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DAVID EDGAR'IN PENTECOST OYUNUNDA GÖÇ VE AVRUPA KİMLİĞİ POLİTİKALARI MIGRATION AND EUROPEAN IDENTITY POLITICS IN DAVID EDGAR'S PENTECOST

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Öz

David Edgar *Pentecost* (1995) oyununda Doğu Avrupa'da karışıklığa sebebiyet veren Sovyetler Birliği'nin çöküşü ve Berlin Duvarı'nın 1989'da yıkılmasının politik ve sosyal sonuçları üzerine odaklanmaktadır. Oyun içerisinde Avrupa tarihini değiştirebilecek kurgusal bir resim ve farklı kültürel kimlikler taşıyan bir grup mülteci terk edilmiş bir kilisenin çatısı altında ustaca bir araya getirilmektedir. Bu makale Doğu Avrupa bölgesinde etkileşim halinde olan Doğu ve Batı kültürlerinin girift ilişkisini tartışmayı ve Edgar'ın ütöpik Pentecost sahnesini 1990'ların başında olduğu gibi kriz anlarında ortaya çıkan etnik ve kültürel çatışmalara bir çözüm olarak incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Pentecost, David Edgar, Doğu Avrupa, Göç, Ütopya, Kültürler Arası İletişim.

Abstract

The political and social ramification of the decline of Soviet Union and the collapse of Berlin Wall in 1989, which brings out a bedlam in Eastern Europe are focused on in David Edgar's play *Pentecost* (1995). In the play, a fictional fresco that could change the history of Europe coupled with a group of refugees who carry different cultures with them are subtly assembled together under a forsaken church in an unknown country of Eastern Europe. This article aspires to discuss the intricate cultural relations between the East and the West that come into contact in Eastern Europe and to examine Edgar's utopic scene of Pentecost as a solution for the ethnic and cultural hatred rising to the surface in a time of crisis, as it happens in the early 1990s.

Keywords: Pentecost, David Edgar, Eastern Europe, Immigration, Utopia, Communication of Cultures.

I. INTRODUCTION

The ramification of the long-lasting Syrian Civil War once again carried the problem of migration up in the agenda of the political authorities. Millions of Syrian citizens escaping from the war have passed to the neighbouring countries such as Lebanon, Iraq and Turkey. However, the journey of some has not ended in these stations. Many refugees have also trespassed the political borders between the continents and have reached up to the Western Europe. The concomitant refugee crisis arising in Europe in 2015 has actually been a re-visitation of a long-standing problem for Europe. The issue of migration has always caused problems between the East and the West, but the heat of the crisis occasionally rises once the numbers of the refugees and asylum seekers soar.

This article examines a literary work *Pentecost* (1995) by David Edgar that is written at one of those crisis moments that reappeared in the Eastern Europe in the 1990s to bring out a constructive approach to the problem of migration. The play is the second piece of a trilogy Edgar produced after the downfall of Berlin Wall in 1990. The other plays consist of *The Shape of the Table* (1990) and *The Prisoner's Dilemma* (2001), and all these three plays handle the ethnic and political problems that emerge in the border regions of the former Soviet Union. In *Pentecost* a group of refugees invade a church where a historical discovery has recently been made. The

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game of story-telling they play while waiting for an answer from the authorities to their asylum requests surprisingly creates a Pentecost, a utopic moment for both the refugees and their hostages. This paper aims to underline the constitutive elements of this utopia as a remedy for the recurrent crisis of emigration between the East and the West.

