

CAPONEU - The Cartography of the Political Novel in Europe

Isabella Hammad

Enter Ghost

Presented by: Elijah Butcher

Isabella Hammad's 2024 novel *Enter Ghost* is a modern exploration of the complexity of the Israel-Palestine conflict, multinational identities in the Middle East, and the significance of Shakespearean theatre to contemporary issues. The bulk and overarching plot of the novel is an explicit allegory, as the characters compare "Hamlet" to their resistance to the Israeli regime in the West Bank. The novel is preoccupied with politics; the political issues surrounding the current Israel-Palestine conflict and the various uprisings or "intifadas" since 1948 are discussed both between the characters and stream-of-consciousness by the protagonist, Sonia.

The story follows Sonia, an Arabian actress living in London who returns to Israel, where she grew up, after decades away, to visit her sister, Haneen, and other family. As she grapples with complicated relationships with her family and disdain towards the current state of her homeland, she winds up acting in an Arabic production of "Hamlet" in the West Bank produced by Mariam, a family friend who the sisters grew up with. While planning and rehearsals progress, she is confronted with much of the reality, as Hammad sees it, of life in Israel and the West Bank. Mariam's brother is detained by the Israeli government on shaky grounds, they are frequently interrogated crossing the borders between Israel and the West Bank, including one scene where Sonia leaves the car to yell at the Israeli soldiers. The play gets unwelcome government attention and their theatre is repossessed, nearly shutting down the production. Wael, the actor who is supposed to play Hamlet, quits due to the chaos and inter-cast arguments. The characters are caught in the middle of armed conflict several times and are nearly killed while participating in Islamic street prayer in Jerusalem as a form of protest after violence closes Mosques. However, the show goes on, and they perform with a mock-up of the stage and aren't shut down. The novel ends with them performing again, this time next to the border checkpoint, in military garb, Wael returns, and it closes as soldiers shoot rubber bullets and tear gas at the stage, with the final line: "Enter Ghost" (319).

The novel succeeds in grappling with the protagonists own difficult relationship with her family, home, and ethnicity. She considers her family Palestinian, and during the novel she learns how they participated in various protest movements and organizations against Israel over the past several decades. A recording of her grandmother says, "Even if I cannot live in it, my soul will reawaken if there is a Palestinian state" (22). Throughout the story, Sonia wrestles internally with a fractured family – an aunt and uncle whom neither she nor her father in England hadn't spoken to in years – and the reality that her home is not the "Palestinian state" she wishes it was. The production of "Hamlet" in the Arabic language explicitly serves as an allegory for the current political climate in the region, and the characters discuss this. They debate whether "'Hamlet is a martyr like a Palestinian martyr,'" what part of the story represents "national liberation" (81) and whether Denmark represents Palestine or Israel. Sonia suggests Gertrude (whom she plays) symbolizes Palestine because the character is violently oppressed, even described as raped or usurped (82-83). There are several instances when the dialogue of the play lines up with how the reader is expected to feel towards Israeli soldiers; for example, one of Hamlet's soliloquys about oppression, villainy, and vengeance is spoken while soldiers approach the stage during the opening night. After the line "'that criminals,'"

Mariam, playing Hamlet, “actually half gestured at the soldiers” (305). While getting the point across successfully, Hammad lacks subtlety in her delivery. Mariam even addresses the author’s view explicitly: she mourns that “community’s resistance embalmed in art... means... the middle classes, are less likely to fight the fight... perhaps our *Hamlet* would be just another version of this narcotic” (150). During an early rehearsal, Sonia reflects that “Nothing is more flattering to an artist than the illusion that he is a secret revolutionary... created a feeling among the cast that... we were fighting the odds in the name of Palestinian freedom” (145). The reader is not left with much to infer; it becomes crystal clear that, whether their demonstration is successful or not, the actors are really protestors putting on a bright metaphor as a spark of resistance against whom they view as the villains in their collective story.

Enter Ghost finds the intersection between theatre and politics and dives into it. Hammad clearly intends for the audience to draw parallels between Shakespeare’s “Hamlet” and the modern Israel-Palestine conflicts. She does not try to hide her view of Israel as the oppressor and Palestine as the victim being taken advantage of by a powerful villain. Hammad’s politics lack subtlety, resulting in a novel that often comes across as a political statement. This approach leads the reader to wonder, as Hammad likely intended, what an adaptation of “Hamlet” set in modern day Israel/Palestine could look like.

LANGUAGE: English

This title was not censored before publishing