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TO PERFORM, OR NOT TO PERFORM?

A queer reading of feminist theatre performances in Istanbul

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Abstract

Feminist theatre, I opine, is a tremendously valuable tool that could help individuals to gaze politically at their own lives. This thesis is compiled by an exploratory research into the theatrical stage of Istanbul aiming to analyse three plays with a queer lens as means to uncover the feminist politics that transforms the normative norms of both the theatre and the society.

The main analysis of this thesis proposes to answer whether the Istanbulian alternative theatre as a practice features a feminist political stance; if so, how it helps to resist and battle the patriarchal discourses of the modern art-unfriendly and authoritarian Sunni Islamist JDP government; how text, space, and materiality distort the normative constructions of culture and society; and lastly, if any alternative temporalities such as transgender and/or non-hetero agency are constructed via it.

The methodology of this research evolves around feminist theory, queer theory, governmentality, and materialism, supported by an exploratory field research of three feminist theatre performances in Istanbul during the months of January and February 2020. Descriptive fieldnotes while attending the performances and queer reading method to analyse the plays, are the main two research methods. Additionally, close reading and a semi structured interview are adopted to make a back and forth scalar reading of characters, materiality, and text with the feminist politics of the stage.

I conclude that through their product the cultural producers succeed to subvert the norms around theatre and society and with their art an inclusive space is built where oppositional consciousness and practices take place.

Key Words: feminist politics, feminist theatre, Istanbul, performativity, queer reading.

Dedication

To all culture producers and artists who fight to raise feminist consciousness with their art.

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1. Introduction

Picture this: a circle of seventeen bare foot women giggling in silence and communicating with the help of their bodies as they pass chaotically multiple invisible balls to each other. As they spin, tiptoe, hug, and laugh, soon, the worn stage is filled with bodies of different sizes, ages, shapes, ethnicities, and distinct animalistic noises can be heard coming out from each one of them. This scenery that takes place in the basement of a theatre building in Cihangir/Beyoğlu¹ resembles a rebellion and the silhouettes conceal with the black wooden floor that serves as a pillow under their heads. On that stage there is no hate, no discrimination, no violence. Just emptiness and freedom. This was my experience in the summer of 2019 while attending a theatre workshop organised by a feminist theatre group in Istanbul, *Tiyatro Boyalı Kuş* (Theatre Painted Bird)².

As I was lying down tiredly on that stage's hardwood black floor filled with scratches, probably as a result of moving heavy furniture around, I was having an intense feeling of fulfilment when suddenly Shakespeare's (2005, 2.7: 136-8) words echoed in my ears:

All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely players;
They have their exits and their entrances;

I was suddenly disturbed by Shakespeare's binary language and then I felt intensely angry that it can have the power to spoil this feminist moment of physical freedom, that I was sharing with the other sixteen bodies by lying knocked down as bowling pins on that stage. This anger startled in me a curiosity, a questioning that drove me to contemplate politically on the stage's agency, and this is how the first seeds of my interest in Istanbulian feminist theatre were planted.

I have never thought about feminist theatre before. Not because I was incognisant of its existence, but because I always took its presence for granted, especially in a country where the feminist consciousness increases day by day. During the seven years of my resident status in Turkey, from 2010 to 2017, I recall attending numerous plays that would include feminist themes and issues. Be it Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*, a production of Bornova Municipality City Theatre or Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*, a production of Ege University's Theatre Circle.

¹ Cihangir is a neighbourhood in the district of Beyoğlu/Istanbul, known especially for its narrow streets and the artistic community that resides there.

² [Theatre Painted Bird](#) was founded in 2000 in Istanbul as an alternative theatre. It identifies as a feminist theatre group and its aim is to bring women's issues and related feminist perspectives onto the stage.

Of course, feminist theatre as a professional field is much more than including feminist themes in a play and enacting them on a stage (Aston, 1995; Aston, 1999; Aston and Harris, 2006; Ellen-Case, 2014). However, in this thesis I want to distance myself from theorising feminist theatre or analysing theatre plays within feminist theatre scholarship because I wish to restrain from putting specific theatre practices in a box and call them feminist while excluding the other. To me, the pursuit of a right form of feminist theatre is a vain cause. And as I am arguing in this thesis, feminist theatre does not care if it is produced by elitist educated cultural producers or working-class sex workers. Feminist theatre does not care if it is staged in a national theatre house or in a corner of a bar. Feminist theatre does not care if the theatre-practitioner or theatre-producer self identifies as feminist or not. It is not the labels feminist theatre cares about, or the whole attempt to make feminist theatre, but to make *the theatre* feminist, to make *the theatre space* a feminist space. The feminist theatre's aim is to overthrow the heteronormative patriarchal discourses of power and give a space to those whose voice has been taken away, regardless of the labels under which it was produced.

Nonetheless, as much as I may personally refuse to analyse feminist theatre within the feminist theatre scholarship, my analysis of plays is still in the realm of abstract ideas. It is still theoretically and linguistically written for those who enjoyed the privilege of a higher education. Even more, as much as I may attempt to draw an analogy between the produced cultural practice and the social or political reality of Turkey, my approach is still developed on a conceptual framework and my analysis may be without any practical purpose. I may not bring out any ground-breaking theories of what feminist theatre is, nor any techniques of how to read feminist theatre, but my intention with this thesis is to show how theatre-making can still be feminist without being produced by feminist-identified theatre groups or without calling their product a feminist piece.

It was 2013 when I was a Bachelor student of English Literature at Ege University in Turkey when political tensions started to arise over all cultural institutions. A draft law on regulating cultural practices, opera, ballet, and theatre specifically, was leaked by the press (Aksoy and Şeyben, 2015, p.185). This draft law caused serious concerns among cultural producers, artists, and art lovers specifically on its antidemocratic and illiberal tone. Although at that time this draft law never passed, censorship and regulation were hiding just around the corner. Justice and Development Party (hereafter JDP)'s neo-conservatist politics, policies, and discourses have started to be more evident in the following years and a return to Islamist values was sought thereafter. Feminist practices such as liberal theatre was at serious stake under the

new Islamist agenda³ and as the post-2013s would prove, antifeminist discourses will significantly escalate.

JDP came to rule in early 2000s with a power strategy that would push Turkey towards European Union and economic liberalization leading the leader of the party, Recep Tayip Erdoğan, to be seen by the public as a “champion of democracy” (Akçay, 2018, p.6). But challenges to JDP’s strategy started to appear after 2012 with a settled period of economic slowdown (Ibid., pp.19-20) that along other issues, led JDP to lose the majority of MPs in the election of 2015 (Esen and Gümüşçü, 2016). The JDP’s wish “to hang on the power despite its electoral defeat” has caused “a dramatic rise in political violence and extra-parliamentary opposition, which, in turn, increased government pressure on dissent, including censorship in the media and implicit endorsement of violent attacks against the opposition by [JDP] supporters” (Ibid., p.1581). Hence, the shift from democracy to authoritarian regime and right-wing populism. This power struggle along the failed coup attack in 2016, “facilitated the transformation of the regime into the executive presidential system established in 2017” (Akçay, 2018, p.16).

Under the new system, the power is heavily centralised on one-man patriarchal and authoritarian rule. The antifeminist discourse of both the regime and the ruling party led feminist practices in Istanbul and Turkey in general to be at a dangerous turn. Numerous feminist academicians were already sacked with the decree law of 2017 (Kaos GL., 2017) and JDP has already defined the “familial sphere as the natural locus of women” whose education is significant only “for the fulfilment of their domestic responsibilities” (Coşar and Özkan-Kerestecioğlu, 2017, p.162). LGBTI+ individuals on the other hand, have been facing discriminative and exclusionist politics for years (Uluğ and Acar, 2014, p.172; Göçmen and Yılmaz, 2017). Then, one may ask what is the future of the theatre produced by and/or about these communities? The state theatre, which was once celebrated for its “mission to perform the modern, western art canon” or the local works that are produced within the same agenda, have already started to be seen as a threat to the JDP government due to their representation of “liberal-secular cultural worldviews” (Aksoy and Şeyben, 2015, p.184). How much time does the alternative theatre have left until it is regulated by the same authoritarian patriarchal rule?

³ Here is not to intend that Islam is embedded with hate speech around feminist practices, as feminist practices can travel in different shapes to different corners of the globe regardless of religion, race, ethnicity etc., (i.e. Egypt’s women mosque movement from Saba Mahmood’s (2005) *Politics of Piety*, but to differentiate between Islam and Islamism, as the first one is related to faith and cultural belief system, while the second one is about what Bassam Tibi (2012) calls “religionised politics”, meaning that Islamism is a political ideology where Islam is used as a tool to build a particular political legitimacy.

Although there is a flourishing of alternative theatre, feminist theatre included, conquering ground in the past ten years (Ejder, 2018), when does it become the next target of JDP's or other future governments' mechanism of changing, controlling, and shaping the alternative theatre with a coat of conservative aesthetics? I do not have these answers and I hope I will never live to find them out. Yet, with this thesis I wish to leave a legacy for the future generations to know that in 2020 feminist theatre existed in Istanbul. So, if you, the reader, happen to find this thesis in a dusty corner of a library, or in a not very popular electronic research database, do know that as much as feminist theatre existed in Ottoman times, so it was present in the first decades of the 21st century. It might not be called *feminist* in your era, maybe there would be a much fancier word for it, but keep in mind that it is not the label, but the aspiration for an equal and just world where no one is left behind.

1.1. My overall research journey

I am starting my investigation with a one-way ticket from Copenhagen to Istanbul on the New Year's Eve of 2020 with an already assumption about the Istanbulian alternative theatre being feminist. However, I also wanted to find out how it resists and battles the patriarchal discourses of the modern art-unfriendly and authoritarian Sunni Islamist JDP government. How text, space, and materiality distort the normative constructions of culture and society. Lastly, I aimed to find out if these theatre performances contribute to the construction of alternative temporalities such as queer, transgender and/or non-hetero agency.

To discover a response to my questions I have attended five plays out of which selected three for the purpose of this thesis. *Two Women* (2017) written by Fatma Özcan and directed by Semah Tuğsel, narrates the mental, emotional, physical, and verbal dialogue between a survivor of rape and the wife of the rapist. *Short Cut Stories* (2014) by Zeynep Esmeray is a one-character play based on the biography of the writer who also happens to be the one who is acting the character. It tells the story of a trans woman and her experience of transphobia that she has faced up until, during, and after her gender affirming surgery. Lastly, *The Decision (10)* (2014) written and directed by H. Can Utku, portrays the stories of ten cis women in Istanbul who ended up in a gynaecologist office for getting an abortion.

To answer the afore mentioned research questions, I propose a queer reading method where the text, space, and materiality of these theatre plays are deconstructed and analysed through feminist theory, queer theory, governmentality, and materialism. Moreover, instead of focusing on two, three theorists, I chose to bring an engagement of several theorists from distinct disciplines such as Philosophy, Gender Studies, and Cultural Studies. By doing so, my

aim was to discover queer potentials out of text, space, and materiality that would destabilise the patriarchal discourses that intend to produce social norms and “docile bodies”.

1.2. Feminist theatre what art thou?

When I address *feminist theatre* the first thing that might come to one’s mind might be that it is written by women, directed by women, related to women, performed for women, hence, employing women’s experiences only. Although in its most broad sense “feminism” refers to the political stance of those who oppose “women’s subordinate social positions [in] spiritual authority, political rights, and/or economic opportunities” (McCann and Seung-Kyung, Introduction, 2016), I have the urge to highlight that its meaning “has never been historically fixed or stable” (Ibid.). Even more, at times, it has not been a woman-only movement. For this reason, before giving an account of feminist theatre, I believe it is of highest significance to depict my own understanding of feminism, thus, to also reason my choice of the plays that constitute the analytical part of this thesis.

Adopting Sara Ahmed’s (2017) position from *Living a feminist Life*, feminism to me is “a life question”; it is “to make everything into something that is questionable” (p.2). It is a genderless political position that aims “to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression” (hooks, 2015, p.xii) including all people-related phobias and discriminations such as homophobia, transphobia, racism, ageism, ableism, classism and this list is regrettably endless; it is to ask ethical questions; to dismantle social systems; to interrogate patriarchal ideas; to deconstruct imposed identities and “overcome the tradition of silence” (Anzaldúa, 1987, p.59); to subvert social, cultural, and heteronormative norms that have created walls marginalising and creating *the other, the queer, the monster*.

In this same description stands my choice of working with these specific plays. One written and directed by cis women, connotes a non-normative psychological and physical relationship between two characters who have been subjugated by continuous abuse and violence. The other, written, directed, and played by a trans woman who brings her political identity on stage to tear down norms and binary gender constructions. The last one, written and directed by a cis man who gives a voice to ten women belonging to different social classes and relates their life stories through their decision of having an abortion. Hence, I believe my choice is a feminist choice. Starting from the above given subjective definition of feminism drawn from Sara Ahmed (2017), bell hooks (2015), and Gloria Anzaldúa (1987), feminist theatre has urgent stories to tell and all stories by, on, about discriminated subjects and bodies whose voices have been taken away, constitute the feminist theatre.

1.3. *Queer* reading and *queering*

First and foremost, I would like to stress that my stance towards *queer* does not only imply identities other than heterosexual, but also all identities regardless of their sexuality and gender which resist dominant social norms and refuse to comply to patriarchal discourses. Gloria Anzaldúa might warn that *queer* as a universal identity marker does not unify but rather “homogenizes, [and] erases our differences” (Anzaldúa and Keating, 2009, p.250). Yet, I align to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1994) in that “[a]nyone’s use of “queer” about themselves means differently from their use of it about someone else” (p.8) and hence *queer* is a subjective identity marker. Of course, just as every identity marker, *queer* as well must be cognisant of its flaws and/or agency in the power structures. But here exactly stands the power of *queer* in my opinion, it takes it out from *strange* and *deviant* to oppose and contradict the norm that creates these power structures. Then while *queer* is a political identity positioned to oppose the norms and dominant discourses, *queering* is the name of this action. *Queering* is done to deconstruct language, norms, discourses, and materiality. To *queer* is to “open up the field of possibility for gender without dictating which kinds of possibility ought to be realised” (Butler, 1999, p.viii). In other words, *queering* has no rules and no set structure of how it is done, the aim is to decentre hegemonies and norms by following deconstructive strategies that go within and beyond gender and sexuality (Sedgwick, 1994, p.8). I use *queer* reading and *queering* interchangeably as their purpose is to destabilise and denaturalise patriarchal and heteronormative norms. By a *queer* reading and *queering* in this thesis besides deconstructing patriarchal discourses I also mean to unearth *queer* meanings out of materiality of space, stage, and body. By a *queer* reading I prefer to suspend the default strategies of reading a text, hence, my reading has no fixed discipline or theory. I ricochet between Literary Studies, Gender Studies, Philosophy, and Cultural Studies to find *queer* potentials out of performance, language, text, body, and materiality in general. A *queer* reading in this sense is to use the difference between these objects of study as political rather than metaphorical concepts and to bring new meanings into the theatrical texts.

1.4. Chapters overview

The thesis is divided in six chapters. This chapter introduced my journey with the subject of feminist theatre, what startled my desire to work with this topic and what steps I have undertaken during my research journey. Also, in this chapter I expressed what my understanding of feminist theatre and queer reading is, reproducing these terms and making them hybrid with no specific boundaries because even though feminism is bringing people into the same space, not all feminist accounts must follow the same pattern and not all cultural

producers must approach feminism from the same perspective. In this exact position stands the political power of feminism as oppression, discrimination, and phobias can be taken down in different ways, be it through a raise of the voice, through solidarity, or a simple acknowledgment of someone else's struggle.

In the next chapter, **Resistance from Within: A Genealogy of Women's Movements from Literature to Theatre**, I present a background of feminist theatre raising questions of its historical period. Also, here I bring forth feminist accounts from Ottoman period, early-Republican age, and contemporary feminist theatre. Later, a conversation around JDP's theatre control over state cultural institutions and alternative theatre's resistance strategies are depicted.

In chapter 3, **On Theories and Methods: Where Do I stand?** I present the theories that are further used. These theories are given a short space in this passage just for the explanation purpose of how theory is used to analyse the plays. The methods of fieldnotes, semi-structured interviews, queer reading, and translation techniques, are exhibited and described in this passage. Finally, I also depict a conversation around my background and positionality and how these have aided and/or limited this research journey.

The rest three chapters are divided play by play and for each play some themes and concepts are selected to examine the kinship between the produced cultural product, its narrative, and performativity with the societal issues that it is surrounded.

The chapter *Two Women (2017)* by **Fatma Özcan** involves a reading around post humanist performativity where the materiality of stage and body facilitate to uncover the dominant discourses in society and resist the norms of femininity and sexual violence.

Short Cut Stories (2014) by **Zeynep Esmeray Özadikti** evolves around the concepts of power and killjoy feminism and aims to discuss the themes of transphobia and binary norms.

