Phelan did challenge us to move beyond institutions whose "only function is to preserve and honor objects" (Phelan, p. 165) to inventing "an economy not based on preservation but one which is answerable to the consequences of disappearance" (ibid.), here is where I want to be more explicit about the collocation of the psychical context.

Performance theorist Josette Féral's formulates "presence effect" as "the feeling the audience has that the bodies or objects they perceive are really there within the same space and timeframe that the spectators find themselves in, when the spectators patently know that they are not there" (Féral, 2012, p. 31). Féral also explains that there is the object we are seeing, which she calls the "object's apparition" (ibid., p. 33), that the idea of this object exists in our thought. Presence effect, she suggests, is "more perception and sensation than *representation*" (ibid., emphasis mine). In other words, presence effects could be interpreted as the *feeling* (both perception and sensation) of something, or someone, 'being there'. As such, the clothes, cameras, and photographs in the memory boxes can be construed as the "object's apparition" in Féral's words; they are the ghosts of the deceased. The presence effects will "endure in social time" as long as these objects and memories are localised on site, *in situ*, in the box or in an archive. Because these presence effects are perception and sensation, rather than representation, I suggest that these ghosts are performing each time the boxes are moved, or opened. But because these ghosts cannot perform

without a site (the "permanent material base" in Bastide's words), the objects in the boxes are co-dependent on the materiality of the box and the eventual destination for an open exhibition. The performance site is inside the box, and outside as well. Here, by suggesting that the memory boxes perform memories each time it is opened, I propose that the Memory Box Initiative is both an archive and a repertoire in Taylor's formulation, but with a slightly different inflection. It is both a 'site and the psychic' that is endowed with presence effects localised on-site with memory, that not only saves, but also spends in Phelan's words. In other words, the objects as actors, paradoxically, perform their own disappearance, but only insofar they remain intact in the box, their own performance space.

When Bisharat asked what they should do with the memory boxes when the two-day exhibition was over as their office was too small for storage, he said that the "final decision will be with the Afghan government, the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission and the international community" (AHRDO, n.d., c), and ended his speech with a provocative question: "Will they make our memories matter?" (ibid.). On one hand, the non-destination of the boxes – the site and the psychic – reflected an unethical displacement of these 'ghosts' (or presence effects) when subjugated by another collocation of context that is more politically driven. On the other hand, this seemed to be a backhanded rhetorical question that put the supportive visitors at the Exhibition, and possibly the funders, in an involuntary participation in the feelings of guilt and shame. By refusing AHRDO's call to safekeep the boxes, visitors (who also included officials from the government) would have been made guilty for ignoring and dismissing these stories of loss. Symbolically, the power brokers, including the

international community, were forced to 'close' the lid on the Pandora's (memory) box to do something about their history of impunity having seen them. In other words, Bisharat had not only given no alternative to his visitors to look away from the encounter of these "ghosts" – memories to haunt the power brokers of human rights injustices – he had shifted the responsibility to his visitors to intervene. To not do so would mean apathy and indifference on the Afghan narratives in their theatre of war. AHRDO's staging of victimhood demanded a response, but this response, I suggest, seemed almost calculative.

The next point of critique refers to a political context of the Memory Boxes. Though the material objects that were endowed with immaterial presence primarily belonged to men, the discourse proliferated by AHRDO has feminised victimhood – as all the participants were women and that they needed to be saved, helped or pitied. The juxtaposition of the women narratives and men's objects constantly reflects AHRDO's human rights agenda. For example, on 25 March 2013, AHRDO brought policymakers to the Canadian Embassy (who hosted one of the exhibitions) to be in attendance with more than one hundred participants that included "civil society activists, High Peace Council members, representatives of the diplomatic community and various government officials" (AHRDO, n.d., d). The meeting was not about public awareness as it was at the exhibition, but a strategic meeting for policy changes. With the six memory boxes on display, Ms Jamila Afghani, Head of an AHRDO-founded Women's Council, proposed three policy changes, such as the abolition of the Amnesty Law which contributed to "blanket impunity in Afghanistan" (ibid.); an expansion of parliamentary agenda to "explore the social integration of the country's war victims" (ibid.); and an allocation of the national budget to support

these victims. These illustrated the extent to which AHRDO wanted the boxes to 'perform', and by regulating the archives – the ghosts of memory – they sought to control, or at least influence, national policies. Hence, this strategic meeting showed the privilege of the archive over the 'performance' of the women's narratives told during the workshop process. And in doing so, the archive as a document re-inscribes the staging of victimhood narratives, which further sediments identity formations of Afghanness in a cyclical state of needing interventions. Ironically, though, because these objects belonged to deceased men, they took up more visibility and permanence than the women (participants as mothers or wives) who brought them. As such, the social context of the workshop in building communities seems to be undermined by the political context to change policies, and consequently, there is a constant disappearance of identities and histories from both the participants and the deceased; the former is imposed through the collocation of contexts, while the latter is invoked in performing loss. Throughout these fluctuations, victimhood is, nonetheless, being underscored and readily consumed by activists who front the transitional justice model of reconciliation – but this sense of victimhood also disappears in all of its contexts.

Throughout the Memory Box project, I have highlighted the differences between the workshop (process) and the exhibitions (performances). In the former, AHRDO raised the importance of social and emotional bonding, breaking down walls of suspicion between the various ethnic groups. The collocation of this social context allows the reader to understand how a collective Afghan identity is being forged, constructed and represented – from the objects imbued with memories, but from women's perspectives. When the social context is

complemented with a political context to effect policy changes, they both perform a discourse of victimhood needing external intervention. However, in order for the memory boxes to perform the culture of impunity in Afghanistan as AHRDO has intended, I suggested looking at the archive as a *site* and the objects, having been endowed with "presence effects", as *psychic*. When the boxes are transported and showcased, they both (site and psychic) perform, circuitously, and entrench their own disappearance. In the overarching argument of this chapter, the project circulates victimhood narratives, but, paradoxically, in their attempts to 'locate' Afghanness in the circuit of culture, it cannot be found either. The act of representation becomes more pronounced in the next case study when a suicide attack happens in a theatre performance, collapsing all possible known forms of even talking, or thinking, about 'Afghanistan'.

'Heartbeat: Silence after the Explosion' (2014)

Heartbeat: Silence after the Explosion (thereafter, *Heartbeat)* was performed on 11 December 2014. The 40-minute movement theatre performance was directed by Berta Bauer (name has been changed for security reasons, which will be explained), a Jungian psychologist from Germany, and the original music was composed by Yves Pignot from France. It was performed in the theatre auditorium of the Institut-Français d'Afghanistan (IFA), located within the high security premises of Istiqlal High School, by Azdar Theatre in collaboration with the Afghanistan National Institute of Music (ANIM). The reader would recall that the Istiqlal High School was the site of the first drama education – the pupils theatre company as it was called – which was founded by French teacher, Guy-Michel Carbou in the 1970s (see Chapter 2).

Azdar Theatre was founded in 2006 by French director, Guilda Chahverdi, who worked at the IFA, formerly known as the French Cultural Centre. Azdar Theatre's main goal was to "continue for [sic] saving Afghan cultural and traditional believes [sic]" (Formuli, 2015, personal communication). Soon, they were selected in two Afghan National Theatre Festivals in 2006 and 2007. In all, they have performed nine different plays in various festivals, including *The Little Prince* (written by Antoine De Saint-Exupéry, directed by Iranian director, Arash Absalan) and *The Tale of the Tiger* (written by Dario Fo, directed by Arash Absalan) at the International Theatre Festival in Delhi, India, in 2012 and 2013 respectively (see also Bobin, 2014). The last performance before *Heartbeat: Silence after the Explosion* was *Kaikavus*, directed by Haroon Noori, in 2013 (see earlier case study). Currently, the team leader at Azdar Theatre is Ahmad Nasir Formuli.

Berta Bauer, the director of *Silence*, is the founder of a counselling organisation that has projects in Afghanistan and Haiti. As a clinical psychologist and humanitarian worker, Bauer appeared as a TEDGlobal Talk speaker in 2010, stating the importance of psychosocial wellbeing in Afghanistan. She recounted an Afghan woman coming to thank her after a psychological treatment. The Afghan woman said, "Because you have felt me, I can feel myself again" (Bringing peace to the minds of Afghanistan, 2010). Bauer was probably referring to the clinical concept of empathic witnessing, which can be defined as the "basic intersubjective participation, the alternative of being left alone in pain and the reduction of differences to the humanistic compassionate sameness" (Berman, 2014, p. 249). It is the silent witnessing of someone's pain. On her website, Bauer also asserted that "cultural dialogue and the arts as a way of

supporting social and local cultural identity in a globalised world seemed to be relevant, enabling people to balance the tension between global and local, self and other" (~~IPSO, n.d.~~; note that the strikethrough is intentional, for reasons that will be made known later, and taken up again as 'under erasure' in *Blowing Up Bamiyan Buddhas* in Chapter 4). Her interests in the arts stemmed from her previous training as a dancer and choreographer. This project is independent of her non-governmental organisation work.

Rehearsals for *Heartbeat* started on 15 April 2014. According to the team leader, the ensemble from Azdar were excited about Bauer's proposal because "it was [the] first time that [they] will perform a musical theatre with dancing and body language and movement theatre" (Formuli, 2015, personal communication). It was Bauer's idea to explore movement in theatre. It was much later in the process that Bauer asked if the actors had any texts they wanted to include into the piece. "You can say it from your heart," was her instruction, recounted Formuli, "because you're sad, always in Afghanistan there's war, you [sic] never in peace" (ibid.). Formuli explained the words they used have strong emotional resonances, leading him to cry when thinking about war in Afghanistan. As a director, Bauer was consultative and non-authoritative because she sought the approval of the ensemble before concretising the shape of the performance. In that sense, there was a form of ownership of the performance and the scripted text that generated an emotional honesty to complement the abstract representation in movement. The text will be analysed in the next section, in sequential order of the performance. The ensemble rehearsed twice a week at the IFA, but two weeks prior to the performance day, rehearsals became more intense and the seven actors met up everyday. It was only two or three days before the production that

they rehearsed with seven musicians, together with French composer Yves Pignot.

During the actual performance on 11 December 2014 (which I had not seen, but told to me by Formuli, and then pieced together from their photographs), musicians from ANIM are playing upstage, one on a piano, one on a tabla, one on a flute. The cyclorama has a blue wash over the back wall. Dressed in casual clothes such as sweaters, jeans, and sneakers, the performers are seen forming tableaux, stationary images that are frozen in time and space, one after another, while looking out into the audiences, sometimes in expressions of horror, sometimes in a state of indifference (see Plate 18, Appendix 2). In another moment, five performers twirl in circles in the style of Sufi dervishes, whilst one of them, on his knees, stretches out his hand to these dancers. Occasionally, they break away from these images by forcefully shoving, dragging, or pulling each other, before a new tableau is formed. At other times, they align themselves in a horizontal line, doing synchronised movements, including running on the spot, always staring to the back of the auditorium. When the music changes tempo or tonal quality, the performers move repeatedly into spasmodic dance sequences (see Plate 19, Appendix 2), flailing their arms or rotating them at the shoulders with bodies hunched over. Two of them fall over. In another moment, two men carry the 'dead bodies' in their arms walking towards downstage centre (see Plate 20, Appendix 2). They crouch down and lay them there in the dark, while another man drags a 'dead body' across from stage right to stage left in the light (see Plate 21, Appendix 2).

Heartbeat does not follow a linear narrative, and there are no major characters in

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the performance. It is an ensemble piece driven essentially by improvisation and movement, with the performers kinesthetically responding to each other and to the music for cue changes. It includes different media, live music, lights, and multimedia effects. Han-Thies Lehmann states that in "post-dramatic forms of *theatre*, staged text (*if* text is staged) is merely a component with equal rights in a gestic, musical, visual, etc., total composition" (Lehmann, 2006, p. 46). It is a transformation of theatrical modes of expression, with a move from dramatic theatre whose means of meaning-making was through the primacy of the written word (the text or the script) to postdramatic theatre which sees "breath, rhythm and the present actuality of the body's visceral presence take precedence over the logos" (ibid., p. 145). Lehmann states that it is a "visually organized dramaturgy" that "is not subordinated to the text and can therefore freely develop its own logic" (ibid., p. 93). This form of theatre-making, according to one performer (see Formuli, 2015, personal communication) is considered novel to many of them. In the performance, the mood is sombre. Bond Street Theatre director Joanna Sherman, who was in the audience, recounted: "The play was elegant, stylized, precise, with just snippets of thoughts or poems spoken. The entire effect was graceful and profound" (Sherman, 2015). Formuli said, "I like the performance. It was very, very nice. The audience was silent", indicating a high level of audience engagement.

In another moment, the performers are all lying on the stage floor, seemingly writhing in pain, with occasional music from the flute and the piano coming to accompany the text, spoken in Dari language. This segment reveals the script just prior to the bombing:

Homan Wesa:

Get up and take me with you

I'm tired of the bloodshed

In this nation

Edris Fakhri:

Why none of you have anything to say?

You just look

And that's it

Sulaiman Sohrab Salem:

I don't want you to remember it

Homan Wesa:

There's a long way to go

I'm scared of the night and its darkness

Zubair Shams:

O hearing ear,

O looking eye,

O heart

With feeling

Come and see

Listen and feel that I don't exist anymore

Mahfoz Nejrabi:

Where have you all gone?

I've been looking for you

Please answer me

O the earth that gives life

Have you seen them?

Answer me

[When **Edris Fakhri** is reciting his poetry "*Screaming mothers of orphans*"]

Bamik Bamik:

Let me be ashes

I have no more strength to say further.

Sulaiman Sohrab Salem:

Where is the ear that listens and would not go deaf

Where is the heart that would not pump

Where is the soul that would not feel and get emotional

Zubair Shams:

Where are those hands that lift me up

Where are those eyes to see what I am going through

(Azdar Theatre, 2014)

While the original Dari text shows some cadence and rhyming pattern, it does not follow a strict poetic form. Rather, this is a form of monologue called *tak-ghoyee*, which is spoken aloud (not intended for the audience, but to a higher being like God). From an English literary perspective, the text is punctuated with synecdoches. There are specific parts such as the heart, body, ear, eye, and hands that are referenced in the text, all of which denote the parts that make up a larger entity written here in the first person ("I", "me"). But this "I" may not be one symbolic person, but multiple persons. In the text, the address is directed at a second person ("you"), but it is unclear who is being spoken to, but "take me with *you*", "why none of *you* have anything to say?" or "I don't want *you* to remember it" seems to oscillate between an indifferent saviour and a heartless stranger. The last pair of rhetorical questions – "Where are those hands that lift me up?" and "Where are those eyes to see what I am going through? – reinforces the anguish and pain of six suffering individuals, six different presences. Because it is spoken by different performers on stage, I did not interpret it as a collective, singular

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voice seeking assistance, but many voices. They are each seeking a listening 'audience'. On one hand, this underscores Bauer's concept of empathic witnessing (akin to an earlier "Because you have felt me, I can feel myself again" interpretation), but on the other hand, their pleas also accentuate and circulate the narration tropes of redemption and salvation.

When the suicide attack occurred in approximately three-quarters through the production, it generated confusion. In the first few seconds after the explosion, Formuli recalls that whistling was heard, with some audience members amazed by the theatrical effects (Formuli, 2015, personal communication). It is when darkness envelops the theatre and a few cries ring out that audience members and performers realise that it is not a fictionalised bombing. Giuliano Battiston, who was among the audience, writes on his Italian blog afterwards:

> Suddenly, a loud explosion. For a moment I think it's part of the show. I look around and realize that it does not. Reality and representation are confused. Smoke is everywhere. Seeking Bibi Jan. I get up to go to her. He's still sitting. "It's part of the show?" He asks incredulously and confused, like me. "No Bibi Jan, let's get out." We seek a way out in the dark, among the rubble, debris, puddles of blood on the ground. (Battiston, 2014)

"It's part of the show?" is a chilling question that blurs fiction and reality, a topic on 'representation' and 'real' that I will seek to theorise. Here, Victor Turner's concept of "social drama" offers some insight. It is defined as "an eruption from the level surface of ongoing social life, with its interactions, transactions, reciprocities, its customs making for regular, orderly sequences of behaviour" (Turner, 1985, p. 196). As such, the suicide attack is a form of rupture of the

representational form, an interruption of a piece of theatre. The "orderly sequences of behaviour", in Turner's words, associated with theatre-watching here were suddenly and forcefully disrupted to produce chaos and confusion. A social drama which is often seen as "units of aharmonic or disharmonic social process[es], arising in conflict situations (Turner, 1985, p. 180) typically follows Turner's four phases of public action: *breach, crisis, redressive action,* and *reintegration.*

Perhaps in the reception by the Taliban, the performance was in itself an affront to their interpretation of Islamic values, hence it was a *breach* of perceived customary norms in Afghan society. The teenage suicide bomber here forced himself into the theatre auditorium, reportedly in the middle of the performance and stayed at the rear end of the auditorium (BBC News, 2014b), symbolically forcing himself as an external actor rupturing the representational (theatre) on stage. The bomb going off represented the *crisis*. One audience member also recounted that "[p]ieces of flesh were plastered on the wall. There were children and women crying for help. Some were running out, some were just screaming" (Shalizi, 2014). In this *crisis* stage, the dead and the survivors were 'separated'. The chasm between the perpetrators of the violence and the victims was widened, polarising the two groups even further. The *redressive* stage could be the arts community and media's condemnation (evidenced later), leading to a "rapidly ramifying cleavage" (Turner, 1985, p. 74) against the Taliban. The redressive stage could also be the support given to the performers. As recounted by Formuli, he explained that the actors were sent for one counselling session that required them to do visualisation exercises, which the actors shirked off as another one of those theatre exercises they were familiar with. There was additional support

given by the Indian consulate when the performers and their families sought temporary refuge in India. However, there was no known formal judiciary or legal machinery to redress this crisis. In some other ways, people have tried to make sense of it – including myself – as a way to redress and arbitrate the meanings from this tragic event, but it remained a largely private or personal affair, invisible to others. The fourth stage involved *reintegration* of the disturbed social group, which in this context, led to an irreparable schism between the two parties: the arts community and the Taliban. In an edited collection of essays based on Victor Turner's construction of cultural criticism, Kathleen M. Ashley states that "social drama is universally the form of political action and social transformation" (ibid.), which generates productive forms of cultural performances, including oral and literary narratives. If the suicide attack during *Heartbeat* is seen in this light, it means the attack could be construed as a productive and generative force for social transformation, which is an uneasy position to adopt. In other words, "unruly audiences" in the form of the Taliban could, potentially, be seen as a democratic participatory form of audience engagement, as raised by Baz Kershaw (see Chapter 2). This, I argue, is a hermeneutic position that is both facetious and fatal.

This event, including the bomb blast, arguably contributes to one larger postmodern event – like the representational form itself – with incomplete narratives, scenes that have no closure, or texts that do not make meanings coherently. Here, I borrow Lehmann's concept of postmodern performances again, where he cites Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht's notion of "production of presence" (cited in Lehmann, 2006, p. 141). This "production of presence" stems from our fascination with real events, in a way of "moving things within reach so

that they can be *touched*" (ibid., emphasis mine). The explosion, the debris, the blood, for example, could be "touched" in visual, aural, olfactory, and kinesthetic ways. Furthermore, the combination of movement styles, musical language, rhythmic poetry, and in this context, sound of explosion, cries, noises, silence, and utterances such as "It's part of the show?" by one of the audience members can also be considered part of Lehmann's principle of polyglossia, in the "production of presence". However, because it is the actuality of an event, it is no longer a mimesis or representation. It is real.

Even though the above analysis is part of an interpretive position that anthropologist Clifford Geertz might have agreed upon as "thick description", I find it disturbing and perhaps deceitful as a performance scholar, examining this event theoretically without looking at how it had also affected me. After all, the performers were my friends and I had cried when I first heard the news, frantically trying to reach them and see if they survived the blast. In the next section, I bring in personal anecdotes, as well as media responses, to frame my intersubjective responses to this tragic event.

Silences and Outcries: Immediacy and Crisis of Representation

Taliban's suicide attack in the IFA auditorium during the performance has been condemned by German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier as a "cowardly attack" (O'Donnell and Shah, 2014; see also BBC News, 2014b). Steinmeier states that the "attack is particularly perfidious because it happened at a cultural institute where Afghans and helpers from the international community come together for friendly exchanges and because it is directed against those people who are supporting the country in building a better future" (ibid.). Similarly,

French President François Hollande rebukes this "odious attack" (ibid.), saying that "the terrorists were targeting culture and creativity" (ibid.). The Taliban spokesperson, Zabihullah Mujahid, on the other hand, condemns the show as "desecrating Islamic values" and is "propaganda against jihad" (Mojaddidi, 2014). In response, Taliban's media release statement states:

> The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan takes this opportunity to warn certain immoral media and all organizations acting in the name of 'civil society,' issuing publications, disseminating reports attacking Islamic values, organizing meetings and demonstrations against the veil and in favour of music, prostitution and corruption, and helping to manipulate society's young people. We inform them that from now on the Mujahedeen will not remain indifferent to these activities and will destroy the very core of these corrupters. (Reporters Without Borders, 2014)

On the day of the bombing, I desperately searched for other examples of performances and concerts that had been banned in Muslim countries, to identify if the reasons cited were similar, just to make sense for myself of what was happening in Kabul, and why my friends who were passionate about the arts were targets of an attack. Honestly, I wanted to find reasons to find theological faults with the Taliban's arguments to prove them wrong. I found out that several musicians such as Chicago, Battle of the Bands, Megadeth, and Beyonce had been banned in Malaysia because of inappropriate lyrics, offensive body art, dressing or hairstyle, as well as perceived antisocial behaviours especially from heavy-metal groups. I also tried to uncover the various definitions of *haram* (forbidden), *halal* (lawful), and the debates around entertainment in Malaysia and Iran (see Ghani, 2009), quoting verses from the Qur'an in my naive attempt to understand if Islamic values *really* condemned entertainment (see Chow, 2014).

As I probed further, the question remains to be begged: what *are* Islamic values? I did not want to universalise Muslim communities and arrive at a standard set of 'values'. The next day, I was told my friends survived the attack, but Dr Sarmast, whom I met in London once, was critically injured.

Consequently in the media, the representations focused more on the institutions and the victims as a counter-narration to condemn the Taliban, humanising the 'good values' espoused by the French, for example, and extolling the Institut Français d'Afghanistan as a "haven of peace" (Lamfalussy, 2014). *The Guardian* focused on the founder of the Afghanistan Institute of Music (ANIM)'s story instead. Referring to Dr Sarmast, their headlines read: "He was the saviour of Afghan music. Then a Taliban bomb took his hearing" (Rasmussen, 2015). *Salisbury Post* ran a story on the German man, Frank Ehling, who died in the attack (Wineka, 2014). Zobir Hatami, the TV cameraman from MITRA who died from sustained injuries was also covered by *Reporters Without Borders* (Reporters Without Borders, 2014). The stories listed above spotlighted individuals who had made an impact in their family and in their work. It was a form of eulogy for the German and Afghan victims who died in the attack. The mood around the event, at least created in the media, was horror and sadness.

However, Formuli questioned the media's attention on Dr Sarmast, who, according to Formuli, had claimed that he was a famous musician and, hence, was the prime target of the attack. Formuli believed that Sarmast's claiming to be the victim had been misrepresented both by Dr Sarmast and the media, as there were many other famous actors and directors in the audience as well, including Golden Globe-winner film director and producer Siddiq Barmak, and Professor

Hosseinzadah from the Theatre Department. "The problem that all journalists think is that it was a suicide attack for Sarmast, but it was wrong," Formuli stated. After two or three months after his recovery, albeit losing his sense of hearing after "[e]leven pieces of shrapnel had lodged in the back of his head" (Rasmussen, 2015), Formuli claimed that Dr Sarmast had apologised to the media to retract an earlier claim that he was the target of the attack; instead, Sarmast said it was an attack on Azdar Theatre. This denial of victimhood by Sarmast and then the claiming victimhood by Azdar is peculiar. Formuli explained later that he, together with some other ensemble members, received anonymous calls on their mobile phones. The callers told them that they were behind the attacks, further underscoring that my friends' lives were still in danger. I will discuss this later. In a separate letter posted on the International Theatre Institute Action Committee for Artists Rights, Joanna Sherman reflected optimistically, with a sense of hopefulness rather than helplessness as epitomised by victim tropes:

> The Afghan people are unwavering, stubbornly continuing their lives and refusing to let the wicked amongst them rule their existence. But they all bear a pervasive sense of grief and resignation, a deep longing for peace. For all their trying, their country is infected with a disease and it is being meticulously spread to impressionable youth. We have been privileged to work with many brave theatre groups in Afghanistan who take great risk in performing publicly. […] To revitalize the arts is to restore the soul of the nation. The Afghan people have been through so many years of tragedy, they are utterly fed up. I believe that this spate of attacks is the last hurrah of a desperate group. (Sherman, 2015)

I am inclined to make a statement on how heroism ("brave theatre groups") is used as a trope here, or how words such as "wicked" or "infected with a disease" continue to play on myths about the Taliban, but to do so is a form of personal

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betrayal to my friends who were victims of a suicide attack. To claim that they were "brave" heroes defending cultural arts is incorrect; they performed *in spite of* the volatile security climate, not *because* of it. And for me to discredit their work in the midst of violence and instability is to also gravely ignore the real, material circumstances from which their works have emerged. In other words, I find myself struggling to theorise and make meaning about this event that has overwhelming emotional overtones for me.

So far, I have used Victor Turner's framework and examined the event as a social drama, as well as Lehmann's framework to see the entire event as a postmodern performance, both of which I find problematic because of the severity and repercussions of the event. The Taliban have attacked and spoken out against this performance. There were deaths. And the effect of that horror is still lingering: the performers had to leave the country for protection, but are now back in Afghanistan, still under threat; and the names of the theatre director and her organisation are still withheld as a way to protect the arts practitioners who were involved in theatre-making.

Secondly, the other resistance in theorising about this performance event is my affective connection to the performers and to the space, an emotional connection to "presence" we had shared when I was working in Afghanistan. I felt like I was there as well at the performance of *Heartbeat*. It was a real, affective response that cannot be trivialised either. Performance theorist, Cormac Power, defines one type of presence as "being the simultaneity between consciousness and an object of attention" (Power, 2008, p. 3). He states that one way of looking at presence is to understand simultaneity: "[t]o be present in a particular place is to be

simultaneous with a particular space-time environment" (ibid.). This being "present" in space and time with Azdar Theatre is, to a large extent, not physically possible for me as I was in the UK when they performed *Heartbeat*. But I still saw myself as part of their audience from afar. In *The Transformative Power of Performance,* Erika Fischer-Lichte states that "[presence] concerns the energetic processes between people; it is only somewhat possible to attribute to things and energy generated by them" (Fischer-Lichte, 2008, p.116). It is understood then that presence is a material quality (energy) that is generated between humans. She adds that this energetic process can result in an automatic feedback loop existing between performers and audiences, for example to explain the circulation of energies as emergent phenomena in what she calls autopoiesis. In the introduction of her book, Marvin Carlson elucidates this and explains that performances functioning as autopoietic systems see both performers and audiences simultaneously as "producers and products" in a circular system "that survive[s] by self-generation" (Carlson, in Fischer-Lichte, 2008, p. 7). Even though I was not physically present in Afghanistan for the performance of *Heartbeat: Silence After the Explosion,* I was affectively – energetically – jolted into a form of response when watching the news broadcast of the theatre being attacked. I found myself constantly oscillating between the role of a researcher and the role of a friend who had shared experiences and the performance space in Kabul. Fischer-Lichte argues that perception generates meanings based on previous meanings, and it is possible that my reactions were based on this emergent phenomenon. She posits that "if perceptions (as states of consciousness) are defined as meanings, it follows that meanings are generally responsible for bringing forth further meanings." (ibid., p. 152). As such, my affective, emotional energies connected with them, as well as with the space

based on previous memories, had caused these reactions and behaviours to be in tension. When I related to them as *friends*, this "perceptual order of presence […] tend[s] to produce meanings as sensations and emotions that are articulated physically and can be perceived by others as physiological, affective, energetic, and motor reactions" (ibid., p. 149), but when I perceived and analysed the whole performance as an event, I saw them as *actors*. So this "perceptual order of representation tend[s] to stimulate thought, ideas, and emotions which are articulated internally but hardly ever grow to a point at which they overwhelm the spectators, allowing them to maintain a certain distance to what they perceived" (ibid.).

In a methodological context, this cold, distanced relationship between researcher and, say, participant-observer is still deeply problematic. I had to act and react emotionally, and ethically, to the situation. Fischer-Lichte did argue that acting on emotional impulses can bring "a resolution that hermeneutic processes could not contribute to" (ibid., p. 158), which I believe corresponds to James Thompson's proposition in *Performance Affects* regarding the ethics and effects of performance practices, where theatre practitioners are confronted, or even compelled, to tell the story and talk about the trauma felt by survivors and victims. Thompson questions that practice and proposes developing *affective* responses instead. Borrowing from Levinas, Thompson substitutes the 'face-to-face' interrogation with the other with a 'side-by-side' accompaniment. He states that when we are faced with a survivor, for instance, our "coming face to face with others […] is a moment of shared affect – the presence of the other produces a range of affects within me – and this instigation of a relationship between people makes ethical demands […]" (Thompson, 2009, p. 172). Even when we

are called to respect that person's humanity – rather than judge the accuracy or integrity of their story or performance – the face we encounter must, "paradoxically, include the right to turn away, to avert the eyes and refuse the interrogatory gaze of the 'witness'" (ibid.). This encounter is important because audiences can also be coerced into listening to trauma stories, instead of having a choice to turn away, which problematises the encounter further. Because I could *not* look away. Thompson's proposed model of affect is not "I feel your pain", but "I accept the feeling of responsibility you provoke in me" (ibid., p. 172). This, I believe, is what was happening to me when this suicide attack was 'forced upon' the performers and audiences (including me); I felt an *affective* impulse, perhaps responsibility, to act and react ethically – which accounted for the conflicting tensions.

