A Paradigm of Dramatic and Postdramatic Tragedy: Simon Stephens's *Motortown*[1]

Dramatik ve Postdramatik Bir Tragedya Paradigması: Simon Stephens'ın *Motortown* Adlı Oyunu

Mesut Günenç[*]

Abstract

Tragedy has been studied and reworked by theorists from ancient Greece through Renaissance and into the modern age. Hans Thies Lehmann examines task of tragedy in his last work *Tragedy and Dramatic Theatre* (2016). In his detailed study, Lehmann classifies periods of tragedy such as predramatic, pure dramatic and postdramatic. In the beginning of twenty first century dramatic and postdramatic tragedies have been placed with the plays of Sarah Kane, Mark Ravenhill, and Simon Stephens. Simon Stephens's play *Motortown* (2006), written over four days, represents signs of dramatic and postdramatic tragedies. The play consists of eight scenes which have structural order with each other; however Simon Stephens, choosing monologues, deconstructs hierarchical structure and diverges from the dramatic text. Stage structure of the performance is deconstructed by the explanation at the beginning of the play: "the play should be performed as far as possible without decor". At this point, *Motortown* puts forth a new approach to tragedy in dramatic theatre, which conventionally depicts overt physical acts and suffering on stage, and in postdramatic theatre which unconventionally depicts overt non-hierarchical structure and irruption of the real. This paper considers

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how traits of dramatic and postdramatic theatre are determined and how aspects of dramatic and postdramatic tragedy are experienced in Simon Stephens's contemporary performance.

Keywords: *tragedy, Simon Stephens, dramatic, postdramatic theatre, Motortown*.

Öz

Tragedya antik Yunan'dan Rönesans'a ve modern çağa kadar teorisyenler tarafından çalışılmış ve yeniden yorumlanmıştır. Hans Thies Lehmann son çalışması *Tragedy and Dramatic Theatre* (2016) adlı özgün eserinde tragedyanın yüklendiği görevi analiz eder. Onun ayrıntılı çalışmasında, Lehmann tragedya dönemlerini predramatik, dramatik ve postdramatik olarak sınıflandırır. 21. Yüzyılın başlangıcında dramatik ve postdramatik tragedyalar Sarah Kane, Mark Ravenhill ve Simon Stephens'ın oyunlarında yerlerini almıştır. Simon Stephens'ın dört günde yazdığı oyunu *Motortown*, dramatik ve postdramatik tragedyaların özelliklerini sunar. Birbirleriyle yapısal bağı olan oyun sekiz sahneden oluşur fakat Stephens monologları tercih ederek hiyerarşik yapıyı bozar ve dramatik metin özelliğinden ayrılır. Performansın sahneleme yapısı oyunun başında yapılan "oyunun dekor kullanılmaksızın sahnelenmesi gerekir" açıklamasıyla yapı bozumuna uğratılır. Bu noktada, oyun geleneksel anlamda fiziksel eylemi ve acıyı göstererek dramatik tiyatroda tragedya anlayışına yeni bir bakış açısı getirir, postdramatik tiyatroda ise geleneksel olmayan şekilde hiyerarşinin yıkılması ve gerçeğin kırılması özelliklerini betimler. Bu çalışma Simon Stephens'ın çağdaş performansında, dramatik ve postdramatik tiyatronun özelliklerinin nasıl ortaya çıktığını ve her iki tiyatroya ait unsurlarının nasıl deneyimlendiğini analiz eder.

Anahtar sözcükler: tragedya, Simon Stephens, dramatik, postdramatik tiyatro, Motortown.

Introduction

In accordance with his agenda and poetics, Simon Stephens's *Motortown* (2006), staged in the Royal Court Theatre, discovers the relationship between the effects of disturbing happenings on an individual (Danny), his society and family relations. The play itself is the inspired from the contemporary traumatic event and the 7/7 bombings in London. After 9/11, the USA with the UK and their partner countries sent their soldiers to Afghanistan, Iraq and Basra because post 9/11 society was characterized with the war on terror and globalization. The mass death of soldiers in Afghanistan, Iraq and Basra and 7/7 terrorist attacks in London brought about reaction in the West. On account of the war and the government's decision, on the 15th of February 2003, hundreds of thousands of people, gathering to protest and to expose their opposition in company with the slogans like "George Bush can feel it, Tony Blair can feel it. Turn up the heat" (Jeffery, 2003) have represented social resentment at Iraq war. Stephens, observing the protestation, clarifies that.