In *The Decision (10)* (2014) by **H. Can Utku** the concept of borderland is developed around the intersectional and third space feminist theory to reflect on how social class creates borders within a society.

My final thoughts are exhibited in the final part of this thesis, **Conclusion**, where I reflect on my overall research, discuss the research findings, and share what I have learned, what has frustrated me, and what amazed me during this journey.

2. Resistance from Within: A Genealogy of Women's Movements from Literature to Theatre

I begin this chapter by an investigation of feminist theatre's roots questioning the historical period and geographical location of its first accounts. I continue to argue that feminist theatre is not a product of the 20th century by bringing historical facts from the Ottoman theatre's interactions with feminist issues. Then, I analyse the re-territorialisation practices of alternative theatre groups which help to resist the discourses of JDP against the modern political art.

2.1. Feminist theatre, where it all began? Rediscovering Turkish feminist accounts

When I embarked on the research of feminist theatre history to find its roots and connection to the Turkish feminist theatre, I have encountered a long list of academic works and a multitude of knowledge to take from. However, to my sad disappointment a lot of these were western accounts.⁴ Having a BA major in English Literature and an attempted minor in American Literature, I was more or less familiar with the feminist drama written in this part of the globe during the previous centuries, but I was looking for transnational theatrical voices from the other geographical locations. Nevertheless, the reason of the extensive literature on feminist theatre from this part of the world stands, I believe, in both the women's liberation movement that swept these regions during the late 1960s and early 1970s, and in the interest of feminist scholars and historians of that age in women's voices (Ellen-Case, 2014, pp.5-6). The 1970s brought a ground-breaking literature related to the theatrical texts and new anthologies of plays written by women or biographies of women playwrights have merged (Ibid.). However, even though the availability of these texts produced back in the 1970s and onwards is wide and easily reachable with the help of nowadays digital technologies and rich publishing, it is of no means to say that the feminist theatre as a genre was born in that corner of the globe. As Sara Ahmed (2017) states, to assume that feminism in general and feminist stories travel from west to east is "a travelling assumption" (p.4), hence, to assume that feminist theatre is a product of the west, in my opinion, is a false view for two reasons. First, feminist movements travel in different coats in different parts of the world including those who did not have contact with the aforementioned regions.⁵ Second, regardless of age or location, feminist movements have been present, but there might be multiple barriers that can restrain scholars from reaching those

⁴ Western here should be understood as a geographical location and not as a geocultural concept.

⁵ See examples of differently located women's movements from Roy (2016); Thayer (2010); Tripp (2016).

accounts, hence, perhaps a good amount of literature might be lost and/or even destroyed. These reasons constitute the barriers for locating a specific place and a specific time to the ‘first’ feminist movement, and since feminist theatre has a tied connection to feminist movements, the same argument applies to it, as well. For example, just as Renaissance stage of England was assumed for an extended period of time to be all-male, the recent archival research has proved that women played a vital role in it and accounts of women who have contributed to the development of the English Renaissance theatre have started to merge out (Brown and Parolin, 2005; Hackett, 2013; McManus, 2007; McManus and Munro, 2015; Orgel, 1996). Yet, as I have affirmed in the introduction part of this thesis, feminism is not a woman-only product and Shakespeare himself has penned feminist characters and/or included themes and concepts in their writings that would disrupt the misogynist social and heteronormative norms.⁶

A similar quest “to rediscover the voices of women who had fought for women’s rights in the past” (Knaus, 2007, p.48)⁷ started in Turkey in the 1980s with the rise of a self-identified feminist movement. Although 1980s was hitherto “the most oppressive and authoritarian decade in the republic’s history”, cultural diversification, pop-culture products, and feminist literature have started to merge and openly embraced discourses on sex and recognition of gay and trans people (Parla, 2008, p.34).⁸ Women started to initiate discussions on oppression and male dominated regime and formed small groups with the aim of increasing consciousness that would eventually form the first democratic movement after the coup (Tekeli, 1989). During this time, efforts to discover woman writers of the past and feminist texts were attempted. However, this quest was a difficult task as the language reform brought by the Republican era, as Jale Parla states “had the object of severing the people’s ties with the Ottoman past” (2008, p.28), hence, everything written during the Ottoman age was linguistically inaccessible for the generations born after 1925 (Ibid. p.28).⁹ Nonetheless, the translation accounts in the post-1980s era have succeeded to uncover and publish a large amount of works on women’s political voices from both Ottoman and Republican women’s movements that were once erased or

⁶ When it comes to literary studies, I am an ardent reader of Shakespeare and I do identify with what I call ‘Shakespearean feminist’, meaning that I support and argue that Shakespeare was a proto-feminist and characters such as Viola (*Twelfth Night*), Portia (*The Merchant of Venice*), Lady Macbeth (*Macbeth*) to name a few, prove this point. Also see an interesting short article from Ahlin (2016) on [Bustle.com](#).

⁷ A detailed account can be found on [Women’s Museum Istanbul](#), a virtual museum with the aim to give an exhibition of the history of women that was lost, veiled, and erased.

⁸ Zuhale Yeşilyurt Gündüz (2004) denotes that besides the 1980s phase, Turkey has experienced some other distinct phases related to feminist movements. One that began in 1839 “with the wide spectrum of laws in the *Tanzimat* period”; and another during the early-Republican era, “with Mustafa Kemal Atatürk granting women certain rights” (Ibid., p.115).

⁹ In 1928 the alphabet reform was implemented where Arabo-Persian alphabet was replaced by the Latin and later with the language reform of 1936, the language got purified of its Ottoman vocabulary (Parla, 2008, pp.28-9).

forgotten (Çakır, 1996; Demirdirek, 1993; Sirman, 1989).

The literature on Istanbulian Ottoman theatre shows the first traceable accounts of feminist engagements to be found in the the 19th century. Regardless of their gender, intellectuals from Istanbul started to raise questions on “women’s participation in social life [and these] emerged as significant themes” in the theatre of that age (Adak and Altınay, 2018, p.192). Turkish women were not allowed to be on stage and their presence at theatre in general was very controversial (Menemencioğlu, 1983; Adak and Altınay, 2018). Yet, other ethnic minorities and especially the Armenian community, contributed significantly to the ascension of women both onto the stage and into the theatre salons. While Armenian women continued to hold their acting positions regardless of the criticism faced from “their patriarch and the conservative members of their community” (Menemencioğlu, 1983, p.52), the Armenian theatre director, Güllü Agop, encouraged Turkish women to attend theatre plays. At first, Güllü Agop charged them nothing for the attendance of plays and then only a small amount of the payment (Ibid., p.52). The first women to become stage actresses and establish their own theatre companies, were also Armenian.¹⁰

Later, Turkish women started to conquer the stage, as well. Such an entity can be referenced to Halide Edib, who was a feminist, novelist, playwright, journalist during the Ottoman period and early-Republican era. Edib’s play *Kenan Çobanları* (1914) (The Shepherds of Kenan) was crucial “in the history of women’s involvement in Ottoman theatre as one of the first plays with a Muslim woman playwright and director and Muslim actresses on stage” (Adak, 2018, p.277). *Kenan Çobanları* (1914) was performed as an opera as well and it “aimed to transfer the feminist [...] thoughts by means of art” (Çitçi, 2009, p.655).¹¹ Hence, I will echo Halide Edib’s words uttered at a conference in 1913: “[t]he fact that Ottoman women do not have a written history of their progress should not lead us to conclude that they have not done anything” (Edib cited in Çakır, 2007, p.73). The same goes, of course, for all dissident individuals be it in their movements, literature, and theatre.

Besides Halide Edib, late Ottoman and early-Republican period has seen other brilliant feminist minds, as well. Significant contributions to the shaping of Turkish feminist movement

¹⁰ See [Aruşak Papazyan](#), the first Armenian stage actress and [Yeranuhi Karakaşyan](#), the first Armenian actress to take roles of young men on stage in the Ottoman Empire. [Aghani Zabel Binemeciyan](#) and [Kınar Sivacıyan](#) are the first Armenian women to establish their own theatre companies in the Ottoman Empire.

¹¹ Halide Edib’s plays have not been studied in Turkish and/or Euro-American context until 2013 because of their political content but also because Edib was a Turkish woman (Adak, 2018, pp.275-6). For example, their play titled *Masks or Souls?* (1953) written in English, was dismissed from the theoretical discussions on “Theatre of the Absurd” while euro-male-centredness is in force and Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco, or Harold Pinter represent the canon in absurdist plays (Ibid.).

and feminist literature have been made by Fatma Aliye Hanım, women's rights activist, novelist, essayist, who included in their writings women's issues such as education, right to divorce, honour killings, and working rights (Karaca, 2011; Knaus, 2007). Selma Rıza Feraceli, the first Muslim woman journalist of the Ottoman Empire who was also a novelist and penned the novel *Uhuvvet* (1892) (Brotherhood) which has been extensively written to raise awareness of the societal issues such as social class and equality along institutionalised structures of polygamy (Hazer, 2011; Oktay, 2016).

Thence, by looking at these examples can we argue that the feminist theatre is a product of Women's Liberation Movement of the 1970s as Elaine Aston (1999) and Sue Ellen-Case (2014) suggest? By "we" here I mean feminist scholars and students who engage interdisciplinarily with theatre studies. Of course, such studies offer a more descriptive endeavour and cannot much redesign what the historians have produced. Yet, here stands my argument, we should approach historical feminist theatre scholarship sceptically since the under-documented and limited data from different geographical locations and periods of time do not and should not lead to the refusal of recognizing or acknowledging the fact that there were different attempts and accounts of feminist theatre in the past, although dressed in different coats and/or disguised in distinct forms.

2.2. Contemporary feminist theatre in Turkey

The first contemporary accounts of feminist theatre production could be traced as early as 1990s in Ankara and Istanbul as alternative theatre groups. Although some of them do while some of them do not identify themselves with the feminist label, their product is definitely feminist. As I argued in the introduction chapter, not the label but the consciousness is what matters. *Kadın Tiyatrosu* (1993) (Woman Theatre), *Tiyatro Öteyüz* (2001) (The OtherFace Theatre), *Feminist Kadın Çevresi* (2002) (Feminist Woman Circle), and *Kadınlar Sahnesi* (2005) (Women Stage) are some of the first contemporary theatre groups that share a feminist consciousness. However, because these were amateur rather than professional, the first professional and self feminist-identified theatre in Turkey is considered to be *Tiyatro Boyalı Kuş* (Theatre Painted Bird), founded in 2000 in Istanbul. Of course, my intention is never to separate amateur theatre groups from the professional ones as to me regardless of experience or expertise, registered in public or not, as Sara Ahmed (2017, p.3) states, as long as someone recognizes the power relations, that person is carrying out a feminist movement. So is with theatre. Be it in front of a mirror, on a school stage, in a bar, publicly or privately. If there's a

resistance to patriarchy, heteronormativity, social norms, violence, and queerphobia,¹² that theatre piece is a feminist piece. Therefore, perhaps it might be erroneous to even enounce that feminist theatre was set in motion in the 1990s since intellectuals from the 1860s already had “began to develop an interest in feminism, women’s status and their participation in social life [and these] emerged as significant themes in Ottoman theatre” (Adak and Altınay, 2018, p.192).

In an interview with *Agos*¹³ taken by Ayşe Akdeniz (2013), Jale Karabekir, the founder of *Theatre Painted Bird*, discusses how they started to engage with feminist theatre in the 1990s. It was a time when alternative stages started to flourish and were trying to do something different from the state theatres. Karabekir was a dramaturgy student in Istanbul back then and they learnt about feminist theatre at the University, although of course the theoretical material was all from the west, they say, be it about the feminist movement of 60s and 70s, how this movement met with academia, how feminist plays and theatres emerged, and how feminist working methods have developed. Because both state theatre and alternative theatres were “extremely patriarchal, thankfully”, Karabekir and their friends decided to establish a feminist theatre right after their graduation. Their main aspiration was to bring on the stage the lives of silenced people as a political act, to deconstruct the existing texts, and to create their own feminist dramaturgy. For example, their play *Çernobil’den Sesler* (2007) (Voices from Chernobyl), had an antinuclear stance against the state’s tender to open a nuclear power plant. *Çıkmaz Sokak* (2009) (Dead End Street) was the first play about lesbianism, written in 1908 by Şahabettin Süleyman, but because Ottoman Turkish language is a barrier, a lot of similar plays remain on the dusty shelves. *Theatre Painted Bird* not only deconstructed this play and brought it to the stage, but also transcribed and printed it so that everyone could reach it, Karabekir states.

2.3. Re-territorialisation of alternative theatre in Istanbul

Activities of alternative theatre, feminist and queer theatre included, from Istanbul have started to grow vigorously in the past ten years for a few reasons. First, the oppressive character of the ruling JDP, which imprisoned artists, academicians, politicians and journalists, has to some extent succeeded to silence these communities. Yet, it also led scholars, culture producers, and artists to migrate abroad where such anti-democratic practices and oppressive discourses

¹² This list of course includes racism, ethnocentrism, supremacism, ageism, ableism, speciesism, anti-environmentalism, and all other phobias and hates that advocate against equality and equity structures.

¹³ *Agos* was the first newspaper during the Republican period to be published in both Turkish and Armenian. Nowadays it serves as an online platform for independent journalism. See agos.com.tr

would not obstruct them and hinder their basic right for freedom of expression. These have continued their investigations and have not stopped to interrogate the current system through their art, orienting their product to the Istanbulian scene.

Such a case in point is *Şermola Performans* (*Şermola Performance*)¹⁴ or *Destar Theatre* with its original name, a theatre company that predominantly performs in Kurdish “about the persecution of Kurds throughout the twentieth century” (Adak, 2018, p.205). Elif Baş (2015) maintains that *Destar* “encourages the audience to question socially constructed perceptions of difference and challenges the idea of fixed identities” (p.326). Due to economic and political issues, nowadays, this theatre collective has one foot in Istanbul and the other in Cologne, continuing through their plays to resist the current social issues and political forces from Turkey. Through their plays a re-territorialisation strategy happens via which the power discourse is resisted and protested.

According to Deleuze and Guattari (1983), when a process of transformation in societal structures or domination over citizens is intended, *detrterritorialization* and *reterritorialization* strategies occur (emphasis added). By *detrterritorialization* is meant a social machine that exorcises a discourse with force to maintain subjects “in a subordinate position” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1983, p.153). Then *reterritorialization* follows as means for these subordinate subjects to incorporate and personalise the discourse of that despotic machine (Ibid., pp.259-60). If I borrow these concepts but instead of letting them as “opposite faces of one and the same process” (Ibid., p.258) and employ them on contrary axes while *detrterritorialization* remains the dominant power discourse and *reterritorialization* is politically decoded as a counter-productive practice; then the second would be transformed to *re-territorialisation*, in other words re-establishment of a territorial cultural practice as means to resist the discourse apparatuses.

The political tensions over all cultural institutions but specifically theatre started when a draft law about closing down the State Theatre, Opera and Ballet and initiating an arts council-type institution that would fund artistic projects based on selection was leaked by the press in the spring of 2013 (Aksoy and Şeyben, 2015, p.185). This draft law raised many questions but especially how would this art institution specifically choose the projects to be funded because as Aksoy and Şeyben (2015) relate it would be naturally “composed of government appointed personnel, with no mechanism defined to evaluate the appropriateness of its decisions” (p.185) meaning that censorship and restriction to specific themes and performances could be applied. These tensions intensified with the Gezi Protests in the summer of 2013 by first targeting the

¹⁴ See sermola.com

artists who were active in these demonstrations and threatening them with imprisonment (Aksoy and Şeyben, 2015). These practices of illiberal democracy continued after the coup attempt of July 2016, when it went as far as discharging people from their jobs at state theatres and closing down the municipal theatre in Diyarbakır, a predominately Kurdish city in the southeast of Turkey (Adak and Altınay, 2018, p.203). Two decrees have been issued in the following two years that would limit the autonomy of artists working at state theatres: the first replaced a law from 1949 and “secures [state’s] autonomy over budgeting and programming” and the second “places all state theatres under direct control of the president” (Verstraete, 2019, p.299). However, not just state theatres have suffered. Private theatres as well have become a victim of JDP’s political control and censorship. In 2018, *Sadece Diktator* (Just A Dictator) was banned for security reasons although it “[was] not explicitly about Turkey” (Adak and Altınay, 2018, p.203); *Adalet Sizsiniz* (Justice Is You) play was prevented to reach the stage for “renovation” reasons in four cities; many actors and directors were worried if this political process of shifting powers would affect them and some did not even deny that they implement self-censorship to remain on the safe side (Akyol, 2018). This structural change through the forces of laws, order, and power discourse, is what Deleuze and Guattari mean by deterritorialization and I have given these examples to show how deterritorialization is achieved by the authoritarian regime of JDP. Although the mentioned ban and censorship fear is alive and well in Istanbul and whole country in general, Akyol’s article has given a space to only cis men, and the experiences of trans, gay, or cis women artists and cultural producers are made invisible.