In the after-effects of the performance, something else emerged from my interviews with the team leader of Azdar Theatre. Formuli told me not to worry about using his name and his colleagues' in my analysis of this performance. "We don't have any problem, ok […] just [Berta] name is the problem, ok", he assured me. That accounted for why her name and her organisation had been withheld so far. In an earlier draft of this case study, I had chosen to respond ethically, side-by-side, to keep them safe: the names of my friends – the performers of Azdar Theatre – were also anonymised for their protection. That, I believed, was the least I could do to feed back into the loop, emotionally and ethically. But when I verified this with Azdar Theatre's group leader, Formuli told me to publicise their names. He said, "And we love to have our name in everywhere, in media and in theatre and everywhere" (Formuli, 2015, personal communication). So why were the Afghans so willing to disclose their identities

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despite danger to their lives?

In *Frames of War*, Judith Butler states that there are groups within a community who are worthy enough to be mourned or grieved (Butler, 2009). Because they had grown up in years of conflict, do they then perceive their lives to have 'lower' value, not "worthy enough to be mourned" (ibid.)? This perplexed me greatly, and I wondered if this could also be their claim to victimhood, and hence asylum status outside their country. Alison Jeffers observes that asylum seekers are required to give "a convincing and compelling narrative of persecution […] in order to expedite their case for asylum" (Jeffers, 2008, p. 218). This would include if and when they should cry, or remain calm, while in court to "show how the situation is affecting their mental health" (ibid.). It is a necessary demonstration of victimhood to law courts and immigration departments, which she calls "bureaucratic performance" (ibid.). If this were true, then it is their prerogative and I must honour their wishes. In fact, if I had anonymised their identities out of my perceived ethical standards in an attempt to keep them safe, I might have crossed my boundaries and repressed their agency. Yet I fear for their lives in doing so. This dilemma is still very real. As Jeffers writes, it is "a precarious line between producing validation [of their experiences], on the one hand, and victimhood, on the other" (ibid., p. 217).

Heartbeat: Silence after the Explosion has raised very serious concerns on the impact of theatre in a conflict zone, not just because an actual explosion occurred in the middle of the performance, causing both physical and discursive interruptions to the usual ways of representation (for example, the blur between fact and fiction, postmodern and immersive theatre), but because it did,

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Heartbeat raises a more urgent response from audiences, including myself, standing side-by-side in relation with people who performed in spite of danger. The ethical responsibility that I had assumed has also been questioned and renegotiated in light of their agency, which then further highlights the difficult epistemological and affective terrains in 'representing' their identities as part of a contemporary theatre movement highlighted in this research.

Dis/Locations and Collocation of Contexts

At the beginning of this chapter, I borrowed Homi Bhabha's phrase "location of culture" to interrogate the spaces in which Afghan cultures and identities could be situated, and suggested through the case studies that there are economic, cultural, political, psychical and other contextual factors operating in the production of 'an Afghan culture'. I have called this arrangement 'collocation of contexts', yet these are also the invisible contexts that do not often get represented in the circuit of culture. Sometimes various stakeholders compete with each other in these interstitial spaces to be represented, hence the dynamic nature of the production and consumption of Afghan cultures should also reflect the movements across 'locations'. For example, the economic contexts of *Kaikavus* demonstrated a contested ownership and distribution of indigenous music, while *An Enemy of the People* questioned donations if they were really "without earmarks or conditions". The analysis of *Memory Boxes* highlighted more contexts at work: socially, the Theatre of the Oppressed workshop process built trust and reconciliation among the ethnic groups; psychically, the boxes (site) and the "presence effects" from the objects (psychic) constantly iterated performances of disappearance; politically, the feminisation of victimhood was pushed to front a political agenda in human rights, but in practice, AHRDO had

ironically given the deceased men's stories more power. In the final case study of *Heartbeat: Silence after the Explosion*, it represented a rupture in meaning-making on a methodological and theoretical context, at least from the researcher's point of view because of the affective responses where friends' lives were in danger. But the ethical difficulty in anonymising their names thereafter also showed a struggle to find the 'real' and the 'representation', if the actors wanted to seek asylum or not. Nonetheless, here was another suggestion to show that permissive in/visibilities could be an ethical approach to allow certain practices to remain invisible as a way to protect the parties involved. Altogether, these performances 'from Kabul' illustrated the dilemmas of locating 'local culture' *from* Afghanistan. Firstly, at the epicentre, there were already indications of foreign donors and local NGOs with various motives in producing and circulating aspects of Afghanness, underscoring the notion that 'Afghanistan' is a homogenous polity is a difficult one to maintain. Secondly, *from Kabul* further highlighted the tensions amongst organisations, including the Taliban's imposition of their own set of values and cultural norms. Consequently, this produced and re-circulated a victimhood discourse that was readily consumed. Finally, this chapter offered an analytical concept – collocation of contexts – as a method to articulate some of the invisible representations and discourses, as well as to return to the political conditions of the present" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 3) in this post-9/11 period.

Chapter Four

'FROM AND BEYOND KABUL':

SAVING AFGHANISTAN

*Therefore, the common substance that manifests itself in the exchange value
of commodities, whenever they are exchanged, is their value. The progress
of our investigation will show that exchange value is the only form in
which the value of commodities can manifest itself or be expressed.*
- Karl Marx, Capital: A Critique of Political Economy Volume I (1996)

In Chapter 4, I want to extend the earlier argument on the 'location' of identities
– that Afghanness is not produced *in situ* – and seek to explain how the
phenomenon of contexts can both 'locate' and fracture meanings of Afghan
identities. By exploring the exchange of Afghan identity *from* within the country
and *beyond*, I argue that commodification occurs because of a redemption trope.
Here, I borrow Karl Marx's definition of the *commodity* as "an object *outside us*,
a thing that by its properties satisfies human wants of some sort or another"
(Marx and Engels, 1996, p. 45, emphasis mine). He adds that the "utility of a
thing makes it a use value" (ibid., p. 46), as "use-values become a reality only by
use or consumption: they also constitute the substance of all wealth, whatever
may be the social form of that wealth" (ibid.). In other words, the invisible
cultural practices and contexts that were illustrated in the earlier chapter are
arguably 'useless' if there is no market for it – since consumption requires an
exchange value, which means an identity needs to be visible enough for
consumption. Just as one quarter corn can be exchanged for *x* hundredweight
(cwt) of iron, Marx in one example asserts that "the exchange values of

commodities must be capable of being expressed in terms of something common to them all" (ibid., p. 47). This reducible quality that is "common to all" in all three case studies - *Blowing Up Bamiyan Buddhas* (2001); *Infinite Incompleteness* (2010); and *The Comedy of Errors* (2012) – is the exchange-value of 'Afghanistan' as a commodity construed as cultural heritage. The consumption and circulation of this commodity problematically result in a celebration of heroism or inducement of global interventions which further entrenches Afghans in victimhood discourses.

'Blowing Up Bamiyan Buddhas' (2001)

On 11 March 2001, just 6 months before the 9/11 attacks on World Trade Centre in New York, two 6th-Century Gandhara statues in Bamiyan, a province 128 kilometres northwest of Kabul, were dynamited before the world using "mortars, dynamite, anti-aircraft weapons and rockets" (Margottini, 2009, pp. 191-192). Michael S. Falser, in a 2009 conference organised by the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) on the theme *The Image of Heritage,* states that this was the "first large-scale live-act of performative iconoclasm" (Falser, 2011, p. 158) that was "directed against the Western concept of cultural heritage, together with norms of conservation and practices of protection" (ibid., p. 161). Using performance and theatre lexicon, Falser has called this "performative iconoclasm". In a separate example focusing on the beheading of Kenneth Bigley on camera in Iraq in 2004, Jenny Hughes considers the "power of performance as a weapon of war" (Hughes, 2011, p. 37). Referring to different reports, including *The Guardian* (Carroll, 2005) and *The Observer* (Burke, 2004), Hughes notes that this "theatre of terror" in Jason Burke's words involved sets, props, costumes, scripted performances, and even rehearsals involving decapitation

of chickens and sheep (Hughes, 2011). Examples such as these have construed the event as a performance, similar to Marco De Marinis's definition of a theatrical event, used synonymously as "performance text". By this, he is referring "to a *theatrical object* […] or to the theatrical event considered according to semiotic-textual pertinence, assumed and 'constructed' as a performance text within the paradigms of textual semiotics" (De Marinis, 2007, p. 281). In a similar way, the most obvious conception for the dynamiting of these Buddha statues is a "theatrical event", with the Taliban as the directors and producers of the show, while mediatised audiences are its audiences. But I shall also focus on the Buddha statues per se and the niches that framed them as a "performance text", on which contested meanings have been inscribed, both locally and globally. As such, I have adopted *Blowing Up Bamiyan Buddhas* as the title of this theatrical event.

Directed by Mullah Omar, head of the Taliban, this demolition performance lasted several days, even though there was a series of smaller destructions of Buddha statues at Kabul National Museum prior to this (Morgan, 2012, p. 16). In strict performance terms, the equipment which included mortars, dynamite, anti-aircraft weapons and rockets would have been construed as props used on stage to further an action, but because of the extensive power and potential agency wielded within the theatrical event, I prefer to see them as actors, or performers of the detonation. A secondary set of performers in this theatrical event comprises international actors: the Director-General of UNESCO; Pierre Lafrance, Special Representative of the Director-General; religious leaders (Ulema) from Egypt, Iraq, and Pakistan; Presidents from Egypt and Pakistan; the Organisation of the Islamic Conference; and the Emir of Qatar – all of whom have either flown to

Kandahar to convince Mullah Omar against his decisions, or issued fatwas against the Taliban's orders, or were part of the interventionist safeguarding efforts to prevent the calamity from occurring (Manhard and Lin, 2014). These performers voluntarily co-opted themselves in the theatrical event as antagonists of a Taliban drama, adding a heightened layer of dramatic tension to the plot. Among the audiences who were present on-site during the actual performance event were international aid workers and local Afghans. Journalists were barred from entry (BBC News South Asia, 2001), but one who was dressed in traditional Afghan costume made his way through the site, undetected, and recorded the footage and produced a documentary (see Frei, 2005). Other spectators were watching a mediatised performance, off-site through the Internet. Recorded by the Taliban, these footages were then recirculated and watched countless times.

The political events prior to this act reveal conflicting accounts and contexts. In 1996, the Taliban Minister of Culture alleged that the statues in Bamiyan had "never suffered any damage" (cited in Centlivres, 2008) since the advent of Islam in Afghanistan. Hence, he claimed it was in the Taliban's interest to protect the antiquities of the past. However on 26 February 2001, Mullah Omar – also known locally as Amir-ul Momineen, or the commander of the faithful – issued an edict to destroy the statues. Omar said, "These idols have been gods of the infidels" (cited in Bearak, 2001). In another interpretation, it read: "God Almighty is the only real shrine and all fake idols must be destroyed" (Morgan, 2012, p. 15). Two days later, the Minister of Information and Culture, Mawlawi Qudratullah Jamal, told the reporters in Kabul, "The head and legs of the Buddha statues in Bamiyan were destroyed yesterday. Our soldiers are working hard to demolish the remaining parts. They will come down soon" (ibid.). According to

The New York Times, Jamal said they did not anticipate any difficulties, stating further, "It is easier to destroy than to build" (Bearak, 2001). In a separate book by French Professor at the National Museum of Natural History, Bernard Dupaigne (2007) recounted what one Taliban spokesperson had said, "Our soldiers are working hard; they are using all available arms against the Buddhas. Rocket and tank shells were brought in to help, and the destruction was completed with dynamite. It took us twenty days; it was a trying work" (cited in Centlivres, 2008). As evidenced, the demolition process was laborious and lasted many days.

This immediately prompted international uproar, with the United Nations condemning these acts, urging "Taliban to halt implementation" (United Nations General Assembly, 2001). The Ambassador of France, Pierre Lafrance, was sent by the UNESCO Director-General to speak to Mullar Omar. The Special Envoy also included Sheikh Yusuf Al Qardhaoui, an Egyptian theologian; Tahir Mahmood Ashrafi, a Pakistani cleric known to help Sunnis and Shiites reconcile; the Molana Sami Ul Haq, a former master of Mullah Omar's school near Peshawar; and Sheikh Al Waseel, the Grand Mufti of Egypt, with a few Japanese parliamentarians (Lafrance, 2001). In their meeting with Mullah Omar in Kandahar, Lafrance gave a few arguments, stating, for example, that "Buddhism was the opposite of idolatry" and that the "statues were not in themselves objects of worship but recall the virtue of education, law, wisdom" (ibid., p. 14) and to call them idols would be an insult to Buddhism. Lafrance added that "ancient remains had become pure scientific research objects" and reasoned that "it was contrary to the requirements of Islam to hinder the work of scholars from all disciplines" (ibid.). Finally, Lafrance appealed to their predecessors, stating that

the "most respectable leaders of the Muslim world had since the founding of Islam, respected these remains" (ibid.). Nonetheless, from 7 March onwards, the demolition continued.

On 14 March 2001, a second decree was issued. Five days later, the Taliban allowed one cameraman from Al Jazeera TV into Bamiyan "to witness the final phase of the sacrificial explosion" (Centlivres, 2008), producing a grainy footage that has been circulated globally, including being featured in Christian Frei's 35-minute documentary, *The Giant Buddhas* (2005). To confirm the total destruction, "twenty foreign journalists were finally flown to Bamiyan to see the empty niches on 26 March, a full month after Mullah Omar's decree" (Morgan, 2012, p. 16). To a large extent, these eye-witnesses are also direct audiences of the theatrical event: a performance of 'absence'. These global partners showed repulsion. For example, UNESCO called this event a "dreadful crime against humanity" and a "cold and calculated destruction of cultural properties which were the heritage of the Afghan people, and, indeed, of the whole of humanity" (Falser, 2011, p. 160), and ICOMOS reviewed it as an "incredible act of vandalism" and "barbarity" (ibid., pp. 160-161). Even a senior Taliban commander, Ghulam Muhammad Hutak, said that "Mullah Omar's actions seemed pure madness" (Morgan, 2012, p. 4). Some critics saw this performative act as "cultural terrorism" (see, for example, Francioni and Lenzerini, 2003; Finn, 2002; Romey, 2001).

Such lexicon used to convey shock and horror during wartime are not uncommon (see, for example, Nicola Lambourne's account of the bombardment of the

Cathedral of Reims in France in 1914; Lambourne, 1999), but Michael S. Falser argued that UNESCO's and ICOMOS's responses were misplaced. He continued to make a distinction between vandalism and iconoclasm. Falser stated that vandalism was often "judged as an arbitrary, spontaneous, ignorant and destructive act without a motive of a higher order", where responses of shock were expected. But iconoclasm "has been semantically extended from its original meaning to encompass the intentional destruction or resistance against images and art works in general" (Falser, 2011, p. 161). Falser elaborated on the "higher order", stating that iconoclasm was indeed "an aggressive act against the concept and value behind an object" (ibid.). He posited that the "higher order" was not motivated by their extremist brand of religion, but a political one. He reasoned that Mullah Omar had reconfirmed in a decree he had issued in 1999 that the Qur'an has no explicit mention about destroying another religion's idols. Secondly, since there were no Buddhists left in the country, the Muslims were therefore not against Buddhism per se, but this destruction, Falser argued, was "directed against the Western mental concept of cultural heritage in the age of the internet" (ibid.). This was because the delegates who had the desire to channel large sums of money to preserve and restore the Buddhas and make them part of the World Heritage List were abominable to Mullah Omar as the finances could have been used to feed the millions of starving Afghans. This hypocrisy was what motivated the political "higher order" destruction. Barbara Crossette from The New York Times also echoed this view. Citing Sayed Rahmatullah Hashimi who was part of the convoy, Crossette noted:

> The [Taliban] scholars told them [the US delegation] that instead of spending money on statues, why didn't they help our children who are dying of malnutrition? They rejected that, saying, `This money is only for

statues.' (Crossette, 2001)

According to Hashimi, the Taliban elaborated that "if you [the West] are destroying our future with economic sanctions, you can't care about our heritage.' And so they decided that these statues must be destroyed. […] If we had wanted to destroy those statues, we could have done it three years ago. So why didn't we? In our religion, if anything is harmless, we just leave it. If money is going to statues while children are dying of malnutrition next door, then that makes it harmful, and we destroy it" (Crossette, 2001; see also Harding, 2001). Yet in Morgan's contrasting explanation, Mullah Omar did not show welfare to the five million people who were under threat of starvation in 2001. She reasoned that "[h]ad it been, they [the Taliban] might have heeded the particularly impassioned pleas on behalf of the Buddhas by Japan, a country which was a major humanitarian donor to Afghanistan; or they might have accepted the money offered by Western institutions to preserve Afghanistan's antiquities" (Morgan, 2012, p. 18). She explained further:

> To the latter approach Mullah Omar's response on the Voice of Shari'a (as Radio Kabul had been renamed) was, 'Do you prefer to be a breaker of idols or a seller of idols?' – an echo of an archetypal iconoclast, the eleventh-century Mahmud of Ghazni, who was said to have refused a huge ransom for a Hindu image in similar terms. In reality, what typically drove the Taliban's actions was a messianic determination to impose their primitive idea of Islamic practice, and this motivation seemed to override any other consideration. (ibid.)

As seen from above, the responses to the theatrical event are not homogenous. Falser's, Crossette's, and Morgan's perspectives here show a

complex collocation of contexts: as the religious context is layered with the economic context, both co-produce a political context that construes the interventions (consumption of culture) as either saving a cultural heritage or saving Afghan children's lives. Instead of interpreting the event as a way to demonise the Taliban on religious grounds, the surrounding economic and political contexts allow for a more nuanced approach in the stakeholders' contested production and consumption of Afghan cultures – based on the presumed value behind the Buddha statues.

After the fall of the Taliban, an international conference of Ulema was held in Doha, Qatar, in December 2001. Jointly organised by UNESCO, OIC, ISESCO, and ALECSO, the conference examined Muslims' position on the preservation of both Islamic and non-Islamic cultural heritage in Afghanistan, and subsequently concluded with a clear declaration of principles "in favor of the protection of cultural heritage, including statues, that can be appealed to in the future" (Manhard and Lin, 2014, p. 62). In May 2002, UNESCO organised the first International Seminar on the Rehabilitation of Afghanistan's Cultural Heritage in cooperation with the Afghan Ministry of Information and Culture in Kabul. 107 specialists in Afghan cultural heritage, as well as representatives of donor countries and institutions presented papers to the Minister of Information and Culture of the Afghan Government, H. E. Dr. Makhdoum Raheen. They evaluated the "state of conservation of cultural sites across the country and discussed programs and coordination for the first conservation measures to be taken", resulting "in more than US$7 million being pledged for priority projects, allocated through bilateral agreements and UNESCO Funds-in-Trust projects" (ibid.). Manhard and Lin summarised that "it was clearly stated, and approved by

the Afghan Government that the Bamiyan statues should not be reconstructed"
(ibid.).

UNESCO continued to exert its influence on the reconstruction of Afghan heritage. Since 2003, UNESCO actively collaborated with the Japanese Foreign Ministry, ICOMOS, the German Messerschmidt Foundation, RODIO (an internationally renowned Italian scaffolding firm), the Japanese National Research Institute for Cultural Properties, the Italian experts from ISPRA (Italian Institute for Protection and Environmental Research) and Aachen University, Munich Technical University, and ICOMOS Germany, alongside the Afghan Government Ministry of Culture and Information, the Ministry of Urban Development, and the Provincial authorities of Bamiyan to stabilise and consolidate the collapsing cliffs and two Buddha niches. Collectively, these international partners have advocated against illicit excavations and trained Afghan experts in heritage management and conservation (Manhard and Lin, 2014). With the use of appropriate scientific and archaeological instruments to evaluate the (in)stability of rock formation, tectonic setting and seismicity of the region, repair of the niches, and safeguarding of the clay remains, these experts have sought to reconstruct and reimagine the Buddhas (see Margottini, 2014). More recently, the use of photogrammetric technology has been suggested to recreate it (see Toubekis and Jansen, 2013; Morgan, 2012; Grün et al, 2004). However in December 2012, the 11th Expert Working Group meeting in Aachen, Germany, reported that "the Western Buddha niche should be consolidated and left empty at present as a testimony to the tragic act of its destruction" (Manhard and Lin, 2014, pp. 66-67). After decades of careful interventions and debates, the

contestations on what can or should be done are still testament of the international community's collective efforts to aid in the recovery and restoration of Afghanistan's cultural heritage.

But the locals view the value of their heritage differently. The government of Afghanistan has expressed a "strong wish for the partial reassembly of the Eastern Buddha to be an option in the coming years, and a feasibility study should explore whether or not this is possible" (ibid., p. 67). The locals in Bamiyan have also voiced their support for the West to rebuild these statues. According to one documentary by NATO TV, the imperative to remember the "dark days of the Taliban regime" is important. Dr Habiba Sarabi, the female provincial governor of Bamiyan remarks, "I want to see, first of all, how the Taliban and the fundamentalism or fundamentalist [sic] our Buddha, so their idea is so extremist. Always they're applying the extremism or want to expand extremism around the world." (NATO in Afghanistan – The future of the Bamiyan Buddhas, 2011). A call towards memorialisation is also a call against violence. To remember the tragedy is to remember to avoid the conditions that led to that violence. In fact, Lauren Bursey adds, "For the Afghan administration, rebuilding one of the statues would be a symbolic victory over the militant Taliban. Not rebuilding the statue, the Afghans feel, would be akin to admitting defeat at the hands of the Taliban while depriving future generations of the opportunity to appreciate these monuments first-hand" (Bursey, 2014). Subsequently, economic reasons have also been invoked as the motivation towards preserving the cultural heritage of Bamiyan. Ruth Owen, the narrator of the programme, summarises that this "renewed tourism" will help "their local

economy to develop" (ibid.). In other words, some of the locals' perspectives on 'heritage' are contextualised not as a recovery of the past, but a projection for the future. Their 'heritage' lies not in ancient Afghan antiquity, but the oppressive regime of the Taliban.

So far, the value ascribed to the statues was its physicality and cultural heritage. But equally important in this discussion is the symbolic value of the statues: spirituality. I suggest that the international community's desire to bring to fruition the lost Buddhas of Bamiyan after the demolition, paradoxically, undermines their symbolic value. This is because the presence of the deity – whether in Buddhist traditions or Abrahamic faiths – is often 'found' in an absence. In *An Anthropology of Absence*, Mikkel Bille, Frida Hastrup, and Tim Flohr Sørensen state that the "power of absence, such as an amputated arm, longing for parenthood, revolution, the coming of Messiah, or the negative imprint of a Buddha statue or the memorial "Reflecting Absence" at the site of the World Trade Center, consists in the ability of such absences to imply and direct attention towards presence" (Bille, Hastrup and Sørensen, 2010, p. 4). They refer to this paradoxical phenomenon as "the presence of absence". In other words, it is because of *absence* that there is a powerful *presence*. Filling these niches with restored Buddhas would, ironically, cancel out their spiritual significance. The collocation of contexts – spiritual, economic, cultural, physical – has contributed to the discourse on the exchange value and use value of the statues, primarily for cultural heritage. Yet the next context – the ethical one – reveals the international community's oversight or neglect on the more invisible situational contexts. It has been observed that while the Taliban allegedly demonstrated their anger over

the international community's neglect of starving children, the Taliban conducted a massacre of the Hazara ethnic minority group at Yakaolong district and Robotak Pass in Bamiyan (UNHCR, 2001) during the same time. It could even be said that the heated discourses and debates on cultural preservation deflected the ethical dimensions of other human atrocities.

Despite these 'value' representations, external audiences continue to inscribe meaning and circulate a version of what Afghanistan symbolised. As recent as June 2015, a virtual world materialised when Afghans saw a re-imagination of the Buddhas in laser beams. The Atlantic newspaper states, "3-D projection technology has already been used to resurrect dead music legends and pipe busy politicians into campaign rallies, and now it's been employed to recreate a cultural icon that watched over this valley in Afghanistan for more than 1,500 years" (Delman, 2015; see also Toubekis and Jansen, 2013). The statues were finally 'resurrected' by a Chinese millionaire couple, Zhang Xinyu and Liang Hong (Chan, 2015), who were making a documentary around the world. According to *The Atlantic*, they mounted the projector and cast 3-D holograms into the niches "after receiving approval from UNESCO and the Afghan government" (Delman, 2015; Chan, 2015). This phenomenon is peculiar as many stakeholders, including members of the public such as the Chinese tourists, want to 'own' a particular Afghan history. I posit that this is an attempt to recover a loss, to make present what had been made absent, to re-imagine what it was like, but in new ways.

Yet what is disproportionate is the 'value' ascribed to the Buddha statues: the

value outsiders had for them far outweighed the statues' aesthetic values. In fact, Morgan reported that a certain Lieutenant Vincent Eyre, who was a prisoner of the Afghans in 1842, said that "they [were] very large and very ugly" (Morgan, 2012, p. 33); or Robert Byron in 1934 stated that "[n]either (Buddha) ha[d] any artistic value… their negation of sense, the lack of any pride in their monstrous flaccid bulk, … sicken[ed]" (ibid., p. 34); and Dr James Gerard who accompanied the most famous British spy Alexander Burnes (see Chapter 2) found that at night, the "moving lights and yells of unseen people ha[d] a singularly wild effect, and one dwell[ed] in the contemplation of the scene, till it actually appear[ed] one of an infernal kind, fit only for such companions as bhuts and demons" (ibid.). Despite the alleged ugliness in form and demonic 'presence', the statues possessed an imaginary 'value' prized by Afghans and outsiders. Writing in the year 2012, Morgan raised a further provocation by asking why the public sought to own and reclaim the absent Buddhas: "At the end of a history characterised by attempts to claim Bamiyan by a spectrum of religious or cultural traditions, to whom does this precious archaeological site belong in 2012? The world? The Buddhists of the world? The nation of Afghanistan? The people of Bamiyan?" (Morgan, 2012, p. 175). To a large extent, the interventions reflected the contestations over the actual and imagined 'value' of Afghanistan's cultural heritage. The Taliban, heritage experts, locals, the government and the tourists wanted to have a 'piece' of it. But as seen, in the production and consumption of Afghan identities, a dialectical tension exists: a 'singular' Afghan narrative is constantly being deconstructed and reconstructed. Presence is made absent and absence is made present.

Making references to Rory Stewart's journey into Afghanistan, Professor of Anthropology Reinhard Bernbeck reported that the "Bamiyan Buddhas were ungainly and inflated" (Stewart, 2004, p. 258). Bernbeck also observed that "[t]he few others who [we]re aware of the ambivalent aesthetic evaluation tr[ied] to declare the question moot, but then resort[ed] to a surrogate beauty of the landscape" (Bernbeck, 2013, p. 535). In other words, there is a tendency of romanticising and even fetishising something (the Buddhas) that is not aesthetically appealing. But the perceived 'high' value of the Buddhas is enhanced presumably because there is a "surrogate beauty" in the surrounding landscape. Grün et al further reinforced that "the valley of Bamiyan and its surroundings […] is one of the most beautiful sites and spectacular views of this world" (Grün et al, 2004, p. 181). Simply put, the environment beautified the value of the stones, and because of that comparison by virtue of 'location', the 'value' of the statues appreciated greatly. By this logic, this means that the Buddha statue as a performance text will be inscribed with meanings according to whatever pleases the reader, or spectator of this theatrical event, in part influenced by the surrounding landscapes or human conditions, and in part by the 'value' bestowed on the statues on Afghan culture.

In *Of Grammatology,* Jacques Derrida develops the concept of *sous rature* ("under erasure"). In the Translator's Preface, Gayatri Spivak explains the difference between "being" and "trace". She crosses out these two words (Derrida, 1997, p. xvii), leaving them there on the page in the book like this – "the sign ~~is~~ that ill-named ~~thing~~" (ibid., p. xiv) – to illustrate that "[s]ince the word is inaccurate, it is crossed out. Since it is necessary, it remains legible"

(ibid., p. xiv). It is inaccurate because the meanings ("being") are unclear, but they are left behind to show a "trace" of meanings that can come close to these referents. This points to the concept of *sous rature*, the dialectical tension between presence and absence, that even under erasure, the word is recognised, yet simultaneously questioned for the meaning it seeks to convey. Derrida explains that "[t]he exteriority of the signifier is the exteriority of writing in general, and […] that there is no linguistic sign before writing" (ibid., p. 14). I interpret the exterior act of writing on a page parallels the writing of this performance text (Buddha statues) by all the stakeholders. Here, the intended preservation of the Buddhas is an authorial creation similar to writing, but with the destruction of the Buddhas, the niche now becomes the blank 'text' in which erasure – the tension between presence and absence – occurs (see also the name of Berta Bauer's organisation in Chapter 3 being erased). The above interventions by international partners, including the Chinese tourists, all compete to create a projection of what they perceive as Afghan heritage. Instead of holding together the paradoxes between a spiritual presence and absence of the statues, the international spectators of this theatrical event are filling up the void to recapture the essence of an historical past. The spectators have moved beyond interpretation (consumption) to inscription (production). There is a role reversal in this interventionist act, blurring the 'value' of an Afghan culture.

In this case study, I first raised the question on the 'value' for life (starvation of Afghan children and the annexation of Hazaras) and the 'value' for art (heritage preservation), especially in the way the religious, economic, political and ethical contexts are collocated and layered one after the other. I then theorised about the

paradox of presence and absence, that in the 'consumption' (interpreting) of Afghan cultural heritage, local and international stakeholders, including tourists, have participated in the 'production' of a fetish value of the statues. This reflects a constant contestation of Afghan identities, histories and cultures *from and beyond* Kabul. In the next case study, I shall examine a theatre performance that actually leaves the geographical boundaries of Afghanistan to be performed in Japan, raising more questions on the reconstructions of identities as part of a transglobal movement.