I was confused by why I felt nervous about the anti-war campaign and the marches on Hyde Park. I was confused by why I felt angry about the moral didacticism of that campaign's

spokespeople. I was confused about why I felt more sympathy towards Fusilier Gray Bartlam, convicted in Osnabruck of several unspecified crimes in his dealings with Iraqi prisoners, than I felt for Harold Pinter or Damon Albarn. It was especially confusing when many of their arguments resonated with sense (2006: 419).

Meanwhile, it is precise that the anti-war campaign and marches on Hyde Park have put emphasis on discrimination between middle class and working class people in England. This discrimination produces mixture of disadvantage, exploitation and violence in the society. In his article "Dark Times British Theatre after Brexit", Aleks Sierz lays bare and questions the disadvantage of lower classes that lead to violence. He indicates that ... Simon Stephens' *Motortown* (Royal Court, 2006), about a working-class veteran, returned from one of Blair's wars, who casually kills a black woman. The main criticism of such powerful imaginings of underclass life is that they are instances of cultural tourism: well-healed middle-class audiences gawping at poor people doing bad things in dirty settings (2017: 7).

As can be easily observed, British playwrights, giving chance the dispossessed and deprived ones to express themselves, have been both listening to such people and writing plays about them for decades. The time which led to the play's production was a time that reflected the alienated British society that had to deal with physical suffering and violent acts because of the war on terror.

The play's following reception shows the play's timeliness and the controversy around its subject matter. By and large, critics agreed that the play has a distinctive effect on audiences with its shock value, violent scenes and alienated mind. Paul Taylor's review for the *Independent* asserts that this play is "[w]ithout doubt, the most provocative and gripping piece produced so far in the Royal Court's 50th anniversary year" (2006). Similarly, Nicholas de Jongh is confused "to find a Royal Court playwright sympathetically engaging with the experiences of the British military in Iraq" (Evening Standard, 2006). Likewise, as Ansdel states, "Daniel Mays performance is quite extraordinary: supple, aggressive, fearless, disturbing ... Stephens has written an instant modern classic, the first major anti-anti-war play of this era" (2006).

Despite the play's overt anti-war stance, some critics have accused the play of being supportive of war. In the *Telegraph*, for example, Charles Spencer, evaluating Macbeth as a play justifying serial murders, reviews Stephens's play as a play supporting the war: "To say that this is a work that defends the war in Iraq is a bit like saying that Macbeth is a play that justifies killing. In drama, the nature of the character making the case is every bit as important as the words he utters" (2006). Ramin Gray, director of the play, referring to the Gulf War and the need of Western capitals for the oil reserves of the Middle East, questions the paradoxical condition of the anti-war campaign in England as follows:

All these people (on the 'Million' march against Iraq, 16 February 2003) walking down the road holding their lattes wearing their t-shirts and saying 'no war, no war'. Don't they realise that their lattes and all the wealth they have comes from the oil that is being pumped out of the Middle East? Don't they see the irony of that position? (40)

Furthermore, Charles Spencer lays bare his feelings for the play as: "a deeply unsettling piece and this play "'gets under your skin'" (*The Telegraph* 2006). Likewise, Gardner (2006) clearly states that *Motortown* is a violent play which shows desperate and brutal insensibility. Sierz analysing the play as "there was too much blood tonight so we had trouble cleaning the blood" (2011: 131), supports Gardner's thoughts. Part of the reason why this play has been criticized with emotion is because of play's content that displays the themes of fear and sense of community.

Critics also review the performance of Daniel Mays in the role of the protagonist Danny, and point out the portrayal of Danny as an important factor for the play's success. Gardner, for instance, asserts that the play is "a searingly honest play written and played particularly by Daniel Mays as Danny, with a deadly coiled energy" (2006). It is generally accepted that Danny lost his mental health because of the war however with Stephens' explanations that "Danny was psychotic at school" (Sierz, 2011), weakens the central argument that war has brutalised Danny. Gardner's subsequent words that "Danny was a psychopath long before he went to Iraq, or perhaps even joined the army, Stephens undercuts the connection between personal violence and violence perpetrated in the name of the state" (2006), further support Sierz' thoughts. In general, critics are divided about the intended stance of the play, some support it to be against the war while some praise it for criticising the anti-war movement.

