

Place and belonging in David Greig's *Outlying Islands*

By

Maha Thair Muhammed

Department of English, College of Arts, University of Baghdad/Iraq

Email: Maha.thaer1203b@coart.uobaghdad.edu.iq

Esraa Jalal Jawad

Department of English, College of Arts, University of Baghdad/Iraq

Email: israajala@coart.uobaghdad.edu.iq

Abstract

People are always associated with a place because to have a place is to have an identity. Whatever they practice or occupy is formulated according to their sense of belonging and notion of place. This paper is concerned with David Greig's *Outlying Islands*. The play narrates a journey of two ornithologists, Robert and John, to a remote Scottish island to make a survey of rare species of birds there. They settle in an old place in the island which was a chapel once upon a time. The island is inhabited by an old man, Kirk, and his niece, a young beautiful lady Ellen of seventeen years old. As the two ornithologists come to fulfil their duty, they discover, later on, that they are here after another governmental goal in which birds are to be submitted to an anthrax test. The island has a charming effect on Robert that he feels united with its land. John's attitude differs from Robert's. This difference reveals their true tendencies and perspective of place. The purpose of this study is to examine the theme of belonging in light of Soja's theory, Thirdspace, arguing that a person's perspective of a place decides his/her destination that could be a thirdspace he/she aspires to reach.

Keywords: homeland, belonging, isolation, nature, thirdspace.

Introduction

David Greig is one of the prolific Scottish playwrights. He was born in Edinburgh 1969, brought up in Nigeria, and studied drama at Bristol university. Due to his father's profession in construction, he and his family experienced frequent transitions which gave him, consequently, a sense of criticism upon issues related to place and watered his fondness for travelling worldwide. Hence, he is interested in issues related to place, belonging, identity, place politics, and social struggles. He thoroughly highlights these issues in most of his dramatic writings (Billingham, 2007, p.5).

Greig's *Outlying Islands* highlights the journey of two ornithologists Robert and John to a remote island to catalogue new kinds of birds there. When they met Kirk, the land-lease holder, and his niece Ellen, they discovered the real mission behind the scene in which the government sent Kirk a message declaring that the birds should be submitted to an anthrax test. Here comes the moment of truth to reveal the reality of both Robert and John.

John is not interested in the island. He envisions it as a negative power that he should withstand and he is eager to go back home. This attitude can be shown in the final scene when he meets the captain of the ship and shows his readiness to return to mainland (Wallace, 2013, p. 85). Robert, on the other hand, is captivated by the serenity and charming nature of the island which draws his attention away from his mission and homeland.

The play can be perceived through the lense of Edward Soja's theory of the Thirdspace. The theory divides space into three levels: the firstspace which picturizes the reality of a space as it is, the secondspace embraces the perspectives of people about the space and how they perceive it positively or negatively, and the thirdspace combines the first and secondspaces to introduce a new space which aims at bettering man's life (Soja, 1996, p.56).

Accordingly, the island represents the firstspace, the secondspace is embodied through the perspective of all the characters in the play and how they think about the island. Robert is the only character who reaches the thirdspace as he believes the island is very precious part and doesn't want to violate or destroy it in such a negative way. He feels that he belongs to the island more than to his real homeland and this attitude explains the idea of belonging in which man belongs to the place where her/his comfort zone is available the most.

Place and Belonging

David Greig's *Outlying Islands* was first produced by the Traverse Theater Company at the Traverse Theatre, Edinburgh, on 12 July 2002. The story is inspired by Robert Atkinson's book *Island Going* (1949). It introduces two ornithologists who travel to the Outer Hebrides in 1930s and 1940s in order to make a study of a rare kind of birds there (Wallace, 2013, p.81).

In the play, in the North Atlantic during summer 1939, two young Cambridge ornithologists, Robert and John, arrive to a remote Scottish island called "Gruinard Island" with a governmental commission to make a survey of rare species of birds including its fork-tailed petrels. The island is inhabited by an old man, Kirk, and his niece, a young beautiful lady Ellen of seventeen years old. They settle in an old place in the island which was a chapel once upon a time. Kirk lives a primitive life there with a large number of birds. He is used to bring up different kinds of birds as he is obsessed with this career and they represent a fortune for him. The two ornithologists discover, later on, that they are here after another governmental mission in which birds are to be submitted to an anthrax test (Wallace, 2013, p. 81).

Greig introduces two polarized characters and frames them within the concept of place and belonging. Although they are on the island after certain mission, each of them chooses his own way which is closer to his real needs. Robert lives a free life, like a bird. He doesn't love to be constricted within certain commitments or being submitted to certain standards that trammel him from doing what he loves. John, on the other hand, is crippled by social traditions and more conservative. He wants to fulfil his mission and returns home safely. These contrasted attitudes reveal how much each one of them belongs to his place. A man is more attached to the place where he finds closeness and similarities with his desires and demands.