At the end of the 1990s the collapse of Soviet Russia generated an excessive migration from the former Soviet bloc countries into Western Europe. As Stephen Castles and Mark J. Miller emphasise the severity of the situation: "The political transformation of the region enabled hundreds of thousands to emigrate. During 1989 alone, some 1.2 million people left the former Warsaw Pact area" (1998: 12). The political turmoil and ethnic conflicts played a significant role in the increase of this number. This ethnic conflict, economic depravity and the wars in Bosnia and Croatia triggered new waves of migrants from Eastern Europe to the West. Heinz Fassmann and Rainer Munz underlines that "[i]n Europe, the wars in Croatia (1991-1992) and Bosnia-Herzegovina (1992- 1993) and the repression of ethnic minorities in Voyvodina (Croats, Hungarians), Serbia, and Kosovo (Albanians, other Muslims) led to the largest wave of migration since 1945-1946" (1994: 530). This huge number of refugees went through the Eastern European states to arrive in the comparatively prosperous Western states like West Germany, France and Sweden. To regulate the excessive flow of these refugees, the Western states implemented "the safe third country rule" over the Central and Eastern European states and demanded "their increasing involvement in refugee policies as gatekeepers for asylum seekers and immigrants heading for Western Europe" (Lavenex, 1999: 51). According to this rule, as Sandra Lavenex states, the Western states, the members of the European Union, were allowed to send the refugees back to these safe third countries (1999: 52), and therefore, each safe third state, not to be heavily burdened with the accumulation of the refugees, would "[tighten] up its external borders, the restriction of entry, and the downgrading of social and legal provisions for asylum seekers" (1999: 66). Once the agreement was settled on the safe third country rule Central and Eastern Europe undertook the responsibility of filtering the refugees coming from the further East. Consequently, the countries like "Hungary, Poland and the Czech and Slovak Republics became an immigration buffer zone for Western Europe" (Castles and Miller, 1998: 106).

II. PENTECOST: CULTURAL COMMUNICATION TO CREATE A UTOPIA

The location of *Pentecost's* setting is sited right in the middle of the chaos created by the masses moving from one end of Europe to the other in the 1990s. The author does not name an exact country for the location of the play, but it is obvious that it takes place in one of the Eastern Border States of Europe. The language of the country is mentioned to be Bulgarian though the country is not Bulgaria (Edgar, 1995: xx). Apart from that, there are certain references about the occupation of this specific region by both Russians and the Ottomans (Edgar, 1995: 5). One of the characters even remarks that this is "Europe's battlement" against Russia and the Muslims (Edgar, 1995:24). Edgar's preference to not specify the country enables him to powerfully refer to the whole region influenced by similar conditions (Reinelt and Hewitt, 2011: 235). It is not specifically Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Hungary or any other Eastern European country but it would not be surprising if it was any of them. In this respect, the ambiguity of the location of the play does not diminish its strength, but on the contrary, reinforces its message.

Pentecost consists of two acts and the introduction of the refugees comes up at the very end of the first act. Most of the first act covers the discovery of an Early-Renaissance-style fresco under the dome of a forsaken church in this unknown country. The art-curator Gabriella discovers, in the wake of a meticulous research she has conducted through historical documents, a fresco depicting the dead body of Jesus Christ and Mary and his followers mourning his loss. The technique and content used in the painting, the perspective and the anatomy of the human figure, resemble The Lamentation of Giotto, the famous Italian painter of Renaissance. The art historians, Oliver from England and Leo from America are invited to inquire the reality of Gabriella's claim. The problem about Gabriella's discovery is that its painter is unknown and the fresco could actually precede Giotto's version and this could mean a ground-breaking change for



this country and for Europe. If the painting is not a copy of Giotto, it might mean that Renaissance had flourished in this country even before it started in Italy. Hence, the people of this country, just like Gabriella, may claim a European identity. In addition, rather than being the gatekeeper of the European Union, they might claim a central role in European identity. The fresco might be an easy entrance card for them.