After *Motortown* (2006) was staged at the Royal Court Theatre and later continued to be staged in Hannover, the play has ultimately allowed Stephens to win the title of Best Foreign Playwright. According to Sierz, the sources of the play consist of "a mix of Georg Büchner's *Woyzeck*, Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* and any number of road movies" (2011: 131). There are also two suggestions about Stephens' motivations for writing *Motortown*. The first can be considered the events that happened after the 11th of September 2001 when the terrorist group Al-Qaeda attacked to the Twin Towers of the World Trade Centre in New York. Because of this event, the US, supported by the UK, declared a war and invaded Afghanistan. The more recent and connected suggestion deals with coordinating terrorist attacks on 7/7 2005 when four British Muslim men exploded bombs at the London transport system, which is exemplified by Stephens' next play *Pornography*, representing 52 people killed in the 7/7 London bombings with seven scenes. Bolton clarifies the situation as "the stated motivation for the bombings was the United Kingdom's ongoing involvement in the Iraq war, also known as the Second Gulf War" (2014: 111). Therefore it can be argued that after the 52 people had been killed, Stephens wrote *Motortown*.

In other respects these characteristic happenings as the reason for the structure of the play, *Motortown* can also be read by means of a third perspective which examines the destructive effects of violence and war, and the appearance of social corruption and moral chaos. Depending upon these events, Stephens claims that "I was deeply nervous about that (anti-war) march and that (anti-war) movement this moral chaos of England play rejects a simplistic division of the world into good guys and bad guys" (Interview, 2006). That is to say, "Stephens's play counters what he saw as a delusory moral superiority in the anti-war campaigners" (Middeke and Schnierer et al. 2011: 452) and his ambition is "to write (…) about England" and its "dark and contradictory and violent" (2006) side. Stephens wrote a

play which is a reaction against the war in Iraq because "British soldiers literally have no idea who their enemy is any more, leaving them in a morally chaotic state" (452).

A Paradigm of dramatic and postdramatic tragedy

At the present time, pushing the envelope of tragedy and explaining it in a simple way are both hazardous and difficult, for we must analyse historical background and present readers and spectators with fundamental terminology and terms such as tragedy, plot, tragic experience, pity and fear and action. The definition of tragedy was characterized by Aristotle in the fourth century BCE. Tragedy was "a representation of an action that is serious, complete, and of some magnitude; in language that is pleasurably embellished, the different forms of embellishment occurring in separate parts; presented in the form of action, not narration; by means of pity and fear bringing about the catharsis of such emotions" (Aristotle, 1965: 64). Definitions about tragedy have been discussed for centuries, based on readings of Aristotle's analysis. Aristotle claims that structure, plot and narration have an organised system in drama. Dramatic structure has systematic action and structure (beginning, body and conclusion); that is, the form of cause and effect is set up in Aristotelian drama. Every tragedy has six constituents such as plot, character, diction, thought, spectacle, and song. Among these elements in the definition of Aristotle's tragedy, Szondi asserts that "plot is the most important constituent of drama, which not accidentally, owes its name to the Greek word for the plot's action" (2002: 56). Plot is the most important one because it orders the incidents and represents action and life, pity and fear, happiness and unhappiness.

Hans-Thies Lehmann's latest work on tragedy and dramatic elements of theatre and presentation revaluates contemporary performances in the aggregate that contains both dramatic and postdramatic elements. Lehmann puts forward that "the theory of tragedy must make its point of departure the distinction and between predramatic, dramatic and postdramatic theatricality; this is what imparts to the basic tragic motif particular, historically specific contours that change from epoch to epoch" (2016: 4). Ancient tragedy refers to a predramatic form (Aristotle's Poetics); in the 16th and 17th century Racine's tragedies and pure drama refers to dramatic form and contemporary tragedy refers to postdramatic form. It merits emphasis that Lehmann divides western theatre into three parts: the classical era, the dramatic theatre of Europe from about the beginning of the early modern era to the downing of the twentieth century and the rise of postdramatic theatre in the wake of the aesthetic disruptions of the historical avant-garde.