'Infinite Incompleteness' (2010)

Infinite Incompleteness (thereafter, *Infinite)* is a play written and produced by Hjalmar Jorge Joffre-Eichhorn, a Bolivian-German applied theatre practitioner who co-founded the Afghanistan Human Rights and Democracy Organisation, or AHRDO (see *Memory Boxes* in Chapter 3). It is a play that focuses on transitional justice and women's rights. The source material for the dialogues in the play are drawn from more than twenty Playback performances, where audiences are encouraged to tell their stories and have their stories performed back by AHRDO's small group of practitioners. From the approximately 120 stories that were told, a total of ten were then "carefully selected, linguistically edited and arranged in a basic storyline that takes into consideration Afghanistan's ethnic and linguistic diversity (the three main national languages are spoken by the characters during the performance), the different conflicts starting from 1978 up to the present, as well as the promotion of both male and female voices" (AHRDO 2014, p. 94). AHRDO then added fictional actions and events "to create a final narrative that is set in the past, present, and ultimately, future of the country" (ibid., p. 95). The play was first performed in 2010 in

Kabul, then in Washington, D.C. and New York City in 2011. In 2014, AHRDO published the play in *PAJ: A Journal Of Performance And Art*, with a subtitle: "A Documentary Theatre Play" (ibid., p. 94). They claim that the play comprises "real accounts" (ibid.) of stories from survivors of war in Afghanistan and that it is performed "verbatim" (ibid., p. 95), which I will show is a problematic 'value' given to the "documentary theatre" as a specific genre, hence potentially blurring lines of reality and fiction for a particularised consumption of Afghan suffering. Referring to the specific group of audiences they play to, I will also argue that AHRDO relies on a careful 'marketing' of victims' stories globally, using these as evidence, or "use-value" in Marx's term, against war perpetrators.

The three-scene play is performed by one female and three male persons, each taking turns to tell "verbatim" (ibid.) stories of nine Afghan people, all of whom chronicle in some graphic ways the manner in which their family members were shot, killed, or tortured. For example in one of the stories, ninety-year-old Haji Moqim says, "I was told that my son was killed when he opened the door trying to escape to the roof. When I saw my son, I didn't see any injuries on him but when I went to the roof, I saw sprinkles of blood and pieces of his brain and clothes all over" (ibid., p. 98). Dr Sharif, in another story, recounts, "The interrogator called four more people. They tied my hands and feet and started beating me with a cable for hours. Then they started torturing me with electric shocks" (ibid., p. 100). In Zarghona's story, the thirty-year-old woman recounts, "When I heard for the first time that my husband was killed, I did not want to believe it. From hands to toes my entire body turned red and those red fires have stayed with me ever since. It's been eight, nine years but I can still feel the pain. They shot my husband in the heart. Both in the heart and in the back" (ibid., p.

104). Forty-six-year-old Shafiqa's story is similar. She says, "When I arrived home, I saw that my nephew had been killed. His brain came out of his ears. My daughter thought it was cotton. No, it was his brain" (ibid., p. 109). Throughout the play, there is an overwhelming sense of helplessness and pessimism, evoked by specific details of horror and scattered body parts. This degree of shock is arguably accentuated by an understanding that the dialogues are real, but uncritically collapsing notions of fiction as will be illustrated through the characterisation of Butimar-e Kabul.

Sometimes known as testimony theatre (see Waterson, 2010), ethnodrama (see Saldaña, 2005), theatre of witness (Malpede, 1996; "Theatre of Witness: Teya Sepinuck in conversation with Carole-Anne Upton", 2010), or verbatim theatre (see Hammond and Steward, 2008; Wake, 2013; 2008), documentary theatre use people's real life stories, usually in the form of oral testimonies to form the content of the play (see Forsyth and Megson, 2009). Alan Filewood who had recorded Canadian theatre history states that the documentary theatre genre can be "analysed as both an historical phenomenon and a genre of performance with its unique formal characteristics" (Filewood, 1987, p. viii). He adds that because references are made within the performance itself – for example, the names and ages of the witnesses in my example – it "breaks down the normal expectations of fiction on stage" (ibid., p. x) while "authenticat[ing] the play's claim to factual veracity" (ibid.). It functions like a document. Because the "value of the document is predicated on a realist epistemology" (Reinelt, 2009, p. 7), Janelle Reinelt claims that the "experience of documentary is dependent on phenomenological engagement" (ibid.). In the case of *Infinite*, this engagement is characterised by shock and horror as audiences witness nine victims' stories. For

example, it is observed that the recurrent theme in *Infinite* is death; the frequency of the word "dead" appears twenty-nine times and "killed" appeared twenty-six times throughout, referring to deceased family members, actors counting the "dead", or actors 'killing' each other on stage and lying "dead. To a large extent, AHRDO's "documentary theatre" (AHRDO, 2014, p. 94) functions like an archive whose "use value" is shock. In her reference to war photographs, Susan Sontag states that the "hunt for more dramatic […] images drives the photographic [or in my case, theatrical] enterprise, and is part of the normality of a culture in which shock has become a leading stimulus of consumption and source of value" (Sontag, 2003, p. 23). But in the case of AHRDO, I posit that the value of shock is part of their larger political enterprise: they are using horror to critique US-Afghan politics in exchange for transitional justice.

Infinite is first framed by a blocking of three sites. According to the stage directions, stage right is designated the mass gravesite, centre stage as the construction site, and stage left a garbage site, with all three men praying in each of these sites, two of whom pray "in the Sunni way" (AHRDO, 2014, p. 97) and one "in the Shi'ite way" (ibid.). The stage directions explain that the first man is taking Polaroid pictures of victims, "documenting all the atrocities that happened over the past decades" (ibid.), while the second is inspecting the garbage site carrying the "load of history" (ibid.), and the third arranging bricks and stones as a way of "(re)building a new Afghanistan" (ibid.). These are directorial comments that take on the past, present, and future representations of Afghan histories respectively, a symbolic interpretation which may not be obvious to the audience member. Upstage, a pregnant woman, called the Butimar-e Kabul – which is not a proper noun – has a map of Afghanistan "covered with pictures of

the millions of men and women who died during the various conflicts in the country" (ibid.). One by one, she takes these photos, counts them, and throws them into the fire of the *bokhari* heater. The various monologues are performed, as previously illustrated, with the other actors still engrossed with their own activity. At the end of Scene One, the men walk away suspiciously and swap their "sites" with each other, now occupying a different one from the one they were in. In the second scene, however, the men silently engage in a physical confrontation between the monologues. Dust and rocks are thrown at each other while one mimes an attempt in hanging himself. This scene ends with the Butimar-e Kabul reciting a poem and the men strangle each other, screaming. In Scene Three, after the next set of victims' stories are told, the men "get increasingly violent" (ibid.) and "destroy the different sites" (ibid.), taking whatever object is available and kill each other. The stage directions state that all three men "lay dead on the streets of Kabul" (ibid.). The only survivor, the woman, then grabs the Polaroid camera, takes a picture of the three dead men, covers them with white cloth, puts the pictures on top of them, delivers her baby beside the corpses, picks the baby up while singing an Afghan lullaby, drops the baby and "starts cutting her nose and ears with a pair of scissors" (ibid.). She picks the baby up, writes a Victims Manifesto, and reads it aloud, and the scene ends with a soundclip from President Barack Obama: "There is a difference between Afghanistan and Iraq. Afghanistan is a war that we had to fight and we have to win because that is where Al-Qaeda launched the attacks that killed three thousand Americans" (ibid., p. 112).

Infinite has documented perpetrators such as the warlords (in Haji Moqim's story), or the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (in Dr Sharif's story), or

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the Taliban (in the stories by Said Mohammad, Mirwais, Hakima, and Zarghona). Framed also by Obama's pre-recorded speech, *Infinite*'s narratives of fiction and reality have been intentionally blurred, especially through the characterisation of the maternal figure who abuses her own baby. This discussion will be taken up later. But at this juncture, AHRDO appears to be criticising the US-led invasion of Afghanistan as the cause of grievous hurt and deaths. This is arguably stemming from AHRDO's perspective, rather than the victims'. If that was so, then AHRDO demonises Americans as the oppressive outsider. Here in *Infinite*, AHRDO seems to use the same ideological practices as seen in *Memory Boxes* (see Chapter 3) to shame President Obama into taking responsibility for war crimes. (In Memory Boxes, AHRDO relegates responsibility of the boxes to the "international community", hence is seen to be absolving their own responsibility as an organisation). From this perspective, horror and the testimonies of death are being treated with a use-value for political means.

On a more discursive context, I question AHRDO's explicit use of "documentary theatre" as a genre for shaming at the expense of the victims' stories and the audiences' witnessing. Kerrie Schaefer makes a strong assertion that when working with the testimony of marginalised or oppressed communities, there is a tendency for theatre practitioners to privilege the realist genre, which then "lays claim to presenting authentic, that is direct and unmediated, experience of a particular problem" (Schaefer, 2009, p. 87), but denies or blurs artistic mediations and interventions. She explains, "In so speaking 'truth' to 'power' the idealization of authentic experience obscures the act of translation (from personal story to public performance as theatre) and the role of subjectivity of the theatre worker in the process of performance making" (ibid.). But I argue that this is

further conflated with the political intent of the organisation. In *Change on Whose Terms? Testimony and an Erotics of Injury*, Julie Salverson asks:

> Is there a conceptual language through which artists and educators can negotiate our representative and pedagogical practices? Without a language that brings together questions of ethics, mimesis, and testimony we are left with an atmosphere of mystification and cannot clarify how performances operate to educate, to envision, to relieve pain, or simply to reinscribe stories of victimization. (Salverson, 2001, p. 120)

Salverson calls this circulation of victimisation the "erotics of injury", as well as the "erotics of suffering" (see also Salverson, 1999) – with a sexual metaphor of gaining 'pleasure' from it. She construes this as a form of "looking *out* at some exoticized and deliberately tragic other [which is] [e]ven more discomforting than […] voyeurism" (Salverson, 2001, p. 122). This term "erotics of suffering", however, has been rephrased by Emma Cox as "fetishisation of suffering" (Cox, 2012, p. 122). This discursive context, collocated with the political context of AHRDO, seems to codify and re-sediment a narration of powerlessness that now not only perpetuates the mythology of Afghanistan's violent histories (see Chapter 2), but also produces the same myths for a global audience to consume. But what is the purpose of such a commodification?

The majority of the audiences from and beyond Kabul for *Infinite Incompleteness* include human rights activists who use theatre for political means, or at least a targeted group of people (including university students) who care for, and fight against, oppressions such as this. For example, AHRDO performed this play in Kabul in 2010 at the Lycée Estiqlal on Human Rights Day; at the American University in Washington, D.C. in 2011; at the Helen Mills Theatre in New York

City in 2011; and more recently at the World Voices: International Play Festival at City University of New York (CUNY) in 2015. Except for the International Play Festival at CUNY, the other events are centred on human rights activism. One of the host organisations that invited AHRDO to New York is the International Center for Transitional Justice (ICTJ). The ICTJ operates from a transitional justice model, which basically means that the organisation "works to help societies in transition address legacies of massive human rights violations and build civic trust in state institutions as protectors of human rights" (ICTJ, n.d.). ICTJ also states on its website that "[i]n the aftermath of mass atrocity and repression, [they] assist institutions and civil society groups—the people who are driving and shaping change in their societies—in considering measures to provide truth, accountability, and redress for past abuses" (ibid.). This coincides with AHRDO's mission to promote participatory democracy in programmes that "create spaces for dialogue, peace-building, social justice, public participation and consequently societal transformation from the grassroots up" (AHRDO, n.d., a).

In the performances at the American University in Washington D.C on 5 November 2011, and the Helen Mills Theatre in New York on 8 November 2011, Patricia Gossman (who is a Senior Researcher with Human Rights Watch in Afghanistan and the Acting Head of Afghanistan Programme of ICTJ) sat on the panel with Hadi Marifat, the Director and Co-Founder of AHRDO. Richard Bennett, Special Advisor to the UN Assistant Secretary-General for Human Rights, was also on the panel at the Helen Mills Theatre. These are considerably influential people in the human rights sector, hence the political positioning of AHRDO's work is an important one. This is especially important because it is

AHRDO's "hope to highlight victims' and justice issues ahead of the Bonn 10 Conference on Afghanistan as well as to examine the use of arts-based techniques in approaching questions of accountability in conflict and post-conflict settings" (Levitow, 2011), as reported in the Theatre Without Borders website. In other words, there is a strategic 'marketing' of the work (use value) that AHRDO does to effect changes on the political front (exchange value). The Bonn 10 Conference refers to the 10th Anniversary of the Bonn Agreement, which is a "series of agreements designed to re-build the state of Afghanistan following the U.S. invasion in response to the 9/11 terrorist attacks" (Embassy of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, Oslo, n.d.). Established in 2001 in Bonn, Germany, together with the aid of the United Nations, the Afghan Interim Authority functioned as "a provisional government for six months, at which point the Transitional Authority [namely Hamid Karzai] would head the government for two years, followed by elections" (Council on Foreign Relations, 2001). This was an attempt to form a functioning, more permanent government of Afghanistan. According to the UN, the "agreement provides the legal framework until the adoption of a new constitution. The Agreement also calls for the integration of all armed groups into the new Afghan Armed Forces under the authority of the Interim Authority. The Agreement calls for the UN to assist in the formation of a national army and the UN Representative to lend his Good Offices to facilitate post agreement implementation" (United Nations Peacemaker, 2001). Here, AHRDO positions themselves as part of that movement towards a fully, functioning democracy for Afghanistan, justifying, perhaps, the use of victims' stories and making them more visible.

According to Hadi Marifat, their transitional justice action plans had been

approved by former President Karzai himself, but Marifat adds that the risks are still very real, especially since these stories performed in *Infinite* function as evidence against war atrocities. He says in an interview, "What do you do with the documents, you know, you get from the victims? […] And there's a risk, you know, that every time these warlords that are still in power, and they have, let's say, stronger influence over security forces in the country, so they could come to you and stop you and take whatever you have. But we as a human rights organisation working in Afghanistan, it's such a difficult circumstance, challenging. Always take a low profile in order to be safe, and protect ourself [sic] from them" (ICTJ, 2011). But AHRDO does not seem to be keeping a low profile.

For AHRDO, one of the main concerns is to raise political awareness of the injustices suffered by Afghan families to the government in Afghanistan (see *Memory Boxes* in Chapter 3). They had held policy meetings with UN officials and had provided "briefings to diplomats representing the permanent missions of Finland, Norway, Denmark, Germany, Canada, Turkey, Switzerland and Iceland […] on the situation of human rights and women rights in Afghanistan" (AHRDO, n.d, d). Moreover, in an interview with Joffre-Eichhorn, the other co-founder and playwright, says that it is a play that "tries to address decades of impunity […] where basically very, very few people have ever seen a jail from the inside, or have ever held accountable for the crimes they committed" (Joffre-Eichhorn, 2013, personal communication). He adds, and I quote at length:

> But at the same time, I think, today in hindsight after three years it was originally produced, you can also say this play has made a small, but

hopefully significant, contribution to the fact that ever so slowly, little changes with regards to addressing the past are happening in the country. Such as, for example, when General Dostum, as part of his presidential campaign for 2014, for the first time has acknowledged the atrocities, has apologised not personally but in the name of the perpetrators. Where a few weeks ago, a list was released with 5000 dead people that had not been released for thirty years. And now there's a list out there when many victims for the first time have absolute confirmation that their husbands, or brothers, or sons were killed, and that list in itself – even though it's a painful document – has also given a lot of recognition and even satisfaction in the sense of 'I know what happened to my family member' to the victims of Afghanistan. (Joffre-Eichhorn, 2013, personal communication)

Tangible benefits, including aspects of relief and reconciliation as highlighted by Joffre-Eichhorn, have resulted from the performances of *Infinite*, which, to some extent, echo a re-writing of Afghan history, as did the earlier case study on Bamiyan Buddhas, so AHRDO's work is not as "low profile" as Marifat had claimed. In fact, their visibility in the public and international arena as seen by the wide-ranging performances *from* and *beyond* Kabul, especially in New York, is hardly "low profile" either. Furthermore, in November 2013, AHRDO organised the "Central/South Asia 1st Theatre of the Oppressed Conference" with the theme "creative resistance for women's rights" with participants from "Iran, Pakistan, Nepal, India, Bangladesh, Kyrgyzstan, Egypt, Singapore, Afghanistan, UK, USA, Germany, and Bolivia" (Asia's Theatre of Oppressed Network, 2013), all of which highlight the intensity of AHRDO's strategies for public engagement beyond its geographical boundaries, including bringing the play to Japan. The list of countries, as well as partners and audiences, are testament of AHRDO's reach *beyond* Kabul, which I posit as strategically produced and marketed to address

human rights abuses. Even though the play addresses war atrocities to all victims, both male and female, AHRDO's particular positioning focuses more on women's rights.

The idea of women's rights, as personified in *Infinite*, is best captured by the lone survivor of the play. When all the other (male) characters have 'died' on stage, Butimar-e Kabul delivers a baby, mutilates the nose and ears of her newborn, and delivers a long monologue. In her reading of the Victims Manifesto, Butimar-e Kabul says:

> My dear child, although I should confess that it was not my wish to deliver you among the fire and chaos, in a place where men slaughter one another and sleep with teenage girls in beds soaked in blood, this skirt of sin unwrapped to commit another wrong. The truth is, you belong to one of the countless generations that came from this aberrant skirt. Sometimes you grow up in exile, other times among the bombing and shelling of your hometown. In one of the dark nights, on the outskirts of the mountain where you lost your dignity, you were taken to the abandoned graveyard of the victims.

The references to "teenage girls in beds soaked in blood", her "skirt of sin", and the "aberrant skirt" suggest violations of women's rights, for example, in cases of child brides (see Rasmussen, 2015; BBC News, 2014a; Coren, 2014; Arifa, 2013) and rapes (see Saul, 2015; Galpin, 2014; Khamoosh, 2015; Walsh, 2015). The recent beating and burning of Farkhunda who allegedly burned the Qur'an also shows a high level of violence towards women in Afghanistan (see BBC News Asia, 2015b; Motley, 2015; Siddique, 2015). While physical deaths are mentioned in the play, women's 'deaths' are symbolically referenced, with

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intertextual links to knowledge of what is happening in the Afghan society. As the only woman left on stage doing the unthinkable act of mutilating her own child, she has been caricaturised as *the* victim, the mother who reads the Victims Manifesto, someone who appears rather non-human. Remembering that this piece of theatre has been construed as "documentary theatre" by AHRDO, the fictional character depicting Butimar-e Kabul's victimhood blurs fiction and reality, and has been feminised for a political effect. Yet in her femininity (as a mother), she was construed as a monstrous other. Italian feminist Rosi Braidotti states that the feminine monstrous figure "points to a system that is implicit in the binary logic of oppositions that characterizes the phallogocentric discursive order" (Braidotti, 2011, p. 80). For her, the "monstrous as the negative pole, the pole of pejoration, is structurally analogous to the feminine as that which is other-than the established norm", which, in this line of reasoning, construes the female actor amongst three male actors a sexual deviant. Here, I take the casting and narrative choice symbolic of a larger system of unequal power at work. Braidotti continues:

> Within this dualistic system, monsters are, just like bodily female subjects, a figure of devalued difference; as such, it provides the fuel for the production of normative discourse. If the position of women and monsters as logical operators in discursive production is comparable within the dualistic logic, it follows that the misogyny of discourse is not an irrational exception but rather a tightly constructed system that requires difference as pejoration in order to erect the positivity of the norm. (ibid.)

It can be argued, therefore, that this play, and especially the portrayal of an Afghan woman in this role, is problematised by this return to the norm, the

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heteronormative misogynist discourse that continues to violate the feminine other – a trope that is evident in the way women are reportedly (mis)treated in Afghan society (see, for example, the Afghan Girl in Chapter 1) and therefore need saving. Possibly, this symbolic portrayal is what AHRDO had intended to show, that is, the harsh realities women are still imprisoned by. But this is further troubled by the artistic naming of this character. Her name 'Butimar-e Kabul' is neither a Dari or Pashto word; its 'nonsensical' coinage associated with Kabul construes her more as an abstract symbol or an institution (the city), that ironically projects her lesser than a human being, unlike the nine individual stories of Haji Moqim, Dr Sharif, Said Mohammad, Sabzagul, Hakima, Zarghona, Abdul Alim, Mirwais, or Shafiqa. She – her name – is conjoined to the 'institutionalised' cold-hearted identity of Kabul. Furthermore, she proclaims that she is "alone", and rightly so, since she is the only female performer in the ensemble performing an act of artistic (and symbolic) violence while seeking help: "Someone is coming. Someone who is with us in heart, breath and voice. Someone is coming. Someone whose coming cannot be prevented. Handcuffed and thrown in jail. Someone is coming. Someone else. Someone better. Someone who is like no one" (AHRDO, 2014, p. 112). As seen, AHRDO constructs this other monstrous feminine figure as use-value to propagate and circulate tropes of victimhood, seeking help. It is the same appeal for redemption or salvation that earlier tropes had identified when it comes to saving Muslim women (see Abu-Lughod, 2002). All these point to the complexities, and possibly, misleading use of testimonies in AHRDO's play, especially here with a "documentary theatre" conflated with an imaginary characterisation.

From 19-23 December 2013, *Infinite Incompleteness* was performed in Tokyo as

part of the 'Theatre Born in Conflict Zones' series organised by the Agency of Cultural Affairs of Japan and the Japanese Center of the International Theatre Institute (ITI), co-produced by Tokyo Metropolitan Theatre (Andrews, 2015; Japanese Centre for Intercultural Theatre Institute, n.d.), where productions from Palestine, Algeria, Romania, and the Middle East have also been showcased. The play was directed by Yoshinori Kouke and produced by Hideki Hayashi. It was translated, adapted, and re-titled *Irreparable* by Ms Ayako Goto, and performed by Ms Moeko Koyama, Ms Hikari Masaki, Koichi Hanagasaki, Taka Okubo, and Kenjiro Otani. Drawing on an earlier quote by Janelle Reinelt, she states, and I reiterate, that the "value of the document is predicated on a realist epistemology, but the experience of documentary is dependent on phenomenological engagement" (Reinelt, 2009, p. 7). Reinelt also claims that the "documentary is not in the object but in the relationship between the object, its mediators (artists, historians, authors) and its audiences" and that the "experience of documentary is connected to reality but is not transparent, and is in fact constitutive of the reality it seeks" (ibid.). Instead of fetishising suffering and horror as AHRDO had done, Kenjiro Otani, the Japanese actor playing Dr Sharif, avoided such objectifications by making a distinction between him and the role, and between his Japanese audience and the Afghan situation – a collocation with a different cultural context.

Having attended and participated in ten rehearsals at the point of the interview, Otani showed an acute awareness of performance technique. When asked about some of the challenges when playing Dr Sharif, the Pashtun character, Otani replied:

Like I said, first of all, I am *not* him. And in that case, when he's playing, there was him talking with himself on stage. So already, I have one additional layer that I have to portray – him speaking about himself. And plus, this man – Dr Sharif – he himself being Pashtun has acted a woman of the same tribe and a man from a different tribe. I'm sure he has done it through his perspective in Afghanistan. But I don't. So my perspectives are not as simply, like, it is not one. I have like, you know, I have very complex […] It's very complicated actually. It's actually kind of bizarre, to think about where I should put my perspectives. It's like I am the [*unclear word*] person – because I have not experienced any of those. But I, as an actor, I have to imagine it. To certain degrees, I have to have sympathy to it, to them. So it's a unique experience. (Otani, 2013, personal communication)

Otani recognised the difficulties in playing Dr Sharif, saying that he had to "imagine it" and to "have sympathy to it, to them". Furthermore, Otani recognised that Dr Sharif was "actually himself playing himself" back in Afghanistan, but that he also played three other victim roles, which was "going to be duplex or complex" for Otani. Borrowing Joseph Roach's concept of "surrogacy" (Roach, 2004), which is "the substitution of one person or process for another" to produce a "vicarious experience, vicarious sacrifice, and vicarious bleeding" (Roach, 2004, p. 568), I interpret Dr Sharif's role as an actor 'sacrificing' himself as the symbolic martyr. Roach states that in surrogacy, actors "are not merely there *for* us; they are there *instead* of us" (ibid.). In other words, Dr Sharif, the man/actor, was a surrogate for the other roles he was playing – a Pashtun woman (Sabzagul) and an Uzbek man (Mirwais) – that instead of the victims re-telling their own narratives, Dr Sharif had become their Afghan substitute. However, the idea of surrogacy did not feature in Kenjiro Otani's reflections in the same sense. He explained the conundrum:

It's… it's... it's not really possible to be the person as an actor when you play a character. So the only thing you can do is to use your imagination, to think what if you were in that situation. So I think that's one of the main purposes as an actor. So with this particular play, of course, it is not even my aim to portray this character at all. It's me. I'm not acting, actually. I am speaking all the words as spoken by the people. As simple as possible, instead of faking it, instead of pretending as if I am the character. And I think it's very, very important for me to deal with such documentary theatre. (Otani, 2013, personal communication)

Otani's "I'm not acting, actually" is qualitatively different from Roach's surrogacy, where the usual victimhood tropes result in far-too-quick responses to save (see Chapters 1 and 2 for examples): the Butimar-e Kabul ended her monologue seeking for someone to come save her. Otani's response as an actor was not one of a symbolic martyrdom as Dr Sharif's. Rather, his ability to sympathise resulted in him taking on an Afghan's perspective without reducing or conflating identities. I suggest that his surrogacy – playing Dr Sharif's role(s) – was rooted in an ethical stance that sought to offer a responsive, albeit aesthetic representation of the many victims' stories. As a professional actor who had studied Theatre Arts at San Francisco State University from 1992 to 1995, he said that he was not acting, nor faking it. Rather, he had chosen to speak Dr Sharif's words "as simple as possible". Further on in Otani's interview, he stated that there were too many differences between life in Afghanistan and life in Japan. He said, "To be honest, I cannot imagine the situation that's happening in Afghanistan. I can only picture it, but I can't physically or mentally experience the way they are actually experiencing it" (Otani, 2013, personal communication). He added, "I don't want to be irresponsible because it's totally

different. The situation is completely different from Afghanistan to Japan" (ibid.).

Here, he underscored the cultural differences without universalising experiences or essentialising 'Afghan' attributes. Otani demonstrated his own ethical context that should be foregrounded: responsibility.

The concept of "responsibility" (a trope which was taken up in my response to *Heartbeat* in Chapter 3, and will be taken up again in Chapter 5's *The Kite Runner*) seems to suggest that there is a certain aesthetic distance and ethical obligation to which Otani, the actor, was bound to. Borrowing Elin Diamond's *The Violence of 'We'* to illustrate the power dynamics of these kinds of identifications and disidentification between actors and character, she states: "Naturalizing the relation between character and actor, setting and world, realism's project is always ideological, drawing spectators into identifications with its coherent fictions. It is through such identifications that realism surreptitiously reinforces (even if it argues with) the social arrangements of the society it claims to mirror" (Diamond, 2007, p. 407). Diamond is arguing that identifications, when left unchecked, can result in reinforcing certain social arrangements, which in this case, entrench victimhood discourse further. Otani's ethical response is to not meld his own identity into Dr Sharif's selves. By making himself visible, Otani interrupts the culture of production, and hence production of culture, that is characterised by Diamond's sense of disidentification. It is a strategic act of resistance, to potentially avoid the commodification of suffering and horror. This, I argue, is because the stage reading in Tokyo is primarily driven by an aesthetic theatrical context, rather than an overtly political one.

In my examination of *Infinite Incompleteness,* horror and deaths in the genre of a piece of "documentary theatre" possess a use value because realist epistemologies are known to evoke responses. In a political context, they are exchanged to address human rights abuse and advocate for transitional justice. In a theatrical context in terms of casting, I have put forward the argument that AHRDO had feminised victimhood instead. The Butimar-e Kabul, as the only woman left on stage, had been construed as a monstrous other as she mutilated her own child. All these visibilities seek to entrench victimhood discourses from and beyond Kabul. But when collocated with a different cultural context in Japan, Otani's disidentification with the roles he was playing established an ethical response – responsibility – so that the theatrical genre did not collapse into an "erotics of suffering" in Salverson's words, but one with a more nuanced understanding of Afghan suffering. In the next case study, I shall examine a Shakespearean production in London to interrogate the use value of a very visible performance beyond Kabul.

'The Comedy of Errors' (2012)

The Shakespearean play *The Comedy of Errors* (thereafter, *The Comedy)* was performed by Roy-e Sabs Theatre (originally Rah-e Sabs, meaning 'Path of Hope') in London during the Cultural Olympiad World Shakespeare Festival from 30 – 31 May 2012. Directed by German-Canadian actress, Corinne Jaber, and produced by Oxford alumnus, Roger Granville, the play toured India (Bangalore, Pune, Mumbai, and Delhi from 12 – 22 May 2012), Germany (in a town called Neuss), and the United Kingdom (Sheldonian Theatre and Hatfield House in Oxford, and Globe Theatre in London). In Roy-e Sabs' Dari version *Comedy-e-Eshtebahat*, names and cities were changed to reflect a more

'authentic' Afghan feel for global audiences. Instead of the shipwreck at sea, the setting was changed to a desert to reflect the Afghan terrain. The corpus comprises a BBC Four documentary, *Shakespeare from Kabul*, aired on 5 August 2012; my observation and participation at the Globe Theatre as an audience member; interviews with cast members; and theatre reviews of the performance.

Corinne Jaber trained with Monika Pagneux and Philippe Gaulier in Paris, and had worked with both Peter Brook and Ariane Mnouchkine (Purcell, 2012). In 1987, Jaber performed in *The Mahabharata* directed by Brook. In addition to her European tour of Bruce Myers' bilingual production *A Dybbuk for Two People* (1992), Jaber acted with the Royal Shakespeare Company. In 2001, she was awarded "the Moliere Prize—the French equivalent of the Tony—for best actress in Richard Kalinowski's *Beast on the Moon*" (Seligson, 2011). Jaber's professional accolades and international prestige bear testimony to her success at selecting timely and artistically interesting projects. In 2005, Jaber directed a production of *Love's Labour's Lost* in Kabul (see Omar and Landrigan, 2012; Carroll, 2010), deemed as "ambitious" and triumphant (see Seligson, 2011) but highly controversial. For example, the "actresses in *Love's Labour's Lost* did not hide behind veils or burqas and were allowed to flirt with their co-stars – a strict taboo in the world beyond the playhouse" (BBC News, 2005). In the Afghan cultural context, I argue that her directorial choices and practices had compromised the performers' safety. Probably because of the apparent successful collaboration between Jaber and the cast, she returned to Kabul to direct *The Comedy of Errors* at the end of 2011. I will not summarise the synopsis of *The Comedy*, or examine the text, as the plot is inconsequential to the issues that I want to raise, primarily on the process of theatre-making, the global reception of

'Afghan' theatre, and the commodification of heroism.

