

THE POWER OF THOUGHT THROUGH THERAPEUTIC DISCOURSE IN *GHOST STORY* BY MARK RAVENHILL**Assoc. Prof. Dr. Erdinç Parlak, erdincparlak@gmail.com *****M.A. Student Güzin Şarman, guzin.srmn@gmail.com *****Abstract**

Regarded as one of the polemical playwrights considerably touched by the firm atmosphere of Thatcherite reign in Britain, Mark Ravenhill comes to the forefront with his bold spirit and opponent voice reflected in all of his works through his unconventional narrative style. Inasmuch as he is generally placed into the theatrical sensibility of In-Yer-Face theatre which is substantially fuelled by the politics of Margaret Thatcher, his later plays mostly deal with social problems as well as inner sphere of individuals as presented in the play *Ghost Story* (2010). This study aims at analyzing the power of thought in healing process of female characters suffering breast cancer in *Ghost Story* while setting light to the inner minds of them. In line with this, the resonances of their stream of mind will be presented through content analysis of the play. The evaluations will also be given in the conclusion part of the study.

Keywords: Power of Thought, Positive Thinking, Therapeutic Discourse, Healing**MARK RAVENHILL'İN *GHOST STORY* OYUNUNDA İYİLEŞTİRİCİ SÖYLEM ÜZERİNDEN DÜŞÜNCE GÜCÜ OLGUSU****Öz**

Britanya'da Thatcher döneminin sert havasını soluyan ve dönemin tartışmalı yazarlarından biri olan Mark Ravenhill, alışılmadık anlatım tarzı üzerinden bütün eserlerine yansıyan muhalif sesi ve cesur yapısıyla ön plana çıkmaktadır. Ravenhill her ne kadar Margaret Thatcher'ın politikalarının büyük ölçüde beslediği Suratına Tiyatro anlayışı içerisinde yer alsa da yazarın son oyunları çoğunlukla *Ghost Story* (2010) oyunundaki gibi bireyin iç dünyasının yanı sıra toplumsal sorunları ele alır. Bu çalışma *Ghost Story* oyununda iç dünyalarına ışık tutarak meme kanserinden muzdarip kadın karakterlerin iyileşme sürecindeki düşünce gücünü incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Bununla bağlantılı olarak karakterlerin zihin akışlarının yansımaları içerik analizi ile sunulacaktır. Ayrıca çalışmanın bulguları sonuç kısmındadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Düşünce Gücü, Olumlu Düşünme, İyileştirici Söylem, İyileşme

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1. INTRODUCTION

Contemporary age marked upon the various changes in theatre in terms of both content and form with a great many contributions of several playwrights such as Sarah Kane, Martin Crimp, Anthony Neilson and Mark Ravenhill under the great influence of Thatcherite reign giving a distinct shape to British society. These leading figures formed a new theatrical understanding titled In-Yer-Face theatre which is coined by Aleks Sierz in his book *In-Yer-Face Theatre: British Drama Today* (2001), shattering the former rules and components of theatre. With this newly created understanding in theatre, the playwrights headed towards the issues being unspoken and unmentioned onstage before. Their chief goal was basically to present an unusual experience in theatre which is “neither literary nor intellectual, but theatrical and practical” (Sierz, 2011:51). In parallel with this, they touch upon the hidden and repressed feelings/notions of audiences in such a way to irritate and shock them by means of provocative and confrontational plays. As Sierz states, “they explore personal pain rather than public politics, but it’s worth stressing that most of them are passionately interested in staging critiques of modern social conditions” (2002:22). Being remarkably criticized by theatre critics, the irritating plays of these playwrights deeply horrify audiences, the purposes of which are, at first, passively sitting on their chairs and watching the plays. In capturing the full focus of audiences, this theatrical sensibility targets at shaking them with unpleasant scenes and profane language. As Sedláková notes, “it challenges the existing ideas of what should or should not be shown onstage. It talks about the forbidden, violates taboos and it deliberately creates discomfort” (2010:3). In this recent theatrical form in which one meets unforgettable characters breaking taboos, voicing the banned, disturbing, undressing, having sex and perpetrating violence, audiences are released from their own passiveness, thus experiencing a sort of purgation in the face of unwanted sights onstage. In accordance with these features, the description of Sierz on In-Yer-Face theatre is quite significant:

The widest definition of in-yer-face theatre is any drama that takes the audience by the scruff of the neck and shakes it until it gets the message. It is a theatre of sensation: it jolts both actors and spectators out of conventional responses, touching nerves and provoking alarm. Often such drama employs shock tactics, or is shocking because it is new in tone or structure, or because it is bolder or more experimental than what audiences are used to. Questioning moral norms, it affronts the ruling ideas of what can or should be shown onstage; it also taps into more primitive feelings, smashing taboos, mentioning the forbidden, creating discomfort. Crucially, it tells us more about who we really are. Unlike the type of theatre that allows us to sit back and contemplative what we see in detachment, the best in-yer-face theatre takes us

on an emotional journey, getting under our skin. In other words, it is experiential, not speculative (2001:4).