In predramatic period, tragedy centres on a character who is clash with circumjacent incidents. The central character of tragedy can be tragic hero or heroine, who, in many ways is stronger, better, more courageous and strong-minded than most people. These heroes are usually kings, princess, queens, princes, and great leaders. "(Tragedy is) a narrative of the fortunes of heroic (or semi-divine) characters in adversity" (Atkins, 1943: 31). In a sense, the chorus embodies the whole sentiments, thoughts and passions of the drama and ethical or meditative consciousness making comment about the performance and reveal true thought in the audiences. By means of plot, characters, action and chorus, tragedy actualises a purpose to reflect tragic side of hero/heroine.

On one hand, this tragic side together with the readings of Aristotle's analysis together with prescription on tragedy continued in dramatic period. Both in predramatic and dramatic tragedy, plot (mythos)[1] is the crucial point of tragedy; "a similar principle also holds painting: if one were to cover a surface randomly with the finest colours, one would provide less pleasure than by an outline of a picture" (Aristotle, 1965: 53). In predramatic and dramatic tragedy, a plot is about one man; many things, evaluations and emotions may happen to one man. On the other hand, tragedy came to presented with a middle class individual, who, as being sacrificer, protected his/her society. Szondi clarifies changes in dramatic tragedy:

The drama of modernity came into being in the Renaissance. It was the result of a bold intellectual effort made by a newly self-conscious being who, after the collapse of the medieval worldview, sought to create an artistic reality within which he could fix and mirror himself on the basis of interpersonal relationships alone. Man entered the drama only as a fellow human being, so to speak (1987: 7).

Having restrained to feel actor as a living creature, masks and costumes are other conventional tools preferred in predramatic form: "They prevented the player from taking the stage as a physically individuated person" (Lehmann, 2016: 213). Contrary to predramatic period, dramatic tragedy witnesses the falling of the mask and "the actor, who cast off the mask and appeared concretely" (213). While chorus directs the route of the play in predramatic theatre, it is moved away in dramatic tragedy. On the ancient stage, dialogue is not an essential factor for other players, hero uses language for praying and cursing however his thoughts and feelings are not figured out by others in the play. Franz Rosenzweig states that "the tragic hero has only one language that is in perfect accordance with him: precisely, silence. So it is from the beginning" (2005: 86). The subject in dramatic tragedy refers to "a clan or tribe" and in Elizabethan period "unclear and problematic family relations always stand at issue" (Lehmann, 2016: 243).

In the 16th and 17th century, Racine presents a disciplined approach to dramatic theatre and represents pure dramatic form. "Racine is at one with the English in his basic vision of the human situation and his concern with its mystery" (Leech, 2002: 19). John Reilly explains basic vision of central character in Racine: "the hero fought an affair of the soul in the tragedy of the Greek Sophocles, while in the plays of the 17th century French tragedian Racine, the central character played out an affair of the heart" (1994: 57). Racine, at the same time, refers to theatre of passion and his drama is absolute which "constitutes a whole that seems utterly self sufficient; at least in, it does not quote" (Lehmann, 2016). His pure drama contains unity of time, place and action and focuses on real time. On the other hand Racine's drama "translates the tragic motif of overstepping into excessive order and rule – that is, into immoderate resistance to order as well as the excessiveness of order itself- pure dramatic tragedy emerges" (Lehmann, 2016: 276). Needles to say, Racine forms a realistic and psychological theatre focusing on social and family relations.

After the 19th century new theatrical forms and major revolutionaries occurred in the theatre. Reilly lays bare that "free theatre with many new, young dramatists" (1994: 37) is witnessed and in the 20th century classical drama meets with several historical avant-garde

theories. In contemporary theatrical performances, European and American theatre start to create new theatrical situations; however Lehmann goes a step further and asserts that

Ancient tragedy, Racine's dramas and Robert Wilson's visual dramaturgy are all forms of theatre. Yet, assuming the modern understanding of drama, one can say that the former is "predramatic", that Racine's plays are undoubtedly dramatic theatre, and that Wilson's operas have to be called "postdramatic" (2006: 34).