To understand how re-territorialisation strategy works let me shortly analyse how *Şermola Performans* executes it. Likewise, many artists who went abroad, seeking political asylum or not, due to political oppressive machine of JDP, *Şermola Performans*’ Germany arm has tight connections with Istanbul. While the founders, Mirza Metin is writing and organizing plays from Cologne and seeks to create a meeting space for Kurdish performers, Berfin Zenderlioğlu continues their directing work in Istanbul and seeks for collaborations between Istanbul and Germany, has shared Zenderlioğlu in an interview (Aybar, 2018). This collaboration helps to re-do and re-establish the cultural practice that was confined by the socio-political dynamics of JDP but also inspires international productions and collaborative practices where resistance is achieved on many sites and not just Istanbulian one. In this sense, the resistive matter travels in different spaces creating transnational solidarities.

Another reason for the multiplicative number of feminist theatre and performances in recent years in Istanbul as Ejder and Salta (2019) suggest, is the heightened demand for such

practices. The amount of venues and theatres has risen, individuals have become more interested in the current issues of the country, hence more has been started to be written and performed about the subjects “that were considered taboo before” (Ibid., p.1). Of course, re-territorialisation practices happen not only through theatre plays although *stage* is a vital tool and an essential empowering metaphor. An illustration to that are the festivals, workshops and labs organised by NGOs and/or theatre collectives which bring together artists and performers.

Similar to “other illiberal democracies, the [JDP] regime’s characteristics have included misogyny, homophobia, and transphobia” (Adak and Altınay, 2018, pp.204-5). For instance, as part of the measures to be taken against the novel coronavirus pandemic that has taken over the globe these days of spring 2020, on 24th of March 2020 JDP has proposed a draft bill to reduce the sentence of the sexual crimes, gender-based violence crimes, and child abuse, meaning that most of these perpetrators will be released (Kepenek, 2020a). Such measures to be taken in a time when women are at most risk of suffering from violence and abuse (Kepenek, 2020b) proves Adak’s assertion of JDP’s misogynist agenda. Even though JDP’s discourse wishes to erase feminist practices of any kind, such as commanding against pride marches and attacking with pepper gas and shields for example (Kepenek and Adal, 2019), the aftermath of the Gezi protests period “has witnessed an upsurge in feminist and queer theatre production” (Adak and Altınay, 2018, pp.204-5). Besides *Theatre Painted Bird*, *Oluşum Drama Enstitüsü* (Formation Drama Institute), *Devrim Tiyatroları* (Revolution Theatres), *Tiyatro Boğaziçi* (Theatre Boğaziçi), Sabancı University’s *işte boyle guzelim . . .* (here you go my sweetie...), NGOs to name a few *Amargi*, *Pembe Hayat* (Pink Life), *KAOS GL*, *Arada Derneği* (Arada Association), *Karşı Sanat Çalışmaları* (Counter Art Practices), have all carried out feminist projects. These all have created a space where regardless of JDP’s homophobic, transphobic, and misogynist socio-political machine, feminist consciousness could be shared to help audiences to battle these phobias, hence constituting a re-territorialisation practice.

3. On Theories and Methods: Where do I stand?

Due to the interdisciplinary approach of this thesis, I integrate theories from several disciplines and from multiple theorists. My theoretical framework specifically dwells on feminist theory, queer theory, governmentality, and materialism aiming to unpack the patriarchal discourses around femininity, rape, transphobia, and abortion. Under the next sections I discuss how these theories relate to the analysis of each chapter separately; how methods of fieldnotes, semi structured interviews, translation techniques, and queer reading are employed in this study. Lastly, I make clear my background and positionality and how these reflect the way of engagement with this research along the limitations that they produce.

3.1. Theoretical Framework

Because of the vast theoretical approaches I refer to in this research and because the theories I engage with differ from one chapter to another, in this section I mention them shortly and later I develop them at the beginning of each analytical chapter. I allocate one chapter for each play and every chapter's analysis develops around a specific concept.

In the fourth chapter, *Two Women* (2017) by Fatma Özcan, I discuss the production of “docile bodies” through the means of patriarchal discourses. Here, Foucauldian (Foucault and Rabinow, 1984; Foucault, 1995) governmentality is used to analyse how patriarchal discourses of power are embedded in this play through the materiality of stage and characters' body. While Judith Butler's theory of performativity shows how gender is maintained by the use of “a stylized repetition of acts” (Butler 1999, p. 179), Sandra Bartky (1997) and Andrea Cahill's (2000) ideas incorporate the relationship between discourses and their material effects on the characters' bodies. Lastly, the spectatorship theory from cinema studies of Teresa de Lauretis (1987) and the male gaze of Laura Mulvey (1975) facilitate discussions on examination of male gaze through the eyes of the characters and how it is distorted.

The fifth chapter, *Short Cut Stories* (2014) by Zeynep Esmeray Özadikti, involves Foucault's (1995) conceptualization of power that creates a space for resistance. The power of resistance, which is the theme of this chapter, I argue that has its roots in Sara Ahmed's (2017) killjoy feminism. Ahmed's political stance is used to depict the survival strategy of the character who with space choice, killjoys, and snaps subverts the norms of theatre and society.

The last analytical chapter, *The Decision (10)* (2014) by H. Can Utku, looks at Sandra Bartky's (1997) arguments around occupation of space and posture to portray the characters'

social class as a struggle that creates borders. Gloria Anzaldúa's (1987) idea of borders and Emma Pérez' third space feminism (1999) on the other hand, help to analyse the setting of the play as a third space, as a place where patriarchal discourses are distorted collectively.

3.2. Methods

For my research, I use the methods of fieldnotes, semi-structured interviews, and queer reading. Following, I describe the choosing process of the analysed plays, depict the methods and mention how they aid to the development of this research as a whole.

Choosing the plays

As I expressed in the introduction chapter, my research questions for this thesis evolve around the enquiry of how the theatre practices from Istanbul resist and battle the societal norms and the patriarchal discourses of the JDP government. To observe if my initial assumption on Istanbulian alternative theatre of being political is valid, the first thing I have done was to do a mini digital research via Facebook and seek for alternative theatre stages. As Istanbul is an enormous city situated on the two benches of European and Asian continents, where every evening more than 150 theatre plays are being staged (Ejder, 2018), I decided to focus just on the European side and mainly on the district of Beyoğlu, as it is a historical and culturally distinct space where queer individuals can perform and display their queerness (Sandıkçı, 2015) with the hope of finding plays written, directed, or played by queer artists. Hence, I managed to find around seven alternative stages distinct from state theatre.¹⁵ Next step was to identify the plays that were going to be staged in these places and, as my time in Istanbul was limited, I focused just on the plays that were going to be performed during the whole month of January and beginning of February 2020. Even though there were tens of plays to choose from, I have decided to choose the ones that would have feminist issues as a central theme. Hence, I have attended five plays: *A Room Of One's Own* by Virginia Woolf, translated, adopted, and directed by Jale Karabekir, the founder of *Theatre Painted Bird* (a.k.a. the first feminist theatre in Turkey); *Two Women* (2017) written by Fatma Özcan and directed by Semah Tuğsel; *Short Cut Stories* (2014) by Zeynep Esmeray Özadikti; *The Decision (10)* (2014) by H. Can Utku, founder of the *Other Lives Theatre*; and lastly, *Mouthpiece* written by Amy Nostbakken and Norah Sadava and directed by Tamer Levent. Eventually, I settled to analyse only three of them and

¹⁵ [Asmalı Sahne](#), [Bo Sahne](#), [Galata Perform](#), [İkinci Kat](#), [Kumbaracı 50](#), [Salon IKSIV](#), [Tatavla Sahne](#).

excluded *A Room Of One's Own* and *Mouthpiece* because these were not local productions and also because *Mouthpiece* was performed at a stage that is not located in Beyoğlu.

Fieldnotes

Due to ethical approaches of the copyright content during the attendance of the plays, the only way to record the description of the cultural product was fieldnotes. Fieldnotes “are a type of journal [...] written in a free-flowing, spontaneous manner” (Brodsky, 2008, p.341). In the field, I used fieldnotes extensively because they allowed me to take notes of what I see on the stage, but also to record my own thoughts and emotions in relations to what I observe. My fieldnotes were put together both in forms of descriptive observations where I relate the setting, what is on the walls, how is the stage arranged, what are the mimics, body position and mobility of the characters, their monologues and dialogues; and in forms of speculative personal reflections where I express my first impressions about the setting, and my feelings during the performances.

Semi-structured interviews

Initially my aim was to conduct three interviews with a cultural producer from each play. For this reason, I went back to Istanbul at the beginning of March 2020 to conduct the interviews as planned. However, due to the Covid-19's border restrictions I had to leave Istanbul sooner than expected. Nonetheless, I managed to get in contact virtually with Semah Tuğsel, the director of *Two Women* (2017), and proceed the interview process with her on the Facebook Messenger App. The interview was conducted in written conversation form in Turkish language between 26th and 30th of March, 2020. Semağ Tuğsel is a middle-aged, educated, heterosexual, and financially stable cis woman. Her preferred pronouns are ‘she’ and ‘her’. She is employed at the Istanbul State Theatre as a full-time actress, who occasionally engages with directing jobs at alternative theatres.

Before the interview, I described my thesis topic, aims, research process, her rights of withdrawing at any time from the interview. I explained how I will be using the collected data and asked for permission to use her full name. Next, I sent two consent forms, one in document format that could be printed and signed, the other in digital format where she could sign it online, giving her the possibility to choose the most convenient format. After she had digitally signed the consent form, I saved it and sent the example in document format back. Then, I proceeded to ask the questions from Appendix 1, although, I also occasionally directed follow-up questions when I needed more clarification. At the end, the interview was transcribed in

Turkish and sent back to the interviewee giving her the chance to add clarifications or remove the data she wishes not to include anymore. The transcribed transcript was initially kept in a password protected file, and then in May 2020 was deleted. The interview was analysed using narrative analysis in order to avoid the distortion of Semah Tuğsel's words, experiences, and thoughts. By doing so, my aim was to preserve her speech and thoughts in literal form.

Queer reading

As I introduced in the first chapter, for the analysis of theatre plays I propose a queer reading method. By a queer reading I intend to deconstruct the text, space, and materiality in each play apart. By using this method, my aim is to destabilise patriarchal and heteronormative norms and to suspend the default strategies of reading a text. For this reason, I distance myself from the rules of reading a text that are demanded in literary studies for example, and look instead at performance, text, body, space, stage, and materiality, without any specific pre-settled principles. For example, I mostly dwell on Karen Barad's (2003) post humanist performativity and try to look at the agency of matter. Then, instead of looking at the text in *Two Women* (2017) to find repetitions, contradictions, or similarities, per say, I direct my analysis on stage and body to highlight the meaning of their materiality and how these support and/or subvert the patriarchal discourses. In *Short Cut Stories* (2014), for instance, I analyse the space to reflect the resistance strategies against the JDP's political control of theatres. I further look at the text not for the sake of finding out the figurative language, but to detect feminist killjoys that can change the societal and cultural norms. While, *In The Decision (10)* (2014), I again look at the characters' bodies and their posture to argue how identity markers such as social class are visible on the body. Ending with a look at the gynaecologist's office as a third space where women from different backgrounds and different categories, form a collective meeting point to refuse the discourses around motherhood and abortion, and take the control of their own bodies.

By a queer reading I also mean to move away from a 'male gaze' position of seeing women and dissent individuals as "bearer of meaning and not maker of meaning" (Mulvey, 1975, p.343) to a concept of spectatorship which while aligned with feminist and queer theory creates new grounds of resisting the dominant discourses. Therefore, throughout the entirely analytical part, I look at text, space, and materiality to unveil their power of making new meanings instead of having a predisposed meaning.

Translation techniques

Since I am fluent in both Turkish and English and I am familiar with the culture and

idiomatic expressions from Turkey, I was the only translator of this study. Besides translating the interview that I conducted, I also engaged in several translation techniques to translate the knowledge I have accumulated from articles and books written in Turkish but also the text of the plays. Therefore, I employ different translation techniques such as borrowing, literal translation, reformulation, and transposition.

Borrowing involves the use of the same word or phrase from original language in the target text. I use this technique because I found it difficult to translate specific words that are culturally inaccessible to the English language. They are written in *italics* and a footnote is given to define their meanings.

Literal translation is a word to word translation where the same syntax, meaning and style of the original text is kept in the target language. I use this technique to translate titles and/or theatre names. E.g. *Kadınlar Sahnesi* — Women Stage.

Transposition proved to be the most useful translation technique due to the dissimilar grammatical structures between Turkish and English. Through this technique, the word order changes its sequence, but the meaning is not altered.

3.3. Research ethics

When we were asked to think about a research idea, I instantly knew that my research would be about Turkey, be it the feminist and/or queer cultural practices that take place there. One may wonder why not choose to write something related with my own country of origin and I understand this inquire as I myself have been asking if it is unethical or if it is an exploitative practice, but under many considerations I realised that I am more comfortable and more aware of myself as an individual in the Turkish context for two reasons. First, my political and feminist consciousness was developed in Turkey and this research for me is a return to my roots as a feminist. Second, I had also found the courage to accept my queerness in Turkey, and this country played a significant role for educating me and building up the person that I am today.

Many of the choices I have done while writing this thesis are strongly related with my political stance as a feminist and queer person. These include the word choice on which I have had to make decisions about specific language and terminology. For clarity's sake, I chose to use pronouns 'they', 'their', and 'them' as singular pronouns for the people whose pronoun preferences I did not know. Under the category of 'woman' all persons who identify as such are included. Therefore, when the words 'woman' or 'women' are used they include all trans women, cis women, queer women, etc., and all those who may not have an exclusive identity but at times may identify themselves as 'woman'. The same is done for 'man' and 'men' which

include trans men, cis men, and all other persons who identify as such. In chapter 6, *The Decision (10)* (2014) by H. Can Utku, I chose to use the word ‘fetus’ rather than ‘baby’. I do this because the word ‘baby’ has negative implications for reproductive rights and is used to afford the fetus a personhood thus using abortion as a negative act and as a tool to blame and control the lives of those who decided to terminate their pregnancy. However, when other sources are quoted the word ‘baby’ is left intact. Similarly, both in chapter 6, *The Decision (10)* (2014) by H. Can Utku and chapter 4, *Two Women* (2017) by Fatma Özcan, I refuse to use the term ‘mother’ unless citing other sources or using it as a particular concept. Instead, I prefer the term ‘pregnant person’ or ‘parent’, unless the characters I describe identify specifically with being a ‘mother’. This choice aims to reject the label of ‘mother’ and seeing ‘motherhood’ as a norm. Other terms that I reject to use are ‘non-consensual sex’, ‘forced sex’, ‘date rape’, or ‘acquaintance rape’ because these may both lead to minimizing the seriousness of rape and because rape is not sex, sex is consensual, rape is not.

Because all plays that I attended were performed in public spaces and were open and accessible to everyone, I did not ask for special permission to analyse or include them in my research. Nonetheless, any media that would disrupt the copyrights of the attended plays was not taken. The leaflets included at the beginning of the last three chapters were open for public distribution and they were photographed by me and added to this document. For the photographs of the improvised stage and sitting layout while attending *Short Cut Stories* I asked for permission from Muaf Beyoğlu employees and made sure no one’s face is visible and identifiable in the photographs.

3.3.1. Situating myself as a researcher: positionality, privileges, limitations

Donna Haraway (1988) sets out for a research politics of situating knowledges where “the god trick of seeing everything from nowhere” (p.581) is left aside and the researchers position themselves from their own location so that the appropriation and claim to have the vision of the researched subject is disrupted. For this reason, in this section I bring an account of my position, privileges, and relate my background with the Turkish culture, language, and knowledge in the fields related to the topic of this thesis along its limitations.

Positionality

I come into this research with knowledge of Turkish culture and language that dates back to the year of 2000 when my family moved to Istanbul. Since then I have travelled back and forth to Turkey and Moldova for educational and/or visiting purposes until ten years later

when I was offered a scholarship to do my bachelor studies in Izmir and became an expat for the next seven years. The environment by which I had been surrounded all this period integrated me quickly and never let me even once to feel alienated. For this reason, I never felt as ‘the other’ and this experience gave me the subjectivity to engage with such a research project for my master’s thesis. My knowledge of Turkish has made this research possible without any limitations of reaching written sources, attending the theatre performances, or engaging in conversation with the culture producers. Another significant point in regard to my positionality is meeting with feminism through the use of Turkish language which allowed me to reflect on societal issues from a feminist perspective first in the Turkish context and then in Moldovan or transnational context. I am also present in this investigation from the positionality of being a former literary studies student, both in bachelor and master’s – during which I continuously included questions of feminist literature in my academic writings. Therefore, the queer reading of theatre performances in this research is strongly related to close reading and deconstructing techniques with which I have worked in my previous academic projects (Farima, 2018a; Farima, 2018b; Farima, 2019).