Both ornithologists come from the same modern place, yet their sense of belonging differs according to their perception of the place. Robert feels that he doesn't belong to the modern place from where he comes. He is more indulged with the charming island. He believes that he is a part of it and cannot sustain the idea of leaving it. He has a wide imagination and observes things behind the scenes and feels as if a power draws him toward the island. He stresses this idea in the opening scene when he says:

I have noticed that something draws us towards outlying islands. Some force pulls. A quiet bay, an island in its middle- we take a small boat and we row out from the island. I have noticed from the study of maps. The more outlying the island- the further out it is in the remote ocean- The stronger the force that pulls us towards it. (131)

The speech sheds light on Robert's tendencies towards the island and how much it

influences him as if a magical power draws him there. Although Robert comes from the modern city of London, he is fascinated with the primitive and ancient way of living on the island specially after Kirk's death. He informs John that they have the utmost freedom to do things freely without being constrained with certain bonds, he says:

We can do what we like. That's the luck of it.
When the old man died- it was like a fog fell away-
I realized nobody really knows we're here.
We can do as we please. We are alone. Dead to the
world and free. (190)

The island, for Robert, represents a golden opportunity to be invested and they are the first to photograph birds there, nobody else does so earlier. With the passage of time, he develops a boundless love with the nature of the island and describes it as a pure place, unpolluted by man's modernity. He tells Kirk: "The first comprehensive survey of the island's wildlife. We'll be taking observations. Studying the habits of the birds. The petrels in particular. This is an almost pristine habitat, Mr. Kirk, it's barely been touched by humans. It's unspoiled" (155).

In her book, *The Theatre of David Greig*, Clare Wallace assures that Robert develops a feeling of empathy and transcendental oneness with the natural environment there (2013, p.85). He stresses this idea in the following speech:

I've been watching the petrels, Johnny. Where do you think they go, Johnny? They land on the island, but they don't live on it. It's a landfall but it's not their home. They live unweighted by mainland, tethered only to an outlier. Imagine. Living without time. Because time, Johnny, time belongs to the land. Not to the sea and the air. Imagine entering their world. Imagine that. No beginnings and no endings. Limitless. Imagine departing from the land. (226-227)

When the reality of their governmental mission comes to the surface, the incident reveals their loyalty to their career which stems from their perspective about the place and themselves as well. As John is a convention-bond character who wants to maintain traditions and codes of homeland, he doesn't want to go through unfamiliar adventures or undiscovered potentialities. He is not attracted to the island and wants to return home. Robert, on the other hand, is an open-minded character who feels attached to places that are similar to his fondness and desires. He finds the island closer to his personality and doesn't want to exploit it the way Kirk does. That's why he damns his government when he discovers their project of Porton Down and turns outraged with the profitable plan:

Robert What have the ministry said to you?

Kirk, they told me their plans. But the ministry don't know about the fowling rights. They don't know that I take some two hundred fowl from this island every year. Does the germ kill the birds? That's what I want to know.

Robert, they told you about the germ. I didn't realize the ministry had told Mr. Kirk about the germ.

Kirk It was a slip of the tongue. Not my place to have mention it.

Robert The letter must have been from Porton Down, was it?

Kirk That's right, aye.

Robert The ministry's intention, Mr. Kirk, is to bomb this island with anthrax in order to see how many living things will be wiped out. And for how long. Mr. Kirk, this land is a sanctuary.

It's pristine. This cannot happen here. It must not be spoiled. You'll simply have to recommend another.

Kirk, I don't want to recommend another. I want to recommend this one. This one is mine.

Robert, you don't seem to grasp Mr. Kirk, if the ministry – if they infect it- the island will be dead- for years... (166-167)

Throughout reading the play, it seems that nobody cares about the island but Robert. John wants to fulfil his governmental duty and go back home. Kirk thinks of the island as a pagan place, he declares: "It is a useless lump of rocks. A pagan place. I'd have sold it years ago if there was ever a buyer. Let them have it for many years as they need. For seven hundred pounds my niece can be married, and her husband given a share of a herring-drifter. That is supporting life" (167).

Kirk develops an ambivalent attitude towards the island, on one hand, he is pleasant to be isolated in this island which enables him to preserve his Christianity from being corrupted by what he perceives as pagan practices in the city, on the other hand, he believes that the island is the source of paganism. He emphasizes his attitude towards the island, saying: "A hundred years ago there were people living on this island. Godless they had become through isolation. Fallen to blasphemous practices. Till God sent a famine that drove them to the mainland. Now their descendants live amongst us and build cinemas where there were churches before" (161). These connotations reflect the exploitative nature of Kirk's personality that he doesn't belong to any certain place and he just searches for places that can fulfil his thirst for material things. Although he stands for the old established Scottish Church (Reid, 2016, p. 5), his personality combines Christian faith that emphasizes the idea of God allows man to do what he desires with nature since it relates to him and materialism of modernity (Wallace, 2013, p. 82).