This has changed the roots of dramatic tragedy. Twenty or thirty years after World War II, dramatic forms are abandoned for new theatrical forms, which break off from mimetic theatre directed by only with text. In the reorganization of the theatre an astonishing number of names such as Samuel Beckett, Heiner Müller, Elfrede Jelinek, Sarah Kane, Simon Stephens and Tim Crouch comes to mind. In a sense, the 20th century witnesses the death of tragedy. To Steiner (1961) tragedy died after Racine, however Lehmann claims that tragedy died because "Christianity trumps the tragic with the prospect of redemption, or because tragedy supposedly cannot exist without metaphysics" (2016: 402). While the ending is always known in great tragedies, readers and spectators start to question events to find out how the story progresses and ends in postdramatic tragedy. Within the postdramatic theatre "it is no longer only a matter of whether life can be represented dramatically ... tragedy remains doubly bound to the theatre" (Lehmann, 2016: 411) and performance becomes tragedy's lifeblood. No longer dramatic texts and non-hierarchical structure become rule in postdramatic tragedy. "The theatre has become postdramatic and tragedy along with it" (2016: 411). We witness a theatre without text and tragedies represent minor characters or characters are shown only with numbers letters and voices. Moreover, it is a commonly recognized belief that we live in a postdramatic age whereby the significance of the dramatic within tragic modes has been interrogated and where Aristotelian traditions and its dramatic inheritance, no longer control the play or act as a 'regulating principle' in performance today (Lehmann 2006: 22). The common ground that seems to have brought this change in performance is re-presentation of the real, media, redefinition of language and 'the society of spectacle'. After the conventions in predramatic and dramatic phases, this study will question whether tragedy still preserves its original form or has any place in our contemporary culture. It is obvious that contemporary theatrical forms are no longer dramatic, therefore texts and forms are considered as postdramatic. "Heiner Müller's *Hamletmachine* invokes the five-act structure of tragedy even as it takes leave of drama. And even in a postdramatically conceived work such as *Cleansed* by Sarah Kane, one observes allusions to tragedy – starting with the catharsis that the title announces" (Lehmann, 2016, 6). In one sense, postdramatic works deconstruct the power of the hegemony of Aristotelian model of theatre. By tracking how tragedy has been adopted in predramatic, dramatic and postdramatic forms, the place and function of tragedy in these different theatrical forms are examined. As a significant example of postdramatic tragedy, *Motortown* comprises eight scenes which have a structural order and correlations with each other. During the Gulf War, the US and the UK sent troops to Iraq, and this play portrays life of one of soldier (Danny) life after turning to his homeland from war zone. Taking into consideration the timeliness of the play reflected in various critical responses, this article will study Stephens's tragedy *Motortown* within the dramatic and postdramatic perspective.

The play

This part of the study investigates Stephens's play *Motortown*. Here the analysis will illustrate aspects of Stephens's tragedy by focusing mainly on dramatic and postdramatic sides. In ancient Greek tragedy hero seems to be as an opponent of the Gods and in Elizabethan heroes "who impress by their desire and passion beyond measure, rationality and morality – in the last instance without sense, auto destructive" (Lehmann, 2016: 94). In ancient period tragedy remains a mythology, however today tragedy reflects politics and political desire. Tragedy becomes a reality of life in modern dramatic tragedy. Danny, the hero of the play, is a member of working class, hence this play represents a working class tragedy, in other words, it reflects real and certain perspectives.

On the other hand, modern period tragedies deconstruct class distinctions and needless to say tragedy is being democratized and now contains all kinds of classes. In *Motortown* we can witness all kinds of classes and different relations.

Stephens complements the thematic content and critical discourse of the play with an inventive approach to dramaturgy in terms of plot, composition and stage direction. The play hones in on fundamental social norms, morality, personal identity, meaning and borders like in dramatic tragedy. It also questions the war on terror, in which events occur in such a bloody, perverse and amoral way.