From Gabriella's statements in *Pentecost*, it can be deduced that the European identity does not warmly embrace the people of this country. They are deemed to occupy the position of the other in the construction of the European identity. Stanton B. Garner draws attention to that

Europe has always constituted itself as geopolitical and cultural entity along the fault lines of its border regions and in opposition to non-European peoples and cultures. Chief among these defining encounters has been the confrontation with the East. From the earliest division of the Roman Empire and Orthodox Churches, through the centuries-long conflict with Ottoman Islam, Europe was constituted and reaffirmed as a specifically western idea, whose guardianship Christian, humanist and later enlightenment values was guaranteed by the construction of an East as orientalist Other" (1997: 4-5).

This identity construction put Western Europe in centre, yet the status of Eastern Europe has remained ambiguous. In Garner's words, Eastern Europe has been "an in-between region that has always raised the question of where Europe ends and where Asia begins" (1997: 5). In this sense, Eastern Europe constitutes the periphery of Europe and is categorised together with the East, that is, the other.

This in-between region occupied by various forces inherits a piece from each occupation and brings up a different identity that is not appreciated by the European identity. The church where the play is takes place carries the traces of each occupation. As Gabriella clarifies the history of the church: "When we are Hungary, it [the church was] Catholic, when we are holy Slavic people, Orthodox. When we have our friendly Turkish visitors who drop by for few hundred years, for while is mosque. With Napoleon pass through, is house for horses [stable]" (Edgar, 1995: 5). Apart from that, she also emphasises that before it is lately abandoned, the church has functioned as a potato store, a museum of Atheism and as a prison (Edgar, 1995: 5). The names of the prisoners and the whitewash used to cover the paintings of the Orthodox saints can still be seen on the walls. After all these occupations from the East and the West, this country lastly has torn loose from the Soviet influence, which has for long been the basis of the counter (Eastern) identity of European identity before the collapse of Berlin Wall and the decline of Soviet Union. Thus, Gabriella yearns for renouncing this Eastern identity and becoming a member of the European identity. Her attempt to set a date which is prior to Giotto stems from her hope for moving away from the periphery towards the centre. Janine Hauthal underscores that "the counter-history Gabriella proposes does not question or reject historicism's master narrative, in which Europe features as 'the original home of the modern', but simply shifts the origin of that modernity" (2015: 35).

The desire to become a part of Europe is also behind the reason for this country, which works as an immigration buffer zone, to be reluctant to host refugees coming from further East. The view that marginalises Eastern Europe in the eyes of Western Europe is adopted by the marginalised and is cast on the other eastern countries by the characters like Gabriella. She does not welcome the immigrants and says "I don't see just because of war, we have to be trashcan for world misfits. Or Ellis Island for all huddled masses en route to wild west. OK, so bad things happen. Very bad. But that is since 50 years ago now actually. Why should we be world transit camp? Why should we get rid of Russian army and get Russian dregs and scum in place?" (Edgar 1995: 40). It is also reported in the play that gypsies and Vietnamese and Ukrainian refugees are attacked by the skinheads while people applaud (Pentecost 39). There is an explicit hostility against the refugees because they are esteemed to preclude this country from entering into the European community.



As Janelle Reinelt and Gerald Hewitt also underline that “the East-West binary, with its consequent power dimensions, inheres within the play’s formal structures” (2011: 235) Gabriella as a prominent character in *Pentecost* manifests the strength of the East-West dichotomy and the Western contemptuous outlook on the East. However, Edgar casts doubts upon this dichotomy and introduces a group of refugees to demonstrate how the “dregs and scum” look like and what brings them to this country. At the end of the first act, while the other characters discuss the value of the painting, a group of refugees composed of Raif – an Azeri, Antonio – a Mozambican student, Nico and his daughter Cleopatra – Bosnian gypsies, Yasmin – Palestinian Kuwaiti, Amira – a Bosnian, Marina – a Russian, Grigori – a Ukrainian, Abdul – an Afghan, and Tunu – a Sri Lankan, together with their hostages an Englishman Derek and an English woman Toni, raid the church and block the entrances. They are running away from the authorities of this country and request asylum from various western countries. Since the multiple foreign languages the refugees use are not translated into English, their entrance does not only disturb the characters on stage but also the audience watching the play. The audience “is no longer granted the linguistic centrality traditionally accorded it by plays set in foreign countries (where all characters speak in English for our benefit) and [. . .] [the audience] must now confront the resistances inherent in intercultural encounter” (Garner, 1997: 9). Therefore, the play underlines the cultural gap between the East and the West and criticises the centralisation of the latter as opposed to the former.