In one particular scene from a BBC Four documentary, Jaber is sitting with the ensemble and says that she is "going to say something again which they're [actors] not going to like" (Shakespeare from Kabul, 2012; after which, direct quotes are from the documentary, unless otherwise stated). She turns to the female actors and says, "Whenever the men come on stage, there is a wonderful energy and liveliness. And when the women come on stage, it's like…", and then she yawns, slumps to the side, and snores. At this moment, the oldest actress, Parwin Mushtal, nods in agreement. Jaber continues:

> No, but why, why do you let the men bring all the energy on stage? Why now, that we have Afghan women [fists pounding on her laps] on stage, in this theatre, you let the men do all the work? [Frotan, another actress, gives a smile that appears to disagree] And again, you retreat and you don't want to show yourself as an actor – I don't know what it is – WHY? Don't let the men take over the space on stage, vocally, physically. Be there. Take your place. Because otherwise, the impression we give of this country, that again, the play is like Afghanistan, where all the women are hidden away (*hands covering face*) and you don't see them in their own houses. At the moment, it looks like that.

Jaber wants the female performers to push their own physical and aesthetic boundaries. Her "take your place" can be read in many ways. Aesthetically, the women's physical energy on stage seems to be waning. Even among the male actors, women are chastised for their lack of acting abilities. Nabi Tanha, a famous actor who starred as Ali in *The Kite Runner* movie (2007; see also Chapter 5), remarks, "I told you there are a lot of actresses here you can see on

TV. Everyone says I am an actor or actress but in their brain there is nothing. There's a big difference between them and Shakespeare." The youngest actress says that the men who are in the ensemble "have twenty or thirty years of experience. We started from nothing and they are masters". To a large extent, this form of gender discrimination seen in the way both genders perceive each other and of themselves is possibly what Jaber seeks to remove, so that the women can take their social place and stand as equals with men, without the sense of inferiority and powerlessness. Hence, "tak[ing] your place" can be read symbolically and politically, even though Jaber acknowledges that she is not a feminist. Yet when Jaber remarks "Because otherwise, the impression we give of this country, that again, the play is like Afghanistan, where all the women are hidden away and you don't see them in their own houses", she is ironically reinforcing the stereotypes that Afghan women's invisibility is a sign of weakness. Her attempts to raise the public profile of these female actresses can therefore be seen as the missionary act of rescuing Afghan women from the symbolic burqa (see, for example, Abu-Lughod, 2002; Zeiger, 2008) that hides women from the public eye. Telling them to take their place (on stage) is a sign of empowerment. In other words, women's visibility, in Jaber's perception, connotes equality with men.

Following Jaber's admonition to the ensemble, Harriet Shawcross, the documentary commentator, states that the director "is not just asking the women to be more outspoken". She narrates that "the rehearsals are becoming increasingly physical. And men and women are interacting in ways they would never do at home", with a scene of Jaber instructing a female actor how a male actor should embrace her. Here, the male actor Abdulhaq Haqjoo (the same actor

from *An Enemy of the People*, see Chapter 3) comes behind Jaber, has one forearm across her chest and the other cupping her eyes like a blindfold, in a demonstrably romantic scene between husband and wife. Jaber admits, "They are hugging, touching… but we're not kissing yet". She chuckles and says that "all that, all that goes really well. It was a lot of work, a lot of, you know, uncontrollable giggling." Shah Mohamad, one male actor in the ensemble, explains that he has never seen anyone embrace in Afghan films. The only kind of touch he has seen, as he demonstrates, is to have the woman's palm on his palm, and both sets of fingers gently touch. Abida Frotan, one female actress, shows extreme discomfort in that and says, "When we go back to Afghanistan [after the London production], maybe I could have family problems because I have been threatened before, and some of my family have stopped talking to me." The actress, Farzana who in the scene is hugged by Haqjoo, recognises this as an external cultural influence and remarks that Jaber was from overseas and had enjoyed a different sense of freedom, possibly even the same freedom as men in Afghanistan. Nonetheless, she exclaims, "I am thinking that if I go to Afghanistan and I become a victim, although I hope it doesn't turn out like that, it will have been worth it. If we don't do this, then who will?" As seen here, the former actress expresses worry about what might happen to them, whilst the latter seems to show a certain degree of self-sacrifice in the name of art. Farzana says "it will have been worth it". I will be developing this self-representation as sacrifice, and possibly martyrdom, but before doing so, an important contextual response from Jaber needs to be articulated: her stance on doing theatre in a conflict zone.

In the documentary, Corinne Jaber explains:

I'm not a feminist in that sense. And I'm not doing it for the purpose of I'm going to make these women more free. It is more to do with, I'm an artist and I'm putting on a play with them and telling a story. And in order to do that, this is what we need to do.

At the outset, it appears that, for Jaber, the aesthetics of storytelling in theatre take privilege and the act of storytelling is independent of any socio-political or religious context – that there is a play, and so "this is what we need to do" to tell that story. Jaber's emphasis on telling the story was challenged during the casting of actresses. In the documentary, Abida Frotan, one of the few women who got the role eventually, reported that her "meagre salary" from teaching was not sufficient to support her family. She recounted that her daughter was very sick and needed to be taken to the doctor, but her husband yelled, "To hell with her. She's a girl, wait until she's married and then her husband will pay for treatment. If she is to die - then let her die." Since then, she had taken on acting on film just to "pay for the children's school, the rent, and the bills" (BBC News Asia, 2012). Recognising the dire situation that the women who had come for audition were in, Jaber emphasises, "I'm not doing a humanitarian project. I'm not doing an aid project. *I'm doing culture*" (italics mine). This seemingly mundane and innocuous phrase immediately raises two questions that beg to be asked: What does "doing culture" mean for the Afghan society? Can such an endeavour be simplistically divorced from the political, humanitarian, and social contexts that plague Afghanistan for decades? Noticeably challenged to find more actresses for the show, Jaber's desperate attempt to fill those roles eventually resulted in one refugee actress being 'imported' from Canada, a male actor doubling in a female role, an Afghan actor from London standing in for Nabi Tanha who broke away

from the project because of "artistic differences", and a very young woman with no stage experience embarking on the project (see BBC News Asia, 2012). These are 'local', contextual conditions that influence and determine the outcomes of the theatre project where the movement 'from and beyond Kabul' is neither centrifugal nor centripetal, but both. But there are other situational factors that emerge during the rehearsal process, which I have alluded to in the previous chapter as "situational context", that further illustrates Jaber's notion of "doing culture".

In one drama exercise, Jaber tells the ensemble to cross the circle with a specified emotion, "You meet somebody and you're really angry with them." Two women walk across the circle with their heads down. One gives a cursory glance and abruptly walks off. "Is that how they're angry?" Jaber queries. Jaber continues to demonstrate what anger might look like and repeats the exercise. This time, no one dares to move from the circle. In that awkward silence, Jaber exclaims, "I'm going to fall asleep now." While it can be argued that "Is that how they're angry?" can be an expression of surprise, her frustration tells otherwise – she is vividly annoyed by the unexpressiveness of emotions and feelings of the Afghan women. This, I argue, is intrinsically imbued with cultural insensitivities and prejudices on how anger should be expressed and performed, as if there is a singular, universally-accepted way of emoting. Moreover, it is possible that there are other variables at work in this social situation where the women could not show anger or show eye contact. For example, tribal or ethnic differences in the Afghan social context including education, age and status could be the other factors that were unacknowledged in the rehearsal space and in the network of social relationships, which probably adversely affected the quality of interactions

and energy amongst the group members too. Incidentally, in the Dari language, two words are associated with this aforementioned emotion. *Ghossa* means harsh anger or cruelty, while *khapa* means angry, annoyed, irritable, distressed, but also sad, worried, anxious and unhappy. As such, anger can be interpreted in various ways. Furthermore, anthropologist Benedicte Grima recognises that Afghan women, particularly Pashtuns, make a conscious effort to control and suppress emotion. She states, "Paxtuns strive to close the gap between culture and the individual. Thus, we will see *hal wayel* [speaking of the inner state] spoken of as socially incorrect" (Grima, 2004, p. 8). Hence, when Jaber claims that she is only doing "culture", it is not a situation that can be exhorted simply to make theatre, *ceteris paribus.* The conditions in which theatre is made – political, social, cultural, religious and the like – have to be seriously and sensitively considered. All forms of social interaction must be collocated in these contexts then.

Their theatrical and social contexts become undermined when their rehearsal space, the British Embassy in Kabul, was bombed and the cast forced to flee to India for a safer rehearsal space. While in India, Jaber faces more obstacles. Four weeks before the actual performance at The Globe, Nabi Tanha, their celebrity actor whom Jaber had referred to as one of the two pillars of this play, left the troupe because of "artistic differences with the cast and Corinne" (Shakespeare from Kabul, 2012). Tensions amongst the ensemble fluctuated frequently. A five-minute scene, according to the documentary, took five hours to rehearse. Jaber remarks to the camera, "You hit a wall, but it doesn't want to sink in, get in." Her negative use of the modal verb "*want*" suggests an obstinate, rebellious sort of attitude coming from the actors – they do not want to get it right – which I find profoundly problematic. Their inability to understand or comprehend what her

directorial choices are could be due to language differences, lack of clarity in instruction, or other social codes interfering in the process, but Jaber dismisses this as a reluctance or insubordination on the part of the actors. While it can be perceived that these conflicts are interpersonal in nature, I would argue that these are actually local struggles reflecting the power dynamics between the performers and the female director, a form of postcolonial resistance to an imperialistic cultural outsider. This is further supported by Shah Mohammad's admission later on in the documentary:

> I know Mrs Corinne [Jaber] follows the text. But a lot of the cast, including myself, are saying the text in colloquial language. We talk in Dari slang. I think in some places she knows and stops us and says it's not like that. But in some places she doesn't know. […] And sometimes it happens like this. If there are ten lines, we miss two of them and she doesn't know. We are giving the same message, just not how Shakespeare wanted.

In this separate example, Jaber's adherence to strict poetry and high Persian language in *The Comedy* could be a reflection of her "doing culture" while the actors' subaltern rebellion marks a different way of doing culture – in their own Dari language (as opposed to Farsi as used in Iran), and on their own terms.

In 2005, Corinne Jaber's production of *Love's Labour's Lost* was already perceived as controversial. Demetrius Matheou, a theatre reviewer, writes: "Challenging the country's repressive conventions, the production featured men and women acting together, the women sometimes without headscarves, lovers holding hands. The company's audacity came with a price; two of the actresses involved had to flee the country" (Matheou, 2012). Two actresses had to flee

their villages not necessarily in search for a better life, but as an act of self-preservation, so they can escape death. Parwin Mushtahel was one of them. Three years after *Love's Labour Lost*, her husband was shot, presumably because of her acting (Oleck, 2012). She remarked, "I had to run away. First I escaped to Pakistan, and now I am settled in Canada. Women in Afghanistan are not safe. Not just an actress, but even if she is a doctor, teacher or even a member of the Parliament. Getting out of the house means exposing yourself to death threats" (Ratnakar, 2012). Jaber helped Mushtahel seek asylum in Canada. But she is back to play the role of Emilia, Egeon's wife, in *The Comedy* at the Globe Theatre.

In 2012, putting the performers at risk is re-circulated. Stephen Purcell notices the ambiguity around "the production's apparently emancipatory politics" (Purcell, 2013, p. 284), as well as the performers' "anxieties about touching and embracing" (ibid), including overtly sexual behaviours like wrestling on the floor, embracing each other, and rubbing each other's legs, but dismisses it eventually. He says, "Clearly, Jaber's actresses decided to participate in her project in full knowledge of what would be asked of them, even if putting it into practice made them uncomfortable" (ibid.). However, in my interview with Frotan, she claims that she did not know the project involved so much touching. She says she would be beheaded if people in Kabul found out about it. She has voiced her concerns and claims that the producer had told her she had signed the contract, been given the money, and now has to see the project to fruition (Frotan, 2012, personal communication) – which raises more questions on what it means to "do culture" with actors *from* a conflict zone. What price do the actors have to pay, literally? Already mentioned previously, the younger actress says that if harm befell on her, it "will have been worth it". This is a frightening stance taken

on by a newcomer to the theatre scene, even if the actors had, by their own volition, taken on the road to acting and have willingly taken on those risks themselves. Exacerbating these risks, I posit, perpetuates not just the physical harm and dangers to the lives of those involved in the arts, but also symbolically reintroducing and producing the tropes of victimhood and salvation in this circuit of culture where global audiences now congratulate them for bravery and heroism.

Demetrios Matheou from *The Arts Desk* writes, "These *brave men and women* were making the most of their first appearance at The Globe, performing Shakespeare's farce in Dari Persian, but *grabbing every opportunity* to add the sort of sauciness to proceedings that they wouldn't be able to at home. The result was madcap, exuberant and ultimately more moving than one might expect" (Matheou, 2012, italics mine). He adds, "I can't begin to imagine what appearing in The Globe must have meant to the troupe performing it" (ibid.). This reviewer emphasised that these are Afghan actors who were "brave" enough to go against the oppressiveness of a political regime from where they come, which perhaps allowed the audiences to empathise and stand in solidarity with. Perhaps because the actors might return home culturally impoverished (with the assumption that theatre practices are frowned upon back in Kabul), Matheou construes the actors as hungry heroes on a short journey *beyond* a repressive Kabul, "grabbing every opportunity" before returning home. More reviews echo the same celebratory trope of Afghan heroism, for example, "Afghanistan's *astonishingly brave* Roy-e-Sabs theatre perform outside of Kabul for the first time ever…" (Time Out London, 2011, italics mine), "Roy-e-Sabz is *a truly daring theatre company* where men and women act together in modern Afghanistan" and "Roy-e-Sabz is

a *theatrical miracle.''* (Creation Theatre, 2012, italics mine). The heroic qualities in these commendable reviews, however, have focused on their participation in the arts amidst a volatile and repressive culture, yet these occlude the consequences resulting from the show's sexual overtones.

On the night on 31 May 2012 when I was there at the Globe Theatre, the actors received five curtain calls with standing ovations. The applause would have continued if the security had not told the audiences to leave as they were closing the Theatre. I found myself 'standing in solidarity' with the Afghans, unsure if I was applauding their performance or their heroism. Here, I briefly refer to Baz Kershaw's article (2001) where he analysed the different forms of applause in the theatre. Referring to one instance of a riot at the Abbey Theatre in Dublin in 1926, where W.B. Yeats castigated the rioters for disgracing themselves and "rock[ing] the cradle of genius" (cited in Kershaw, 2001, p. 138), Kershaw draws this opposite conclusion: "The louder and the longer we applaud, the more we participate in the making of masterpieces. Hence, in hierarchical societies, standing ovations produce and reinforce systems of cultural dominance to which audiences are then subjected" (ibid., p. 139). Kershaw posits that unruly behavior in the theatre is a democratic process constitutive of social behaviour, hence the "growing acquiescence in audiences" (ibid., p. 135) has led to "a relinquishing of cultural power" (ibid.). In other words, the quieter audiences are verbally (or louder in their applause), the more subjugated they are as citizens. With the changing dynamic of consumerism in the theatre and its accompanying role shift of the audience from patron, client, and finally to a customer, the "standing ovation becomes an orgasm of self-congratulation for money so brilliantly spent" (ibid., p. 144). Kershaw's analysis of applause is insightful, but I propose that it is

inadequate in explaining what was witnessed at the Globe Theatre when the Afghan actors had completed their performance.

On one level, Kershaw has stated that the "applause is the moment in which the collective aims to assert itself over the individual, in which an imagined community is forged" (ibid., p. 135). This "imagined community" is the sense of affiliation to Afghanistan in what I have been calling Afghanness. Together with the other audience members, I was aligning myself with this imagined community, possibly based on them being Afghans living in a conflict zone, than about their performance per se. This is further supported by evidence of one theatre reviewer's forgiving attitude towards a less than good performance. Andrew Dickson from *The Guardian* observes that the "acting exhibits a few rough edges", but it "barely seems to matter" (Dickson, 2012). In the same paragraph, the observation that everyone seems "to be having a riot" makes it "possible to forgive anything" (ibid.). For this riotous performance, which other reviewers have termed a "community arts event that's funded by the local council" (Patterson, 2012) that is "unashamedly slapstick" (Matheou, 2012), and "more like a panto" (Patterson, 2012), Dickson rewards Roy-e Sabs Theatre with a four-star rating. Focusing on the "physical clowning", "extended slapstick mix-up", and "non-verbal foolery", Stephen Purcell congratulates the group for "a joyful and exuberant silliness, and a profound sense of optimism" (Purcell, 2012). BBC acclaims that it is a "triumphant and moving performance at the Globe" (Shakespeare from Kabul, 2012). In a different article, Purcell calls this a "joyfully life-affirming production" (Purcell, 2013, p. 282). I suggest that these celebratory reactions and standing ovations had emerged because these actors are Afghans and are worthy of admiration for undertaking a journey and overcoming

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adversities to perform in London.

On a more interpretive level, Kershaw's phrase where the collective "aims to assert itself over the individual" is, indeed, a form of political control over the performers. Reflecting on my own subjective responses, I suggest that the five sets of standing ovations could be interpreted as symbolic gestures of conciliation for the unjust victimisation enacted on Afghan peoples, in hindsight, perhaps because of George W. Bush's failed policies. So instead of seeing that the audiences have relinquished their power and submitted themselves into the "logic of 'private' obedience'" to dominant ideologies, as Kershaw has theorised while borrowing from Slavoj Žižek (Kershaw, 2001, p. 134), I deviate from Kershaw to argue that this is an assertion of audiences' hegemonic power instead. Our applause (including the reviews that celebrate Afghan heroism as highlighted previously) functions as an act of conciliation and appeasement, but in the affirmation of this kind of dangerous work requiring Afghan actors to risk their lives, it paradoxically recirculates tropes of victimhood and places Afghan actors in the same position of vulnerability and disenfranchisement, while placing the audiences as people who could offer redemption and salvation. Whether it is an unequal or reciprocal dynamic, the power has nonetheless returned to the hands of the cultural outsider, the audience who receives, consumes, and evaluates the Afghan conditions for success or failure on a global stage. Following this, I will focus on the means in which these conciliatory performances are enacted on the global stage as part of a cultural diplomacy intervention.

Many countries such as Spain, Japan, China, Mexico and Iraq (The Telegraph, 2011) were represented at the World Shakespeare Festival during the Cultural

Olympiad in 2012, but only the Afghan theatre company received unusual support. Afghanistan was the only country where BBC made a documentary, chronicling the odyssey and broadcasting it. Roger Granville, producer of the Roy-e Sabs theatre, commented that "the breakdown of donations was made up of Government organisations like 'The British Council', as well as other charitable organisations and private individuals alike. The Indian Government funded a considerable part of the Indian tour before coming over to the UK through an organisation called the 'Indian Council for Cultural Relations'. I'm afraid we got zero backing from Afghan sources. I fear support for these kinds of projects may simply not exist in Afghanistan" (Granville, 2012, personal communication). To reinforce the cultural partnerships offered by generous donors such as India, *Bihar News* reported the following:

> Recently at an evening hosted by Simon Robey, the Chairman of the Royal Opera House, at his home auctioneer extraordinaire Lord Dalmeny of Sotheby's raised more than £20,000. The forthcoming project at the Globe Theatre represents a truly uplifting piece of news for Afghanistan as well as a unique opportunity for the company to make its first major mark on the international stage, celebrating and expanding upon all that 'Rah-e Sabz' has achieved to date. The company's tour of India and England is sure to leave an indomitable legacy for the continuation of their work in Afghanistan. (Ratnakar, 2012)

The above amount of £20,000 is not the only source of funding. There are more donors and monies, which according to Granville, cannot be disclosed. But why is this done to such an excess? What stakes do international donors have in Afghan theatre? Is this a financial exercise masking a political intention? In Theodor Adorno's critique of the culture industry, he states that "[c]ultural

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entities typical of the culture industry are no longer *also* commodities, they are commodities through and through" (Adorno, 2001, p. 100). To a large extent, the Afghan 'poverty' condition premised on victimhood tropes is dependent on the redemptive acts to secure for each other a 'productive' environment from which the cultural exchange (namely Shakespeare) could materialise. There is a 'use value' and 'exchange value' for an Afghan theatre. One needs each other to propel and propagate its cultural brand: the World Shakespeare Festival, for example, has an Afghan representation, whilst the Afghan theatre group is happy to show the outside world that Afghans are capable of comedy stories, for example, that are beyond war and terrorism. Because the quantitative shift is so great, the culture industry does not need to pursue profit interests directly. Instead, these "interests have become objectified in its ideology and have even made themselves independent of the compulsion to sell the cultural commodities which must be swallowed anyway" (ibid.). Adorno explains further, "The culture industry turns into public relations, the manufacturing of 'goodwill' per se, without regard for particular firms or saleable objects. Brought to bear is a general uncritical consensus, advertisements produced for the world, so that each product of the culture industry becomes its own advertisement" (ibid.). In other words, it can be argued from Adorno's perspective that many sectors of society, local and global, have used the Cultural Olympiad as an opportunity to 'market' themselves: the Afghan society, the British and French communities (the producer and director, respectively), and the international community (though largely British and the Afghan diaspora), the British Council, the BBC, and other stakeholders.

However, one reading of this culture industry is to interpret the making of the

BBC documentary as a conciliatory, placatory response to Afghanistan. Produced and directed by Harriet Shawcross, *Shakespeare from Kabul* is a product from BBC Persian TV even though it was broadcast in the UK by BBC Four. As Annabelle Sreberny and Massoumeh Torfeh state in *Persian Service: The BBC and British Interests in Iran* (2014), BBC Persian was started in Iran (also reaching Persian-speakers in Afghanistan and Tajikistan) in 2009 by the Foreign Office to secure British interests, but simultaneously becoming the "central opponent in the [Iranian] regime's development of its 'soft war' strategy" (Sreberny and Torfeh, 2014, p. 29). BBC Persian TV was established in addition to the already popular BBC World Service, BBC Persian Service, and BBC Pashto Service which operated as radio broadcasts. Before 1986, BBC was reportedly "at the beck and call of the FCO [Foreign and Commonwealth Office]" (ibid., p. 124). Later, "BBC directors were given specific budgets and heads of services and regions took on more responsibility for the way they spent budgets" (ibid.), showing a shift from political propaganda to public policy. Citing Joseph Nye, the authors observe that "policymakers treat public diplomacy as a bandage that can be applied after damage is done by other instruments" (ibid., p. 16), for example, in "the Chinese attempt to enhance its soft power by successfully staging the 2008 Olympics while simultaneously cracking down in Tibet and arresting human rights lawyers" (ibid.). In similar lines of reasoning, I suggest that the BBC documentary may be construed as "soft power" to placate and appease Afghans – because of the war on terror that had been waged in Afghanistan. In fact, David Runciman says that Tony Blair's "analysis of 9/11 was […] wrong, but Blair is still a long way from being able to admit this" (Runciman, 2010). As Runciman notes elsewhere, Blair draws on the rhetoric of good intention "by stating that these are deaths by error" (Runciman, 2006, p.

45). In 2013, *The Independent* publishes a list of political apologies made by past UK Prime Ministers (The Independent, 2013), and David Cameron confirms the same stance: Afghanistan is not to be found on that list. Hence, a possible conjecture is to see that BBC Persian, to some extent, is acting on behalf of the Foreign Office to support these Afghan actors as a performance of conciliation, though it is not an obvious one with reparative intent. But that is the insidiousness of such generosities because such acts hide a larger political intent of BBC's involvement in local Afghan politics.

All these in *The Comedy of Errors* point to the difficulties in representing Afghan cultures and identities, not just because the production and consumption move to and fro, *from and beyond* Kabul in complex directions, but also the several layers of contexts – political, theatrical, situational, cultural, international – refuse to allow for a simplistic interpretation. While I have argued for cultural outsiders (theatre directors, for example) to show more sensitivity towards local customs so as not to put local actors at further risk, the reception by audiences are harder to 'manage'. This is especially so because the 'exchange value' of this performance at the Cultural Olympiad demonstrated an increased interest in Afghan arts (BBC's documentary-making, British Council's involvement, as well as international donors) with global audiences applauding the Afghan actors, but this excessive praise for their heroic, self-sacrificial qualities paradoxically re-entrenches the performers in redemption tropes. Similarly, the earlier case studies in this chapter have also illustrated the contested values placed on Afghan cultures and identities. *Blowing Up Bamiyan Buddhas* highlighted some of the demands placed by heritage experts including the UNESCO, whilst the Taliban have a differing view on how monies should be spent. Even though there is an

absence of the Buddhas, there are still ongoing attempts to reconstruct them, especially with laser light technology by two Chinese tourists, all of which demonstrated a desire to re-value the Buddhas in Afghanistan's cultural history. In *Infinite Incompleteness*, the 'value' placed on the victims' narratives in the documentary theatre was contrasted with the fictional monstrous mother-figure who mutilated her own child. I have argued that the feminisation of the victimhood discourse allowed AHRDO to position themselves globally to front a transitional justice agenda, a political context which did not materialise when a Japanese actor performed the script without collapsing cultural and artistic identities. As the culture industry circulates representations from and beyond Kabul, it is becoming clearer that 'Afghanistan' has, in Marx's words, "properties [that] satisfy human wants of some sort or another" (Marx and Engels, 1996, p. 45). Regardless of the contrasting 'values', Adorno's critique of culture industries becoming "commodities through and through" (Adorno, 2001, p. 100) is increasingly made visible when foreign agencies, directors and audiences intersect across the 'from and beyond' boundary.

Chapter Five

'BEYOND KABUL':

IMAGINARY TEXTURE OF THE REAL

The breakup and the destruction of the first appearance
do not authorize me to define henceforth the "real"
as a simple probable, since they are only
another name for the new apparition [...]
- Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible* (1968)

Following from the commodification resulting from the use value of Afghanness in the previous chapter, all the works examined in Chapter 5 return to the theme on imagining Afghanistan as a way of normalising its own fiction. Because all the plays here are performed and produced *outside* Afghanistan in geographical terms, I want to problematise the concept of 'beyond Kabul' to suggest that the plays about Afghanistan do not remain in the realm *outside* Afghanistan, but are circulated and projected 'into' Kabul. As will be examined in this chapter, playwrights (and their characters) and audiences seem to want to come closer to the 'truth' of Afghanistan, a perceived value that can either contribute to the political critiques of the West's relationship with Afghanistan, or augment them. More specifically, the overarching themes for the three plays in this chapter are 'fetish', 'imagination', and 'aura', concepts that reflect the messiness of talking and 'thinking' about Afghanistan. Merleau-Ponty's quote above reflects both a phenomenological and ontological aspect of reality – that the real "is another name for the new apparition" (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, p. 40). This will be

developed in greater detail in the second case study, *Miniskirts in Kabul*, but he argues that every illusion that is conjured up brings us closer to reality, in what he calls the "imaginary texture of the real". This is an important consideration to my thesis because the imaginations that sometimes critique victimhood tropes are reproduced and consumed, which sometimes demand and further entrench Afghans in an enterprise of endless repetitions and commodifications. The paradox is that the 'real' Afghanistan is as close to what is being imagined, while what is imagined materialises its own reality. In effect, tropes 'beyond Kabul' either repeats tropes 'from Kabul', albeit with a slightly different inflection, or it incites political action outside Afghanistan. This chapter will first examine Tony Kushner's *Homebody/Kabul* (2001), followed by Tricycle Theatre's *The Great Game: Afghanistan* (2009), and then a theatre adaptation of Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* (2007) by Matthew Spangler to further examine how the themes of 'location of culture' and 'value' developed in Chapters 3 and 4 respectively are embroiled in the complex circulations of cultural commodifications.

'Homebody/Kabul' (2001)

Homebody/Kabul is a four-hour play written by Tony Kushner. Originally directed by Declan Donnellan, it first premiered at New York Theatre Workshop on 19 December 2001. Apart from journal articles and interviews with Kushner, my analysis primarily focuses on the published script (Kushner, 2002) and theatre reviews of the performance in New York. This play was written before 2001. The play is set in 1998 during the height of Taliban rule, but one of Tony Kushner's Afghan characters, Mahala, foreshadows this: "You love the Taliban so much, bring them to New York! Well, don't worry, they're coming to New York! Americans!"

Based on this, many critics have praised Kushner for his clairvoyance. For example, Peter Marks from *The New York Times* calls it "eerily prescient" (Marks, 2001); the *Christian Science Monitor* terms it the "prophetic *Homebody/Kabul*" (Fanger, 2001); *Wall Street Journal* titles their review "Devils in America: Taliban Lunacy Foretold" (Phillips, 2001); and it is a "cultural and political apocalypse" (Thomas, 2004). Peggy Phelan also notes that "Kushner began writing *Homebody/Kabul* about three years before "Taliban," "Northern Alliance," "burqa," and "Afghanistan" became the *lingua franca* of denizens of the United States" (Phelan, 2003), but Kushner has dismissed these lofty claims. According to M. Scott Philips, Kushner's play, which was "pure serendipity" is not "prescience" at all. In fact, Kushner states that "the broad outline of serious trouble ahead was so abundant and easy of access that even a playwright could avail himself of it" (cited in Thomas, 2004, p. 1).

Before its production, Marvin Carlson reports that Kushner was told by the producers to cut a controversial scene where the United States is charged "with creating and supporting the Taliban" (Carlson, 2004, p. 6) and warned that the play "could come to regret this" (ibid.). Kushner refused, and hence government funding was withheld. Kushner's insistence on "making an apparent comment on recent events" (ibid.), despite resistance and objections, marked him as a critical social commentator, much like his earlier acclaimed work such as *Angels in America* (1993) – a critique of the AIDS epidemic during the Reagan administration – which won him the Pulitzer Prize for Drama. He had also written screenplays such as *Munich* (2005) and *Lincoln* (2012). The relevance of *Homebody/Kabul* in the wake of 9/11 attacks is poignantly seen and felt in its

numerous productions. After its premiere at New York Theatre Workshop (2001-2002), it was performed by Trinity Repertory Company in Rhode Island (2002); Berkeley Repertory Theatre (2002); Steppenwolf Theatre Company in Chicago (2003); Intiman Theatre in Seattle (2003); The Center Theatre Group in Los Angeles (2003); BAM's Harvey Theatre in Brooklyn (2004); Young Vic Theatre in London (2002; 2004); Espai Lliure in Barcelona (2002; 2013-2014); and Teatro Español in Madrid (2007). As such, representations *of* Afghanistan through Kushner's critiques are being circulated widely. Carlson also observes that audiences at The New York Theatre workshop were co-opted into anti-war protests. The audiences were given pro-peace handouts when it first premiered. In the lobby were signs and quotes from feminist Emma Goldman: "In the face of this approaching disaster, it behooves men and women not yet overcome by the war madness to raise their voice of protest, to call the attention of the people to the crime and outrage which are about to be perpetrated upon them" (cited in Carlson, 2004, p. 11). It is in these two contexts – critics praising Kushner's prescience, and his own political commentary – that frame this piece of work as an uncompromising critique on US-Afghan relations.