Of the foremost figures of this theatrical concept is Mark Ravenhill who overtly blends his theatre through the realities of his age, shocking audiences via his most known play *Shopping and Fucking* (1996) with its darkly humorous atmosphere. Born in 1966, he passed his childhood years in the South of London. Soon after studying Drama and English at Bristol University, he chose his career in being an actor which later turned into an unsuitable work for him. As an expected consequence of unproductive years in acting, he turned towards playwriting, which made him recognized in very deed. His theatre, in fact, is a sort of reflection to societal/individual issues which were covertly handled onstage before. In brief, consumerism, sexual relations, objectification of body and the notion of end of everything alluding to apocalyptic world can be substantially regarded as prominent concepts dealt in his theatre. Explicitly portraying himself as a materialist with a commitment to social observation and with a drive to write about the present (Wallace, 2005:270), Ravenhill does not hesitate to unearth the 'to-be-censored' subject matters on his stage. Through the social conditions to which he adresses, Ravenhill depicts his characters as the embodiments of these conditions and also the products of postmodern living. He simply draws a picture of the current society in his works via social criticism without embellishment, benefiting from harsh and provoking language through the presentation of these postmodern issues and characters. Svich, in parallel, explicates his theatre:

Ravenhill's plays are fuelled by a moral impulse that links him to a tradition of writing that is much more classical in its nature than he is often given credit for as a playwright and librettist. Influenced by ancient Greek drama, the plays of Oscar Wilde and contemporary pop culture, Ravenhill is poised as a somewhat Foucault-like dramatist who documents with wit and veracity straight and gay culture alike. His mannerist plays examine gender, class, and the political-social climate in which his characters live, and how the transactions of daily life (present and past) shape a, specifically British, culture (2003:81).

Besides these issues, Ravenhill also directs his attention to the problems of women along with their feelings towards these problems, as indicated in his play *Ghost Story* which was first created for Sky Playhouse Live in 2010. Presenting an awkward situation depending on changing roles and power of thought, *Ghost Story* points out a common problem experienced by a great many women; breast cancer. The play features three female characters named Meryl, Lisa and Hannah, mostly focusing on their discursive talks and stream of mind. Basically revolving around two of them; Meryl and Lisa, it considerably puts forward a sort of examination of their altering thought. The

opening scene of the play presents a suffering character with breast cancer; Lisa visiting Meryl, the positive thought of which has therapeutic power on cancer. As the dominant issue throughout the play, ‘positive thinking’ provides the basis to the reflection of inner world of the characters. Its influence and purpose on the characters is well explained in the statements of Jones and Ruthig:

Positive thinking has turned into a social case defending the idea that mind has a significant influence on body, thus encouraging patients to be active in the healing process as well as to be hopeful, but somehow aggressive in their approach to the illness (2015:763).

Within a therapeutic process through positive thinking to fight against a psychologically devastating illness, Ravenhill stunningly scatters humorous elements into his play, as presented in the picture of Lisa who draws cancer as a penis on the wall. By touching upon the comic part of the play, Ian labels this work in his review as “a satire on the doctrine of positive thinking, questioning how real or effective it could possibly be in the fight against terminal illness, posing serious questions but also playing it for laughs” (2010). In the opening scene taking place between Meryl and Lisa, inasmuch as the pain is accelerated by the illness, they link their self-directed anger with it:

Meryl All of these questions are natural. Natural questions. But that is not the task. We are here to work on you. You will be healed. Where is your anger?

Lisa Everywhere.

Meryl Illness is anger. Anger caught in the body a trapped anger. Are you angry with yourself?

Lisa Yes.

Meryl Then let’s start with that. If you can forgive yourself . . . I guide. But it’s not for me to forgive you. It’s for you . . . here. All the work you do, you do on yourself (Ravenhill, 2010:393).