It is also significant to point out that my positionality in this engagement is also from a queer woman’s perspective. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1994) opines that “‘queer’ can signify only *when attached to the first person*” (p.8). Starting from this thought queer is how I identify as a traveller moving from heterosexual, to asexual, to pansexual identity in a heteronormative culture. As an able-bodied student in a white dominated Scandinavian institution, who was born and raised in a working-class family in a post-Soviet country.

Privileges

As a cis person I acknowledge my physical and psychological privilege be it in Turkey, Moldova, or any places I have lived in. Nevertheless, by researching in the Turkish context I do not aim to reproduce inequalities of gender categories or any other kinds but to bring an account of feminist theatre through which these inequalities are transcended, out of them a political force is born, and discourses of power are altered. Being a queer woman also makes me, if not fully understand, but at least recognize the psychic and social cost of the queer subjects and the cultural norms and social values that have been imposed on them in these theatrical practices. Aligning with Sara Ahmed’s (2014. p.147) thoughts about living a queer life, I can now reflect on the comforts I did not use to notice “despite my ‘felt’ discomforts”. This paradoxical thought has helped me to reflect on theatrical stage’s potential to both be a *safe space* and a *danger zone*, questioning the performativity/performance concepts and their

political power.

Although the existing power structures privileges whiteness, regardless of my skin colour just by being Moldovan I am stereotypically considered ‘the other’ in both European and Turkish society. I am aware that I am still entitled to white privilege and I am fully conscious of the fact that racialised societies exist and I acknowledge all ethnic and racial identities.

Limitations

I first started to adopt a feminist methodology while analysing pieces of literature and although I have extensive knowledge of English and American Literature, I do not have the same amount of knowledge regarding Turkish literature and/or theatre studies. This I believe is the biggest limitation in the development of this thesis.

Also, it should be noted that although I feel as an insider in the Turkish society and culture for not being alienated by it, speaking the language, getting an education, and having all my close friends and dear people to me living in this country, I must admit that my ethnicity and background may not allow me to see all the nuances and complexities that are present in these plays. Hence, I might not fully understand the sociological and psychological experiences of people and might not be able to entirely observe their affections and disaffections with the social and cultural norms that are reflected in them. Therefore, I acknowledge that I am interpreting these theatre plays from an outsider perspective and work with the intention of being mindful of my own positionality.

4. *Two Women* (2017) by Fatma Özcan

Woman? Man? Or Human?

Crazy questions in my head that are not that difficult to answer.

When did we start to wear these transparent fedoras on our heads?

When did we start to look at each other with a male gaze, do we even remember?

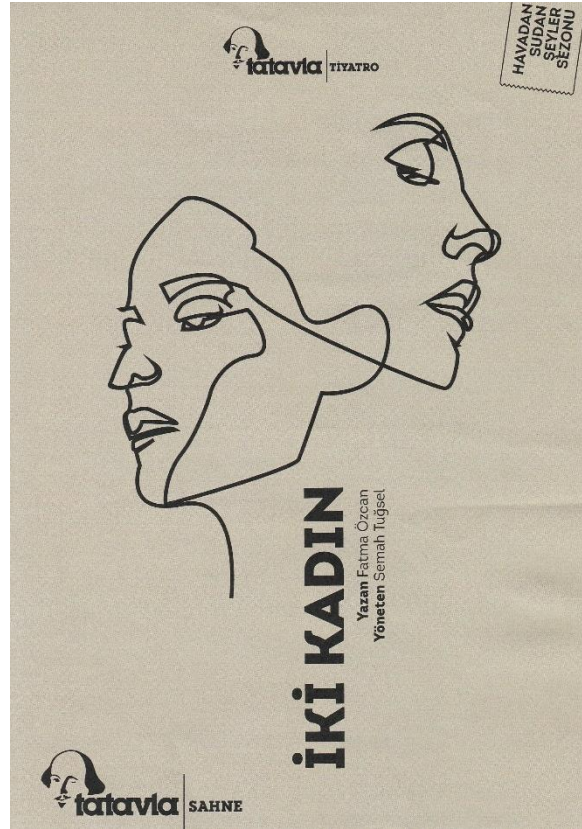


Image 1. Leaflet of Two Women

Two Women (2017), written by Fatma Özcan and directed by Semah Tuğsel, is a play about women looking at each other with an internalised patriarchal gaze; about unreachable solidarities among them; and about a silenced inner scream that pleads for empathy and justice.

The plot of the play revolves around a dialogue between two characters, Hayat the survivor of rape who has defended herself and killed the rapist, and Mine the rapist's wife. This dialogue reflects numerous social norms, such as beauty standards, motherhood, and normalization of violence and rape. Mine's visit to Hayat in prison stands behind her request for bone marrow for her daughter who has fallen ill of cancer. She asks Hayat to sign the documents and give her permission for bone marrow transplantation from the child to whom she has given birth as a result of rape, as both children have the same biological father. The documents are signed in the end but the psychological and physical dialogue and struggle between these two women, raised some crucial questions both in the characters', but also in the audience's heads as *Two Women* (2017) presents a twist and opens a new space for public discussions about rape and violence against women. The play is divided in one act and five scenes and these scenes are separated by the turning on/off the light, hence the light serves as a metaphor for both disruptive communication between the characters, and for an empathetic space where characters and their experiences intertwine with each other. I attended *Two Women* (2017) at Tatavla stage on the 2nd of February 2020.

In an interview offered to Tatavla stage, Fatma Özcan declares that they based this play on a real story taken from newspapers (Tatavla, 2020). This account had an emotional impact on the writer as they sensed that the rape victim and the family of the rapist were close to sympathise with each other, thence the thought that if only women could understand one another, they would get rid of the patriarchal gaze with which they were all raised up, says the writer (Ibid.).

My choice to analyse this play stands in the sharply increase of rape cases in the past years that have been registered in Turkey (Aebi et al., 2018).¹⁶ Rape, sexual, and physical violence have even broadly used as a spectacle through lots of TV series¹⁷ and by close reading and deconstructing this play I wanted to analyse how cultural and political discourses of power

¹⁶ This assertion is based on the number of inmates that were imprisoned between 2010-2015 with rape charges (Aebi et al., 2018). However, Turkey does not have any official data on rape victims and survivors, but according to an independent media collective called bianet.org which annually produces estimative data based on the news found in digital or printed newspapers, be they local or national, just in 2019 the number of women rape cases was 51 (Kepenek, 2020c). Yet, as stated this number is based on news reports and it does not constitute the real number of rape cases, as a lot of these go unreported and/or are not made available to the public.

¹⁷ *Binbir gece* (2006) (1001 nights), *Fatmagül'ün suçu ne?* (2010) (Fatmagül), *Öyle bir geçer zaman ki* (2010) (Time goes by) are just a few tv series that I have watched and distinctly remember the narratives of rape imposed in them.

influence the normalisation of rape and violence.

To analyse how discursive regimes of power affect the characters and their bodies in this play, Foucault's conceptualization of governmentality and Butler's performativity bring a homogenous conversation around norms that help to understand how these characters become "docile bodies" and/or resist these discourses through their costume, acts, choice of words, and body language. For the analysis of stage I draw on Karen Barad's (2003) posthumanist performativity to highlight the meanings of materiality. Sandra Bartky (1997) and Andrea Cahill's (2000) ideas that incorporate the relationship between discourses and body are employed to translate the material effects of discourses onto the female body. Sara Ahmed's (2014) *Cultural Politics of Emotions* helps to relate how experiences of fear create spaces and discourses of resistance. Lastly, the spectatorship theory from cinema studies of Teresa de Lauretis (1987) and the male gaze of Laura Mulvey (1975) facilitate discussions on examination of male gaze through the eyes of the characters and how it is distorted.

The first subchapter describes the theoretical frameworks that are helpful in the analysis of this play. The after following subchapter 4.2. relates the discursive strategies of the current JDP government around the concept of femininity and control of women's bodies. This subchapter, 4.2., is divided by two sections, *Stage* and *Body* where the materiality of these is examined to prove how matter comes to matter. The last subchapter on the other hand, depicts how male gaze is both multiplied and distorted by the characters in the play. Overall, with this chapter I aim to show how materiality can regulate and at the same time can subvert the patriarchal discourses.

4.1. The discursive patriarchal power: from "docile bodies" to a *paradox of performance*

Discursive regimes of power are expressed and embodied in material form through governmental apparatuses, through the actions of rapists and abusers, but also through the actions of victims and survivors. By including victims and survivors in the same sentence with rapists and abusers as facilitators of discursive power schemes, I definitely do not mean to multiply the blame culture, but to highlight how these oppressive regimes form "docile bodies" which Foucault describes as bodies who are transformed through dominant discourse and disciplinary acts (Foucault and Rabinow, 1984, p.17). My aim in this chapter is to find out how the characters of *Two Women* (2017) embody and/or resist these disciplinary acts and dominant patriarchal discourses and what happens if these two seemingly opposite performances are, as I show below, unconsciously enacted at the same time.

This act of performing the dominant discourses while at the same time resisting it is rooted in what José Esteban Muñoz (1999) theorises as *disidentification*. To Muñoz (1999) to disidentify means to perform survival strategies that would help to navigate the phobic public (p.4). Disidentification offers a manner of dealing with the dominant ideology and proceeds to use as Muñoz (1999) would say the code of the majority “as raw material for representing a disempowered politics” (p.31). But because through disidentification one neither assimilates the dominant discourse nor opposes it (Ibid., p.11), I wondered about the performances of those who assimilate the dominant discourse, yet simultaneously oppose it. I decided to call this practice of both absorbing the dominant discourse while at the same time through stylised acts, language, and body attitudes opposing it, the *paradox of performance*. To understand how *disidentification* and *paradox of performance* overlap and yet are distinct, I should direct my argument to Judith Butler’s (1999) heterosexual matrix.

In *Gender Trouble*, Butler (1999) draws back to Monique Wittig’s “heterosexual contract” and Adrienne Rich’s “compulsory heterosexuality” to construct a scheme of cultural and gender intelligibility that through specific regulatory practices would produce male and female bodies (p.194). Butler (1999) calls this scheme the heterosexual matrix (p.6) and according to this matrix, one should perform their gender and this performance should be coherent with their biological sex, heterosexuality, and social norms (p.23). This performance is what makes a body to mean and to achieve an identity (Ibid., p. 33) but to do so, one should repeat specific stylized acts (p.95) and these stylised acts are rooted in culture but also in the patriarchal discursive practices of the governmentality. While Muñoz’s disidentification is a conscious act and these stylised acts are performed for the sake of survival, the *paradox of performance* is performed unconsciously for two reasons. First, the patriarchal discourse has been achieved “through drills and training of the body, through standardization of actions over time, and through the control of space” (Foucault and Rabinow, 1984, p.17) and it has been done so successfully that some individuals have unconsciously assimilated it. Second, because these discursive practices are often multiplied by politics of fear, for some individuals who have absorbed them also opens up the capacity to counteract them. Thence the metamorphosis from “docile bodies” to resisting and opposing bodies.

In my interview conducted with Semah Tuğsel between 26-30 March 2020, she said that before choosing a play to work with the first thing that needs examination is “if I have something to say via this play”, hence she declares that the political stance of a play must coincide with her personal views (S. Tuğsel, personal communication, 2020). That is the exact reason she chose to work with *Two Women* (2017), because it gives a twisted view on the rape

and violence matter, because it does not put blame on the victim for defending herself, and because under the current system both Mine and Hayat are the victims. The unfairness that these characters perform towards each other constitute nothing else but the discourses of power in which they have been raised. However, even though Mine and Hayat are indeed performing the regulatory acts of the dominant discourse, they are also resisting them in different forms. To demonstrate how these characters enact the *paradox of performance*, I bring first examples of how the political discourse of power is imposed through governmental apparatuses by the current JDP rule. Then, analyse how materiality of stage and body fit in this discursive system of gender and cultural intelligibility, and lastly, I depict Mine and Hayat's resistance strategies.

4.2. Imposing the discourse, performing and resisting through fear

Foucault's conceptualization of governmentality, which is the concern of how to regulate and impose order "from the top of the state through all aspects of social life" (Foucault and Rabinow, 1984, p.15), shows how the oppressive impact of co-opting this discourse leads society to become a political target. These discourses are imposed on bodies through "complex and multiple practices" (Ibid., p. 338) and they are strongly related to what Judith Butler (1999) calls a heterosexual matrix.

In their discourse JDP makes use of this technology in a few forms. For instance, in an example offered by Cindoğlu and Unal (2017), in 2013 the spokesperson then of JDP has found fault with a TV presenter's décolleté dress and brought a disapproval of it saying 'We don't intervene against anyone, but this is too much. It is unacceptable' (Hürriyet Daily News, 2013c, cited in Ibid., p.47). Although the mentioned spokesperson did not enounce a name, the TV presenter's job was terminated following this statement (Ibid., p.47). This discourse has become a strategical political game that regulates women's bodies of what to wear and where to wear. First, the body is trained to wear "suitable" attires, otherwise there is the chance of being dismissed from their job, second, over time this "suitable" attire is standardised, and lastly, through these impositions a control over body and space is attained. Therefore, because control over people's bodies take place through similar discursive practices some of them become indeed "docile bodies" and start to adopt these regulatory acts and perform the stylised acts that are intelligible with the social and cultural norms. This power discourse on valuing some bodies over others normalises discussions that women who dress in a conservative manner are more important, thus makes the wearing of conservative attires a stylised act. However, as Cindoğlu and Unal (2017) state, "control over [women's] attire [...] has always been at the very core of political projects in modern Turkey" (p.47). If during the early-Republican ages "women were

expected to dress in line with a certain code of dress that would reflect the spirit of the Republican ideology [western ideology]" (Çınar, 2005, cited in Cindoğlu and Unal, 2017, p. 47),¹⁸ nowadays the power discourse of JDP aims to control the attire of women either through shaming and blaming or through disciplinary schemes of heterosexual matrix. To Butler (1993a), this power of discourse is "linked with the question of performativity" (p.17). Hence, as Foucault analyses in *Discipline and Punish* (1995), such a disciplinary technology takes place in different settings, from public spaces, public institutions and organizations, to private spaces and under this discourse the "docile body" is "used, transformed and improved" (p.198). In other words, the body starts to perform what is expected from it.

Throughout the years of JDP governance, from 2002 until today, women and women's bodies have been moved to the centre of JDP's politics. How to behave, what is proper to wear, conversations against abortion, differentiating between rape and sexual assaults when it is done in married couples (Kaya, 2016; Kaya, 2018; Kaya, 2019), all these discourses of power have the aim to transform and regulate bodies. To analyse how the characters of *Two Women* (2017) and their bodies along with the audience's bodies fit under the mentioned discursive practices, I direct a glance to the materiality of stage and body in this play.

Two Women (2017) was performed at Tatavla stage on the 2nd of February 2020. Tatavla has two stages both allowing flexible performance spaces. While the first stage's floor is at the same level with the first audience row and the other seat rows raise away from the stage, the second stage is situated one level underground and looks like a rectangular box. With its dark walls and black floor, this stage exhibits an unfixed sitting position and the audience is seated around the room resembling actors that are a part of the play rather than spectators. Here are my field notes regarding my feelings on being situated on the stage along the characters of the play:

As I am sitting here next to the cracked mirror and have a full view of the action that is taking place before me, I feel that there's something more about my body's materiality as a spectator in this play...

... I am asking myself how many times I have seen such patriarchal discourses and remained silent? How many times I've heard about cases of rape, sexual assault, and sexual harassment happening in my or my acquaintances' circle and continued my life as if these are such normal acts? Why did I feel ashamed when I experienced sexual assault in public or private spaces? Is this how we internalise these discourses, normalise them, and then go on with our lives like that's what's supposed to be?...

(Field notes, February 2nd, 2020).

¹⁸ By looking at the "Clothing regulation document on staff working in public institutions and organizations" from 1982, women had to ditch the headscarf and always wear their hair neatly brushed or tied (Resmi Gazete, 1982, p.2). This expectation continued into the later decades of the Republic.

A materialist insight into the stage and body regarding the play of *Two Women* (2017) holds that the matter, be it space, stage, object, costume, or body, is ascribed an agency, a power, a temporality that transforms the characters. As Barad (2003) states, it not only helps to acknowledge matter as agential, but also acknowledge it as discursive. Alaimo and Hekman (2008) depict material feminism as a political stance that helps to analyse how “political decisions are scripted onto material bodies” (p.8). These concepts incorporate Foucauldian power discourse and they assist in the understanding of how discourses are transferred through material objects and how they (discourses) impact the material body. Under the following headings, I discover how the dominant discourse prescribes regulations based on the materiality of stage from the *Two Women* (2017), how the bodies of the characters and those of audience are situated in and are performing and/or resisting the dominant patriarchal discourse, but also how through these materialities, violence and sexual assault become political issues and not personal issues.

4.2.1. Stage

...I find myself in an underground spacious room where from my sitting position I can see a blackboard filled with scratching lines that serves as a prison wall; a bedroom corner with a cracked mirror; and in the centre of the room there is a space partially surrounded by barriers... Two empty black stools, and a woman sitting on the table, is waiting...