Homebody/Kabul is a three-act play, but because of its narrative structure it feels like it is divided into two parts. In essence, the first part is dominated by a stream-of-consciousness monologue by an anonymous, female British character, who is in her mid-forties, stuck at home (named 'Homebody') with an obsession with Afghanistan, and the next part of the play shows her family members looking for her in Afghanistan as she had gone missing. More specifically, her husband Milton Ceiling, and daughter, Priscilla Ceiling, go to Kabul in search of

her missing body, a death presumably caused by landmines. As the play develops, such a certainty loses credibility as Priscilla is told that her mother had married a local Muslim man, with no desire to return to London. This heightened sense of non-closure, further underscored by characters looking for and talking about a woman (without a name) literally absent for the rest of the play, paradoxically echoes a hysteria surrounding narrations *of* Afghanistan by characters *in* Afghanistan; they add haphazard meanings to fill in the blanks for her motivations and her disappearance. The play, however, ends with Priscilla bringing home an Afghan lady, Mahala, as her surrogate mother. To begin my analysis, I will examine the script.

The play opens with Homebody sitting in a comfortable chair in her London home reading a guidebook. She sets a historical context of Afghanistan, stating that "[o]ur story begins at the very dawn of history, circa 3,000 B.C" (Kushner, 2002, p. 9). Referring to Afghanistan "at the very dawn of history", she later admires the "serene beauty of the valleys of Kabul River" (ibid.), which immediately frames Afghanistan as the cradle of human civilisation (see Chapter 2 for a fuller discussion on mystification tropes). The reader would also recall in Chapter 2 about Emperor Babur of the Mughal Empire referring to Afghanistan as "the paradise". All these iterations contribute to Homebody's "almost perverse" (ibid., p. 9) obsession with Afghanistan, with her behaving in a "moth-like" way to a flame which is "impassioned, fluttery, doomed" (ibid.). In another section of her monologue, Homebody recounts an (imaginary) encounter with an Afghan hat seller. She sees a man presumably older, and says, "As I handed the card to him I see that three fingers on his right hand have been hacked off,

following the line of a perfect clean diagonal from middle to ring to little finger, which, the last of the three fingers in the diagonal cut's descent, by, um, hatchet blade? was hewn off almost completely – like this, you see?" She demonstrates the cut, and adds:

> But a clean line, you see, not an accident, a measured surgical cut, but not surgery as we know it for what possible medicinal purpose might be served? I tried, as one does, not to register shock, or morbid fascination, as one does my eyes unfocused my senses fled startled to the roof of my skull and then off into the ether like a rapid vapor indifferent to the obstacle of my cranium WHOOSH, clean slate, tabula rasa, terra incognita, where am I yet still my mind's eye somehow continuing to record and detail that poor ruined hand slipping my MasterCard into the… you know, that thing, that roller press thing which is used to… Never mind. Here, in London, that poor ruined hand. (ibid.)

Paradoxically, her fascination with the hand and "its history" dulls to a state of self-confessed ignorance – "I know nothing of this hand, its history, of course, nothing" – which she seeks to resolve in the latter part of the play. She goes to Afghanistan which she calls "The Source" to find answers. What is most intriguing about Homebody's monologue is her construction of the Afghan hat seller, which illustrates the concept of the fetish. In Chapter 4, the idea of fetishism – more specifically "commodity fetish" – was introduced as a Marxian concept related to labour, or the perceived use-value of Bamiyan Buddhas on Afghan heritage. In this case study, the use of "fetish" is connected to the psychoanalytical concept of substitution of the phallus in the Freudian sense, but

more than that, is also the historicised concept of obsession with an object. I borrow William Pietz's definition from *The Problem of the Fetish, 1* (1985) where he states that the "fetish is always a meaningful fixation of a singular event; it is above all a 'historical' object, the enduring material form and force of an unrepeatable event. This object is 'territorialized' in material space (an earthly mix), whether in the form of a geographical locality, a marked site on the surface of the human body, or a medium of inscription or configuration defined by some portable or wearable thing" (Pietz, 1985, p.12). For Pietz, it is an "emergent articulation of the ideology of the commodity form" (ibid.). In the play, the hat-seller's disabled hand is a metonymy of a fractured Afghanistan, one that is neither caused by accidents nor surgery. Yet it exhibits "a clean line". There are three interpretations for this. Firstly, "a clean line" could refer to Aryanism highlighted in an earlier quote, as the "clean" and pure 'master race', a genealogical "line" from where Afghans bore their identities. Secondly, the "clean line" could symbolise the Durand Line drawn up in 1893 by the British to separate Pakistan from Afghanistan. It is an imaginary 2,640 kilometre line running northeasterly, which accounts for the Pashtuns living in Afghanistan and Pakistan having a common identity (see Figure 3, Appendix 2). Thirdly, it could evoke the numerous invasions Afghanistan had suffered throughout history, including the Soviets, British, and Americans, causing lines of conflict and disruptions – though I would argue that this would hardly be construed as a "clean" line. Pietz's definition of "fetish" being a "historical object" can be illustrated here. Performance theorist Framji Minwalla suggests that the hat seller is "an embodiment of Afghanistan, and the sliced hand transmutes into a symbolic marker representing all those imperial incursions and slicings of territory that the guidebook catalogues but never fleshes out" (Minwalla, 2003, p.

36). He adds that the "complicitous incarnation of the beleaguered nation in the butchered hand delivers a history of collaboration, guilt, betrayal, recrimination, resistance, heresy, theft, shame, and need" (ibid.). In other words, the 'terror' of the butchered hand is evocative, ambivalently and historically construed as the postcolonial other. Homebody, as Minwalla suggests, tries to give as many meanings to his body in order to transform the merchant "into an Afghan Everyman, the archetypal colonial refugee" (ibid.).

So as the merchant was completing the transactions for the hats, Homebody finally asks about the history of the hand. This is when she realises she could "speak perfect Pashto" (Kushner, 2002, p. 25). Replying to her own question, Homebody speaks on the merchant's behalf, "I stole bread for my starving family, I stole bread *from* a starving family, I profaned, betrayed, according to some stricture I erred and they chopped off the fingers of my hand" (ibid., p. 23, italics original). The merchant explained that the Mujahideen severed three of his fingers. Homebody then continues in the first person on his behalf in an extended monologue, for example, saying, "Look, look at my country, look at my Kabul, my city, what is left of my city? The streets are as bare as the mountains now, the buildings are as ragged as mountains and as bare and empty of life, there is no life here only fear […]" (ibid.). This act of speaking on behalf of the hat seller can also be seen as a form of territorialisation, in Pietz's definition of the fetish, here seen as an encroachment and substitution of his voice with her voice. She has completely embodied, imagined, and owned his history. Minwalla describes Homebody's soliloquy as "ventriloquizing" (Minwalla, 2003, p. 36), a very useful concept, but Minwalla fails to define it. Here I draw on David Goldblatt's

definition of ventriloquism instead. He states:

> [V]entriloquism is not simply speaking in other voices and hence differs in interesting ways from related performance types like acting, puppeteering, lip-syncing, and impersonating. Unlike acting, where the actress may or may not speak in some voice different from her own the ventriloquist must resort to another voice to help facilitate the appearance of *conversation*. (Goldblatt, 1993, p. 391, italics mine)

Goldblatt states that making the dummy's voice distinct from her own would help the audience shift attention accordingly. However, in Homebody's situation, she does not seem to be making that distinction. In fact, she collapses her own identity and the identity of the Afghan man, arguably making her more visible than him since she has now territorialised the hat seller's voice, so it is now no longer a "conversation" in Goldblatt's sense, but an unsolicited *speaking for* or a speaking *on behalf of*. From a colonial perspective, the West (the British woman) has spoken *for* the Oriental (the Afghan hat seller). Here, because of Homebody's complete embodiment of him, her imaginary attempt to humanise and empower the hat seller (or his voice), has, paradoxically, silenced him totally. This speech act takes on a performative force in Austinian terms, in what I define as "inverse ventriloquism": it is an over-empathetic imaginary attempt to give voice to the postcolonial subject that ends up erasing their history and marking them invisible through speech. This partially echoes Gayatri Spivak's concerns in *Can The Subaltern Speak?* (1988), where she states that "such epistemic violence is the remotely orchestrated, far-flung, and heterogeneous project to constitute the colonial subject as Other. This project is also the asymmetrical obliteration of the trace of that Other in its precarious Subjectivity" (Spivak, 2002, pp. 24-5). In

other words, an act of inverse ventriloquism is a form of epistemic violence on the subaltern (represented by the Afghan merchant). Even though Spivak's argument focuses more on women as the silenced subaltern, the dangers of "colonial production, [where] the subaltern has no history and cannot speak" (ibid., p. 28) are equally applicable to the Afghan man here, enacted by the forceful imagination of the dominant white person speaking *for* him. This form of fetish, demonstrated by Homebody, also produces in the perceiving subject an erotic imagination.

Goldblatt also states that early philosophers including Nietzsche often see the ventriloquist (who is an artist) in an authorial role and the inanimate object as the dummy. On one hand the artist allows whatever force, "which he designates at will, to move and speak through him" (Goldblatt, 2006, p. x), yet the artist is "seen as a manipulator of a medium's meaningful raw material […] that produce an ontologically new creature, an object embodied with meaning (as the ventriloquist's dummy is embodied with meaningful voice)" (ibid.). The "ontologically new creature" that is imbued with new meaning forms the theoretical discussion of the characters' (renewed) relationship with the other. For example, after Homebody's purchase of the hats from the merchant, she recounts, "[…] he's taking the rest of the afternoon off, and he offers me his right hand. I take it and we go out of the shop but no longer on _____ (Gesture), we are standing on a road, a road in Kabul. I hold on tight to his ruined right hand, and he leads me on a guided tour through his city" (Kushner, 2002, p. 25). As seen from this line in Kushner's text, there's no name for the street where the shop is, presumably left blank but to be filled out, or embodied, by her own gestures.

Symbolically, Homebody is continuing her "territorialisation" of her fetish object, in William Pietz's definition, which is now transferred from the incomplete "ruined right hand" to a "road in Kabul". The enveloping of her own hand in his is a heightened image of that colonial power ("hold on tight"), whilst she enjoys the exotic streets in Afghanistan. He takes her through "the gardens of Babur", imagining seeing a "handsome Shah Shujah […] of olive complexion and thick black beard […] dressed in an armor of jewels […] flowers of gold and a breast plate of diamonds, shaped like flattened fleurs-de-lis, ornaments of the same kind on each thigh […]" (ibid.). Homebody continues with a lengthy description, then "cries softly" (ibid., p. 26), only to realise that the "scent of the hat merchant" (ibid.) smells like "toasted almonds" (ibid.), which takes her by surprise. She imagines herself being taken to a place called Bemaru, the grave of Bibi Mahru, and fantasises making love with him "beneath a chinar tree":

> We kiss, his breath is very bitter, he places his hand inside me, it seems to me his whole hand inside me, and it seems to me a whole hand. And there are flocks of pigeons the nearby villagers keep banded with bronze rings about their legs, and they are released each afternoon for flight, and there is frequently, in the warmer months, kite flying to be seen on the heights of Bemaru. (ibid.)

Homebody's intimate desire to seek a union with an exotic Afghan man is represented by his whole hand inside her. Homebody's deliberate repetition of the "hand" – "his hand inside me, it seems to me his whole hand inside me, and its seems to me a whole hand" – suggests, first of all, just the fingers, but she realises suddenly, that it is his *whole* hand, in its entire length. It signifies

pleasure, followed by surprise. Earlier, we are told that the merchant has only one finger and a thumb, appendages like the derelict buildings that are "bare and empty of life" (ibid., p. 23). To have the hand penetrate Homebody – or to 'enter' the 'home' of a 'body' – connotes a union of energetic forces, leading to a home-*coming*. Her role can be interpreted as a redeemer saving him from his dreadful destiny, enveloping his "poor ruined hand" and, magically, transforming his hand "whole" again. Hence, when she utters "it seems to me a *whole* hand" (emphasis mine), the second interpretation can take on a form of healing with an almost magical quality. This can be interpreted as the "ontologically new creature" in Goldblatt's phrase: the *whole* hand. In other words, Homebody can be seen as a 'mother' giving birth to something, or in this case, nurturing his fractured body (metonymically construed as Afghanistan) to health, which is resonant of colonial discourses with redemption tropes. In fact, in a subsequent part of Homebody's monologue, she says, "I love the world. I know how that sounds, inexcusable and vague, but it's all I can say for myself, I love the world, really I do… *Love*. […] How could any mother not love the world? What else is love but recognition? Love's nothing to do with happiness. Power has to do with happiness. Love has only to do with home" (ibid., p. 27). She sees her role as a mother in a procreative manner; it is her love that drives her to embrace the ontological 'new' world. In his Preface, Kushner references Nabi Misdaq, a writer who suggested that "[t]he shape of the map of present-day Afghanistan resembles a left-hand fist with the thumb open" (ibid., p. 7). Symbolically, Homebody's love can be seen to close up the boundaries, contain the uncontainable, or perhaps heal the wounds and remains of dismemberment, but it is also a love that climaxes at the peaks of her erotic fantasy. In that respect, Homebody's relationship with 'Afghanistan' could be interpreted as another form of ventriloquism, an interpenetrative act of

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embodying another fully and 'wholly', animating what was once 'barren' to life.

Homebody's role as a perverse lover returns again when she interrupts her own imagination by transporting the audiences back to her London home, where she and her friends are admiring and wearing the hats she had bought. The hats become a sexual metaphor for a condom, a cover for the stiffened phallus, as she amusingly recounts: "The hats at the party are a brilliant success. My guests adore them. They are hard to keep on the head, made for smaller people than the people we are and so they slip off, which generates amusement, and the guests exchange them while dancing, kaleidoscopic and self-effacing and I think perhaps to our surprise in some small way meltingly intimate, someone else's hat atop your head, making your scalp stiffen at the imagined strangeness" (ibid., p. 28). The sexual imagery is provocative. With hints of erotic nuances of being touched by an "imagined strangeness", the hat is both amusing and "meltingly intimate". Yet the small hats – a form of cover and protection for the head – slip off easily, further suggesting that there is a degree of reckless abandonment of decorum. The guests end up "dancing […] and "self-effacing", obliterating their self-identity. A more political reading would construe the British women (Homebody and her guests) as the coloniser territorialising and seeking to own the fetish object (the hat). The image of a party orgy with everyone exchanging hats, trying it on and letting it slip can then be interpreted as a confluence of international actors trying to occupy and own a piece of Afghanistan again, perhaps resonant of Derek Gregory's notion of the "colonial present" which Kushner is seeking to critique – exemplified also in Chapter 4 as UNESCO and other cultural experts trying to save the Buddha statues. Yet, Homebody reminds

us, they "slip off". Perhaps this is Kushner's critique of policies in Afghanistan that have titillated on the surface, causing a growth in some civil sectors or in military interventions, but have ultimately slipped off and failed. In fact, in the Afterword, Kushner laments: "What the U.S. intends for Afghanistan is anybody's guess. The fate of the people of Afghanistan is, again, in the hands of the U.S., and there are ominous signs that we are beginning to lose interest" (ibid., p. 145).

Kushner's play has been one of imaginations and narrations (the giving voice *to*, and speaking *on behalf of*), where various characters have given new meanings to Afghanistan's history and to the story of the Afghan hat seller. More specifically in the examination of the two motifs of the "fetish", I have previously referred to ventriloquism when Homebody speaks *for* the merchant in fluent Pashto, imagining the history of his life and of his butchered hand. This is, in Pietz's definition, a form of territorialisation of an historical object. In the second formulation of the fetish, she also sexually envelops his partial hand, fully, while making love, and feels him "whole" again. Rather than seeing Homebody as the puppet since the merchant's hand is *in* her, I see her agency and power enclosing him *in*. This is possibly another form of territorialisation of a body part, but seems beneficial to the hat-seller, where she imaginatively heals him as would a mother or a redeemer. Both these motifs represent a relationship that can be construed as colonial, one with unequal power. However, if I take David Goldblatt's formulation of a ventriloqual relationship further, he argues that the artist and the dummy can often merge as one. He states that "a ventriloqual relationship is the link between self and world, a link that problematizes the

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source of artistic origin while it blurs our connection with things" (Goldblatt, 2006, p. x). For example in the second part of the play when Homebody's husband and daughter arrive in Kabul to look for Homebody, Doctor Qari Shah explains that Homebody was "being beaten repeatedly with wooden planks and stakes and rusted iron rebar rods" (Kushner, 2002, p. 32) by approximately ten assailants. Mullah Aftar Ali Durranni, another character, attributes her death to Frank's Sinatra 'Come Fly With Me', a piece of "[i]mpious music which is an affront to Islam" (ibid., p. 33) that was found in her possession. Milton, Homebody's husband, reacts in exasperation and returns to oriental myths of a dangerous type: "Nothing works here! This is not London! Where's her body? *They ate it*, for all we know, this place is that bad it is!" (ibid., p. 42). Other conjectures include stepping on a mine where "[p]eople are vaporized here" (ibid., p. 51), or falling in love with a man and converting to become a Muslim woman on "[s]ome heavenly star-spangled night" and that she has no wish to see her family "of the past" again (ibid., p. 69). Except for the Afghan lover, all of these permutations construe Afghans as violent, bestial, and savage. But it also echoes Goldblatt's notion that this form of relationship "blurs our connection with things".

Even though Goldblatt is referring to new meanings ascribed to interpretation of artworks as his formulation of ventriloquism, for example in the relationship between self and the world – which, according to him, is predicated on conversations – it is possible to transpose this (non-existent) relationship Homebody has with her daughter or with the hat-seller in her own reality because they are conjectures and imaginations, rather than conversations. However, it is through Priscilla's relationship with Mahala that the conversations with each

other, and therefore power dynamics, become more reciprocal. When Mahala, the first wife of the Afghan man who had allegedly married Homebody, pleads to move to London with Milton and Priscilla, the ventriloqual relationship in Goldblatt's formulation here adds more complexities to a mere substitution of the voice. Grasping Priscilla's fingers, Mahala cries: "To leave is a terrible thing. But I must be saved. Yesterday I could not remember the alphabet. I must be saved by you" (ibid., p. 87). This reflects a dilemma between staying and leaving. It is a "terrible thing" to leave Afghanistan, yet she must "be saved". By the end of the play, there is a role reversal. Mahala is in the same room in London where Homebody was in at the beginning of the play, dressed "like a modern English woman". Priscilla and Mahala engage in a conversation, a relationship that is distinctly different, and absent, from Priscilla and Homebody. Even in an earlier confession when she has not disappeared, Homebody says that "nothing ever seems to go well" (Kushner, 2002, p. 26) between Priscilla and her: "I am her mother, she is… starving. I… withhold my touch" (ibid., p. 28). This is ironic because, as the reader would recall, Homebody portrays herself as one with generosity and unconditional love, yet she withholds her touch for her own daughter. Nonetheless, the estranged relationship is now replaced with a more reciprocal one. Goldblatt states that the "dummy defines (identifies) the ventriloquist. In Heidegger's words, 'Neither is without the other.' Ventriloquism is the occasion for letting strange voices speak" (Goldblatt, 1993, p. 393).

More specifically in the final scene when Priscilla wonders if her biological mother is alive or dead, Mahala interjects that it is a good thing. Mahala says: "She gave you… responsibility. For a life. It could be that she has embraced a new being. A suffering woman of Afghanistan. Though she chooses what no

Afghan woman would choose" (Kushner, 2002, p. 138-9). To Mahala, Priscilla's mother might have embraced "a new being" (or a lover), even if she has become a sacrificial lamb in Christian terminology. But Priscilla has also embraced "a new being" in her own life, since the audiences were told that at eighteen, she aborted her baby and had tried to commit suicide. Now, with Mahala, Priscilla is forced to take on "responsibility. For a life" – a new relationship that has brought her out of her own seclusion, and brought Mahala out of the womb of danger. In other words, it is possible to see the melding of two identities into one, as would be seen of the ventriloquist and the dummy, a relationship, which in Goldblatt's formulation, has a link between the self and the world. It is perhaps this "responsibility" that characterises Goldblatt's ventriloqual metaphor that is based on an exchange. It is perhaps the same responsibility that Kushner demands from the Bush administration, as he ends his Afterword with a provocative phrase borrowed from the Talmud: "Repentance preceded the world" (ibid., p. 151). In fact, the play ended ambivalently with Mahala's final words: "The rains are so abundant. In the garden outside, I have planted all my dead" (ibid., p. 139). It is unclear if she has buried the past, waiting for new life to sprout, hence offering optimism and hope, or that the cyclical pattern of death and destruction will sprout again to engulf and consume the living. Structurally, Kushner offers no easy answers in *Homebody/Kabul*, but nuanced relationships for audiences to consider.

In the *American Theatre* magazine, reviewer James Reston Jr recounts the preparation he did before watching *Homebody/Kabul* by watching Mohsen Makhmalbaf's film *Kandahar.* He recounts: "There on the big screen was the

real Afghanistan of sand dunes and jagged, desolate mountains, of chaos and thievery, of birdlike women behind their blue pleated bird-cage costumes, of primitive mullahs and hate-filled madrassases [sic], […], of bombed-out towns whose mud brick ruins are only suggested by the set of *Homebody/Kabul*" (Reston Jr, 2002, p. 29, italics mine). Here, this example could be a demonstration of how widely circulated images of Afghanistan are in the western imagination, that these orientalist images are very much part of a fetishised narration of its geography, women, children, tribes, and religion. Reston Jr continues with his review and acknowledges that this is a "baggage of reality" (ibid.) that he had brought into the theatre on West 4th Street. But he is still reminded of these images because Kushner's play references missing body parts, similar to the "vision of the stumps of mine-shattered legs and arms that [he] had seen in *Kandahar*" (ibid.). While he recognises that America had made an "open-ended commitment as a nation to this terrible place", he asks a pertinent question: is this "to embrace and to civilize and (could it really be?) to democratize Afghanistan" (ibid.)? Reston Jr states that they, the Americans, "could not go everywhere in the world as its policeman" (ibid.). Despite these new sensibilities raised by the play, Reston Jr still resorts to calling Afghanistan a "terrible place", which illustrates the complex narration of talking and construing a conflict zone that is beyond one's immediate worldview. In other words, I observe that narrations of Afghanistan in post-9/11 times still suffer from a dialectical relationship between judgement and criticality, moral superiority and subjective empathy. It is impossible to describe or speak about Afghanistan – or any other war zone – without appearing moralistic, judgemental, or orientalist. It remains a fetish in many people's imaginations.

David A. Rosenberg, in his review with *Back Stage: The Performing Arts Weekly*, writes that "[l]ike a snake re-coiling upon itself, the drama circuitously searches for meaning in what once seemed a meaningless corner of the world". He also says that "[i]n wanting to show that there are 'consequences to everything,' Kushner neglects connecting events to characters" (Rosenberg, 2002). And '[s]killed as he is, director Declan Donnellan cannot evoke the work's human heart" (ibid.). Similarly, Iris Fanger writes that "[i]f the aim of theater is to incite emotions and stir discussion, Kushner has succeeded. However, it's less certain that he's made up his mind as to his intentions. Kushner has created a dream play in which characters appear never to return, daily objects take on ominous significance, and dialogue conjures up illusions as often as the truth" (Fanger, 2001). However, contrary to Fanger, Peggy Phelan thinks that Kushner has an intention. In fact, she writes: "Kushner's habit of mind alerts him to the hideous violence the United States has done in the world, and while he continually reminds us of the vast complexity and long duration of the history of Afghanistan, all too often he wants to make the United States the 'cause' of the disaster" (Phelan, 2003, p. 168). She adds: "But to place the United States as prime-mover everywhere and forever is to fall into the trap of considering it as it prefers to be considered: as only and forever the super-power. This falsifies the history of the world" (ibid.). Phelan's critique of Kushner is right, but Kushner, I would argue, is not seeking to resolve the issues, nor putting the blame on the West (even though he did), but, through the play, to open up debates on global issues. This ambivalence is not, as these critics have stated, his reluctance on standing ground on a singular point of view. Rather, it is the complex relationship one has with Afghanistan

that cannot be easily split into convenient binary, polar opposites of Bush's "for or against us" rhetoric. In fact, in the Afterword, Kushner states that "*Homebody/Kabul* is a play about Afghanistan and the West's historic and contemporary relationship to that country" (Kushner, 2002, p. 143). He adds:

> It is also a play about travel, about knowledge and learning through seeking out strangeness, about trying to escape the unhappiness of one's life through an encounter with Otherness, about narcissism and self-referentiality as inescapable booby traps in any such encounter; and it's about a human catastrophe, a political problem of global dimensions. It's also about grief. (ibid., pp. 143-4)

He continues, "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" (ibid., pp. 144-5). Throughout my analysis of *Homebody/Kabul*, I expanded the notion of ventriloquism and suggested that the territorialisation of the 'other' can be motivated by a protective, maternal instinct, or equally blurred by a sexualised fantasy in Homebody's context. Even with audiences, there is a tendency to collocate it with political intent, and expect the same of the playwright who may not want to offer closed readings. This has serious implications. It shows that the consumption patterns of 'Afghanistan' tend to produce 'Afghanistan' along fetishised lines, once again blurring narrativisations (fiction) and contexts ('reality'). For my next case study, I move out of the American context into the British context to evaluate another

representation of Afghanistan 'beyond Kabul'.

'The Great Game: Afghanistan/ Miniskirts of Kabul' (2009)

The Great Game: Afghanistan is a series of twelve plays produced by the Tricycle Theatre in England. It was first performed in 2009 in north London for two months during the Great Game Festival (Wooldridge, 2009). This term 'great game' was used to describe the "strategic rivalry and conflict between the British Empire and the Russian Empire for supremacy in Central Asia" (Tricycle Theatre, 2009, p. 9). It was a term popularised by Rudyard Kipling in his 1901 novel, *Kim*. In this collection of plays, the playwrights retell the history and politics of Afghanistan and its troubled relationship with Great Britain. After 2009, *The Great Game: Afghanistan* was remounted in July 2010 before they went on a US tour. This full-day performance ran for about eight hours over a weekend, depicting Afghan history in chronological order, in three parts: (i) Invasions and Independence 1842-1930; (ii) Communism, the Mujahideen and the Taliban 1979-1996; and (iii) Enduring Freedom 1996-2010. In Part One of this trilogy, four of the plays are *Bugles and the Gates of Jalalabad* (Stephen Jeffreys); *Durand's Line* (Ron Hutchinson); *Campaign* (Amit Gupta); and *Now Is The Time* (Joy Wilkinson). Part Two comprises *Black Tulips* (David Edgar)*; Wood for the Fire* (Lee Blessing)*; Miniskirts of Kabul* (David Greig)*;* and *The Lion of Kabul* (Colin Teevan)*.* Part Three includes *Honey* (Ben Ockrent)*; The Night is Darkest Before The Dawn* (Abi Morgan)*; On the Side of the Angels* (Richard Bean)*;* and *Canopy of Stars* (Simon Stephens)*.* In the published anthology with the abovementioned twelve plays, Naomi Wallace's play *No Such Cold Thing* has also been included. The plays have been widely summarised and reviewed (see Tricycle Theatre, 2009; Billington, 2009; Fisher, 2009; Marks,

2010; Shaw, 2010; Kent, 2011).

According to Michael Coveney from *The Independent,* many of the plays in the trilogy critique Great Britain's involvement in Afghanistan, demonstrating that "the British mission has changed from the colonial impetus on the borders with India to one of anti-terrorist righteousness" (Coveney, 2009), or that there are "shady manoeuvrings of the super powers" (ibid.), including the "Foreign Office's smoothly patronising interventions" (ibid.), but a critic such as Peter Marks from *Washington Post* claims that some of these plays are "straightforward evocations of the nation's turbulent history. […] But they're essentially embellished reportage" (Marks, 2010). Another reviewer, Tim Treanor, from Washington D.C. states that "Nicolas Kent has mounted a monumental examination of a fantastically complex problem, and in so doing has fulfilled the highest purpose of art: to foster understanding" (Treanor, 2010), with the only fault that none of the plays has humanised the Taliban. Treanor observes that throughout the plays, "the Taliban destroy art; burn out the eyes of little girls for trying to learn to read; draw and quarter human beings with trucks, for trying to teach them; desecrate dead bodies; feed men to carnivorous beasts" (ibid.). Another reviewer, Lesley Ferris, writes in *Theatre Journal* that this work "transforms into an international dilemma grounded in the present, asking us questions about the impossibility of whitewashing the past" (Ferris, 2010). Briefly, some of these reviews from both British and American audiences highlight contesting expectations *about* their involvement, each seemingly wanting to know the 'truth' about Afghanistan. I shall give a more in-depth analysis of one play – David Greig's *Miniskirts of Kabul* – that, for me, encapsulates, on one hand, the tensions and debates *about* Afghanistan in the

whole trilogy, and on the other, crystallises the arguments that I have presented on the imaginings *of,* and *for,* Afghanistan that echo not only the critiques of theatre makers, but also the ambiguity of foreign interventions represented by the characters.