Both Robert and Ellen share certain characteristics that make them belong to another place away from their home. Their dreams cannot be applied in their home because of policies and conventions that are deeply rooted and hardly to be changed overnight. Consequently, they decide to move against the wind and reconstruct their lives accordingly. She wants to be an actress and lives freely. She doesn't belong to this cast away island. Instead, she feels attracted to the city and modern life. Even Robert when he describes her, he refers to her as an actress in a performance. He says:

She is a young female of the species. It's fascinating to watch her so close up. She moves with an acute awareness of being watched and judged. Even the way she sets the fire – before- when you were fetching the kit- every step she took was considered as to the eyes watching. And when she finished, she stood back to be sure she'd be taken in – as a picture. Every movement of hers is arranged into a small performance for the spectator. When the performance is over, she drops her eyes to the floor and awaits applause. (151)

The play tackles the concept of place and how much it affects man's life and represents a shelter where peace and love are available in order to establish strong individual who becomes fruitful and creative to enrich her/his country with knowledge and progress in any field of life. Soja's Thirdspace focuses on the concept of place which stands as a compass that directs man's life. Robert, when he decides to remain in the island, finds his identity there and is united with the place. So that Robert combines the reality and his vision about the island to formulate a new space which is the third.

Hence, the play presents the characters' self-struggle to feel belonged to a place where they can apply their career, hopes, and ambition. Robert, from the very beginning of the play reveals his attraction and belonging to the island when he picturizes the island as a human with

spirit not merely an island. He belongs to the sounds of ebb and flow and the waves clash the cliffs; "Night falls and the mainland slips into darkness. We listen to the waves. The island claims us. I've noticed from the study of maps. The more outlying the island, the further out it is in the remote ocean the stronger the force that pulls us towards it (131).

Similarly, Ellen, after being submissive and obedient for years under her uncle's custody, starts to think differently and wants to make drastic changes in her life specially after Kirk's death. She becomes free and starts to achieve her dream by traveling to London where she feels attached. At the time when she was bathing in the stream, Robert captures a photo of her, and she admires it a lot since she has not seen herself in such a picture before. As if she passes through a turning point to change her life and residence. She says: "I've never seen myself. Look at it [...] I have broken the limits of decency" (218-219).

The French literary philosopher, theorist, and essayist Roland Barthes (1915-1980) introduces the idea of reflection and how things seem differently in a new angle in his book *Camera Lucida* (1980). He explains the art of photographing on his late mother's picture and analyses it under two elements: studium and punctum. This art transforms a subject into an object, from vital concept into a dead one. He deconstructs a photograph according to three angles: the one who captures the photo, that who is being captured, and the spectator who views it and decides it to be negative or positive (Barthes, 2000, p. 9).

According to Barthes's *Camera Lucida*, Ellen's photograph awakens her and stirs her imagination to see things differently. It represents a shaking force to make her realize the real desire and ambition to be a movie star. The studium in Barthes's book refers to the traditional and historical background. Punctum, on the other hand, arises a touching and pathetic feeling on someone's soul (Barthes, 2000, p.27).

Ellen's view of the photograph is different from others. Any viewer can see the photograph as an ordinary one, but she sees it differently. She doesn't regard the photograph as an object, on the contrary, she sees it full of life and different from the rigid and mundane life that she is obliged to live on a remote island. That's why she eventually decides to go with John to London where a new life awaits for her and all her dreams will come true there after years of struggles and dullness, she says: "Awake. Is all. After winter, spring" (169).

Robert decides to end his life by throwing himself from the mountain and be united with nature which he feels really belonged to. He belongs to the island where serenity and peacefulness away from restrictions and modernity of the city.

Conclusion

Analyzing David Greig's *Outlying Islands* in light of the theme of belonging reveals that Ellen and Robert are the ones who suffer from the dilemma of not belonging to their homes and they search for a place where they can feel satisfied and belonged. As both live in a place that inhibits their real identity and desire. The modern city of London and modernism are not what Robert aims for. Instead, he adores serenity and natural views he finds in the island. Ellen suffers from the life of confinement she is obliged to live under her uncle's custody. Her dreams and obsession are on another place where modernity prevails as she looks for a place that can adopt her dream and embrace her talent to be a movie star. The place is a crucial factor in fulfilling one's dream by providing her/him with many things that can help her/him in achieving success.

References

- Agnew, John A. (1987). *Place Politics: The Geographical Meditation of State and Society*. Allen& Unwin Inc.
- Barthes, Roland. (2000). *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. Translated by Richard Howard. Vintage Books, London.
- Billingham, Peter. (2007). *At the Sharp End: Uncovering the Work of Five Leading Dramatis*. Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Greig, David. (2010). *Selected Plays 1999-2009*. Faber and Faber. London.
- Reid, Trish. (2016). Teenage Dreams: Power and Imagination in David Greig's *Yellow Moon* and *The Monster in the Hall*. *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 26(1), Pp.60-70. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10486801.2015.1123701>
- Soja, E. W. (1996). *Thirdspace*. Cambridge, MA: Blackwell
- Wallace, C. (2013). *The Theatre of David Greig*. London and New York: Bloomsbury, Methuen Drama.