Besides, postdramatic theatre reflects globalized and mediatised society which "is less surveyable and manageable than ever" (Munby, 2006: 11). In his corpus, Stephens illustrates corruption, capitalism, war and traumatic memories, uncertainties, mediatised global society, internet, new technologies and social media which trigger individual's power of perception (Sayın, 2016: 117). *Motortown* involves in individual's perception, mediatised society, war and traumatic memories and uncertainties. Uncertainty is one of the most striking formal features of *Motortown*. It gives information to director that "the play should be performed as far as possible without decor" (Stephens, 2009: 142). Nevertheless, there is no single detailed explanation which gives no definitive information about stage direction. The order of the tragic characters is deconstructed within this postdramatic tragedy and the order of scenes is fictionally organized by hero. With concrete situations and realistic characters *Motortown* refers to one of the distinctive postdramatic theatrical sings "irruption of the real" (Lehmann, 2006: 86). The fictional world, shaped by mimesis thought of conventional drama, takes a different shape in postdramatic theatre by separating reality from fiction, claiming no dominance among theatrical elements, and creating spectators who cannot decide whether the play on the stage is real or a fictional reality. Postdramatic theatre asks spectators questions and gives them the opportunity to observe, furthermore while leading spectators to stalemate with its provoking position and aesthetic fiction formed between reality and daily life. In the play, Danny represents both fiction and reality equally. In his dialogue with a couple of smug married swingers, he declares that he is married with Marley, who rejects Danny's wanting:

Helen Are you married, Danny?

Danny I am, yeah.

Helen What's your wife called?

Danny Marley (Stephens, 2006: 194).

On the other hand *Motortown* undeniably represents violence, trauma and effects of war. While spectators are watching the play, the scene can suddenly be dangerous for them. Stephens, like in the other distinctive contemporary play *Faust is Dead* by Mark Ravenhill, represents a live experience in scene six. At this scene Danny abducts Jade, a fourteen-year-old teenage girl, to Foulness Island, where he has got military training, and tortures her by pouring oil over her head like a process of brutalization in Iraq while he was in the army. While killing her, he takes photograph with his phone and continues to speak with her while putting her body to the bag. Stephens makes use of media technique because media triggers spectators' imagination. Donny cuts his jugular using a razor and commits suicide in *Faust is Dead*. In this way, he tries to get us to feel the real and desires to realize himself by the help of suffering and cruelty. Like Ravenhill, Stephens removes the borders between fact and fiction using the character Danny and showing his violent and cruel side. In this way, the playwright helps spectators to realize the fact. Dramatic representation of the play is deconstructed and literary phantasmagoria is observed instead of realistic mode of the play. Stephens has shown dramatic and postdramatic characteristics not only with the real characters and concrete situations, but also with the irruption of the border between fiction and fact.

Conclusion

Tragedy is tied to formations of European theatre discourses in the ways that differ according to circumstance; it was born in predramatic ancient theatre; then, an essentially dramatic subject (or subject of drama) developed and achieved completion in various configuration; now, in a postdramatic context. In *Motortown* the consequences of the destabilization of Danny's relations with other characters can be observed. The discrepancy between what is present and what is lost leads Danny to make mistakes. He replaces his lost sense of belonging, understanding of love and compassion with his frustration and violent behaviours. In most part of the play Stephens offers a plot structure with dramatic qualities and representation, specific characters and dialogues. However, in the last scenes of the play, he presents postdramatic signs and aspects such as irruption of the real and media. "Many works of contemporary postdramatic theatre attempt, via the fictive structure of a re-presentation of the real, which has come to be experienced as powerless to move out into the theatre through the strategies of the irruption of the real" (Lehmann, 2016: 416). Though dramatic tragedy and its tradition still go on, postdramatic tragedy occurs with applying Lehmann's postdramatic theatrical signs. Needles to say, by focusing on historical features of tragedy with new paradigms and definitions, Stephens's play *Motortown* has been argued within the context of contemporary condition.

Endnotes

1   "Aristotle's understanding of mythos, the term from the poetics that is normally translated as "plot". It is Aristotle's claim that plot (mythos) and action (praxis) are logically prior to the other parts of dramatic fictions" (Brooks, P. (1984). *Reading for the Plot*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

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