Furthering the criticism on the East-West dichotomy, Edgar, in *Pentecost*, reinforces the idea that all the cultures are intricately tangled with one another. The fresco which is esteemed to be the product of a European Early Renaissance culture turns out to be the work of an Arab immigrant who is imprisoned in this church. The British art historian Oliver elucidates that in the Middle Ages people were not locked up into certain territories but they moved quite frequently from one region to another. He figures out that an unexpected painter, an Arab colourist, could have painted this fresco:

OLIVER. [. . .] An Arab colourist, who learns his fresco in the monasteries of Serbia or Macedonia. Who sees the great mosaics of the mighty churches of Constantinople. And who thinks, like any artist, I could do that too. And having thought some more, that he could do better. But his huge advantage over almost everybody else is not just that he has the classic geometry the Arabs kept alive for the best part of 800 years, nor yet again the optics they hypothesised around the first millennium, but the fact that nobody explained to him that painters aren’t supposed to use them. (Edgar 1995: 98-99)

Edgar reminds the audience/reader that Eastern culture possessed knowledge which had not been known in Europe before the Renaissance and that the interaction of the east and the west has been critical in the development of the current European culture. Edgar chooses the Arabs on purpose not least because they have been in touch with the Greco-Roman world. Enrique Dussel puts forward that “beginning in the seventh century, Constantinople (the eastern Roman Empire) confronted the steadily growing Arab Muslim world. Here one should not forget that from that point on the classical Greek world – the one traditionally associated with Aristotle – was as much Arab Muslim as Byzantine Christian” (2000: 466). Apart from that, in Dussel’s words again, “Aristotle’s writings on metaphysics and logic were studied in Baghdad well before they were translated into Latin in Muslim Spain; then, from Toledo, they arrived in Paris by the end of the twelfth century” (2000: 466). Hence, by giving the credit for the fresco to an Arab painter, Edgar implies the cultural trade that has existed between the East and the West for long centuries.

At the end of the play, the other art historian Leo, going through a character development, recognises that each culture is indeed an accumulation of the past trades – which might occur through trade, war, invasion and immigration, etc. That is why he concludes by saying that “we are the sum of all the people who’ve invaded us. We’re involuntarily each other’s guests” (Edgar 1995: 105). Each occupation this country experiences constitutes a part of its culture and identity.



However, this mixture of culture is not merely a characteristic of this region. The Western culture also contains elements from different other cultures. Dussels's emphasis on the Eastern influence on the Greek sources is an example of this multiplicity lying at the heart of European culture. Therefore, Edgar does not accept western culture to marginalise the east but shows that cultures consist of intricate relationships.

The title of the play, *Pentecost*, refers to a biblical story that is about a miracle which erases the linguistic barriers between people and allows them to understand different languages. The playwright creates a Pentecost scene that overcomes the enmities emerging from the East-West dichotomy with a similar miracle. In the Pentecost scene of the play, the refugees start a game of story-telling. Though they use different languages, through translation and mimicry they could understand each other. Eventually, after a felicitous dance attended by the refugees, Tunu, the Sinhalese girl, starts to tell another story. Although none of them knows her language, they all understand what she tells by interpreting her gestures and mimics. Hearing Tunu's story - the hostages also hear the stories told - Oliver recognises its similarity to the fall of Adam and Eve and tells the Christian version of the story. Finally, the refugees and the hostages, the East and the West become a part of this game.