Miniskirts of Kabul (hereafter shortened as *Miniskirts*), is set in the United Nations compound in Kabul. The date is 26 September 1996, a time when the Taliban have taken a stronghold over several provinces across Afghanistan and is now trying to seize the capital city, Kabul. The play is between two characters, the President of Afghanistan Dr Najibullah who is deposed and under house arrest, and a female British writer (who is simply known as 'Writer'). The scene begins with President Najibullah working out and lifting weights, and a Writer walks in. In between the sounds of shelling in the distance, they engage in a conversation about each other's jobs, attitudes towards the British Empire, women wearing miniskirts, as well as to the violence happening in the city. The President is reportedly killed at the end of the play during a coup attack. Written in a style without textual clues who the interlocutors are, the script can be read as one long monologue, but it also prepares my discussion on an overarching theme of imagination and projection. Nonetheless, we are quickly introduced to the first scene:

Are you from the UN?
No.
American?
I'm British.
Are you a diplomat?
No.
Normally, I'm given details of any visits.
I didn't go through the official channels.
What channels did you go through?
This is not a normal visit.
I don't understand.
I'm imagining you.

This British woman's "I'm imagining you" is a provocative statement on the West's imagination of Afghanistan. Furthermore, she goes through unofficial channels to 'enter' the compound, a symbolic form of unwelcomed invasion. Yet, because the conversation collapses the identities of the two interlocutors, the other is, essentially, the same person. But this is complicated with one insisting on knowing or understanding the other, indicating a separation of the two, as shown:

Look – why are you here? What do you want with me?
I want to find out about you.
Read a book.
I have read books but the books leave me with questions.
What sort of questions?
I want to understand you. (Tricycle Theatre, 2010, p. 134)

The President probes the reason for her being in Afghanistan and wanting to interview him. She says she wants to understand him. In other words, there is a split between the two identities, even if both stem from the same source of imagination. Much later in the play, she asks if women in Kabul wore miniskirts. He asks, "Have you come all this way – imagined yourself all this way –

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imagined yourself sitting with me in a city under siege – to ask me about women's fashion?" (ibid., p. 141) She replies, "I'm interested in how it felt to be a woman in Kabul in the nineteen eighties." Perhaps this British woman's attempt in understanding a foreign culture is her way of historicising Afghan women. Drawing on Leslie Stevenson's taxonomy of imagination, he describes one variant of imagination as "the ability to think about a particular mental state of another person, whose existence one infers from perceived evidence" (Stevenson, 2003, p. 241). Citing Iris Murdoch's work, Stevenson also states that "[w]e may identify with deprived or persecuted people though [sic] our imaginative understanding of their plight. […] How much do we know, what do we know about 'what it is like to be' other people? As moralists, political moralists, we specialise, we have favourites. We sympathise with, know about some sufferers, not others, we imagine and desire some states of affairs not others" (ibid.). This is similar to contemporary concepts of empathy, to feel *for* someone or to imagine being in someone's shoes.

However, Carolyn Pedwell, cultural studies scholar, observes that "'Western' conceptions of empathy are a product of colonial and postcolonial histories that imbricate 'West' and 'non-West', 'Europe' and 'Africa', 'England' and 'Sierra Leone' in transnational networks of affect" (Pedwell, 2014, p. 3). For example, Pedwell suggests that we need to trace how empathy moves across diverse fields, contexts, and borders, and examine how it is interpreted, translated, and transformed. She proposes looking at transnational formulations of empathy in how they "generate damaging exclusions, how they involve unevenness, [and] failure" (ibid., p. xii); or how empathy arises "within, and work to (re)constitute, social and geo-political hierarchies and relations of power" (ibid.) in what she

calls "transnational networks of feeling" (ibid.) or "affective technologies of power" (ibid., p. 2). She asks, more incisively, "[t]o what extent does the political imperative to understand 'others' accurately from the perspective of their 'own' cultural context via empathy predictably reify 'cultures' as bounded, fixable and/or fully explicable, and how can such rhetorics be contested in the midst of transnational relationalities" (ibid., p. 120). Through this line of reasoning, it is therefore possible that the British woman's uncritical empathetic claim to want to know "how it felt to be a woman in Kabul in the nineteen eighties" or her desire to want to understand President Najibullah reifies, essentialises, and re-sediments tropes around a particular Afghan culture or Afghan femininity. This, as also alluded by the trespassing of this writer into the UN compound to interview Najibullah, could be Greig's critique of the West's invasive relationship with Afghanistan on wanting to 'empathise' with the Afghan other, which is an assumption that needs further critical interrogation. Yet while researching on the play, Greig found women wearing miniskirts during a demonstration in Kabul. He recounted:

> I remembered reading somewhere that under the communists there were 'miniskirts on the streets of Kabul'. It seemed such an alien thought. I began to research the story. In my research I found this picture of a demonstration for women's rights on the campus of Kabul University in 1973. It was the only concrete evidence I had found for miniskirts. Knowing the history of the ensuing three decades I find the innocence and hope and bravery of the women in this picture is almost overwhelming. (Greig, n.d.)

Greig described this as an "alien thought". He also found the "innocence and hope and bravery of the women […] almost overwhelming" – three qualities all

fused into one while evoking in him a response, as Stevenson states earlier, to identify with persecuted people or sympathise with sufferers during the communist regime. I question if this perception of women's "bravery" an echo of the heroic tropes also found in *The Comedy of Errors* (see Chapter 4) – that the women are doing something admirable *because* of the risks, or if the 'repressive' circumstances and contexts framed their behaviours as "brave". At which stage in Afghan history shall political resistance by the locals be construed as political dissent? Or are we, in the West, not able to escape from the (imagined) orientalist tropes when constructing a relationship with Afghanistan? Symbolically, the relationship between the British woman and President Najibullah in the play is Greig's possible critique of the hierarchies of unequal power and perceived empathy. In re-establishing 'control' as the interrogator, the white woman in the play "reif[ies] 'cultures' as bounded, fixable and/or fully explicable" in Pedwell's terms. This not only reconstitutes West and non-West unequal hierarchies, but also re-sediments Afghans in heroic, redemption tropes.

The question Najibullah asked – "Have you come all this way – imagined yourself all this way – […] – to ask me about women's fashion?" also reflects our (audiences') obsession over Afghan women's dressing, ideas about freedom and repression, and religion. The orientalist perception is that a miniskirt reveals but a burqa conceals, both of which represents polarised ends on the 'freedom' spectrum. Used as a provocative title to arouse the imagination, titillate the senses, as well as offer a critique of this phenomenon, Greig's *Miniskirts of Kabul* illustrates this complex idea as a political symbol, a fetish image, and a cultural commodity. An article *Women In Afghanistan: The Back Story* on Amnesty International's webpage includes a recount by a woman, Horia

Mosadiq, who says, "As a girl, I remember my mother wearing miniskirts and taking us to the cinema. My aunt went to university in Kabul" (Amnesty International UK, 2013). This was immediately preceded by a contrasting description:

> Think of women in Afghanistan now, and you'll probably recall pictures in the media of women in full-body burqas, perhaps the famous National Geographic photograph of 'the Afghan girl', or prominent figures murdered for visibly defending women's rights. (Amnesty International UK, 2013)

The reference to Sharbat Gula, the Afghan Girl on National Geographic, has been discussed in Chapter 1 as the most visible, arguably most entrenched image of Afghanistan that still pervades people's imagination. Following that, the article contrasts the freedoms enjoyed by women before the 1979 invasion by the Soviets and "the 'crime' of being born a girl" (ibid.) in the 1990s enforced by the Taliban, with the conclusion that women are "still routinely discriminated against, abused and persecuted. There is lots to be done before the equality of political rhetoric becomes an everyday *reality* for women in Afghanistan" (ibid., emphasis mine). But this "reality" perceived by Amnesty is a reality that collapses imagination and the real, as problematised in Greig's play. For example, when the Writer asks Najibullah why he did not go in exile to Moscow, Cairo, or Madrid, his reply is sharp – and it questions her lack of understanding of his reality:

> Don't you understand? This is not a great game for me. This is my country. I don't want freedom on the streets of Madrid. I want freedom on the streets of Kabul. I don't want dams on the rivers of Egypt. I want

dams and power stations here – in these valleys. I want roads across the deserts here. In Afghanistan. For you this is imaginary. For me it is real. (ibid., p. 146)

This is possibly Greig's most important critique on the circulation of images by the cultural outsider who too easily assumes the 'safest' option is the best "reality" and hence dismisses contextual complexities. Here, the Writer has a limited understanding of Najibullah's personal, social, cultural, and political contexts, all of which are presumably 'inaccessible' because of her different set of lived experiences. For the President, the "real" refers to the material conditions associated with a deep sense of identity to his nation-state, whereas the "imaginary" is outside the 'local'. In other words, the concept of freedom has no relevance for the President if it is exercised or enforced in the realm of the 'global'. Locating himself 'beyond Kabul' is a form of escape; the *real* is here, in this moment of transformation. Najibullah states that this "is a moment of change" (ibid., p. 147).

The Writer then asks Najibullah if he prefers violence to democracy. He replies, "You talk about democracy as though there is no violence within it. Democracy contains violence. Democracy is a demonstration of the potential violent power of the majority" (ibid.). The President explains further, "In Afghanistan people have no fear of war. What Afghans fear is the majority. To govern in Afghanistan one must be capable of negotiating between many different possible sources of violence and one must be capable of violence oneself. Democracy is not a possibility for us. It is not desirable for us. It may never be possible for us" (ibid.). The character Najibullah's imagining of Afghan people having "no fear of war", however, seems to essentialise Afghans steeped in a history of violence. In

an actual footage of Najibullah addressing different district representatives in Kabul on 21 February 1989, the President himself also said that the "people of Afghanistan stood against Alexander, the Macedonian, and broke his jaw; against the Mongolians, and the British!" (Dr. Najibullah's speech to representatives of Kabul (english sub), 2013). These support the claims that Afghans have "no fear of war", which circulates the myths of their own people (see also Chapter 2).

In this documentary footage, Najibullah calls for peace: "I think a real son of this country and a real servant of one's own nation should not raise his voice, saying irresponsibly that he would bathe Afghanistan with blood. On the contrary, we have to begin to save the people of Afghanistan from this bloodbath" (ibid), followed by his proposal on a policy of National Reconciliation and Peace. In the play, however, the President admits to killing a few people with his own hands, and a few thousand by his orders (Tricycle Theatre, 2010, p. 140), again a reminder that "[d]emocracy contains violence". These show the complex constructions on the term "democracy" which, on one hand, seem to promote peace and reconciliation, yet on the other hand, recognise that killing and violence is part of that same process. In other words, "reality" in the Afghan context – or any conflict zone for that matter – is complex, dichotomous, and even fragmentary. Knowing the multiple collocation of contexts might help to articulate these nuances.

Arguably, the most important idea raised in Greig's play is summarised by the President's frustration with the Writer's incessant questioning. The dialogue is as follows:

My country has been imagined enough. My country is the creation of foreign imaginings. The border between Pakistan and Afghanistan is an imaginary line – Pakistan is a dreamed up country – Pakistan – which – by the way – is paying for those Taliban peasant to right now throw rockets at my city – Every bloody conflict in the world today has its origins in the imagination of British surveyors. You come here imagining. You expect me to co-operate?

I'm sorry.

Imagining warriors and tribesman, imagining oriental sultans, imagining veiled women. Imagining your way into my lives to… what? Own me?

(Tricycle Theatre, 2010, p. 134)

Najibullah's explanation that his "country has been imagined enough", from Pakistan to Great Britain, from warriors to tribal leaders, from "veiled women" to Presidents, is a colonial condition that the other chapters have also sought to address and critique. Here the President asks the foreigner what is the purpose of such imaginations – "to… what? Own me?" (ibid., p. 134) This form of ownership has already been discussed in relation to Homebody's possession and territorialisation of the fetish object (see Kushner's *Homebody/Kabul* in this chapter). Perhaps afraid of being accused of becoming the colonial master, the Writer replies, "I'm just saying that I have read all the books I could find and I have talked to people but I want to understand the world from your point of view. So that involves thinking about you. Mohammed Najibullah. Imagining what it was like to be you" (ibid.). Here, this character distances herself from the colonial discourse and reverts to the empathetic form of imagination – "to understand the world from your point of view […] Imagining what it was like to be you" – which, ironically, is still part of the "affective technologies of power" in Pedwell's terms. This imagining is most poignantly felt when the Writer concludes the play: she recounts that more gunfire is closing in and Najibullah, dressed in Afghan clothes, has gone outside to talk to the approaching jeeps.

Najibullah asks, "What happens next?" and the Writer, here, takes over the narrative as a verbal reportage:

> This morning. September 27th 1996 Kabul falls to the Taliban. The UN do not send a helicopter to rescue you. Some reports say that in the last hours before dawn your old enemy Ahmed Shah Masood comes to the UN compound and offers to take you to safety in the north. You refuse. Armed men break into the compound just before dawn. […] The Taliban capture you. They beat you. They castrate you. They tie your dying body to a jeep and drive round the compound pulling you behind them in the dirt. Finally they take you to a busy road junction where they hang you from a concrete lamp post. They put money in your pocket and stuff cigarettes in your mouth as a symbol of your decadence. I don't know what you did at the end.
> No one wrote it down.
> I imagine you fought.
> You spent four years lifting weights. You were a boxer. They called you the ox.
> I imagine you fought. (Tricycle Theatre, 2010, pp. 148-9)

Here, the representation (imagination) and the real (facts) collapse too easily. The Writer draws on many levels of imagining in this final scene: the Taliban imagines Najibullah as a decadent President, the writer imagines Najibullah to be fighting until his last breath, and the locals (and the woman writer) imagining him as an ox. This is also a significant closure, with a piece of news reporting *on* what had happened to the President. The writer states that Najibullah was beaten, castrated, tied to a jeep and driven around, and finally hanged to a lamp post. It is the woman who ends the play, "I imagine you fought", provocatively suggesting a British or European retelling of a shocking and gory piece of Afghan history.

This could be Greig's critique on the levels of foreign narration and 'intervention' about a country we know little about.

Ben Brantley, reviewer from *New York Times*, states that Greig's play "is neither the best nor the weakest of the dozen plays by different writers […] But Mr Greig's extended question-and-elusive-answer captures the dynamic behind and within all of 'The Great Game'" (Brantley, 2010). He notes that he was "seldom bored or impatient, even if only a few of the individual works meet the standards usually asked of first-rate drama" (ibid), then explains that "you always feel the creative energy and strenuous empathy that went into the making of 'The Great Game' […] But it's also because of the swirling richness of the subject here. Afghanistan observed generates its own natural poetry" (ibid). I argue that the agency of Afghanistan generating "its own natural poetry" is, however, not at all "natural". On one hand, Brantley seems to return to a mystical place where Afghanistan is exoticised by its beauty and charm. He adds that Afghanistan "continues to baffle all outsiders" (ibid.). On the other hand, the agency of Afghanistan having its own poetry, its own rhythm, can be credited to the people who speak *for* or *on* her behalf. The protagonist, Homebody, in Kushner's play has done it, and here, the female Writer in Greig's play is also rewriting Najibullah's history. This series of imagination is what I call an 'enterprise of imagination'. It represents the productions and consumptions seeking to commodify aspects of a culture through levels of interpretations, imaginations, and projections, some of which can result in entrenching and re-sedimenting stereotypes and tropes of Afghan victimhood, for instance, or can result in comparisons that either glorify the past or condemn the present too quickly. Brantley also observes this collective act of imagining Afghanistan. He writes

that *The Great Game* "is nothing less than a collective attempt to imagine into comprehensible existence a country that continues to baffle all outsiders who would rule, use or appropriate it" (Brantley, 2010). Calling attention to Britain, the Soviet Union and the US, Brantley adds that the "plays as a whole become an imaginative testament to a historic and repeated failure of the imagination" (ibid). Similarly, Mohammad Tanha's article in *The Diplomat* is titled, *Afghanistan: A Story of Successful US Failures* (Tanha, 2015). It is perhaps another echo of Brantley's "repeated failure of the imagination".

It is difficult to find reasons or causes for this "failure". In *Miniskirts of Kabul,* imagination in the (imagined) dialogue between the woman writer and President Najibullah oscillates from 'empathy' (wanting to understand him, or the women who wear miniskirts) to 'ownership' (wanting to own him), and from 'real' to 'imaginary' (asking why he remained in Afghanistan and not seek asylum elsewhere). In Abi Morgan's *The Night Is Darkest Before The Dawn*, another play from the *The Great Game* anthology, two characters are trying to convince a father let her child go to a school sponsored by an international charity. They draw on the universal goodness of education, but the father declines the offer and says that his daughter can work on his poppy field with returns of USD $5000. In defence, the teacher says, "He who has a slave-girl and teaches her good manners and improves her education will be rewarded twice." But when probed what would happen if the Taliban returned, these education advocates have no further responses. Even though the play ends on a hopeful note where the girl is finally allowed to study, there is an implicit critique on the *imagined* 'goodness' that education can do for her, when poppy cultivation could otherwise have been the actual *reality* for progress. Another play, *On The Side Of The Angels*, written by

Richard Bean, highlights the complexities of non-governmental organisations working in Afghanistan, and more so, on the commodification of Afghan narratives. For example, one character says "I can't 'sell' farming […] You know how this business works" (Tricycle Theatre, 2010, p. 219), while another quips much later in the dialogue: "I'm not stupid. I know that if I can show a photo of a young Afghan girl on her first day at school looking 'happily bewildered' – I might be able to maintain funding at something like the 2006 levels " (ibid., p. 220). By the end of Bean's play, the first character remarks, "I've never seen a photograph deliver a more perfect narrative. It's that perfect, you'd think I'd photoshopped it", and when asked if he did, he replied, "Would I? I didn't no. 'cept the eyes." (ibid., p. 231). This raises complex questions on the 'production' of Afghan cultures – what is 'real' – to be consumed as the "perfect" image *of* Afghanistan, again, to a large extent, fetishising the same pair of penetrating eyes of the Afghan Girl. It might suggest that the fictionalised elements did not match the 'truth' or the expectations of what 'Afghanistan' is. Nonetheless, there is a 'product', a commodity of Afghanness constructed 'beyond Kabul' that loops back into the enterprise of imagination.

For example, when Nicolas Kent, the artistic director of Tricycle Theatre, says that "there were huge gaps in [his] knowledge of Afghanistan's history, and the causes of where we are now" (ibid., p. 7), that he "was sure [he] was not alone in this ignorance" (ibid.), and remarks that politicians and the media had focused too much on Iraq, but nothing on Afghanistan (Tricycle Theatre, 2010), he commissioned 'political' writers to creatively respond to the debates about Afghanistan. So, when Abi Morgan was approached to write a half-hour play, she says she has the freedom to "write whatever [she] liked", which frames the plays

as part of an imaginative project. In fact, one reviewer for the MPR News, Euan Kerr, notices that "there were some elements where it was clear Tricycle has used a lot of dramatic license" (Kerr, 2010). It suggests that there were fictionalised elements that did not match the 'truth' or the expectations of what 'Afghanistan' *is*. Nonetheless, 'Afghanistan' becomes a product of colonial imagination, even if it is framed as a form of inquiry. More specifically, Kent had previously directed plays about Darfur and Guantanamo, so this Trilogy is "an inquiry into the whole of a nation's history" (Norton-Taylor, 2009) in Kent's repertoire.

Once 'Afghanistan' becomes a commodity, it is open to enterprise: ownership, distribution, or sale. Here, the plays take on a new audience for 'education' and military training. General Sir David Richards, the former British Chief of Defence, took his Sandhurst cadets to watch *The Great Game: Afghanistan,* who reported: "The Ministry of Defence as a whole, and certainly the armed forces, desperately want to understand the country well, and this series of plays – if I had seen it before I had deployed myself in 2005 for the first time – would have made me a much better commander" (Norton-Taylor, 2011). General Sir David Richards' comment here about being "a much better commander" either discloses the lack of understanding and cultural appreciation of Afghan histories when the British troops were deployed in Afghanistan, or reveals the exasperation of a commander, in hindsight, who had wasted too much time understanding the land and her inhabitants. This play also toured the United States. With the £30,000 sponsorship by the British Council, the British embassy, according to Nicholas Cull, "intervened to ensure that the play was seen by the policymakers in the Department of Defense" (Cull, 2011, p. 125). Leaders from politics and military, including CIA, attended the September 2010 performances. US Army General

David Petraeus who was in Kabul had requested DVDs of the production, which were given through the UK military the following month. Petraeus endorsed the plays, especially the idea of "using culture to broaden an understanding of the military's mission" (ibid., p. 133). The British Council also took a poll during the intermissions and "while the results revealed a range of reactions around issues like optimism about the war in light of the play, there was one question that elicited a 100 percent affirmative response: every survey respondent indicated that *Great Game* contained information that would be of direct relevance to their professional engagement with Afghanistan" (ibid., p. 134). This raises further issues *beyond* Kabul, because as evidenced by Nicholas Cull, Tricycle Theatre's journey from London to the Pentagon serves as British Council's "cultural diplomacy" (ibid., p. 125), and the use of theatre is possibly seen to promote, rather than question, military missions with a deeper understanding of Afghan cultures. This becomes problematic when culture becomes a weapon for war.

Jeanne Colleran observes that the cycle of works in *The Great Game* are "inconclusive about whether American and British presence is productive or helpful. Certainly the plays expose all manner of self-interest and political obtuseness, but they also suggest that something valuable may be at work" (Colleran, 2012, pp. 206-7). In a post- 9/11 world that is rife with political and ethical questions, Colleran's verdict is also expressed by Erika Munk who critiqued the plays for being dishonest. Munk states that the "real intention was to show a reassuring semblance of debate – we're listening to both sides, we see the historical problems, we're aware of our own prejudices – while actually presenting a series of arguments for the western military presence as the only

possible course, despite all difficulties and contradictions" (Munk, 2011), and that *"The Great Game* ends up proposing no other answer is its ultimate dishonesty" (ibid.). Sadly, it is impossible to talk and think about Afghanistan in a way that does not reduce its narrations to the familiar tropes of poverty, violence, or women – women in miniskirts, girls needing education, and NGOs performing redemptive acts and manipulating images. However, when the Trilogy of *The Great Game* collocates the imaginative theatre productions with political consumption and viewership at the White House, for instance, the representations of Afghan identities in the play become a 'yardstick' for executing softer military operations, all of which are circular attempts to represent and understand 'Afghanistan'. At the beginning of this case study, I referred to what Merleau-Ponty has termed "imaginary texture of the real". These are the ambiguities blurring what is real and what is imagined, that one is a trace of the other. Merleau-Ponty, in *The Visible And The Invisible* (1968), states, "For when an illusion dissipates, when an appearance suddenly breaks up, it is always for the profit of a new appearance which takes up again for its own account the ontological function of the first" (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, p. 40). In other words, each trope, each imagination, each narration, as well as its erasure, will lead to the next imagination, appearing to come closer to the "real". *The Great Game: Afghanistan*, in this instance, could still be provocatively summed up by President Najibullah's question to the British writer: "Imagining your way into my lives to… what? Own me?" In the next play, such a form of colonial ownership is greatly reduced with intense collaboration between the adaptor of a play and an Afghan author.

'The Kite Runner' (2007/2014)

The third and final play is a return to Chapter 1, where I first began my exploration of Afghanistan in its most visible and familiar contemporary form: *The Kite Runner* by Khaled Hosseini. Hosseini's novel has been adapted into a film in 2007 directed by Marc Forster with the screenplay by David Benioff; a stage production adapted by Matthew Spangler (Spangler, 2007); and a graphic novel illustrated by Fabio Celoni and Mirka Andolfo (Hosseini, Celoni and Andolfo, 2011). As referenced in Chapter 1, the sale of the novel alone had totalled over 7 million copies by 2013 (NPR, 2013) and it was a New York Times bestseller (see Guthmann, 2005; Italie 2012). The 2007 movie grossed a worldwide USD $73,276,047 in lifetime earnings (Box Office Mojo, n.d.), with an Oscar nomination for Best Original Score. Despite its successes, there were controversies. For example, the rape scene involving the Hazara boy, Amir, has been objected to by the actor's (Ahmad Khan Mahmidzada's) father. According to BBC News Kabul, Ahmad's father said, "They didn't tell me about the story of this book" (Haviland, 2007). Even though the father alleged that the producers had agreed not to film the rape scene, the film-makers did it nevertheless but without the boy removing his trousers. One of the producers, Rebecca Yeldham, reasoned, "The scene contains no nudity. It's rendered in a very sort of impressionistic way. But it's also important in being *faithful* to that story – that there's no confusions that the attack in the alley that took place on that child was a sexual violation" (ibid., emphasis mine). The BBC writer also remarked that this film "is a brave move aimed at achieving maximum *authenticity*" (ibid., emphasis mine). These two concepts of being *faithful* to the novel and its *authenticity* bring up important discussions about the 'real' Afghanistan that

these adapters are trying to recreate. This further complicates the circulation of culture, echoing Merleau-Ponty's assertion that when one illusion disappears, another one appears, bringing us closer to the "imaginary texture of the real". Here, I use Walter Benjamin's basic assumption that "[i]n principle, the work of art has always been reproducible" (Benjamin, 2008, p. 3), that copying – such as casting, embossing, engraving, lithography, and film – "give[s] works wider circulation" (ibid.). I then use Benjamin's concept of "aura" to frame the adaptations of Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* as reproductions, to ask to what extent these copies of the 'original' are seeking to be as 'real' or as 'authentic' as the 'original'.

In 'The Work Of Art In The Age Of Mechanical Reproduction', Benjamin asserts that the here and now of the work of art which he calls "presence of the original" (Benjamin, 1968, p. 220) is the "prerequisite to the concept of authenticity" (ibid.). Its authenticity, or the "unique existence of the work of art" (ibid.), is located in a specific place and time, and it determines "the history to which it was subject throughout the time of its existence" (ibid.). Benjamin gives an example that a medieval manuscript coming from a fifteenth century archive can help to establish its own genuineness – its historical origin and development in place and time. Because authenticity is "outside technical […] reproducibility" (ibid.), a work of art maintains its "full authority" (Benjamin, 2008, p. 6). He further suggests "it [is] possible for the original to come closer to the person taking it in, whether in the form of a photograph or in that of a gramophone record" (ibid.). In other words, the aura of the original work can be taken in by the beholder if he comes close enough. In a reproduction of the original, the "halfway" (Benjamin, 1968, p. 220) area is where both meet. Here, *The Kite Runner* novel establishes

itself as a work of art in post- 9/11 times. Because Khaled Hosseini was born in Afghanistan in 1965, his memories and experiences validate his novel as having Afghan authenticity. This is where I also suggest that the meeting between theatre adapter Matthew Spangler and Hosseini (whom I will discuss in full) is a way for the former to come closer to the original work of *The Kite Runner* novel. Yet at the same time, Spangler is also coming closer to the concept of 'Afghanistan' – the representation of a nation-state according to its narrations. In other words, I suggest that there are two 'original' works of art here: firstly, the novel by Hosseini; and secondly, the concept of 'Afghanistan'. Here, I shall examine the performance on 1 October 2014 in the UK as a way (for us) to get closer to the 'aura' of Afghanistan.

When the theatre doors of the newly refurbished Birmingham Repertory Theatre opened, a musician on downstage left was already playing his tabla in soft rhythmic beats to welcome audiences as they filed in to take their seats. On the proscenium stage were two gently-sloping floor boards extending from the wings to the centre of the stage, where a large rectangular area was covered by a carpet. Here, the tabla beats allowed audiences to soak in an ambience possibly associated with folk rhythms from Afghanistan. Closer to the opening time, the drumming became louder and it suddenly appeared as if the musician, Hanif Khan, had taken over the stage in his own virtuosic performance of rhythmic sounds. When the beats ended to mark a transition to the beginning of the play, the audiences clapped vigorously for Khan's showmanship. This was possibly a symbolic gesture that showed public support to Afghanistan, a phenomenon I have called "conciliatory performance" (see the discussion on *The Comedy of Errors* in Chapter 4).

Music, as explained in Spangler's script, performs three functions: to underscore moments, to convey transitions in time and tone, and to identify changes in location (Spangler, 2007). I would, however, add a fourth, that is to project an imagined authenticity of a foreign (Afghan) culture. Authenticity is not an unproblematic concept in theatre discourses, as Helen Freshwater has observed in 'Consuming Authenticities'. She notes that its associations with "genuineness, honesty, integrity, and uniqueness meant that it was widely adopted as a term of approbation at both ends of the cultural spectrum during twentieth century" (Freshwater, 2012, p. 155). Citing Phillip Vannini and J. Patrick Williams, she states that authenticity "is a hook employed either to sell products and services […] or a hegemonic discourse through which various ideologies are articulated" (ibid.). But on the other hand, she recognises that the advertising industry has welcomed it enthusiastically. Recognising that Lionel Trilling says that authenticity "is one of those words […] which are best not talked about if they are to retain any force of meaning" (Trilling, 1972, p. 120), Freshwater continues to engage with this paradoxical term by observing the musical *Billy Elliot*, which "shows [among other things] an exceptional commitment to reproducing the specificities of a particular place and time" (Freshwater, 2012, p. 159). They include a Geordie accent, a Pathe newsreel showing miners marching with banners at the 1947 Durham Miners' Gala, a speech by Deputy Prime Minister Herbert Morrison, and historical images of British mining industry. Likewise, the tabla drumbeats before the opening scene of *The Kite Runner* functioned to reproduce an Asian-style ambience in the theatre – beyond what the book could produce – so that audiences would be "getting closer to" (Benjamin, 2008, p. 9) the unique cultural contexts of Afghanistan. Val Harris, reviewer for *The Good*

Review, stated that the "soundtrack of Afghan percussion and the whirling wind things […] operated by the cast members provided atmosphere and cultural *authenticity*" (Harris, 2014, emphasis mine). This was because live music in the form of drumbeats, singing bowls, Schwirrbogen (the wooden spool used to create a 'natural' whistling sound of kite-flying in the wind) – and, according to the programme, hidden singers underpinning the action – gave this performance a feeling of an 'authentic' Afghan soundscape, in contrast with scenes from America which had pieces of music played through the speakers, such as Kool and the Gang's *Celebration* and Steve Miller Band's *Abracadabra*. Music, then, became part of the collocation of a cultural context, framing and determining the "aura" of an imagined Afghan authenticity.