(Field notes, February 2nd, 2020).

Material discursive forms of agency in *Two Women* (2017) are found in the spatiality and the set design of the stage. Because the stage itself is neither elevated nor separated from the audience, but the audience is incorporated in it, the agential power of stage shows how matter comes to matter and how the discourses of power are materialised, strengthened and/or distorted through these matters.¹⁹ There are four visible spaces: a prison cell, a kitchen, a bedroom corner, and a meeting room in the middle of the stage. These spaces are analysed to find out how the agential separability among these, although seemingly apart, are intertwined and their materiality serve as discursive schemes.

The corner of the stage that exhibits a black board with multiple scratched lines, and the bedroom corner with the cracked mirror placed in the opposite part of the stage, serve as the private spaces of the characters. If audience removed, by this placement the discursive

¹⁹ According to Karen Barad (2003), language should not be seen as the primary element in meaning-making and matter itself is an active participant when it comes to the relationship between human and non-human networks because not only through language but also through matter the discursive practices can be materialised.

mechanism of what is private should stay secluded is enforced. Mine should keep her memories in form of photos and drawings on her desk and Hayat should serve her committed crime in the prison cell. These types of regulations are alive and well as they keep the “purity” of family and home regardless of the internal struggles that individuals have. This could be depicted in the child drawing from the desk that incorporates a happy family on a green yard under the blue sky, but which imposes the private/public divide as a distinction made to silence Mine and justify her oppression. On the public note Mine is happy and radiant due to her heteronormative family and the “sacred” role as a mother, while on the private note she is silenced by the normalised discourse that rape is not violence when it happens under the wedlock. Hayat’s empty prison cell on the other hand, portrays Hayat as a criminal not because she killed Kemal, the rapist, but because she is an intruder into the canonised norm of marriage.

Yet, the question to be asked is ‘are these indeed as private spaces as the patriarchal discourses impose?’. Mine’s bedroom corner has a photo of her husband and daughter placed on the desk. Here, the golden frame of the photo serves as a metaphor for a daily reminder of social, cultural, and political pressure which aim to regulate the most private spaces and acts of women. Since this discourse is enforced upon not only by governmentality and patriarchy, which are embodied in Kemal’s figure, but also by the self, the family, and the society in general, all represented in the daughter’s figure whose name is never enounced, the intention of these is to remind that they are surveilled rather than offered a personal space free from others’ eyes. On the other hand, Hayat’s empty prison cell with no personal objects around depicts the total control of the system where private space is taken away completely. These corners on the stage when situated among and next to the audience allows for a free surveillance performed by the spectators, as well. Foucault calls these spaces “small theatres in which each actor is alone [...] and [yet] constantly visible” reminding that “[a]nyone could operate the architectural mechanisms as long as [they were] in the correct position, and anyone could be subjected to it” (Foucault and Rabinow, 1984, p.19). However, by including the audience’s seats next to these spaces and around the central space where Mine and Hayat psychologically and physically meet, while enforcing surveillance and empowering the patriarchal discourse it also challenges the political foundations of personal, home, family, and women’s subjugation. It supports the feminist philosophy and opens discussions on what is personal is also political. The oppression and violence that happens in “personal” space is no longer private or individual, it is a public issue because the public itself contributes to the generation of patriarchal discourse.

The part of the stage that is partially surrounded by barriers performs as the physical meeting space of private with political. Here, the psychological and physical dialogue between

Mine and Hayat allows to avoid the sexual violence they both have been through to be morphed into an individual and personal issue. Then, when Hayat reports that she cried and screamed ‘NO’ and asks Mine ‘Have you ever said NO to him?’, the rape becomes no longer a private matter. What this part of the stage performs is the materialised interaction between society and governmentality. It is the physical space that creates consciousness by insisting to look at Mine and Hayat’s social, economic, cultural, and political oppression they have been subjected to. Mine’s responses ‘We were married’ and ‘I was his wife’ proves the power of the discourse that rape is not rape when it happens in wedlock. Interestingly, the JDP proposed in 2016 to put off “the sentencing or punishment for sexual assault in cases where there was no physical force implied and the victim and perpetrator were married” (Kaya, 2019, p.694). The back then Minister of Justice, Bekir Bozdağ and Prime Minister Binali Yıldırım have defended the proposal by saying that “Those aren’t rapists (...) the fathers have ended up in prison. This is a one-time measure to correct an unjust situation” (Ibid.). Fortunately, the proposal was withdrawn but the discourse of rape in married couples as a normalised act is proven by Mine’s answers.

To conclude, the stage’s structural divide and setting between Mine and Hayat’s rooms on different opposites and away from the central stage recreates the discourse of power on physical and sexual violence as “private” issues and emphasises the canonicity of marriage through the materiality of space and objects embedded on the stage but also through their absence. However, although the bodies of the audience are situated next to these spaces and given the eye of the actor rather than that of a simple spectator prove Foucault’s conceptualization of how the state and society exercise control and regulates through surveillance and discourse with the mean to form “docile bodies”. Yet, this setting and seating arrangement helps also to create a space of resistance in material form through the bodies of spectators because they occupy and change the space as the message of the play suggests, there is no ‘I’ but ‘We’ in this battle. Therefore, the assemblage of the stage within and among the audience has two purposes. One, to show that we are all contributors of the patriarchal discursive practices. Two, to understand that ‘I’ is no longer valid and only through ‘We’ a collective consciousness can be enacted in order to dismantle the discursive mechanism around the norms of sexual violence. This was the message of the play, shares Semah Tuğsel, the social norms need to be teared down, “It is the most vital and the primary issue” she states, because “we [women] must be honest with ourselves and admit that inside us there is a little part of Hayat and Mine” (S. Tuğsel, personal communication, 2020).

4.2.2. Body

In Sandra Bartky's "Foucault, femininity, and the modernization of patriarchal power" (1997), Foucault's discourse concept and its material effects on the women's body is theorised. To produce "docile bodies", as Foucault (1979) suggests, a coercion of the "body's time, its space, and its movements" is needed (Bartky, 1997, p.26). The regulation of the body's space through material discursive practices was analysed through the stage agency from *Two Women* (2017) in the previous subsection. This subsection on the other hand analyses how the oppressive norms of femininity, violence, and sexual assault are materialised on the bodies of the play's characters. From their costumes to their occupation of space and stylized sets of acts Hayat and Mine are both performing their gender and at the same time are resisting the heteronormative norms imposed by patriarchal discourses.

The opening scene of *Two Women* (2017), Hayat sitting on the table in her black sleeveless shirt, cleavage on the sight, tight black pants, and cardigan tied around her waist contradicts the discursive feminine etiquette of the female body. According to Butler (1999), femininity is an underwritten code of gender norms through which intelligibility is established. Hence, a female body is given a legitimation through its expression of femininity but if it fails to conform to the "recognizable standards of gender intelligibility" (Butler, 1999, p.22), it will not be considered *ahem* real. Hayat's costume in this sense fails to adapt the femininity discursive norms around a woman's attire. While her modest cleavage, tight pants, and make up aid somehow to the performance of femininity, although do not serve the culturally conservative discursive aims, her visible bra straps, black heavy boots, and cardigan tied around waist resist these and bring a fragmentation onto the compulsory femininity that is needed for a female body to be considered legitimate. Bartky (1997) suggests that women's space occupation and manner of movement are as well placed under restriction when it comes to the performance of femininity. Hayat violates the norms of femininity through her occupation of space on stage. She starts the action of the play by sitting loosely on the table. Under Bartky's (1997) arguments, Hayat would be labelled as the "loose woman" (p.30) because she refuses to take up less space, she sits confident on the table with legs wide apart, her back slouched, and hands resting comfortably on her thighs while looking at what appears to be a piece of paper in her hands.

The other character, Mine, seems to comply to the norms of femininity with both her costume and her body's motility. Her neatly ironed white long-sleeved shirt and black skirt that extends under the kneecap and heeled shoes depict a feminine body and instantly the knowledge of Mine's gender is deducted from the clothes she wears and from how they are worn. Bartky

(1997) argues that the woman's body is "an ornamented surface" and that discipline is involved in the production of it (p.31). While the audience is never told what Hayat's profession is or if she has any, the director of the play in our communication declared that the only difference between these two characters is that Mine belongs to the intellectual strata (S. Tuğsel, personal communication, 2020). In the play, from Hayat and Mine's dialogue the audience is let known that Mine has a textile business. Therefore, the political investment of Mine's body could be said to be more powerful as a cause of long educational years, supporting the family institution, and having an economic power. But this domain of power as Foucault (1995) suggests is the cause of regulatory mechanism that makes the body a political economy by drawing from it its utility and its docility (p.25). Yet, besides given a political and economic agency, Mine's body is also subjected to distribute the heteronormative norms and to dictate hierarchization. Hence her costume performs what it is expected: feminine, modest, and conservative attire. Mine executes hierarchization through her speech and mimics when Hayat shares that a new person was brought to their cell, a prostitute who wounded her pimp, she asks, 'Won't you ask why?' and rolling her eyes Mine says 'I could. (smiling sarcastically) But it doesn't concern me at all'. These materialised sets of acts, rolling the eyes, smiling in a sarcastic manner, words embedded in indifference, serve as weapons and support "the power and knowledge relations that invest human bodies and subjugate them by turning them into objects of knowledge" (Foucault, 1995, p.28). In other words, the patriarchal discursive practices are performed and materialised in form of attire, body language, and words which separately or all together contribute to the discourse politics that all bodies are merely objects through which this discourse can be empowered.

However, while Hayat does indeed resist the femininity discourse through her costume, occupation of space and counter stylised sets of acts but Mine internalises it and proves to be a "docile body", they both go back and forth from performing the discourse to resisting it in different forms. This act is what I have previously theorised as the *paradox of performance* in section 4.1. The discursive patriarchal power: from "docile bodies" to a *paradox of performance*. The "bold and unfettered staring" (Bartky, 1997, p.30) of Hayat at Mine throughout the play changes to averting her eyes, casting her head downward, and shrinking in the chair when discussions on the rape incident arise. This shrinkage is significant Ahmed says because "fear works to contain some bodies such as they take up less space" (2014, p.69) and "[i]n this way, emotions work to align bodily space with social space" (Ibid., p.69). The politics of fear then works hand in hand with the dominant discourse because fear does not begin in the body and then limiting the body to move and act freely, but it is relying on particular narratives

(Ibid.). Andrea Cahill (2000) develops Bartky's theory of discursive patriarchal power to add rape as another discursive element of femininity that would regulate women's bodies. This discourse I opine is in close relation to the politics of fear as fear and rape work together to produce the woman's body and to regulate it. Cahill (2000) states that for women "danger [of rape] is so omnipresent, [...], that the "safety zone" which women attempt to create rarely exceeds the limits of their own limbs" (p.56). Then when the narrative of rape is present Hayat shrinks in her chair avoiding Mine's gaze. This change of position is the materialised act of the body that is marked by fear (Bartky, 1997) as means to protect itself from sexual violence. Hayat's body therefore is the consequence of power dynamics around rape narratives which impose that women are responsible for the violence to which they are subjugated. For this reason, her body is subjected to self-discipline where she alters her behaviour to reduce the threat of rape and violence. Hayat's body is "docile" in this sense, yet, as Foucault suggests "the body as constructed is not incapable of resisting or defying some (if not all) of the demands of that discourse" (Cahill, 2000, pp.47-8). As I have previously mentioned Hayat does indeed resist the femininity discourse and perhaps, it could be said that due to the emotions of fear, of being restraint and governed by it, Hayat counteracts the discourse of femininity through her attire and bodily acts and fear itself could be said that gives her agency through which the patriarchal discourse is resisted. These two seemingly opposite acts of performance, one resisting the feminine discourse through materiality of attire, occupation of space and body motility, and the other absorbing and internalizing the patriarchal narratives around rape through discipline of the body exemplifies the *paradox of performance*. Mine, for instance, through her costume has proved how the discourse of femininity is embodied, and through her body acts has shown how discourses of power create hierarchizations and objectifications. In spite of that, similarly to Hayat Mine also succeeds to stand up against patriarchal discourses. Bartky (1997) maintains that "[f]eminine faces, as well as bodies, are trained to the expression of deference" and they "are trained to smile more than men" (p.30). Mine does not abide by this rule and throughout the play she never smiles except when her words are expressed with sarcasm. Then, when Hayat laughs saying, 'You look just like my grandmother, she also used to never smile,' Mine's facial expressions do not change keeping the same sullen look and establishing resistance against the smile economy. This performative expectation from women to smile more is an exploitative practice by patriarchal discourses "for they give more than receive in return" (Bartky, 1997, p.30) and expected to look nice and happy regardless of their inner state.

The material consequences of the discursive practices, as analysed, are performed and

resisted in multiple forms. From selection of clothes, application of makeup, to body posture, mimics, body movement, and occupation of space. However, when the discourse has been assimilated it is reflected in the physical acts of the body, as well. The last scene of the play portrays the ultimate material incarnation of the patriarchal discourse through violence. When Mine starts to choke Hayat and then forces her face down on the table, her acts multiply her husband Kemal's acts of rape and violence towards Hayat. Cahill (2000) reasons "that rape cannot be considered merely an act of violence" because it plays an instrumental role in the regulation and control of the female body (p.43). This play of power as analysed in this subchapter is characterised through pervasive discourses of femininity and sexual violence at the expense of female body. Yet, as I have presented, although these discourses produce "docile bodies", they are not omnipotent, and the possibility of resistance is present. Mine and Hayat are both subjected to the acts of sexual violence because their bodies signify the failure to conform to the norms of heterosexual matrix. But rape as Cahill (2000) suggested, is not just an act of violence, but it is also an instrument through which regulations on the body are imposed. For this reason, the characters of *Two Women* (2017) perform these discourses, at the same time their bodies become a site of struggle resisting them and this resistance gives an agency to their bodies. This performance of being docile to the patriarchal discourse while at the same time resisting it is the *paradox of performance* and it aims to translate the effects of the discourse on the body while creating a space of resistance against the social, cultural, and political norms of bodily acceptability.

4.3. Distorting the male gaze

In the previous subchapters I have discussed and analysed how patriarchal discursive mechanism can be inflected on materiality of stage and body and how resistance is achieved through it. In this section, I examine how gender norms are internalised through the oppressive male gaze and how this gaze is performed and multiplied by the characters of *Two Women* (2017) while at the same time I show how moving from a male gaze to a woman's gaze both for characters but also for audience, helps to distort the metaphors of sex object and motherhood.

Male gaze is a trope in the process of femininity construction, and it perpetuates a patriarchal order (Mulvey, 1975; Doane, 1982; De Lauretis, 1987). In the assemblage of this patriarchal order, gender, sexuality and economy are sets of social relations that aim to reproduce the male dominated structures and De Lauretis (1987) calls these the technology of gender (p.8). To see the working technology of gender and analyse how the narrative of the

play *Two Women* (2017) is constructed around sexuality and male gaze, I would like to make use of Laura Mulvey's (1975) 'Visual pleasure and narrative cinema'. Although Mulvey (1975) offers a framework of analysis on "the relationship between the viewer – or the viewing subject – and the cinematic text" (Durham and Kellner, 2006, p.339), I regard their theory as a very well-substantiated in the theatre performance analysis, as well.

The characters in the play, Hayat and Mine have both internalised the male look and are performing it unceasingly. It is true that through various strategies they also resist the patriarchal discourse as I have analysed in the previous subchapter. However, through discursive practices of interaction with one another they also keep multiplying it. I would argue that they gaze each other in terms of maternal and sex objects and just as Mulvey (1975) would say, they are "bearer of meaning and not maker of meaning" (p.343). From the first scene Hayat's male gaze towards Mine deals specifically with issues of objectification and sex. She sees Mine's body in terms of fetishism saying, 'Your perfume is nice, and your skirt suits you very well', asking playfully 'Did you put it on for me?', and then suddenly realising that she has no makeup inquires surprisingly 'Actually [short pause], why don't you put on any make up?'. Hayat's gaze here is distinctly tied to male sexual desire and Mine's body is seen as nothing else than an object to which a meaning is already given. However, besides Hayat's gaze reproducing the patriarchal culture, De Lauretis is of the opinion that it is also absorbed by the individuals to whom these technologies of gender are directed (1987, p.13). Then, even though Mine has answered previously that she does not like makeup, in the next scene, the audience meets Mine in front of the cracked mirror putting on a deep wine red lipstick. From this point on, the spectator is let known that Mine has absorbed what has been expected from her and starts to perform the male gaze herself. This performative act shows how interpellation occurs. Interpellation, in Althusser's view as elaborated by De Lauretis, is "the process whereby a social representation is accepted and absorbed by an individual as her (or his) own representation" (1987, p.12). Then, Mine's act of performing the male gaze on her own body, reflects how the representation of gender is constructed by discursive apparatuses (De Lauretis 1987, pp.12-4). Mulvey (1975) talks about the pleasures that cinema can offer, "looking itself is a source of pleasure" and similarly "there is pleasure in being looked at" (p.344). Thence, Mine takes delight of what she sees in the mirror. This is the "fascination with likeness and recognition", Mine is experiencing the mirror phase and this experience "is crucial for the constitution of [her] ego" (Ibid., p.345). Yet, as Mulvey meditates, this recognition is overlaid with misrecognition because the mirror reflects the body as a superior entity with an ideal ego and it does nothing else than "giv[ing] rise to the future generation of identification with others"

(Ibid.). For this reason, Mine is infected with the male gaze and later also enjoys performing on Hayat what has been imposed on her gender itself.