By means of drawing on this anger directed to both themselves and illness itself, they initiate a kind of an act of forgiveness as given in the statement of Meryl who applies for positive thinking; “We see what we tell ourselves to see. Forgive yourself” (Ravenhill, 2010:394). During this act of forgiveness and relief, Ravenhill depicts Lisa as numb, weak and immobile, and she may be the embodiment of numbness at first in the play. On the other side, Meryl first portrayed as the healer triggers Lisa to face her consuming fear by posing the question “What’s your fear? Name it” (Ravenhill, 2010:394). She endeavors to command the power of thought of Lisa through the central aim to erase negative feelings, thus placing lighter feelings in the minds of both her and herself:

Meryl You can’t access those feelings.

Lisa No, I can't access those feelings.

Meryl Words create a story about ourselves. I'm a person who is dying. I have no choice. My body is diseased and ugly. My breast is my enemy. Is that a story you can hear in your head?

Lisa Yes.

Meryl So. A new voice, a new . . . I'm at the centre of my universe, I am filled with love, my body is filled with well being. We can . . . if we do the work. Will you do the work?

Lisa I'll try (Ravenhill, 2010:394).

However, Lisa remains uneasy with the efforts of Meryl trying to make her challenge the illness and overcome its malign effects. Ravenhill, by doing so, pursues to demonstrate one of the brutal aspects of *In-Yer-Face* while picturing his characters as succumbed to pain which annihilates their feelings and captures their minds. Shifting his attention to the observance upon the characters, he "keeps open the question of surveillance and its uses by positioning the audience in the role of silent witness" (Spencer, 2008:286) to a kind of psychological theatre. Lisa, in a mental need, seeks for help to eliminate her fatal condition. This circumstance is much more felt in the statement of her:

...and I'm overwhelmed by darkness. The story I'm living is . . . I will move closer and closer to my death. It will be a horrible death. I will lose control of my body. I will be in great pain. I need a helper to change that story. I need you (Ravenhill, 2010:396).

As an opposing means against Lisa's pessimistic thoughts, the notion of reality is put forward by Meryl defending the unsteadiness of perception which has the capability of rendering everything real or unreal. In putting emphasis on the power of thought, Ravenhill strives to indicate that the existence of things, either concrete or abstract, depends on the human perception. As the play proceeds, it becomes more obvious. Lisa is given much more attention by Meryl who attempts to persuade her to change her mind about negative thoughts predicated on the illness. To practise her central objective, Meryl urges her to think positively by making her question what is real. She, therefore, underlines the power of mind which has the ability to change the way one looks at the world. This case is presented in the speech delivered by Meryl:

Look at this room. Look around. Look at me. Look at my hand. Does any of this actually exist? Actually objectively exist? No. It only exists in my perception. The universe is only as I perceive it to be. I am ill. I am well. I decide (Ravenhill, 2010:398).

Persistently compelled by Meryl to command her mind, Lisa takes the first step to overcome her psychological disorder fuelled by fear, thereby uttering the name ‘cancer’. Her fear, indeed, does not stem from death, but has its source from the attachment to her daughter. However, the sense of beauty in society is another cause for her psychological breakdown, which is given in her statement; “My body is diseased and ugly” (Ravenhill, 2010:394). In the therapeutic discourse taking place between Lisa and Meryl from the beginning to the end, the play sheds light on the inner minds of characters, whereby uncovering their conflicts as well. On this matter, it might be true to propound that:

By the way of unearthing inner world, actors do not search for their “true self” or their “true feelings.” They alternatively examine the inner conflicts engaged to reveal the suppressed thought or feeling of which one avoids to be conscious (Davis, 2007:37).

Soon after exposing the audience to the constant conflicts of Lisa showing “the fragility of the victim of a harsh disease, desperate to find any way out to recovery” (Ian, 2010), Ravenhill also draws attention to the condition of Meryl turning out to be another woman suffering the psychological impact of breast cancer, and the illness itself. In fighting against breast cancer seen as deadly and unnerving in the eyes of women with the great aid of positive thinking enhancing their perception towards the illness, Meryl and Lisa alter their roles by empathizing with each other in such a way to end their agony during relieving process. However, they involve in a power struggle about who they are while lines are crossed between the healed and the healer. Featuring respectively as both ‘the healed’ and ‘the healer’, they pursue to relieve their pain in the course of confrontation with their long-lasting fear. Meryl, on the other side, is gradually portrayed as helpless in contrast with her first appearance onstage as the play proceeds. While Lisa gains strength against her illness under favour of positive thinking through therapeutic discourse generating self-observation “which increases awareness of the original problems and allows an altered relationship to these problems” (Weiste & Peräkylä, 2015:3), Meryl seems to be incapable of commanding her mind. In very deed, Meryl initially comes up with strength and professional attitude towards Lisa who is in the pursuit of crossing the line between the healed and the healer to urge Meryl to share her own experiences of breast cancer. By means of great confidence in her therapeutic discourse as a healer, she prefers to be silent about her own condition, thus focusing on other patients with cancer. The only way to cope with cancer seems to develop a self-defense mechanism for her to the extent that she tells lies under the guise of protecting herself against the brutal fact. However, she becomes vulnerable, for she is honest to herself about her current condition at the end. Ian, therefore, comments on the play