To further enhance an Afghan authenticity, the extensive use of Dari language was heard very early in the play. In Act I, the first scene showed the adult Amir, the protagonist in America, receiving a phone call from a family friend (Rahim Khan) telling him that there was a way to be good again. Briefly, the San Francisco setting changed to Afghanistan with increased tempos from the tabla, now with a younger Amir and his best friend, Hassan, running and playing cowboys. They then delivered lines in Dari for a seemingly long period of time. Harris, the same reviewer, wrote that the "Farsi used by the two boys in the opening scene as they played and joked was perfectly understandable without the need for translation" (Harris, 2014). I was admittedly charmed by the foreign language too. There was a feeling of 'Afghanness' in the atmosphere, an attempt by the theatre-makers in reproducing an historical time and place in Kabul through music, costume, and language – all of which, I argue, contributed to the believability and authenticity of the fiction that reproduced the aura of

'Afghanistan'.

Structurally, Spangler's adapted script followed the same linear progression as Hosseini's novel. Act I, set primarily in Kabul, documented Amir's significant childhood moments and ended when Hassan and his father left Baba's household due to an accusation of theft, while Act II primarily dealt with Baba and Amir's life in San Francisco, as well as Amir's rescue of Hassan's orphaned son, Sohrab. When asked if he chose to specifically follow the structure of the novel closely, Spangler states that *The Kite Runner* has a "built-in advantage" because of Amir's first-person narrative voice. Since the narrator can be on stage telling the story, it allows Spangler to be both "true to the text and create a workable piece of theatre" (ibid.), whereas other novels he has worked with require more changes or are resistant to changes. Spangler explains, "It doesn't do any good if you create a play that is very accurate to the text but doesn't work as theatre. You don't do the text any favours" (Spangler, 2014, personal communication). In other words, for him, the play has to be theatrically possible to tell a good story first, not the novel. Secondly, Spangler claims that "the shape of the book follows the shape of a stage play" (ibid.) – there is an inciting incident in the first act, the second act introduces new themes and resolves the themes from the first act, followed by a climactic scene at the end. Spangler admits, "*The Kite Runner* follows the form of what we in western theatre expect." He adds, "In a strange way, the closer I was to that book, I felt like the more it was working as a piece of theatre" (ibid.). I suggest that the "closer" Spangler was to Hosseini's book and the closer he was with historical accuracies, the more he was coming closer to the aura of 'Afghanistan'.

However, the stage adaptation offered possibilities that the novel could not do, such as an interjection of dialogue to interrupt the narrative voice. For example, in an early scene of Act I, Amir was describing the mud shack where Hassan was born. He went on to explain how Hassan's mother had abandoned Hassan and so, both Amir and Hassan were nursed by the same woman. The narrator's lines were interrupted by lines from a dialogue when Hassan was playing tag with Amir, as shown below:

Amir   So my Baba hired the same woman who had nursed me to nurse Hassan. We fed from the same breasts. We took our first steps on the same lawn. And under the same roof, we spoke our first words. Mine was: Baba. His was:

Hassan   Amir!

Amir   My name.

Hassan   You're it. *(playing a game of tag)*

According to Harris, the earlier reviewer, he observed that Amir "slip[ped] in and out of the action" while narrating his dilemma in a "series of soliloquies". Harris also noted that Spangler used this method frequently as he "'love(d) the dexterity of that approach' which brought a 'film aesthetic' to the stage" (Harris, 2014). I suggest that this "film aesthetic" is the layering of two sets of time – real time and narrative time (see, for example, Ryan Claycomb's discussion on real world and narrative world in a theatrical paratext; Claycomb, 2009) – which allowed for a permeability of actions. Added on to this complexity was Act II's introduction of historical time: the Soviet war in the 1970s and the Taliban rule in late 1990s, both of which reminded the audience that it was a theatre presentation while simultaneously reproducing faithful representations from Hosseini's text. The

play ended exactly how the novel ended, with Amir running after a kite for Sohrab, just as Hassan had previously done for Amir. The reader might also recall that in *Kaikavus* in Chapter 3, Sohrab is the name of Rustam's son who was killed in battle. The 'rescue' of Sohrab that was not accomplished in the Persian classic is symbolically circulated with greater success here in Hosseini's novel. The ending was a redemptive act in atonement for Amir's childhood betrayal to Hassan, Sohrab's father. It was Amir's way "to be good again".

When audiences watched the play, we witnessed Afghanistan's history unfold. Louisa Britton, one reviewer, said that this production brought "Hosseini's epic tale to the stage with vivacity and poignancy" (Britton, 2014). In a *Birmingham Post* review, Fionnuala Bourke stated: "[T]he play is so good as it is based on Khaled Hosseini's 2003 international bestseller. But *replicating* such a complex story which spans a long period and crosses the globe cannot have been an easy feat" (Bourke, 2014, emphasis mine). Bourke's phrase – "replicating such a complex story" – implies a form of imitation, duplication, or reproduction of an 'original' representation of 'Afghanistan'. Here, Walter Benjamin reminded us that the "genuineness of a thing is the quintessence of everything about it since its creation that can be handed down, from its material duration to the historical witness that it bears" (Benjamin, 2008, p. 7). It can be interpreted that Afghanistan's history has been "handed down" into material form in Hosseini's semi-autobiography – his own family left before the Soviet invasion, and he "return[ed] to Afghanistan after the rise of the Taliban" (Milvy, 2007) just like the protagonist, Amir. As such, it can be difficult to ascertain the 'truthfulness' of the fiction and the 'reality' that Hosseini had experienced as a child.

Nonetheless, the "genuineness of a thing" or the 'original' representation in the concept of 'Afghanistan' becomes the marker by which all the other reproductions are compared or evaluated. For instance, another reviewer writes: "Not having read the book, I can't comment on whether Spangler's adaptation is *faithful* to the original. But the play is a phenomenally powerful piece of theatre which for many people *will portray Afghanistan in a totally new light*" (Orme, 2013, emphasis mine). In some audiences' minds, there are two copies of 'Afghanistan': Spangler's adaptation is a copy of Hosseini's, while Hosseini's novel is a copy of the concept of 'Afghanistan' embedded within a sociohistorical period. For Orme, there is no 'original' text to compare with, so it allows for a 'direct mapping' of Spangler's play to an understanding of 'Afghanistan' without seeing Hosseini's text as an intermediary. All these attest to the argument that 'Afghanistan' has been pre-conceived as a representation with the values of a commodity that has been handed down through history.

To write this adaptation, Spangler spent about eight months reading, researching, and understanding about Afghanistan. Spangler said during my interview:

> In the case of *Kite Runner*, I wanted to learn as much as I could about Afghan history and culture *before* I started adapting. Because it occurred to me that if I didn't know things about Afghan history and culture, I could make a mistake in adaptation, [like] take something out or leave something in, juxtapose two scenes that shouldn't really be juxtaposed, and create something that would be *culturally offensive*. And I may not even know that I'm doing it. (Spangler, 2014, personal communication, emphasis mine)

To avoid being "culturally offensive" is key to my discussion here on his fidelity

to Hosseini's text. In fact, Spangler had lengthy conversations with Hosseini's father-in-law who was a university professor to clarify the accuracies about Afghan history. Weighing against an Afghan's perspective, Spangler was able to, in his words, "triangulate" what he was reading and arrive at his own conclusion, for a period from November to July before he adapted it for the stage. He recounted that he wanted to know Afghan history and culture "well enough that [he] felt he could sort of take a scalpel to Khaled's novel […] and reduce the likelihood that he would make something culturally offensive" (ibid.). Here, I borrow the concept of "historical fidelity" from two linguists who have made Biblical translations, John Beekman and John Callow. In *Translating the Word of God,* they stated that it was inappropriate to make use of cultural substitutes when making translations. For example, the fig tree that Jesus cursed should not be changed to an avocado tree, or "some other better known, local tree" (Beekman and Callow, 1974, p. 203). By changing these words, this act would violate the fundamental principle of historical fidelity" (ibid.). Shuttleworth and Cowie reasoned that it is because "the Christian faith is rooted in history" (Shuttleworth and Cowie, 1997, p. 71), hence objects, places, persons, animals, customs, beliefs or activities which were part of a historical statement must be translated (or adapted, in my case) in a way that the "same information is communicated […] as by the original statements" (ibid., p. 35). In other words, historical fidelity is a strategy of "not transplanting historical narratives" (ibid.) into a new context, of not violating the Christian faith. Similarly, Walter Benjamin stated that "[t]he uniqueness of the work of art is identical with its embeddedness in the context of tradition" (Benjamin, 2008, p. 10). It is therefore necessary for a piece of art to reference its "context of tradition". Here, "getting closer to things", in Benjamin's words, is equivalent to Spangler getting closer to the 'truth' of

Afghanistan, including its history and its traditions, for eight months. Potentially, Spangler is getting closer to the aura, the authenticity, of Afghanistan – without transplanting historical narratives. This is also similar to Hosseini's sentiments when he wrote *The Kite Runner*. He wanted "to make Afghanistan *a more real place* rather than just a remote, war-afflicted nation", as reported by *The Guardian* (Iqbal, 2013, emphasis mine). As previously suggested, there are two levels of reproductions of Afghanistan's 'aura', real and imagined: Hosseini's representation of 'Afghanistan', and Spangler's representation of Hosseini's 'Afghanistan'. Even for David Benioff's screen adaptation, all these reproductions have kept the title unchanged, which suggest a reimagining of this "aura" in fidelity terms. Beyond this (perceived) level of fidelity to historical accuracy, Spangler also sought to establish a different connection with the author himself.

In 2006, Spangler met up with Khaled Hosseini in Say Francisco Bay Area where they both live and shared ideas with him. Spangler initially conceived his play as a refugee story based on the latter half of the novel. But the more Spangler involved himself in the story of the refugee character, the more he felt he had to include other sections, which eventually became the entire novel. Furthermore, many of the earlier drafts were vetted by Hosseini, whose comments "were things in the book that he (Hosseini) would have wanted changed if he were to rewrite the book today" (ibid.). Seen in this context, Spangler's reproduction was not a direct copy of *The Kite Runner,* but potentially an 'original' stage adaptation they both co-wrote. But the collaboration did not end there. Hosseini was also involved in the first production at San Jose State University, where Spangler directed it. When it was produced by the San Jose Repertory Theatre, Hosseini

was there for many rehearsals. In all, Hosseini had an active part as "artistic collaborator" in the stage productions from 2005 to 2009, a term Spangler coined for him, and a partnership which Spangler is most appreciative of. Spangler spoke about Hosseini's generosity and kindness – and how easy it was to work with him. Spangler also professed that "[i]t's important to me that Khaled likes the play, and that he feels that it's a fair reflection of the book" (ibid.). The implicit need for the novelist's approval here is, as I have argued earlier, a getting closer to the aura of Afghanistan in the bid to be fidel in the representations of Afghanistan, and to avoid being "culturally offensive". To put it back into the context of the play, I would boldly suggest that it is Spangler's attempt to find a "way to be good again" – the line spoken by Rahim Khan at the beginning of the play to Amir – as one American practitioner's theatrical intervention to redeem the 'war on terror' waged on Afghan soil. This could explain why, of all his adaptation practices, Spangler felt the need to be historically and culturally faithful ("fidelity"), to have eight months of research, to collaborate with Hosseini's father-in-law, and finally, to gain Hosseini's approval. In an interview with *Nottingham Post*, Hosseini praised Spangler's adaptation:

> I think it translates incredibly well. What I really love about the play is that so much of the book is preserved in it. You have freedoms with stage adaptations that you don't have with film. One large chunk of the book is the main character's Amir's internal monologue, […] In the play the lead actor can break from the action, turn to the audience and share his thoughts. (Wilson, 2014)

Furthermore, Spangler's adaptation of *The Kite Runner* is an unfinished one. Even though the production at the Birmingham Repertory Theatre is its eleventh run globally, the script is undergoing constant revisions. Spangler said, "I'm not

publishing the script, because I like making changes to it for every production"
(Spangler, 2014, personal communication). In this context, his rewriting is
possibly another attempt to get closer and closer to the aura of Afghanistan – to
be faithful to the culture and history – while making creative adjustments. A *New
York Times* reviewer of the novel states that Hosseini has "give[n] us a vivid and
engaging story that reminds us how long his people have been struggling to
triumph over the forces of violence – forces that continue to threaten them even
today" (Hower, 2003). It appears, therefore, that to prevent further disrepair and
stereotyping of an Afghan nation, of preventing the narrations of victimhood and
redemption tropes from circulating, 'Afghanistan' demands a constant re-writing.
Next, I want to examine the reproduction of the 'figure' of Khaled Hosseini as an
Afghan 'hero' in some detail.

In Chapter 1, I made an observation that Hosseini's subsequent novels such as *A
Thousand Splendid Suns* (2008)*,* and *And the Mountains Echoed* (2013) also did
very well in the literary market*,* where the former topped New York Times for
twenty-one weeks (Hosseini, n.d., a). Just from *A Kite Runner* and *A Thousand
Splendid Suns*, he sold 38 million copies (Hore, 2013; Hosseini, n.d., a). Hosseini
became celebrated as an icon, not just representing himself as an author, but also
Afghanistan. He was appointed UNHCR Goodwill Ambassador in 2013.
UNHCR wrote an article on Hosseini 'A Writer Who Remembers' with a
celebratory statement: "acclaimed Afghan-American author Khaled Hosseini
knows what it's like to be a refugee" (UNHCR, n.d.). The UNHCR website
detailed his involvement in countries such as Afghanistan, Chad, Darfur, Jordan,
Syria, and Iraq. Hosseini then recounted:

When UNHCR asked me to work with them, I didn't think twice. As a native of Afghanistan, a country with one of the world's largest refugee populations, the refugee issue is one that is close and dear to my heart. It is a privilege to try to capture public attention and to use my access to media to give voice to victims of humanitarian crises. (ibid.)

There is a certain celebrity 'aura' around Hosseini. Here, I draw on Walter Benjamin's theories again, this time by looking at the concept of the "cult of the movie star" in the context of a film market. Benjamin states that when an actor stands in front of a camera, there is the same feeling of strangeness like looking at one's image in the mirror. He asks: "But now the reflected image has become separable, transportable. And where is it transported? Before the public" (Benjamin, 1968, p. 231). The film actor, Benjamin suggests, knows that when facing the camera "he knows that ultimately he will face the public, the consumers who constitute the market" (ibid.), yet he has no contact with them at all. The film, as a technical reproduction, "responds to the shriveling of the aura with an artificial build-up of the 'personality' outside the studio" (ibid.). In other words, the film recognises that the aura of the actor *within* the film itself gets devalued, hence it compensates it with a personality *outside* the film, which he terms the "cult of the movie star" (ibid). But he argues that this cult "fostered by the money of the film industry, preserves not the unique aura of the person but the 'spell of the personality,' [which is] the phony spell of a commodity" (ibid.).

Earlier, I suggested that there is the aura around 'Afghanistan'. Here, I am suggesting that there is an imagined aura around 'Khaled Hosseini' as well. It can be argued that UNHCR has objectified Hosseini by seeing his stardom as the "phony spell of a commodity", in Benjamin's words, to further its humanitarian

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causes. But at the same time, Spangler's coming closer to Hosseini, including his family, seeking his approval, and working alongside with him as a collaborator, also suggest in a cynical way that Hosseini's aura or stardom has contributed to the market's consumption of *The Kite Runner*, and hence our consumption of 'Afghanistan'. In the context of the culture industry, Spangler's adaptation feeds, and is fed by, the same 'Afghanistan' as a commodity. Throughout my analysis of *The Kite Runner*, I have shown that Matthew Spangler's process for adapting this novel into a play has cautiously been written from a "culturally sensitive" perspective, which made him deviate from his usual creative practices. His relationship with Khaled Hosseini and his family, followed by a subsequent collaboration in the theatre with Hosseini, suggests a "coming closer" to what I have framed as Walter Benjamin's concept of the "aura". Afghanistan's aura, I argued, demanded that Spangler conduct eight months of reading and research 'around' Afghanistan *before* writing the play, which in translation works has been termed "historical fidelity", whose purpose stems from protecting and preserving the faith and tradition of the community. Here, faith in Afghanistan and in the people becomes Spangler's motivation. All of these, I suggest, is Spangler's (or perhaps the West's) way to "be good again" to Afghanistan, as in earlier chapters I have termed "conciliatory performance".

Conclusion

This chapter on 'Beyond Kabul' presented theatre productions that were directed or produced in the United Kingdom and United States. Throughout these three plays, the theatrical representations of Afghanistan and Afghans have continually been negotiated as a series of imaginations that I analysed in concepts of the "fetish" (see William Pietz), "imaginary texture of the real" (see Merleau-Ponty),

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and "aura" (see Walter Benjamin). In Kushner's *Homebody/Kabul*, the fetish indicates the territorialisation of the butchered hand of the hat-seller, to whom Homebody makes love. This territorialisation also reflects an inverse ventriloqual relationship because in her concern for the merchant's life story, Homebody speaks for him and, ironically, silences him. The same idea is taken up in Greig's *Miniskirts of Kabul* where the British writer *enters* the UN compound, uninvited, and starts interrogating President Najibullah as an act to understand what it feels to be him. Najibullah's criticism of her imagination of him is to 'own' him. Yet in her concern for his safety, the Writer assumes it would be safer for Najibullah to seek asylum elsewhere. Najibullah explains his *reality* is here – in Afghanistan, not beyond – which underscores the dichotomy between his 'real' and her real which is based on an 'imagination'. The play ends with reports of the President's death and the writer imagining that he fought, attesting to our expectations of Najibullah's heroic qualities. This could be argued that our imaginations re-entrench Afghans in orientalist mythologies. In *The Kite Runner,* Spangler embarks on an arduous process in getting the historical facts 'right', so as not to be culturally insensitive, nor to destroy the faith (in the concept of historical fidelity). All of these contribute to the aura of Afghanistan. While Spangler's re-writing of the scripts can be interpreted as reinforcing this imagined aura of Afghanistan in the cultural marketplace, I would argue that Spangler's re-writing can strategically interrupt the commodification of victimhood tropes of Afghans because of the constant changes he could make to each production. In other words, his not 'putting in print' the play avoids the reification and sedimentation of Afghan stereotypes and myths. As such, these three plays illustrate how 'Afghanistan' moves *beyond Kabul* into the wider consciousness of global audiences – that in the performing of an Afghan narrative, there is an

expectation for theatre makers to 'come closer' to an authentic 'Afghanistan'. Yet in the collocation of cultural, political, historical and aesthetic contexts, this chapter argues that this kind of imagination as ownership or intervention is still part of a culture industry that celebrates the 'genuineness' of the commodity. It is thus difficult to disentangle the 'real' from the 'representation' or the 'representation' from the 'real' because they can be, as Merleau-Ponty points out, apparitions.

Chapter Six

CIRCULATION OF AFGHANISTAN

While they may be displaced, distorted, and (most often) denied,
the capacities that inhere within the colonial past are
routinely reaffirmed and reactivated in the colonial present.
- Derek Gregory, *The Colonial Present* (2004)

Afghan theatre disappears.

This is the thesis of my argument throughout the dissertation – that *theatre* which is a part of the culture industry in Afghanistan is constantly being rejuvenated and erased due to the fluctuations in international funding and the Taliban's interception and interruptions; that *Afghan*, an adjective describing *Afghanistan* as a singular cultural identity marker, is historically being contested and negotiated within international relations, possibly rendering the term obsolete as it is now a property in the imagination and consumption in the wider world; that *disappears*, as a verb, reflects the conceptual and epistemological tensions in the representation of the 'real' Afghanistan, resulting in a phantasmatic entity existing in both memory and desire of what 'Afghanistan' is. While tropes of an Afghan exotica (1800–1920), an Afghan renaissance (1920–1970), an Afghan desertification (1970–2000), and an Afghan redemption (2000 onwards) reflected the colonial iterations before 2001, these complex narrations of 'Afghanistan' have produced a 'nation state' that *disappears* across its own geopolitical borders today. Drawing on Homi Bhabha's idea that the nation is fundamentally a system of cultural signification, the 'nation' is like narration; it emerges as an ambivalent

construction through "the language of those who write of it and the lives of those who live it" (Bhabha, 2000, p. 1). In this case, Afghanistan as a 'nation state' disappears as a polity but comes into being through a representation of the social and cultural life of Afghans and outsiders. In its discursive place is the notion of Afghanness, an emotional identification with Afghans shared in solidarity by many people including tourists, festival directors, TV and film producers, theatre practitioners (directors, adapters, writers), and global audiences. Foreign institutions such as The Den Nationale Scene from Norway have contributed to the building of theatre infrastructure, training, and funding of local productions (see Chapter 3); the BBC, the British Council, the Indian Council for Cultural Relations, and the World Shakespeare Festival have all helped with the refuge of actors and export of *The Comedy of Errors* in India, Germany and the UK (see Chapter 4); UN General Assembly, UNESCO, ICOMOS and representatives from France, Egypt, Pakistan and Japan, as well as tourists from China, have sought to protect and preserve the Bamiyan Buddhas (see Chapter 4); and the Tricycle Theatre, the British Council, the British Ministry of Defence, and the US Department of Defense, including the CIA, have in some ways sought to support theatre as a way to understand Afghan cultures and customs (see Chapter 5). As such, cultural diplomacy demonstrated by these institutions can also be conceived as the wider narration of Afghanness and hence the *disappearance* of its polity.

When I asked at the start of this thesis if theatre has been complicit in the production of violence in any way, resonant with Khaled Hosseini's fictional quote that being in the performing arts was a "fate most Afghans considered far worse than death", the answer has been affirmative. Corinne Jaber's process of theatre-making ("I'm doing culture") which is symptomatic of foreign trends

either from North American, European or Latin American traditions not only demonstrated a cultural insensitivity to local Afghan customs, cultural codes, and religious contexts, but it also potentially ignores political implications and economic entanglements with the current material realities of the ensemble, hence putting performers' lives at risk. Parwin Mushtahel's husband was shot by the Taliban, and died, allegedly because she was an actress in Jaber's previous production *Love's Labour's Lost*; Abida Frotan tried to pull out of *The Comedy of Errors* due to the intimate scenes, but was told by the British Council that she had received her money and had to continue with it; and the youngest actress Farzana Sayed Ahmad said that if her life were put in danger, it would still have been worth it. Dr Sharif in *Infinite Incompleteness* survived hours of beating and torture by electric shock. Berta Bauer's *Heartbeat: Silence after the Explosion* revealed a different complexity when an explosion killed three while injuring many others during the show. It was the 'disappearance' of the director in the follow-up – and her explicit instructions to the cast for her not to be named – which, in my opinion, further wedges distrust between a foreigner and a local. Furthermore, the British Council compound was bombed in 2011, killing fourteen people (Patterson, 2012), leaving the Roy-e Sabs ensemble unscathed because they had decided at the last minute not to rehearse during that time of the morning. Since the suicide attack at the Institut Français d'Afghanistan in 2014, French operations in Kabul have ceased indefinitely (Noori, 2016, personal communication). To a large extent, visibility in the theatre means a higher probability of risks and dangers, which in turn results in the *disappearance* of cultural forms disapproved by the Taliban. Yet, as the thesis has shown, visibility seems to be a 'necessity' in this market economy.

When Afghan theatre *disappears*, its culture appreciates in use value in the market, further contributing to its commodification across borders. Within Afghanistan, the exchange value of its disappearing culture is used to justify human rights, cultural preservation, and heroic discourses which often lead to sacrifices and martyrdom. This results in visibility politics. Peggy Phelan states that visibility is "a trap" because it "summons surveillance and the law; it provokes voyeurism, fetishism, the colonialist/ imperial appetite for possession" (Phelan, 1993, p. 6). The case studies have shown, for example, how the Taliban, the Aga Khan Group, UNESCO and ICOMOS are also seeking to control and regulate aspects of Afghan cultures, while AHRDO, tourists, theatre practitioners, and audiences have been co-opted in fetishising and/or saving the suffering Afghan. Afghans themselves potentially consume the victimhood discourses that the cultural outsider produces of them, to feed into a capitalist system (funding) for their own livelihoods. It is a performativity of their own Afghan identities that fossilises their own victimhood status. As such, the case studies have demonstrated the constant circular movements between production and consumption, each depending on the other for its power, and hence collapse the boundaries of 'local' and 'global'. These circulations of projections and objectifications further echo Derek Gregory's cynicism that "the capacities that inhere within the colonial past are routinely reaffirmed and reactivated in the colonial present" (Gregory, 2004, p. 7). He observes that "Afghanistan was as much the object of international geopolitical maneuvrings in the late twentieth century as it had been in the nineteenth" (Gregory, 2004, p. 45). I would add that the condition of the "colonial present" still persists into the twenty-first century. Yet in the peculiar case for Afghanistan, the intercourse between local and global producers and consumers confirms Gregory's argument that "the relentless

destruction of Afghanistan […] emerged out of a series of intimate engagements with – *not estrangements from* – modern imperial power" (ibid., p. 44, emphasis original), a complicity that I, myself, am also part of.

I have introduced the concept of "collocation of context" to make visible some of the invisible contexts surrounding the production of Afghan identities for two reasons. Firstly, because Afghan theatres potentially *disappear*, they remain out of sight in the global economy. One way to track its temporal narration of the nation is to articulate the cultural practices from 2011 to 2015. The timeline in Appendix 1 also highlights other cultural practices not discussed in these chapters. Secondly, some theatre productions tend to 'enjoy' more publicity. Their visibility often results in a 'singular' narration of Afghan identities being projected and produced globally. This then occludes the other conditions and situations that surround the theatrical context. As such, a collocation of context is necessary to destabilise these singular readings of Afghanistan. Because a "collocation of context" is the layering and side-by-side placement of multiple contexts that simultaneously act on, and compete for, the representation of Afghan identities, it includes (but not limited to) the local, institutional, cultural, religious, political, global contexts and motivations of every single person or organisation involved in the circulation of Afghan culture. Theatre directors, actors, producers, donors, audiences, reviewers and embassies have different reasons for their involvement in the narration of 'Afghanness', so this analytical concept seeks to provisionally articulate, theorise, and problematise some of these narrations and the ramifications that follow.

For example in *Kaikavus* and *An Enemy of the People,* economic contexts were

foregrounded. The former illustrated the contestation and regulation of indigenous music and the latter in the unsaid conditions of a donor's gift. In *Memory Box Initiative*, the political contexts showed the need for archival for human rights abuse, but a psychical context in my argument – the site and the psychic – offers another reading of AHRDO's contradictory intent that displaced women's stories and the presence effects of the deceased. For *Heartbeat: Silence after the Explosion*, the discursive context showed that an analysis was inadequate; the representational and the real were conflated in the suicide attack in the middle of the performance. These four case studies sought to identify and locate Afghan cultures 'from Kabul' (Chapter 3), but all of them had influences and collaborations from non-Afghans in the construction of 'identities', again supporting the argument that Afghanistan in the post-9/11 period does not have an "authenticated cultural tradition" in Homi Bhabha's words. In Chapter 4, *Blowing Up Bamiyan Buddhas* highlighted the conflicting religious ideas of cultural preservation, but the contexts collocated were economics, aesthetics, and humanitarian. *Infinite Incompleteness* drew attention to the political and aesthetic contexts where victims' stories coalesced with a monstrous maternal figure in what was described as "documentary theatre", again blurring the representational and the real. In *The Comedy of Errors*, the rehearsal processes underscored the need to consider situational contexts, while the reception at the Globe Theatre further entrenched a quasi-humanitarian context where audiences exercised excessive praise for brave Afghan actors. These three case studies explained the processes of commodification 'from and beyond Kabul', especially in light of Karl Marx's concepts of use value and exchange value. Finally in Chapter 5, the contexts surrounding *Homebody/Kabul; Miniskirt of Kabul;* and *The Kite Runner* are largely aesthetics and politics, where imagination, fetish and aura were seen

to foment the narration of the Afghan nation. More specifically in the way the case study chapters were organised, this thesis sought to demonstrate how victimhood and redemption tropes about Afghanistan circulated within the culture industry as a transglobal movement: 'from – from/beyond – beyond'. Chapter 3 focused on the 'regulation' of local Afghan identities with various stakeholders from Kabul; Chapter 4 problematised the 'consumption' of an Afghan culture as a commodity from and beyond Kabul; and Chapter 5 explained how the 'production' of 'Afghanistan' typically stemmed from a cultural outsider's imagination and projection. All these identified our connection with Afghanness and involvement with Afghans, but I take on a more sceptical approach to this.

More conclusively, I want to make three points of caution for theatre practitioners, especially those working in conflict and post-conflict societies. Firstly, the 'from–beyond' meta-analytical framework reveals the export of victimhood and the import of redemption tropes which are circulated across space and time. The construction and projection of a singular Afghan identity is primarily based on suffering, which is problematic for two reasons. The first reason is that this victimhood-redemption trope perpetuates and commodifies suffering to the extent that, *that* is what audiences expect to hear from an Afghan person or an Afghan theatre group. With that, it tends to encourage audiences to applaud and uncritically endorse the production of more tropes related to suffering. Also, theatre practitioners tend to 'look for' these needy groups in vulnerable communities to help and save. I am not condemning the help and services rendered to develop the cultural sector in Afghanistan, but I am questioning the 'over-enthusiastic' and uncritical responses played by non-Afghans (potentially,

myself included) in wanting to help revitalise the arts, which consequently circulates this dependency syndrome. Or worse, with our lack of knowledge of the collocation of contexts, we may be contributing to the production of violence. The second reason is that this victimhood-redemption trope does not question, break, or undermine the other tropes that have been identified in this thesis. The form of orientalist thought that pervaded colonial times, which has persisted in the "colonial present", will still construe and represent Afghans as exotic, barbaric, or impoverished. This rhetoric rarely takes on a new narrativisation – and so to a more insidious degree, the westerner's relationship with the orient tends to oversimplify causes and solutions, and possibly even endorse and exert a 'neocolonial' control over post-conflict or fragile states.