This performative practice of seeing the world through the male gaze is performed by Mine through the motherhood norm. Mine sees motherhood in her words as the ‘law of nature’. She craves for empathy in regard to her daughter who is going to die if Hayat does not give her consent for the bone marrow transplant saying ‘Look, you are a mother too, you can understand me’, to which Hayat resists as if showing anger filled with pain: ‘Mother [casting her head downward], did I ask for it? Who gave me this label? I am the one who was raped, and the one who is paying for it! What benefaction can come out of an imposed motherhood? Do you know what they told me? Time has passed for abortion. The legal time [now showing anger]’. Perhaps this anger is the result of the regulatory schemes that impose pregnancy and motherhood as a norm, as a rule to be followed for women’s body to be accepted as viable. It is the male gaze performed towards the female body as a result of maternal memory that has been enforced by the regulatory patriarchal mechanism. Because her body has no other meaning. This myth that every woman is created to be a mother prescribe meanings to the body and produces norms of intelligibility or as Butler (1999) will put out, a “compulsory obligation on women’s bodies to reproduce” (p.115). The materialization of these normative constructions is what makes the body to mean (Butler 1993b, p. 32) and this materialization is made possible through the male gaze. Then, this cinematic code of male gaze which Mulvey (1975) discusses, can not only be analysed as a cinematic apparatus but also as a theatrical code as I have analysed and even as a societal code according to which the “docile bodies” are created. However, besides the fact that Hayat and Mine do appropriate and perform the male gaze they also distort it in various forms. This discursive shift from male gaze to woman’s gaze is enacted once the characters are at the same physical level in the third scene when they face each other on the opposite parts of the table. Their eyes meet at the same spatial level and their bodies become dialogic bodies. This psychological and physical communication from the same spatial level, I believe opens for the characters a space of sympathy whereby looking into each other’s eyes they realise as Semah Tuğsel says that “they are both unfair to each other and also that they both are the victims” (S. Tuğsel, personal communication, 2020). Their hands are situated above the pink file with consent documents and this placement along their soft touches performs the woman’s gaze and challenges the western duality of male coded as opposed to female coded by bringing to the surface the inner emotions of these characters and their experiences in an unjust patriarchal world.

5. Short Cut Stories (2014) by Zeynep Esmeray Özadikti

Sitting or standing, how to pee?

Oh no, do not pee sitting down.

Room? Pornography display? No no, it's sperm count.

Cut it! DO NOT cut it! What was cut? Who cut it? CUT YOUR VOICE!

From life lessons to orgasm. Whose vagina is more original? Biological, antibiological.

And of course, the "authentic" ones.



Image 2. Leaflet of Short Cut Stories

Short Cut Stories (2014) written, directed, and played by Zeynep Esmeray Özadikti tells the story of her gender affirming surgery. Being an autobiographical play in form of monodrama, Esmeray shares all the tragicomic events she has experienced up until, during, and after the operation. The play is neither divided by acts nor by scenes and it has no singular plot but rather several quasi-plots enclosed in it through multiple soliloquies. At the end, these soliloquies are essential to the unfolding of the general message of the play, which is, the problematics of normative social aspects regarding gender identity that creates nothing else than hate and discrimination. The play was written in 2014 and has been played multiple times since then on different theatre stages and universities in Istanbul and other cities, but also in other countries as well. It was an incredible pleasure and luck to catch this once only performance at Muaf Beyoğlu on the 24th of January 2020 where I had this amazing privilege of personally meeting and greeting Esmeray. While the first staging of *Short Cut Stories* (2014) took place at Tatavla stage back in 2014, the same place where *Two Women* (2017) and *The Decision* (10) (2014) were performed, this time the play is acted on the third floor of a bar in Beyoğlu/Istanbul called Muaf Beyoğlu²⁰.

The improvised stage consisting of a classic chair in the middle and a background of dark blue velvet curtains gives entrance to Esmeray with the accompaniment of “Lilies of the valley” song composed by Jun Miyake. While the audience’s seating layout is facing the stage from the same direction, Esmeray walks through the aisle to reach the stage with pride and smile under a wave of applause. Just as the audience is waiting for a dramatic start, Esmeray (2014) starts to quote fiercely but with a tone of sarcasm all the arguments she got from acquaintances and society regarding her decision to get the gender affirming surgery:

– ‘I cut it.’ – ‘It wasn’t cut.’ – Cut it!’ – ‘Don’t cut it!’ – ‘If you cut it, you will commit suicide.’ – ‘You won’t be able to ejaculate!’ – ‘You won’t have orgasm!’ – ‘Cut it!’ – ‘Don’t cut it!’ – ‘You will commit suicide!’ – Oh, cut this music! (the music stops).

After a round of laughs coming from public Esmeray states, “But the time to cut it has come” (Özadikti, 2014), continuing to narrate the difficulties she has faced during the body transitioning up until and after the surgery. Besides confronting the arguments of her environment who talk as if they are professionals, or coming across the curiosity of others in how her new vulva looks like, facing the medical and judicial institutions was another barrier

²⁰ See [Muaf Beyoğlu](#).

of the journey towards the achievement of her gender's body. The tone of the play is tragicomic and resembles a stand-up, yet, as Esmeray states in a TV programme, her stories have a start and end, they have a plot, they have a text, they are a theatre performance called *meddah* rather than a stand-up (24 Ocak Arka bahçe'si, 2015). *Meddah* is a form of traditional Turkish folk theatre that incorporates stories told by a single person based on imitations of other persons (Sarpkaya, 2019). I decided to analyse this play due to its political stance against the normative constructions of both theatre and of society, but also because it is based on the real experiences of Esmeray as rather than being fictional, it portrays the lived experiences of a trans person.

In this chapter I propose to find out the survival strategies of Esmeray in a heteronormative binary society that undermines the existence of LGBTI+ individuals. In the first subchapter I discuss Foucault's (1978; 1995; Foucault and Rabinow, 1984) power/knowledge concept to indicate that execution of power opens up a space of resistance. I call this resistance, the power of resistance and reflect this concept around Sara Ahmed's (2017) killjoy feminism. In the subchapter 5.2., the re-territorialisation strategies of Esmeray are shown with a killjoy political stance against the normative construction of theatre space. Both the *Space* and *Feminist killjoys* are separated into two following sections to show how they resist the social, cultural norms, and transphobic discourses.

5.1. The subversive power of killjoy feminism

Michel Foucault's conceptualization of governmentality as discussed in chapter 4 rests on the notion of power which as reported by Foucault (1978) is a "multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere in which they operate"; a "process which, through ceaseless struggles and confrontations, transforms, strengthens, or reverses them"; it is a "support which these force relations find in one another, thus forming a chain or a system"; and lastly is a strategy "whose general design or institutional crystallization is embodied in the state apparatus, in the formulation of the law, in the various social hegemonies" (pp.92-93). These force relations which Foucault discusses are especially constituted on the power/knowledge concept which signifies that power is composed on general discourses of truth. A discourse of truth might be different from one society to another states Foucault (Foucault and Rabinow, 1984, p.73), but it is linked "with the systems of power which produce and sustain it" (Ibid., p.74). Hence, while power can be considered a disciplinary machinery that governmentality uses to disperse, pervade, and regulate individuals through these discourses of truth, as Foucault (1978) suggests, it should not be seen as an oppressive system, but rather as a type of relation between individuals. And because power is always omnipresent "it is produced from one moment to the

next, at every point, or rather in every relation from one point to another” (p.93). Then, “[p]ower is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere” (Ibid., p.93). Yet, while power is indeed a strategy that is “exercised from innumerable points, in the interplay of nonegalitarian and mobile relations” (Ibid., p.94), it also opens up a way for resistance (Ibid., p.95). Power is often seen by feminist scholars and activists in negative terms because of its effects on individuals who refuse to become “docile bodies”, which as discussed in section 4.1. are bodies who are transformed through dominant discourses and disciplinary acts. However, it is also notable that this power as exercised by multiple force relations also produces reality (Foucault, 1995, p.192) and if power comes from everywhere and produces reality, then the lived experiences of “non-docile bodies” exist and navigate the power structures by producing their own power, the power of resistance. The power of resistance that I would like to discuss and analyse in this chapter in regard to *Short Cut Stories* (2014) play by Zeynep Esmeray Özadikti dwells on Sara Ahmed’s (2017) killjoy feminism.

Killjoy feminism is a political stance and a philosophy. It is a mode of life where every day experiences are re-thought and out of which resistance is produced. This resistance can be in form of a story to tell, in form of a speech act, or in form of a “deliberate or intentional act” (Ahmed, 2017, p.56) but which all kill the joy in the room. One can simply killjoy because they are not multiplying “the requirements of a social system” (Ibid.) and through this they make the room tense by speaking about inequality for example. But besides a speech act, killjoy can sometimes be in form of a snap. To snap can mean “to break suddenly; to give away abruptly under pressure or tension; to suffer a physical or mental breakdown”, “[t]o snap can be to make a sharp sound” (Ibid., p.188); snap is when a situation cannot be taken anymore and when in order to resist “we need willful tongues” (Ibid., p.191). Through snapping a history of resistance is re-enacted but “not all resistance is audible or legible” states Ahmed (Ibid., p.200) to which I will come back later in the following section, but it is through these snapping moments that allows feminist killjoys to have subversive power. The subversive power of killjoy feminism stands in these specific acts and/or snaps of distorting the norms and through these, resistance is materialised, and empowerment is obtained from disempowerment.

In the following I am discussing this particular relation between power and resistance. While in chapter 4 of *Two Women* (2017) I portrayed power as a technology of governmentality through which “docile bodies” are sought to be created especially through discursive practices of JDP, here I see power as a positive trait and attribute it to the materiality of space and feminist killjoys that seek to resist the social and cultural norms and transphobic discourses.

5.2. Empowerment from disempowerment

When it comes to LGBTI+ community, Turkey is a place to amazing and vibrant local pioneers who never cease to raise awareness of LGBTI+ struggles. During my resident status in Istanbul and Izmir, I have witnessed and took place in numerous events and activities organised by the LGBTI+ associations, NGOs, and/or university student clubs. Although the visibility of these political actors is quite high in metropolitan cities of Turkey and neither non-heteronormative sexual identities nor transgender identities are considered a crime under Turkish law, still, dissident people do not have legal protection from discrimination (Göçmen and Yılmaz, 2017, p.1054). Traditional heteronormative values are omnipresent and often seen as vital actors be it in policy making and/or in discourses of truth that political and religious leaders maintain. However, in this chapter I want to stay away from marginalizing and stigmatizing politics and practices of the current ruling government and focus on the resistance strategies of queer culture producers by mainly looking at *Short Cut Stories* (2014) play by Zeynep Esmeray Özadikti whose voice constructs a transgender subjectivity that battles the heteronormative views of trans women in Turkish society.

In section 2.3. I have discussed the political tensions over cultural institutions and especially state theatre which after two decree-laws emitted in the following years of the 2016's coup attempt, the autonomy of the artists working at state theatres has been significantly limited. Nonetheless, I have also pointed out that “the lines between politics and theatre [have been] blurred” (Verstraete, 2018) and besides the government's control taken upon state theatres, the private and alternative stages are at constant risk as they as well have become more cautious and started to even employ self-censorship to avoid the political control of JDP. Yet, while some stages become a danger zone due to criminalization of the stage, some culture producers and artists succeed to resist these forces in several forms. By drawing from Deleuze and Guattari (1983), I have suggested to name the counteractive mechanism of these actors a re-territorialisation strategy. To re-territorialise means to take your space back, to re-establish the territorial cultural practice that resists the authoritarian patriarchal discourses, to continue to vociferate your discontent with the societal structures, to empower your voice from the disempowerment that is enforced through laws, socially repressive norms, and patriarchal discourses.

Zeynep Esmeray Özadikti with her play *Short Cut Stories* (2014) succeeds to employ a re-territorialisation strategy through the choice of space and killjoy acts. In the following sections, I propose to offer a description of these re-territorialisation practices to uncover the resistance acts vis-à-vis the theatre's political control and the public perceptions on gender

affirming surgery.

5.2.1. Space

...As I go up the narrow stairs that are illuminated by tealight candles in beer mugs to reach the third floor where the play is going to be staged, I am experiencing different enhanced emotions asking myself if I ever attended any plays in other spaces than a theatre stage...

...the space is not wide, but the high ceiling intensifies the smell of history and it matches the antique apartment building whose story is left to decay in this corner of Beyoğlu...

...I wonder what this space will tell me... and wonder with what new emotions I will be leaving this room tonight...

(Field notes, January 24th, 2020).

When I walk into a theatre building, I usually expect some kind of an aesthetic design, a space with a specific layout, stage in the middle, heavy curtains, furniture to match the setting of the play for instance. Yet, during my field research of almost two months in Istanbul and all the plays I have attended to, I came to one realization: once I enter the space where the play is going to be enacted, my expectations are always left in the cloakroom along my umbrella, or on the back of my chair next to my backpack. It is interesting how my thoughts and emotions instantly change and the ‘I’ that is governed by theatrical norms and assumptions of what theatre is supposed to look like are immediately left outside. Alternative realities settle in, and new voices and new matters wait impatiently to be represented on that stage. I perceive this disruption of socially and culturally informed self from the performative act, as the power of space. Foucault (1978) has stated that power must be seen as a process that “transforms, strengthens, or reverses” the struggles and confrontations between relations (p.92). What Foucault seems to mean here is that power is a negotiated construct and situationally variant. Then, the power of space or let me say the power of queer space is to break up the aesthetic expectations and instead open up a site for political performance where the focus is not on the stage design or the actors’ talent exhibition, but on a resistance conception.

Esmeray’s choice of staging *Short Cut Stories* (2014) in a bar rather than a theatre stage I opine is a political act. In a time when “the oppressive sociopolitical environment” of JDP seeks to control the theatre, when “[c]ensorship and self-censorship have intensified”, numerous venues have been torn out, and “theatre professionals and scholars have been dismissed or persecuted while others have had to leave the country” (Adak and Altınay, 2018), Esmeray shows us that space can display resistance. Because power itself is contextually bound depending perhaps on axiomatic relations, once it is inflicted be it through discourses or laws,

it also opens “a starting point for an opposing strategy” (Foucault, 1978, p.101). Foucault highlights that discourses produce the power and reinforce it, and yet, they also “undermin[e] and expos[e] it by opening a site for counteraction (Ibid.). The space where *Short Cut Stories* (2014) is performed then depicts a re-territorialisation strategy by showing that theatre can be performed outside of the normative theatre stage and building, and therefore re-establishes a place of performance where discontent with the societal heteronormative norms are still uttered and opposed. Besides being a political materialisation of counter-discourses, this space is also a material theatrical sign. Even though it does not have an elevated stage, neither a pompous design, and nor an amalgamation of costumes that would embody metaphorical meanings, this space proves that theatre does not need the aforementioned aspects for its art to be displayed and shared. A few seats to accommodate the audience (see image 5.2) and a small improvised stage area (see image 5.3) are in fact enough for a play to be performed.



Image 3. The sitting layout for audience of Short Cut Stories at Muaf Beyoğlu, own photo



Image 4. The view of the stage area of Short Cut Stories at Muaf Beyoğlu, own photo

Hence, this space is both a materialised political performance against JDP's restrictive and censoring technology, and a resistant employment against normative constructions of what theatre is and where it should be exhibited. I have stated in section 5.1. that "not all resistance is audible or legible" (Ahmed, 2017, p.200) and this choice of space establishes resistance without speaking up and without pointing up that this is how the norms are counteracted. Both the representational conventions of theatre and the discourses of truth and power are disrupted through this space because as Barad (2003) holds, matter has agency and space here creates a resisting meaning through which resistance itself is materialised.

Through her play *Short Cut Stories* (2014) Esmeray describes the lived experiences of what it means to be a trans woman in a culture and society that seek to constantly marginalise your being. When the whole environment is unionised to aid the survival of heteronormative binary individuals in a society that keeps telling that this is the right way, being a trans woman is an alternative reality. But because power in its broad sense is not something that one possesses and the other does not (Foucault, 1978), where there is power there is also a space for resistance (Ibid., p.95).