in terms of fluctuant state of truth; “it is particularly moving in the way it depicts the lies and half-truths we have to tell to protect others or even our own egos: all the characters obfuscate the truth at some point or other” (2010).

As the third female character who lays the bridge between other two, Hannah comes to stage with her lesbian identity and relationship with Meryl, which is dominantly accompanied by the dialogues about Lisa and breast cancer. She is basically presented as a sort of mediator establishing a bond between Lisa and Meryl from the very act in which she steps into the world of other two female characters. In these dialogues, the audience becomes more aware of Meryl’s pain after she reveals that she does not overcome her recursive illness in her statement; “It’s come back” (Ravenhill, 2010:414). Heightened by the failure to fight against cancer, fear and feeling of Lisa’s existence along with the other patients in the room capture her mind. Stuck between empathy with others and distress, she finds herself in a ghostly atmosphere in which the existence of Lisa is intensely felt due to her influence on Meryl. In a similar vein, Hannah feels the negative atmosphere and the influence of the third person in the room. Meryl, however, signalizes how she is severely affected by the pathetic condition of Lisa, thus empathizing with her:

Meryl She was a cancer woman.

Hannah I see.

Meryl And I – you know – there are plenty of cancer women but this woman, I . . . She had a breast cancer and the breast had been removed and so it –

Hannah You connected with that.

Meryl I did. It was my case. It was me.

Hannah But she’s not you.

Meryl No. She was another woman but her story was my story (Ravenhill, 2010:407).

Shifting from the questionable existence of Lisa to the ambiguous one of Meryl who dies at last, the play revolves around a ghostly mood in a room where Lisa and Hannah talk to ‘energy’ of Meryl which is seen like a ghost. With an intentional step to offer a scene in which mortality is questioned, Ravenhill underlines the bond between the women, either alive or dead, feeling agony due to same illness. Similarly, it is explained in *Broadway World*:

...A compelling drama, the play follows three women grappling with the physical and emotional realities of cancer. These women wrestle with the limitations of their own thoughts and discover inner wellness. Through their exchanges on life and death, the audience is presented with a new perspective on mortality and immortality (2018).

All the female characters in the play are portrayed as both healer and healed with the psychological assistance of each other while putting mortality into question through power of thinking. In addressing to such a serious issue of women like breast cancer, Ravenhill puts emphasis on the misery of the women victimized by this devastating illness. It is remarkably obvious in this play that during the healing process, he offers women a kind of confrontation with it and a chance to overcome its psychological impact.

2. CONCLUSION

Remarkably critical about social cases and their impacts on individuals in his era, Ravenhill refers to a common problem which has both physical and psychological effects for women in *Ghost Story* which may be the exact manifestation of experiences of women with breast cancer. In this play providing a deep insight to the miseries of these women, the playwright treats this issue more in individual context as well as social one, examining the stream of mind of the characters. In the presentation of three female characters, Ravenhill creates a different stage over which the thoughts and perspectives of women have dominion. From the beginning to the end, audience witnesses the experiences of Lisa, Meryl, which are introduced as victims of this illness, and Hannah as a mediator between these two women, thus empathizing with them. The visit of Lisa, a sufferer of breast cancer, to Meryl acting as the healer triggers the hurting memories of Meryl who has breast cancer before. Thus, she is defeated once more by this illness under the influence of being exposed to the pain of other women whereas Lisa recovers. As the play shifts its focus, the characters alter their roles within a changing process such as from positive to negative state or negative to positive one by way of power of thought promoted by therapeutic discourse. Shedding light on the inner worlds and minds of Lisa, Meryl and Hannah, Ravenhill aims at guiding the audience to a sort of therapeutic discourse, the aim of which is to release the victimized patient from his/her psychological downfall. As a consequence of its discursive nature, the play enables women to develop their sense of empathy to one another, thereby provoking the hidden thoughts and feelings to come in surface. Ravenhill, thus, points out a devastating problem which is quite common in society and must be concerned for its psychological influences on women.

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