Secondly, this 'from–beyond' framework raises questions about our responses in times of danger. There is a distinct difference between local Afghan theatre practitioners voluntarily engaging in the arts with the full knowledge of the risks undertaken and a foreign theatre practitioner who mobilises a community using the arts for theatre or social action, causing a rupture in social conditions. There is, after all, a way out for the foreigner when danger occurs – that is, *beyond* Kabul – but not so for the locals. They remain inside the geopolitical boundaries of Afghanistan and are susceptible to more attacks. So what remains behind are noticeably the exploitative relationships between foreign directors and Afghan performers. The subsequent questions to be raised are therefore: How do we avoid exploiting the locals' conditions for the benefit of a show, presumably with high market values with global audiences wanting to 'see' Afghans? Is this form of visibility necessary? What forms of protection and safety measures are made available to members of the troupe – before, during, and after the show? Should

practitioners do a risk assessment before entering the conflict site, as do researchers? These questions are asked based on the observable trend that cultural foreigners (including donors) increase risks and dangers to everyone's lives, including theirs. While there are other performance groups including puppets and circus troupes that have foreign directors or foreign funding, these foreign practitioners have lived in Afghanistan for years (for example, Mobile Mini-Circus for Children or MMCC), who demonstrably show an acute awareness of the collocation of contexts, the cultural constraints, the situational and political risks, and other global factors that impact their work. They are no less visible in their publicity and circulation, but, somehow, have generally avoided attacks from the Taliban. But for other practitioners who come into Afghanistan for short-term projects, they are less attuned to local conditions and contexts and are sometimes complicit in the production of violence.

Finally, arguing from a broader perspective, the 'from–beyond' framework problematises the understanding of conflicts as a condition of the 'local', by suggesting that the 'global' and 'local' are intricately intertwined. While the dangers of making theatre in Afghanistan have been raised, the horrors of war and conflict are not confined within its geopolitical borders as we have seen. Unlike performance scholars such as Balfour (2001), Thompson (2009), Hughes (2011), Obeyesekere (1999), Taylor (1997) who have examined performances in places (sites) of war per se, this circulation framework shows that a singular "place" or site of conflict is tenuous as it is part of a messy, unstable set of flows and exchanges that, in Kershaw's words, rub up against each other. As such, conflicts arise both *from* and *beyond* Kabul, as a result of some of these uncritical exchanges and imaginings of 'Afghanistan'. Conflicts are no longer localised

phenomena; they influence, and are influenced, by wider networks of power. With the interactions constantly causing each to disappear and appear, the 'from' and 'beyond' framework positions itself as a useful methodology for future practitioners and researchers to 'see', perhaps in more vivid ways, how identities, cultures, or even violence, are being commodified, circulated, and hopefully in the future, prevented.

Derek Gregory reminds us that the "commitment to a future free of colonial power and disposition is sustained in part by a critique of the continuities between the colonial past and the colonial present" (ibid., p. 7). In an attempt to critique the power of the "colonial present" enacted on the redemptionist performance of Afghan identities and cultures, I examined how the concept of "collocation of contexts" can make visible the invisible contexts that have caused this reciprocal – albeit unequal – relationship. This is similar to the concept of hyphenated identities, where in Chapter 2, I have suggested that hyphens can help to temporarily mark the formations and erasures of shifting identities. The staging of 'Afghanistan' in the ten performances challenges these boundaries, so a consideration of hyphenated contexts can help us avoid singular interpretations and meanings of Afghan identities. At times, an identification with the Afghan narrative means an ethical distancing of identities – a disidentification – as seen in Kenjiro Otani's 'characterisation' of victims' stories, where he would speak the lines as simply as possible without pretending he was an Afghan (see *Infinite Incompleteness* in Chapter 4). At other times, an identification with the Afghan narrative means a collaboration as seen in Matthew Spangler's adaptation practice that ensured accuracy of historical facts with a constant re-writing (see *The Kite Runner* in Chapter 5). There are no established procedures or rules that

one can 'adopt' to destabilise hegemonic or colonial discourses, but this thesis suggests taking a reflexive step back to look at the collocation of contexts and then to respond ethically.

To 'look' *from and beyond* therefore demonstrates a return to Peggy Phelan's argument on Lacanian's visibility politics. She writes:

> Seeing the other is a social form of self-reproduction. For in looking at/for the other, we seek to re-present ourselves to ourselves. As a social relation the exchange of gazes marks the failure of the subject to maintain the illusionary plenitude of the Imaginary. In the Imaginary there is no exchange of gaze precisely because there is no distinction between what one sees and who one is, and thus the economy of exchange so fundamental to speech and sight, is completely unnecessary. (Phelan, 1993, p. 21)

Perhaps our "imagination" of the Afghan individual is, then, a reflection of ourselves, a form of "self-reproduction" as Phelan describes above. When the cultural outsider (myself included) empathises with the Afghan other (much like Homebody in Kushner's play), there is a clear connection and continuity with the Imaginary: the two entities are the same. But when the cultural outsider is separated from the Afghan other, the Afghan other or the cultural outsider is devastated by the distance and so seeks to establish a connection (perhaps for reparation or reconciliation) or mourns the disconnection. This Lacanian perspective critiques our Afghan 'colonial' imagination because it is our failure as a human being that is 'produced': we are either doing too much or not doing enough to 'save' our connection with the 'Afghan' person or 'Afghanistan'.

But herein lies the second paradox on the *disappearance* of Afghan theatres. To render a cultural practice as lost or destroyed is to privilege a form of visibility in the global marketplace, that performances should be 'saved', archived, remembered, imagined, or restored. Yet at the same time, this visibility often denies the (relative) invisibility of lesser known performance practices in private spaces, as well as invisible situational contexts leading to public performances, unmarking the taken-for-granted consequences of commodification that have become invisible in the culture industry. This means a return to the normative and privileged assumptions of 'performance' as (staged) theatre as 'evidence' of an Afghan culture. Conceptually, this also means that the 'representational' and the 'real' cannot be so easily distinguished. On one hand, it is possible to see a causal relation between the representations of Afghanistan as "real", as mimetic resemblance. The stories of tragedies and victims' testimonials bear witness to horrific regimes that have caused endless sufferings and displaced many. Case studies from AHRDO (see *Memory Boxes* in Chapter 3; *Infinite Incompleteness* in Chapter 4) prove that human rights, transitional justice, and reconciliation are still in want. With the exception of *Kaikavus*, *An Enemy of the People*, and *The Comedy of Errors*, the other theatre productions tend to veer towards realist portrayals and representations of the Afghan condition. In fact, it can be argued that the global audiences expect it to be so; anything less than a realist perception and experience of the Afghan way of life would have less 'exchange value'. On the other hand, this thesis also highlights that the real and the representation may not have a causal link, especially in the enterprise of imaginations and projections that are steeped in mythic stereotypes of Afghans and their accompanying conditions. Tony Kushner's *Homebody/Kabul* and David Greig's *Miniskirts of Kabul* are indicative of the power of 'imagination', territorialisation and

ownership of the Afghan narrative by the cultural outsider. As such, the *disappearance* is also an appearance – through discourse and theatrical representation.

Because of the lack of visibility, other cultural forms also 'fail' to exist in the global marketplace. As such, the (in)visibility of Afghan theatres – as well as Afghan lives – is highly unstable and tenuous. Jenny Hughes states that "[t]o study performance in terms of crisis is to insist on the materiality of life, and the tangible, visceral costs of a world configured by violence and inequity" (Hughes, 2011, p. 17). Phelan further adds that "[v]isibility politics are compatible with capitalism's relentless appetite for new markets" (Phelan, 1993, p. 11). Perhaps, then, it is permissible to insist on the *disappearance* of Afghan theatres – the "deliberate and conscious refusal to take the payoff of visibility" (ibid., p. 19).

This would also mean an active vanishing of the cultural outsider in Afghanistan's cultural sector.

Epilogue

I conclude this thesis with Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* and compare it with my own ethnographic observations (Chow, 2012) on kite-running, which, for me, symbolises the differences between the representational and the real on the ground. In Hosseini's novel, he wrote:

> The real fun began when a kite was cut. That was where the kite runners came in, those kids who chased the windblown kite drifting through the neighbourhoods until it came spiralling down in a field, dropping in someone's yard, on a tree or a rooftop. The chase got pretty fierce; hordes

of kite runners swarmed the streets, shoved past each other like those people from Spain I'd read about once, the ones who ran from the bulls. One year a neighbourhood kid climbed a pine tree for a kite. A branch snapped under his weight and he fell thirty feet. Broke his back and never walked again. But he fell with the kite still in his hands. And when a kite runner has his hands on a kite, no one could take it from him. That wasn't a rule. That was a custom. (Hosseini, 2003, p. 49)

On 7 December 2012, I was with my Afghan friends on top of Tapa-e Naderkhan (Nader Khan Hill) in Kabul, where the barren land was filled with many gravestones (see Chow, 2012). In one corner, there was a huge dome-shaped monument for King Nader Khan. I did not know if he was actually buried there, but in that arid landscape, men were flying kites and the boys were chasing after them. That part of Hosseini's description seemed accurate. What I observed was that these children were holding on to poles, whose ends were tied to branches (see Plate 22, Appendix 2). So when a kite was cut and was floating through the air, children with poles would stick them sky-high, so that the kite would be caught by these scraggly branches (see Plate 23, Appendix 2). When they lowered their poles, the kite technically belonged to the kite-snatcher (in my opinion, rather than *kite-runner*). However, from a distance, I did observe children fighting over the lowered kite. It was not an aggressive display, but it was, nonetheless, a fierce competition between the children who wanted to own the prized possession. Here, Hosseini's claim that no one would take it from the boy with the kite might have appeared romanticised as an Afghan "custom", in his words. My observation reported otherwise.

Nonetheless, what was more peculiar afterwards was the boy with the kite running to a man standing near a gravestone selling kites. It was a makeshift kite-

shop. Hanging on the railings of the gravestone were colourful kites of various sizes and shapes (see Plate 24, Appendix 2). The kite-snatcher sold the kite back to the kite-seller (or owner), and in return, was given a sum of money. The kite-snatcher would use the money to ride children-sized scooters which ran on diesel. Here, the commercial enterprise was evident – the child kite-snatcher knew that money was needed to ride the scooter, and his way to get the money was to snatch a kite and sell it to the kite-seller. The kite-seller, on the other hand, was selling and buying (used) kites, while another man who owned the fleet of scooters was taking advantage of the situation to also profit from each other. The child who was done with the scooter then returns to join the other children to snatch the kites and the pattern is repeated. Money was exchanged in this vivid circulation, and each person was enterprising enough to enjoy the moment, even if the possession of the prize (either kite or money) was temporary. Here, there were no foreign interference or interventions to disrupt the proceedings of the 'market', and everyone seemed happy to get what they needed from each other. Similarly, as observed throughout this thesis, a particularised Afghan culture is also circulating within a global theatre industry – except that now, the accepted form of currency exchanged is, sadly, victimhood.

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CULTURAL TIMELINE

Afghan Theatres and Other Cultural Activities in view of Wider Politics

Note: As with many of these events on the timeline, there are mild discrepancies in accuracy of dates and spelling of names. References, where found, are cited below. More research can be done to examine the influences *from-beyond* Kabul, to investigate how the 'local' affairs are intricately intertwined with the 'global'.

Period	Cultural activity 'from' Afghanistan	Wider politics in and 'beyond' Afghanistan
Before Common Era (BCE)		*329 BCE:* Alexander's Greek troops take over Balkh.
Common Era (CE)		*645 CE:* Arab invasions. Islam is introduced.
		970 CE: Turkish governor from Balkh seizes Bamiyan and converts it from Buddhism to Islam
		1220 CE: **Genghis Khan** crosses the River Oxus and destroyed Balkh
		1273 CE: **Marco Polo** passes through Afghanistan on his way to China
		1504 CE: **Babur**, founder of Moghul dynasty, arrives in Kabul
		1747 CE: **Ahmed Shah Durrani** is declared the amir (ruler) by the *loya jirga* (or Great Council). He rules until 1773.
1800		*1839 – 1842:* **First Anglo-Afghan War** British forces invade Afghanistan and installs **King Shah Shujah** (BBC Asia, 2015).
		1878 – 1880: **Second Anglo-Afghan War**
		Treaty of Gandamark (1879) is signed with **Amir Mohammad Yaqub Khan** (son of Sher Ali Khan), giving Britain control of Afghanistan's foreign affairs (BBC News Asia, 2015a).

		1893: **Sir Mortimer Durand** establishes the border between British India (now Pakistan) and Afghanistan, known as the Durand Line.
1910s		*1919:* **Third Anglo-Afghan War** Amir **Amanullah Khan** declares independence from British influence. His wife Queen Soraya Tarzi is also progressive.
1920s	*1920s*: **King Amanullah** builds an arena theatre similar to Greek theatres in the park of **Pagnaman** (Rubin, 1994, p. 48), where Shakespeare and Moliere were adapted. Plays in Persian or Pashto become favourites. A patriotic play, *Mother of the Nation,* is the first known play. (Rahman, 2004) *1921*: First girls' school was opened by Queen Soraya, wife of King Amanullah Khan (Hakimi, 2013) *1922:* **Herat Theatre** is formed (Soroor, 1999) *1923:* **Cinema and Theatre** building of Paghman is established, which is the first cinema and theatre in Afghanistan (Dowagoi, 1990, p. 55) *1924:* **Modern Pashtun theatre** is formed with "khudai khidmatgar" movement (Khan and Khattak, 2014)	
1930s	**School of Fine Arts** is established in Kabul (Rubin, 1994, p.48) Department of Fine Arts in the **Ministry of Information and Culture** subsidizes school and maintains relations with several countries (Rubin, 1994, p. 48), e.g. state awards	*1933:* **Zahir Shah** becomes king and Afghanistan becomes a monarchy *1934:* Britain's **British Council** is founded

1940s	Government support leads to creation of **Afghan Nanderi (National Theatre)**, a proscenium house staging works from Turkey, US, UK, France and Soviet Union (Rubin, 1994, p. 48)	
	Municipal Theatre of Herat, and state-sponsored **Kabul Nanderi (Kabul Theatre)** are formed (Rubin, 1994, p. 48)	
	Pashto Theatre reaches its zenith (Khan and Khattak, 2014)	
	1944: **Poheni Nanderi** in Herat province was established, c.f. Salehudin Saljughi (Soroor, 1999; Dowagoi, 1990, p. 27)	
	1946: **Kabul University** was formed.	
	1948: **Saari Nanderi** was formed and managed by Abdolrashid Jalia (Dowagoi, 1990, p. 70)	
	1949: **Elm-o-Jahl** was formed. (Dowagoi, 1990, p. 69)	
1950s	**Kheyrzradeh** (revived **Kabul Nanderi**, but also faced opposition, then was exiled in 1959). Worked also in cinema and improvisation.	
	Women finally appeared on stages (Rubin, 1994, p. 48)	
	1951: **Theatre of Kandahar** was managed by Jan Mohammad Yekta (Dowagoi, 1990)	*1951:* Germany's **Goethe Institut** is founded.
	1955: **Bahar Theatre** was established by Knowledgeable Women's group in Kabul, when Poheni Nanderi was on the verge of closing down (Dowagoi, 1990, p. 76).	*1953:* General **Mohammad Daud** becomes the prime minister, who then turns to Soviet Union for help. He introduces the abolition of purdah, which is the practice of secluding women from public view (BBC Asia, 2015).
	Also, the **first drama school** was built (Dowagoi, 1990, p. 77).	
	1957: **Herat Nanderi** was established with the efforts of Abdulrahim Sarkhosh (Dowagoi, 1990, p. 29)	
	First theatre in Kabul was established by **women**, called **Zeynab Nanderi** (Dowagoi, 1990, p. 81). It was managed by Salehe Farooq Etemadi, about women's rights.	
	Banari Nanderi was formed (Dowagoi, 1990, p. 82)	

	1958: **Lashkari Nanderi** was formed in Kabul. Director of the Theatre was Vazir Mohammad Neghat (Dowagoi, 1990, p. 84)	
	1959: **Puli Khumri Nendari** formed in Baghlan.	
	First theatre for children was established by Mohammad Rafigh Sadeq, called **Koodak in Merston** (Dowagoi, 1990, p. 148)	
1960s	**Lashkar Nendari** was formed in Helmand.	
	Russian influence, joined with **Poheni Nendari.**	
	Actors performed to children, but no specific **Children's Theatre** (Soroor, 1999)	
	1963: **Foundation of Institution of Fine Arts** established (Soroor, 1999), but was said to be in 1961 according to Dowagoi (Dowagoi, 1990).	*1963:* **Daud** is forced to resign as prime minister.
	The first Pashto play was performed, called "Ghahremanan" (Heroes). (Dowagoi, 1990, pp. 97-98)	*1964:* Constitutional monarchy is introduced, polarising political groups (BBC Asia, 2015).
	1966: **Pashto Theatre** was established in Kaltour Chukat (?). It was established in Kabul, then moved to Kandahar (Soroor, 1999)	
	1968: **Parwan Youth Theatre** was set up.	
	Afghan Film Organisation is set up with American backing (Graham, 2010, p. 88)	
	1969: **Behzand Nanderi** was established (and managed by Sarkhosh Herawi) beside Herat Nanderi (Dowagoi, 1990)	
1970s	*1971:* John Frankenheimer's film "The Horsemen" was the first feature film to be shot in Afghanistan, scripted by Academy winner Dalton Trumbo (Graham, 2010).	US President **Richard Nixon** "was abandoning Afghanistan to increased Soviet patronage, paving the way for an eventual coup that led to the Russian invasion of 1979" (Graham, 2010, pp. 11-12)
	1972: **Esteqlal High** School theater was opened.	
	1973: **Afghan Nanderi** was formed (Dowagoi, 1990, p. 128)	*1973:* **Mohammad Daud** seizes power in a coup and declares Afghanistan a republic. He then tries to "play off USSR against Western powers" (BBC Asia, 2015).

		1978: **General Daud** was overthrown and killed. The People's Democratic Party took over.
	1979: All printing houses were nationalized. Scholars who had been awarded state prizes had their books published. (Rubin, 1994, p. 49) First play was a play by Brecht, directed by Mohammad Azim Raad (Dowagoi, 1990, p. 145)	*1979:* **Soviet Army** invade Afghanistan and set up communist government
1980s		*1980:* **Babrak Karmal** is installed a ruler, backed by the Soviets.
	1984: **Steve McCurry** photographed Afghan refugee girl for 1985 publication of National Geographic.	Intense fighting from mujahideen groups. US, Pakistan, China, Iran, and Saudi fund and supply arms to the mujahideen (BBC Asia, 2015). *1988:* Afghanistan, USSR, US and Pakistan sign peace accords with Soviet troops withdrawing from Afghanistan *1989:* The Soviet army leaves Afghanistan, but civil wars continue as mujahideen seeks to overthrow **President Najibullah**.
1990s	*1992:* 14 newspapers were circulated regularly in Afghanistan, with Zhowandoon regularly carrying stories on the arts. (Rubin, 1994, p. 49) 1994: **BBC** longest running radio drama "New Home, New Life" made its premiere broadcast.	*1992:* **Najibullah's** government topple and civil wars intensify. *1994*: **Taliban** captures Kandahar. *1996:* **Taliban** seizes Kabul and regulated strict controls. *1997:* **Taliban** is recognised as legitimate rulers by Pakistan and Saudi Arabia *1998:* US launches missile strikes at Osama bin Laden *1999:* UN imposes air embargo and financial sanctions (BBC Asia, 2015).

2001	**Mohsen Makhmalbaf** released film "Kandahar". Film won UNESCO prize. (Graham, 2010) Buddhas in Bamiyan were detonated by the Taliban. UNESCO and other stakeholders rushed to intervene.	**Ahmad Shah Masood,** leader of the Northern Alliance which have been fighting against the Taliban is assassinated. US-led invasion of Afghanistan under the name "Operation Enduring Freedom", immediately after 9/11 attacks on the twin towers in New York. Bonn Agreement is formed in Germany, in favour of an interim government. **Hamid Karzai** is sworn in.
2002	**Steve McCurry** and National Geographic return to Afghanistan to find the Afghan Girl, Sharbat Gula. **Afghan Mobile Mini Circus for Children (MMCC)** begins its work in Kabul. **Michael Winterbottom** releases film "In This World" (Graham, 2010). **National Theatre Company** was revived, staging 10 performances a year. (Tordjman, 2006)	NATO and ISAF are deployed in Afghanistan for peacekeeping. **Hamid Karzai** is elected as interim head of state.
2003	**Bond Street Theatre** begins work in Afghanistan. Documentary "Search for the Afghan Girl" is released. **Siddiq Barmak**'s film "Osama" is released, winning a Golden Globe and other awards. First film to be screen at Cannes. (Graham, 2010, p. 88) Germans help to build the auditorium of the Theatre Department at Kabul University, then known as Dramatic Arts Centre then. (Noori, 2015, personal communication)	
2004	**Roya Sadat** directs debut film "Ellipsis" (*Seh Noqta,* or literally *Three Dots*) **Khaled Hosseini** publishes "The Kite Runner" in April.	

2005	**Corinne Jaber** directs *Love's Labour Lost.*
	Aftaab Theatre is established in partnership with **Ariane Mnouchkine** and Theatre du Soleil. Aftaab Theatre perform *Romeo and Juliet* (directed by Maurice Durozier) in Kabul and Tajikistan (Aftaab Theatre, n.d., b).
	Bond Street Theatre and **Exile Theatre** perform *Beyond The Mirror*
	2nd Afghanistan National Theatre Festival (also called National Theatre Forum) includes workshops and performances at the Kabul Theatre Summer, by Ariane Mnouchkine (France), Corinne Jaber (France), Bond Street Theatre (USA), Lars Jan (USA), Joerg Schuett and Karol Cybulla (Germany), Merle Karuuso (Estonia), Dea Loher (Germany), Ralf Ralf (UK), Hueges Fontaine (France), Neusa Thomasi (France)
2006	**Azdar Theatre** is established by Guilda Chahverdi.
	Guilda Chahverdi directs **Azdar Theatre**'s first play, *Ubu The King*
	Aftaab Theatre perform *Tartuffe*, directed by Helene Cinque.
	3rd Afghanistan National Theatre Festival

2007	**Ariane Mnouchkine** conducts theatre workshops in Kabul	
	Wieland Jagodzinski of the Ernst Busch Academy of Drama, Berlin, conducts workshops at Kabul Uni (invited by Goethe-Institut Kabul) from 2007-2009, where Parwaz Theatre is established in 2009 (Goethe Institut Kabul, n.d.).	
	Mike Nichols directs film "Charlie Wilson's War", which was nominated for 5 Golden Globe awards. (Graham, 2010)	
	Aftaab Theatre perform *Caucasian Chalk Circle* in Kabul, directed by Arash Absalan.	
	4th Afghanistan National Theatre Festival	
	In December, "The Kite Runner" film premiere is screened	
2008	**Corinne Jaber** directs Fabrice Melquiot's *Sisters* in Kabul and Paris.	US President **George Bush** "sends an extra 4,500 US troops to Afghanistan, in a move he described as a 'quiet surge'" (BBC Asia, 2015).
	Alexandra Paraboschi releases documentary "Afghanistan: Reconstructing Through Theatre"	
	Azdar Theatre perform *Macbeth*	
	Caucasian Chalk Circle and *Tartuffe* are performed in Paris and India by **Aftaab Theatre**.	
	5th Afghanistan National Theatre Festival	
	Haroon Noori directs *Kapochee* with **Azdar Theatre**, winning Best Play Award (for Concept, Dramaturgy, Director) at the Afghanistan National Theatre Festival	
	In November, **Khaled Hosseini** publishes "A Thousand Splendid Suns".	

2009	**Parwaz Puppet Theatre** is formed, with the support from Goethe-Institut.	US **President Barack Obama** introduces new strategy for Afghanistan and Pakistan: an "extra 4000 US personnel will train and bolster the Afghan army and police". The total numbers in Afghanistan were 100,000 troops in all.
	From April to June, Tricycle Theatre perform *The Great Game: Afghanistan* (including the case study examined here, *Miniskirts in Kabul*, by David Greig)	
	Azdar Theatre perform *Tale of the Tiger,* directed by Iranian director, **Arash Absalan**. In the same year, they also perform *Four Friends*, directed by Ahmad Nasir Formuli	**Karzai** is declared winner of presidential election, with **Abdullah Abdullah** in second place.
	Aftaab Theatre perform a collaboratively devised piece *On That Day* over a seven-month residence in Paris. Directed by Helene Cinque (Aftaab Theatre, n.d., b).	
	In June, **Parwaz Puppet Theatre** is founded, and performs at the Theatre Festival (Goethe Institut Kabul, n.d.).	
	6th Afghanistan National Theatre Festival is held.	
2010	**Azdar Theatre** perform *The Little Prince*, directed by Iranian director, Arash Absalan	**Dutch troops** withdrawal in Afghanistan
	Afghanistan National Theatre Festival stops because of funding issues (Noori, 2015, personal communication).	**General David Petraeus** takes over the command of US and ISAF forces.
	AHRDO perform *Infinite Incompleteness* in Afghanistan and US.	
	Tricycle Theatre perform *The Great Game: Afghanistan* in September in Washington DC. It was also performed in Berkeley and New York from October to December.	
2011	In February, **Tricycle Theatre** perform *The Great Game: Afghanistan* privately to Pentagon staff, military, policy-makers, aid workers and CIA at the Shakespeare Theatre Company's Harman Theatre in Washington DC.	
	Azdar Theatre perform *The Little Prince* again, directed by Iranian director, Arash Absalan	
	NGO **Yellow House Jalalabad** is established by Australians.	

2012	**Roy-e Sabs Theatre** perform *The Comedy of Errors* in India, England, Germany. Directed by **Corinne Jaber**. In December, **Sam French**'s "Buzkashi Boys" is released. It is nominated for Academy Award for Best Live Action Short Film.	
2013	In January, Oscar winners are announced for film "Buzkashi Boys" **Azdar Theatre** perform *Kaikavus*, directed by **Haroon Noori**. **AHRDO** installs Memory Box Initiative and exhibition. **Globox TV** launches an improvisational theatre, **G Theater**, that is televised for the internet. Directed by **Noorullah Azizi**, this is a small setting with audiences volunteering to act on stage based on the prompts given. In May, **Khaled Hosseini** publishes "And The Mountains Echoed"	
2014	Goethe-Institut tries to reboot **Afghanistan National Theatre Festival** but due to poor quality and non-participation from Kabul University, it stops (Noori, 2015, personal communication) **1st Student Theatre Festival**, with 11 plays are performed at Kabul University. Funded by Den Nationale Scene (DNS) Theatre, Norway. **Haroon Noori** directs *An Enemy of the People*, with Kabul University faculty and students. Funded by Den Nationale Scene (DNS), Norway. **Matthew Spangler**'s adaptation of *The Kite Runner* is performed in the UK. In December, there is a bomb blast at Istiqlal High School during **Azdar Theatre**'s performance of *Heartbeat: Silence after the Explosion*, directed by German psychotherapist and dancer whose name has been withheld.	Presidential election with **Ashraf Ghani** nominated as the President, and **Abdullah Abdullah** as the Chief Executive Officer of Afghanistan. A two-party system is implemented. This was arguably after US Secretary of State, **John Kerry,** intervenes on charges of electoral fraud. Hosting venue, **Institut-Francais d'Afghanistan** (IFA) and all French presence have ceased operations in Afghanistan after the attack during *Heartbeat: Silence after the explosion.* In December, NATO and ISAF formally end its 13 year mission in Afghanistan, handing over its security to its own security forces (BBC News Asia, 2015)

2015	**2nd Student Theatre Festival,** with 8 plays are performed at Kabul University.
	Abdulhaq Haqjoo directs *Someone Is Going To Come*, with Kabul University students. Funded by Den Nationale Scene (DNS) Theatre, Norway.

Figure 2: Administrative Divisions in Afghanistan in 2009
Source: Perry-Castañeda Library Map Collection
(The University of Texas Libraries, 2009)

Figure 3: Afghanistan and the Durand Line
Source: Forum (Pakistan Defence, 2014)

Plate 1: Afghan audiences at Kabul Nanderi, c.1974
Source: Screenshot from *Afghanistan: Reconstructing Through Theatre*
(Paraboschi, 2008)

Plate 2: Afghan women's dressing, c.1974
Source: Screenshot from *Afghanistan: Reconstructing Through Theatre*
(Paraboschi, 2008)

Plate 3: Performance with actress on stage at Kabul Nanderi, c.1974
Source: Screenshot from *Afghanistan: Reconstructing Through Theatre*
(Paraboschi, 2008)

Plate 4: Farida Raonaq in a play by Molière
Source: Screenshot from *Afghanistan: Reconstructing Through Theatre*
(Paraboschi, 2008)

Plate 5: Costume Design in Molière's plays
Source: Screenshot from Afghanistan: Reconstructing Through Theatre
(Paraboschi, 2008)

Plate 6: Parwaz Puppet Theatre performance
Source: Parwaz Puppet Theatre [Facebook]

Plate 7: Parwaz Puppet Theatre performance in rural province
Source: Parwaz Puppet Theatre [Facebook]

Plate 8: Storyteller at the beginning of *Kaikavus*
Source: Daf Records

Plate 9: Sohrab defeats Rustam and throws him down in *Kaikavus*
Source: Daf Records

Plate 10: Sohrab (left) confronts Rustam (right), in *Kaikavus*
Source: Daf Records

Plate 11: Devastated by son's death, Rustam becomes a drunkard
Source: Daf Records

Plate 12: Realism in *An Enemy of the People*
Source: Daf Records

**Plate 13: Actors being thrown potatoes and onions during
the performance of *An Enemy of the People***
Source: Daf Records

Plate 14: Memory Box Exhibit A
Source: AHRDO

Plate 15: Memory Box Exhibit B
Source: AHRDO

Plate 16: Memory Box Exhibit C
Source: AHRDO

Plate 17: Aesthetics of the Oppressed workshop for widows in *Memory Boxes*
Source: AHRDO

Plate 18: Tableau during *Heartbeat: Silence after the Explosion*
Source: Azdar Theatre

Plate 19: Dance movements during *Heartbeat: Silence after the Explosion*
Source: Azdar Theatre

Plate 20: Scene from *Heartbeat: Silence after the Explosion*
Source: Azdar Theatre

Plate 21: Another scene from *Heartbeat: Silence after the Explosion*
Source: Azdar Theatre

Plate 22: Scraggly branches used for catching kites
Source: Edmund Chow (Chow, 2012)

Plate 23: Kite-snatches in action on top of Nader Khan Hill in Kabul
Source: Edmund Chow (Chow, 2012)

Plate 24: Makeshift Kite-Shop for Buying and Selling of Kites
Source: Edmund Chow (Chow, 2012)