5.2.2. Feminist killjoys

The unorthodox forms of theatre display that I have discussed in the previous section and that are heightened with the queer space chosen by Esmeray, may take us back to Brecht whose aim was to show that theatre "transforms the spectators' relationship with the stage action in order to change not just what they think, but how they think" (Bradley, 2016, p.4). Although Esmeray's play does not involve any Brechtian stage apparatuses such as lights, montage narration, or "projected images [to] provide a visual commentary" (Ibid., p.5), she always makes sure to breakdown the illusion of the 'fourth wall'²¹ and makes the spectators conscious of the fact that they are seen by her and she even engages in discussions with the audience as it follows: 'Are you a couple?' (Esmeray asks by looking at two young people from the audience, saying) 'the girl looks like she is fed up with you' (Özadikti, 2014).

After a round of laughs she continues: 'I love these heterosexual couples, you know; they have increased so much lately that they took over all Beyoğlu' (Özadikti, 2014).

Here, Esmeray enacts a killjoy moment by alluding to the fact that Beyoğlu used to be a historical and culturally distinct space of the queer community (Sandıkçı, 2015) whereas nowadays it serves the neoliberal politics. For trans women especially Beyoğlu is a legacy and

²¹ According to Brecht, the 'fourth wall' is when plays are enacted as if there is a wall between the audience and the stage (Barnett, 2015, p.43; Bradley, 2016, p.4).

different parts of Beyoğlu such as Cihangir, for example, used to be called *trans imparatorluğu* (trans empire), *lubunistan* (queerland) or *ibneistan* (faggotland) (Zengin, 2014, pp.367-8).²²

This killjoy moment is taken by the audience as a humorous comment because Esmeray's survival kit involves humour in general. However, it also invites the audience to adopt a questioning stance towards urban heterospaces and understand how these deterritorialize the queer space. This body-space relationship that Esmeray raises shows as Ahmed (2017) would say "how the restriction of life when heterosexuality remains a presumption can be countered by creating spaces that are looser [and] freer" (p.219). Perhaps, hence the choice of performing *Short Cut Stories* (2014) in a bar with the spectators sipping and enjoying their beer, rather than a theatre, and to note down Muaf Beyoğlu does not identify itself as a queer venue, and yet via this space Esmeray succeeds to maintain that one is not only "surrounded by what [they] are not" but also to be reminded that "there are many ways to be" (Ibid.).

The political stance of Esmeray that is reckoned to disrupt the norms and the social space is also depicted in her stories. Sara Ahmed (2017) often refers to the killjoy moments around table "which were philosophical lessons" because "to learn from being a feminist is to learn about world" (p.7). Similarly, Esmeray depicts an incident that happened at a meeting table while taking group therapy before her gender affirming surgery. She narrates:

There are more trans men than trans women and all of them talk about how much they want to get married. They are going to cut it, to add it (alluding to genitalia) and immediately are going to marry (short pause preparing to imitate the people's speeches). – 'If god lets, hopefully the medicine will develop so much that ovarian transplantation will be possible'. – 'So that we give birth'. – 'We breed'. – 'We marry', – 'Have lots of children'. All of them want to become parents (mimicking surprisal) and I am just there listening (Özadikti, 2014).

Prior to this meeting though the doctor notified Esmeray that for the first three gatherings she will have to be an observer and only after these she could engage in conversation with the other members. She continues:

Mrs. Şahika (the doctor's name) raised the subject of lesbianism. Lesbianism (uttering the word more pronounced). And I am waiting impatiently to see what's going to happen, to which one of the trans man raised his hand and

²² To be noted that the suffix of -stan means 'the place of' from Persian and Urdu language. Hence, *lubunistan* (queerland) and *ibneistan* (faggotland) stand for the place of queers and the place of faggots. It also should be noted that *lubunya* (queer) and *ibne* (faggot) are slurs reclaimed by the LGBTQ+ community in Istanbul.

said. – ‘*Hocam*,²³ I don’t get the logics of these lesbians.’ (Esmeray raising her eyebrows as if showing mixed feelings of anger and surprise). Well, I say he is probably 18 or 19, young and nervous, anyway I saaaaayy when suddenly another person states that they don’t get it either. Nobody gets the logics of lesbianism (mimicry embedded by a pause) to which I couldn’t resist and asked for permission to speak and uttered: – ‘Look friends, you all want to get married, and all want lots of children *maşallah*,²⁴ so you got married, got a child, got a daughter, who gooooot lesbian, then they are coming to a therapy as such. Why are we here getting this therapy? (proceeds to answer) First of all, because our parents didn’t accept us, then our best friend, then our partner, then our school, then our job, and then we all met here. (continuing) Your child is a lesbian and is getting a therapy as such. Why? (mimicking) Because our parents don’t get the reasoning of lesbianism’. Whatever the logics there might be (Özadikti, 2014).

By asking for permission to speak even though she was supposed to be an observer for the first three meetings of group therapy, Esmeray’s will is “to stop the flow of [this] conversation” (Ahmed, 2017, p.83). In fact, this is the reason behind the feminist killjoys, to reclaim willfulness and oppose what is discussed in order to stop the further multiplication of that problematic discussion. This incident is a great example of how killjoy happens. Eventually Esmeray was answered back by these people stating that they are not as political as she is and suddenly Esmeray’s politics became a problem because she described a problem (Ahmed, 2017, p.39). But causing a problem is what a killjoy feminist does, because by causing this problem the feminist does not let the problem to become trivial (Ibid., p.34). In fact, Ahmed suggests that “we need to acquire words to describe what we come up against” sexism, racism and then when we name these problems and say “‘That’s sexist,’ we are saying no to that, as well as not to the world that renders such a speech or behaviour permissible” (Ibid., pp.34-6).

Another significant fact about Esmeray’s feminist killjoys in *Short Cut Stories* (2014) is that they educate. When her friends start to warn her about the news from papers on transgender people who after getting the surgery have committed suicide, the dialogue between Esmeray and her friends goes like:

– ‘Are you a trans woman?’ – ‘No’ – ‘Do you have such an experience?’ –

²³ *Hocam* is an interjection that does not have an accurate translation in English but can have the meaning of ‘my teacher’, although in some situations it can also refer to ‘my doctor’ or to everyone who has more knowledge.

²⁴ *Maşallah* is a praise word or an appreciation word that can mean ‘wonderful’ and/or ‘thanks to god’.

‘No’ – ‘Are you a specialist on this topic?’ – ‘No’ – ‘Then what?? Why would I commit suicide?!’ (after an intense pause as if taking a deep breath she continues) And finally I snapped and said to my friend, – ‘you keep saying don’t undergo the surgery, you won’t have orgasm but then how many times have you had an orgasm in your life? (pause, letting the audience to think and guess) THREE TIMES! (she utters with sarcastic voice). She is 43 years old and had orgasm for three times and tells me I will commit suicide, then I asked her – ‘why didn’t you commit suicide?’ She shut up (Özadikti, 2014).

These snapping moments have allowed Esmeray to resist these discourses of truth even though they, the snaps, do not “always involve a conscious act of resistance” (Ahmed, 2017, p.200). But “the temporality of snapping is also crucial” Ahmed argues, because its speed can reflect how fast a snapping can be comprehended as a movement at all (Ibid., p.188). The faster one snaps, the more the ability to resist what is trying to be imposed. Therefore, through her snaps Esmeray becomes the queen of killjoys. The queer feminist power of killjoys is what allows Esmeray to counteract the heteronormative norms.

6. *The Decision (10)* (2014) by H. Can Utku

...it is you who will make the final decision.

If you would like to make an appointment for the operation, you can let me know right now.

However, at this stage, I advise my patients to think for 10 minutes to decide.

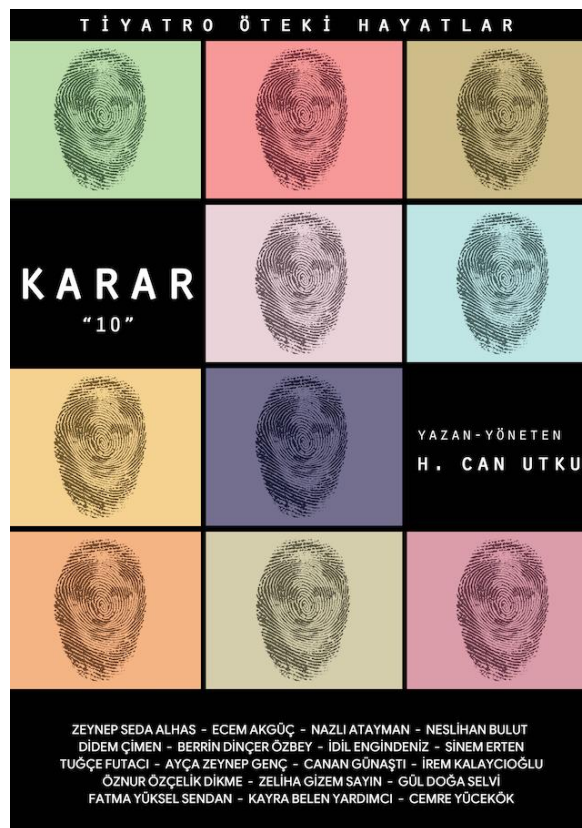


Image 5. Leaflet of *The Decision (10)*

The Decision (10) (2014) written and directed by H. Can Utku for the season 2014-2015 is a play that explores the abortion stories of ten urban women from Istanbul and how their liberties and restrictions are dictated by the social and cultural norms. The play has one act, ten scenes, and ten characters who are alternately played by five actresses. The action takes place in a gynaecologist's office where a final year university student gathers the stories of women who decided to get an abortion. The whole play is constituted as a monologue of each character separately who narrate their social lives, emotions, and thoughts around their abortion decision.

While the other two plays *Two Women* (2017) and *Short Cut Stories* (2014) are independent projects, this play is produced by a theatre group called *Öteki Hayatlar* (Other Lives). The first seeds of *Other Lives* date back to the end of 1990s when students from Galatasaray University established a theatre community and started to bring to the stage the plays of the 'Other' playwrights including feminist playwrights such as Arthur Miller and Dario Fo. It was later in 2005 when the then current and/or former students decided to set up a theatre group. They called it *Other Lives* because as Zeynep Seda Aksoy, the assistant director and actress of *The Decision (10)* (2014) has stated: "Theatre means the others' lives" (*Tiyatro Öteki Hayatlar*, n.d.).²⁵

I selected to analyse this play for two reasons. First, the anti-abortion and pronatalist, although I prefer to use the term anti-choice rather than pronatalist,²⁶ JDP government's discourses have a tremendous impact on the constructions of social and cultural norms that regulate both the individuals and the institutions. Second, because theatre *Other Lives*' feminist agenda of calling onto the audience to look at the reality in which they live from different windows rather than from the frame of their own existence, or, as their *about us* section also relates "we were looking for a theatre that instead of giving answers to the issues that are portrayed on the stage, would make the audience ask more questions and would make them review their already possessed answers" (*Tiyatro Öteki Hayatlar*, n.d.)

To look at the ways in which the characters of this play are affected by their socio-economic, educational, and other socio-cultural factors when it comes to the abortion decision, I use Crenshaw's (1989; 1991) theory of intersectionality. Third space feminist theory of Chicana feminists (Anzaldúa, 1987; Pérez, 1999) on the other hand, is helpful to understand how the power structures of the patriarchal systems of oppression create borders among these women who are a part of the Turkish society and at the same time prepare the ground for a third

²⁵ See [Tiyatro Öteki Hayatlar](#).

²⁶ I prefer to use the term 'antichoice' rather than 'pronatalist' or pro-birth because the prefix 'pro' connotes a positive stance towards something, and there is nothing positive about promoting child bearing as the norm.

space where these systems are resisted.

The first subchapter describes the theory of intersectionality by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989; 1991) and third space feminist theory by post-colonial Chicana feminists Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) and Emma Pérez (1999). I make use of these theories to understand the interstitial location of abortions seeker individuals. The following subchapter, 6.2., discusses the regulatory schemes of the current ruling political party, JDP, around abortion and analyses socio-economic class as a border. The last subchapter, 6.3., on the other hand, depicts how the gynaecologist's office is transformed into a space where oppositional practices to the dominant anti-choice discourse are enacted. My overall point in this chapter's analysis is to demonstrate how despite of government's anti-abortionist mechanism and the reterritorialized borders constructed by nationalism and patriarchy through discourses, women in Turkish society can build a site of resistance where their self-worth comes to matter.

6.1. Borders borders everywhere

First, intersectionality is an appropriate theoretical framework for this chapter because it makes visible the ways gendered bodies experience different forms of oppression and violence (Crenshaw, 1989; 1991). This term was coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989; 1991) to analyse the issues of identity politics that often remain ignored in discussions about the nature of oppression. Hence, intersectionality offers an explanation of why gender, class, ethnicity, race, religion, sexuality, and other identity markers cannot be separated in discourses about oppressed and subordinated individuals. With intersectionality my aim is to analyse how the characters' struggles from *The Decision* (2014) can be recognised and understood with their lived experiences around abortion. Although there are plenty of identity categories to discuss and deconstruct around the characters of this play, I chose to focus only on gender and class struggles. The intersections of these two categories creates significant borders in terms of reaching safe sexual and reproductive health services but they also disproportionality perpetuate domestic violence or social expectations. Moreover, I would like to frame Crenshaw's intersectionality theory as material feminism. Considering that identity markers are often visible on the body, including, but not limited to, race, gender, class, and disability, identity itself is often material. Hence, the consequences of identity are material, as well. Therefore, intersectionality's help in this thesis is to negotiate the borders and struggles of the play's characters and aid in the building of a third space where the dominant discourses and expectations are distorted.

Borders can be defined to be the physical lines that separate one geographical space

from another, but to Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) they are also the intersection where two cultures meet to blend and form a third one, a space where marginalised women resist the oppressions and where their invisibility becomes a positionality. To Anzaldúa (1987), women often internalise the role of the victim and their ability to respond and counteract is taken away by their culture (p.20-21). That is why in *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987) Anzaldúa calls for a change and advocates for a space where the oppressive mechanisms are challenged. This borderland space is “where people of different races occupy the same territory, where under, lower, middle and upper classes touch, where the space between two individuals shrinks with intimacy” (Ibid., Preface). This borderland space is further elaborated by Emma Pérez in *The decolonial imaginary: Writing Chicanas into history* (1999). Here, Pérez poses a theory of what they call third space feminism. In this third space the hidden voices of the silenced individuals are uncovered and oppositional practices to political patriarchal discourses are enacted. This third space is what I argue to be the gynaecologist’s office in *The Decision* (2014) play. With third space feminism, Pérez (1999) describes how narrative strategies can be unearthed and the experiences of the subjugated can be vociferated.

6.2. The regulatory scheme around abortion

Turkey’s experience with reproductive rights dates back to 1983 when abortion became legalised not only on health or medical reasons which was already the case priorly, but “upon the request of individuals”, regardless if it is an unwanted or unsafe pregnancy (Gürsoy, 1996, p.535). Even though this was a significant step in terms of reproductive health and rights that remains valid up to date, this law is problematic on multiple levels. Turkish feminists have particularly criticised it “on the grounds that it was passed without adequate public discussions” especially as being a political population control tool rather than “a response to demands by women for reproductive freedom and control over their bodies” (Ibid., p.536).²⁷ Moreover, besides setting the legal limit of pregnancy termination at 10 weeks, parental consent for minors and especially spouse consent for married persons, were restricting the access to abortion services (Ibid., p.536). These all led for this law to be seen as “giving legal sanction to conservative patriarchal values” (Ibid.). Yet, the patriarchal technology around abortion did not stop there. In 2012, the antichoice JDP government proposed a bill that would restrict people’s access to safe abortion. Although, it never passed, it has become harder and harder to reach abortion services in Turkey since then (Karaca, 2013). Availability and accessibility of abortion

²⁷ The law was passed as ‘The Law Concerning Population Planning’ and it aimed to control the number of population rather than give the right over their own bodies to pregnant individuals (Gürsoy, 1996).

has been reduced in the public hospitals but also in “some private facilities that are financially supported by the [JDP] or prominent leaders within the party” (MacFarlane, et al., 2016, p.66). In 2015, *Mor Çatı Sığınağı Vakfı* (Purple Roof Women's Shelter Foundation) has contacted 37 public hospitals from Istanbul to ask if they offer abortion services. According to the results, only 3 of them declared that abortion service is given upon request; 12 of them do not accord this service in general; 17 of them gave a positive response with the condition that the fetus has died, the pregnant person is in danger, or other medical emergency, assuming that the hospital’s committee has given permission of course; from 2 of them a definite answer could not be received; and the other 3 hospitals stated that such information is prohibited to be given by phone (Mor Çatı, 2015). Besides the difficulty of reaching the abortion service, cost of contraceptives and emergency pill has significantly increased as well. For example, the morning after pill, Ella, which was 50,49 Turkish Lira in 2016 as reported by a pharmacist (Ibid., p.66), today in May 2020 it costs 93,99 Turkish Lira (Türk İlaç Rehberi, 2020). Therefore, along the reduced accessibility of abortion in public medical facilities that leaves pregnant persons in seek for abortion to go to private hospitals and pay high amounts of money for this service, the increased price of contraceptives, acts as a huge barrier for individuals to be in control of their reproductive health. Moreover, the discourses around abortion have also a significant impact on the societal and cultural norms. For JDP’s conservative politics, to be a woman means to be a mother and a wife (Cindoğlu and Unal, 2017, p.42). For this reason, discourses around the “traditional gender roles [...] emphasis on family, family unity and women’s familiar roles” are being reproduced constantly by the JDP parliamentarians (Ibid.). These include antichoice and traditional arguments on having three children; equalling children to future economic success; women’s sexuality that should be controlled and not displayed; and women’s roles as caretakers of elders and children (Acar and Altunok, 2013; Cindoğlu and Unal, 2017).