During this game of story-telling, it is understood that different cultures harbour similarities as they are reflected in the stories. Each story reminds another one in another character's world and extends the chain of stories. This coincidental game creates an unexpected connection between the characters and the hostilities are forgotten. While describing the Pentecost scene, Edgar mentions that "[w]hat happened in Scene 6 is that a group of people communicate inadequately, but they go from a situation of not communicating with antagonism to a situation where they're communicating with each other inadequately, but nonetheless profoundly" (2000: 145-46). Communication, the act of listening and talking to each other, is asserted as a solution for the hatred felt against each other. Rather than evaluating people according to their outlook, it suggests listening to them. By the time the refugees enter into the stage, it has already been clear that the natives of the country feel threatened by the incoming groups crossing their national borders. They are defined as "dregs and scums" and they are not welcomed to the church. However, after learning the motives behind the refugees' leaving their countries, and also sharing some stories that show their similarity, the Western characters start sympathising with the other.

It should also be noted that the stories are "similar enough to hint at the universal while different enough to mark the particularity of each person's culture and history" (Reinelt and Hewitt, 2011: 241). The play does not only aim at finding the similarities or a universal truth behind the events. Although the Pentecost scene creates a link between the characters and a peaceful community, the play also shows how differences could exist together. Edgar states that "[*Pentecost*] is not saying there is just one story underlying everything. [. . .] Rather it is saying there is an inadequate conversation going on, it is about hybridity and celebration of hybridity" (2000: 146). To put it differently, *Pentecost* welcomes the refugees and different cultures and promotes the communication of these cultures to solve the ethnic hatred among the communities. Moreover, the play implies that such a cultural multiplicity, as the fresco is the best example of this, brings out cultural flourish.

At the end of the play the utopia generated in the Pentecost scene is destroyed by a military intervention which enters the church by blowing the dome and the painting together. Resorting to brute force ruins a piece of art that had survived more than eight-hundred years and nullifies the miraculously established circle of friendship. Now the church is transformed into a cemetery. Some refugees and Oliver are killed by the military squad. Such an attitude to solve the problems complicates the situation further by causing the death of Oliver, who looks like a refugee as they make him exchange clothes. Obviously, judging people at their face value brings up bitter fruits. The Western perspective is implied to evaluate people according to their appearance and even a British can be misjudged within his Eastern clothes. However, there is still



some hope at the end of the play. Gabriella and Leo, the characters who learn from these experiences, no longer hold onto a discriminative perspective. Although Gabriella hates the outsiders, now she is the one reading the notebook of Cleopatra – one of the refugees who is now dead (Edgar 1995: 104-05). These notes contain some words like “Ambush” “Convoy Baggage handler” “Backlog” and “Buffet” (Edgar 1995: 105). Cleopatra probably notes the things she witnesses. It is an act of sympathy that it is Gabriella and Leo that read them at the end of the play.

III. CONCLUSION

The political realities occurring in Eastern Europe in the first half of the 1990s are powerfully represented in Edgar’s *Pentecost*. The ethnic conflicts among the newly emerging nation states, the migration of the masses approaching from the Eastern borders and the nascent identity crisis in the absence (for the first time in the past 40 years) of the Soviet influence are subtly nestled in the plot of this history play. The current refugee crisis emerging from the Syrian Civil War can also be interpreted as a problem that is similar to the conflicts in the 90s. The play annuls the European assumption of superiority thereby showing the intertwinement of cultures. The fresco that is a product of different cultures ranging from the Arabian Peninsula to Asia Minor and to the Balkans becomes the epitome of Edgar’s argument. It shows that cultures migrate even the furthest distances as people carry their culture with them. Therefore, claiming superiority over the other cultures is not meaningful. On the other hand, in the *Pentecost* scene, the communication of cultures serves as a remedy for the brute violence that stirs and fuels hostility among diverse ethnicities. From this scene it can be inspired that further communication and dialogue must be ensured between conflicting nations and cultures. The utopic scene of *Pentecost*, in this sense, instils hope for the present and future negotiations.

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