I have presented these facts and regulatory scheme around abortion and traditional gender roles in this section to show how patriarchal mechanism never ceases when it comes to the control of women’s rights and bodies and how the government’s discourses have an effect in real life. Furthermore, besides regulating the norms around abortion and gender roles, through these discourses, JDP’s hegemonic gender politics also creates borders. Just as borders would separate two or more locations, they would also break apart different cultures, social classes, and ideologies. In the following subsections though, I mainly look at the socio-economic class to develop a conversation on how class creates borders and struggles and how they gain materiality on the bodies of the characters from *The Decision (10)* (2014) by H. Can Utku. Lastly, I analyse and how through these borders gynaecologist’s office becomes a third

space where social oppressions around abortion are distorted.

6.2.1. Borders and struggles: Socio-economic

...five women dressed in black wait on the stage as music plays and the spectators enter. There are 5 black chairs arranged in a semi-circle next to which ten colourful headscarves lie neatly arranged on the floor...
(Field notes, January 29th, 2020).

Imagine a university student afraid of society's gossips; a woman who cleans houses to feed her 7 children; one over thirties who is shamed for being unmarried; another one for being divorced; one for not loving her husband; and the other for loving her career. Imagine a woman who got raped by multiple men; one who wanted to pursue her dreams in the big city to escape marriage; one who left her country for love and became a victim of human trafficking. And finally, imagine a woman who wanted to become a parent but could not, and yet the society kept imposing 'motherhood' as an obligation. What do they have in common? They are all women belonging to a society where "the regulatory schemes impose pregnancy and motherhood as a norm, as a rule to be followed for their body to be accepted as viable" (Farima, 2018b). These ten women are the characters of H. Can Utku's play, *The Decision (10)* (2014).

Played interchangeably on stage by five actresses, these characters are given no name. Their monologues depict their background and their struggles in the Turkish society. One of the most significant border struggles is social class. This border takes material form in how the characters occupy the space on the stage. As I have discussed in chapter 4, Sandra Bartky (1997) has argued that "[t]he production of 'docile bodies' requires that an uninterrupted coercion be directed to the very processes of bodily activity" (p.26). This bodily activity includes "gesture, posture, movement, and general bodily comportment" (Ibid., p.29). To discipline women on how to dress and how to act, patriarchal discourses are perhaps the most effective (Foucault, 1995; Bartky, 1997), but because these discourses also create the societal norms, those who get most affected are the subjects whose economic stability lacks balance. At least, this is how it is portrayed in *The Decision (10)* (2014). Let's take for instance the second character, the middle-aged woman with 7 children. Being the only breadwinner in the house because her "husband's attempts of finding a workplace are less than [her] children's number" (Utku, 2014), this character exhibits her working-class status in how she occupies space and how she wears the headscarf. From the very first start of the play the spectator is let know that scarves²⁸ would

²⁸ I use the terms 'scarf' and 'headscarf' interchangeably in reference to the garment worn around the head, neck, or shoulders and it does not have any religious connotations.

constitute a major symbol during the whole performance. Although the meanings attributed to the headscarf in Turkish society may vary from religious to political markers (Çınar, 2008), here I would not restructure a meaning in these terms to it because my attempt is not to establish a ‘true’ entailed message of the headscarf, but rather to look at the metaphorical symbol that it represents in this play. Hair visible from the front, knotted at the back of the neck, long tips falling on the chest, this mode of wearing the headscarf represents the second character’s Anatolian rural roots. I have come across this way of wearing the headscarf especially in the rural areas as it could be considered one of the traditional ways of wearing the headscarf in Turkey, but also in the big metropolitan cities. While in the first case it is a casual daily mode of wearing the headscarf, in the second, it could be considered a visual marker of someone belonging to working class. To watch this character telling her story was eye opening on so many levels for me. The acting was beyond amazing and as a spectator I did not see an actress playing a role on that stage, but a real experience, literal emotions, life struggles materialised in body form. Years spent in doing domestic work without any job and social security are reflected in her body posture. Shoulders slumped, sullen face, arms crossed on the chest in an attempt to mask insecurity, anxiety, and fear. Bartky (1977) argued that “[w]omen are far more restricted than men in their manner of movement and in their lived spatiality” (p.29) and by her body posture and space occupation with her legs tied in an ankle lock making an effort to hide them under the chair, this character depicts the reality of so many women who need to engage in informal work in order to feed their family. However, besides lacking a job and social security, women belonging to the less disadvantaged class are less informed in contraceptive methods and even if they are with the significant growing cost in the past years, they cannot afford them (MacFarlane et al., 2016). The character tells:

I heard of these pills from a woman whose house I am cleaning. I mean, I’ve heard about them here and there before but didn’t know what they are for and it didn’t even come to my mind to ask (Utku, 2014).

As I stated previously, in this play the social class division is reflected in how the headscarf is worn and how the characters occupy the space with their bodies. Another example is the character who although in love with her career had to leave it to become a mother. The sixth character wears a blue scarf tied in an elegant manner around her neck with a small knot on the left side. Sandra Bartky (1997) refers back to Foucault (1995) to argue that the ‘body-object articulations’ of the soldier and their weapon has a tight connection with how women’s femininity is produced and regulated. This time, sixth character’s way of wearing the scarf and her elegant proper etiquette sitting position of a straight posture, head up, legs slightly bend on

one side, depicts an educated woman coming perhaps from a middle-class or upper middle-class. Yet, even though a distinction was pursued to be made by their scarf wearing and occupation of space, just as the second character with 7 children antagonises the patriarchal constructions by refusing to give birth to another child, so is the sixth character who states:

For years I have been missing so many things: meetings, invitations, conferences, my friends' parties, films, and concerts. The young person who was my assistant when I was writing my first book, nowadays has become an associate professor, on top of it, he is a father of two children. But he is a father, not a mother. [...]. I just can't do it again (alluding to pregnancy) (Utku, 2014).

Besides the fact that class and gender commands how one's body is situated in the Turkish society; sullen, middle-aged looking woman who is not even 40 and whose shoulders have fallen tired of scrubbing brushes into someone else's bathrooms on one side; and confident, straight posture of a woman who had enough time to arrange her neatly dress and scarf on the other side, the standardised form of the family that is promoted and supported by the state affects these women considerably. Indubitably, as Crenshaw (1989; 1991) discusses, their social class is intertwined with their gender identity marker. Even more, their social class disproportionately perpetuates domestic violence, economic violence, and social expectations around pregnancy. While the character with 7 children, 9 given births, 3 miscarriages, and 12 pregnancies in total opens up about the domestic violence she has faced from her husband around her pregnancy lacking period, the social expectations from the elitist educated woman of becoming a mother again are intensified. Although differently enacted, the pregnancy and motherhood demands of the state and society are materialised on the bodies of these women. To be in possession of certain civic rights Turkish women are expected to perform their motherhood duties (Tepe, 2017). Their citizenship is justified as long as they are capable to become mothers because as mothers their foremost responsibility is to protect the republic and its future (Ibid.). These traditional, social, and cultural norms around family values though, affect women regardless of their social class. Therefore, when the sixth character exclaims the reasons of wanting to get the abortion, regardless of her class, education, or her place in the society, she feels guilty and has the need to justify her decision.

The systematic modes of oppression with regards to socioeconomic class also differ. The second character a parent of 7 children comes from a low-class family and this entity is also reflected in her past. As she states with sadness and disappointment, "I was given to the first man who asked my hand as my parents were eager to get rid of me" (Utku, 2014). As a

person with female genitalia she is considered nothing else than a burden. On the other hand, the character who had the privilege to be in academia, a self-identified feminist, who had the advantage of choosing her own partner declares that equality structures are a must in her family. Then she expresses “However, no matter how equal we are, when you become a parent these equality structures degrade. [...]. The mother and father (taking a deep and heavy breath) cannot be equal anymore” (Utku, 2014). The load of educating and bringing up the children traditionally falls on women’s shoulders regardless of their social class. Their access and/or ascension to a career of their desire or even a job is minimised. That is why the although educated and socioeconomically privileged character looks at what a wonderful position, she would have held in academia today if she had not given birth to her first child and states “I just can’t do it again (alluding to her second pregnancy)” (Utku, 2014).

6.3. Gynaecologist’s office – a site of resistance

“...If my father hears that I am pregnant he will kill the both of us...”

(Field notes, January 29th, 2020).

As I have detailed in 6.2. subchapter, the political dialogues of JDP have a considerable influence on the hospitals’ position in refusing abortion procedures. Although abortion in Turkey is legal since 1983, from 2012 onward, when JDP proposed an anti-abortion bill and the party leader Recep Tayyip Erdoğan remarked that abortion is “murder”, the safe access to abortion has minimised (Çelebi and Çabak, 2019). Similar antichoice discourses were displayed by other JDP members, as well. The former JDP’s mayor of Ankara, Melih Gökçek, stated in a TV interview:

“the mother should kill herself and not the baby, why would the baby be responsible for the mistake the mother did. [...] The body is yours, [...], but if you make an abortion, it is called murder” (Habertürk, 2012).

These abortion demonising discourses have created a third space for abortion seeking persons. The gynaecologist’s office becomes this third space, and, in this space, the patriarchal discourses are distorted collectively (Anzaldúa, 1987). According to Pérez (1999), third space is a location where women exercise their agency, and oppositional practices against dominant discourses are enacted. As I have argued in the previous subchapters the characters’ experiences with safe sexual and reproductive health and access to contraceptives has tied connections with their social class (MacFarlane et al., 2016). Nevertheless, the gynaecologist’s office for this

reason becomes a third space, because it gathers women regardless of their class, education, ethnicity, religion, skin colour, political views, or ideologies. What makes this play, *The Decision* (2014) distinct is that the lived experiences and struggles of different women are voiced. So, if the socio-cultural factors such as education and class create borders among these women who seek safe abortion services, the meeting place, the gynaecologist's office offers them a space where an act of resistance to social, cultural, and political discourses that marginalise them on a daily basis, is performed (Pérez, 1999). This in-between space is a site of negotiation where women describe the systematic sexism they have been subjected to by the family, society, and political leaders. The first character, a third-year university student who has left her city to come to Istanbul and get a higher education there, sees being Istanbulian as a privilege asking the interviewer:

Are you from Istanbul? I mean, do your parents live in Istanbul? If that is the case, you probably think of me as old school. You probably think that getting an abortion is not a big deal in this era anymore. (Proceeds to give her reasons) But my family is traditional, what can I do? My father is very conservative. [...] They (alluding to her own and her partner's parents) will say that 'she did it without being married', 'maybe she did it to be taken as a wife', 'and the one who today cheated on her father, tomorrow will cheat on her husband', but they won't say anything because we made our decision (Utku, 2014).

The oppositional consciousness embraced by this character reflects her agency through which she communicates her strategies of survival. In her monologue she alludes to the border created between the more educated, privileged women born and raised in Istanbul and the ones who came to Istanbul from less disadvantaged backgrounds.

The second character, the parent of 7 children who migrated to Istanbul while she was a teenager, supports this belief saying:

I believed in destiny when we migrated to Istanbul. I was so excited by the belief that I won't rot in a village, because to be an urban person, to live in the biggest city where everyone could do whatever their heart desires, where they can become whatever they want to become, what could be better than this, right? (Silence followed by a deep heavy breath) How dumber could be a child of 16 years old? Then, I was given to the first man who asked my hand [...] and begin Bedriye to give births (slipping her name through her lips) (Utku, 2014).

Although social class and background create an invisible border between people in Istanbulian society, the gynaecologist's office becomes the space where this border is disrupted. As related by these two characters who belong to a more disadvantaged background in terms of either coming from a conservative family with patriarchal values, or having economic disadvantage, job and social insecurity, the threshold of gynaecologist's door signifies the overthrow of the patriarchal discourse that a woman's duty is to become a mother (Tepe, 2017). The transformative potentials of the gynaecologist's office lie in its stance of creating a space where women are listened regardless of their social, cultural, or political identities. For this reason, the interviewer is absent, the interviewer is silent to give a space and a voice to those who struggle with the dominant patriarchal discourses. The gynaecologist's office becomes a site where these women describe their survival strategies into the systems of oppression. Where they share the ways of their personal and embodied resistance against the hegemonic mechanism of oppression.

7. Conclusion

When writing about Istanbulian feminist theatre, I have shared a multitude of personal thoughts and ideas of what feminist theatre is. I never claimed objectivity in my thesis because I started this research journey with Donna Haraway's (1988) situated knowledges and never aimed to play "the god trick of seeing everything from nowhere" (p.581). My whole purpose was to show my position, how I, a queer, body abled woman who had the privilege of getting higher education see feminism interrelated with theatre. Through feminist theatre, I opined, the individuals of a society can look at their own lives in a political manner and through this art form a change can be acquired. In this last chapter, I am going back to every thought and step I took in this research to reflect on my overall journey, discuss the research findings, and share what I have learned, what has frustrated me during this trip.

I started this thesis by arguing that theatre can be feminist without labelling itself as such. Because feminism itself is "a life question" (Ahmed, 2017, p.2), a way of living, questioning, resisting, and distorting the norms imposed to us by patriarchal mechanisms. To me *theatre is feminist* when it shares this consciousness. That is why I selected the plays of theatre groups and cultural producers who do not necessarily have to self-identify as feminists, but who share this way of life. The director of *Two Women* (2017), Semah Tuğsel, stated in our interview that she never worked with the idea of doing feminist theatre specifically. However, she did act in Dario Fo's plays while being abroad and argued that every person should be aware of the societal inequalities. Although she did not identify as feminist on our interview, to her "the first and foremost matter of our society should be the decontamination from the patriarchal imposed norms", she declared (S. Tuğsel, personal communication, 2020). With Zeynep Esmeray, the writer, director and actress of *Short Cut Stories* (2014), I had the privilege to meet and change a few words right after her performance. As she declares in an interview, she identifies as a feminist and fiercely announces, "Since I am a feminist, I do not want to be involved in any ideology that reproduces patriarchy" (Mynet, 2010). I could not find what self-identity *Other Lives* theatre shares. Their *about us* section does not mention anything about feminism, though, they do declare that "[they] were looking for a theatre that instead of giving answers to the issues that are portrayed on the stage, would make the audience ask more questions and would make them review their already possessed answers" (Tiyatro Öteki Hayatlar, n.d.). Hence, since feminism is a genderless political stance that aims to dismantle the norms and end oppression, all these three plays are feminist plays regardless of how their

producers self-identify or how their product is labelled. That is what I was trying to establish from the beginning of this thesis. Not the label but the consciousness is what makes these plays feminist.

Another issue that disturbed me while doing my research was the attempt to locate feminist theatre to a specific geographical location and time. Elaine Aston (1999) and Sue Ellen-Case (2014), both vital scholars of theatre and feminism, locate feminist theatre to Women's Liberation Movement of 1970s. Yet, I followed Sara Ahmed's (2017) argument that the assumption on feminism as a travelled concept from the west to the east is just as stated "a travelling assumption" (p.4). For this reason, I looked to find feminist theatre accounts that predated the 1970s. The literature on Istanbulian Ottoman theatre showed the first traceable accounts of feminist engagements to be found in the the 19th century where "women's participation in social life emerged as significant themes" in the theatre of that age (Adak and Altınay, 2018, p.192). Halide Edib was a feminist, novelist, playwright, and journalist during the Ottoman and early-Republican age. Their play *Kenan Çobanları* (The Shepherds of Kenan) which was written in 1914 and performed as an opera as well as a play, "aimed to transfer the feminist [...] thoughts by means of art" (Çitçi, 2009, p.655). This play was also a crucial historical acquirement "in the history of women's involvement in Ottoman theatre as one of the first plays with a Muslim woman playwright and director and Muslim actresses on stage" (Adak, 2018, p.277). Just as Halide Edib vociferated in 1913, "[t]he fact that Ottoman women do not have a written history of their progress should not lead us to conclude that they have not done anything" (Edib cited in Çakır, 2007, p.73), so should we, feminist scholars and students who engage interdisciplinarily with theatre studies, we should refuse to locate the feminist movement and theatre to a specific location and age. Because regardless of these, feminist movements and art have been present, and I repeat they do not have to bear the *feminist* label to be considered feminist. What really matters is the consciousness and not the label.

After I introduced my research journey in the Introduction chapter, argued my opinions on the feminist theatre's history in the second chapter, and discussed my methodological approach and positionality in the third, I commenced to analyse the plays and bring answers to my research questions with which I started my investigation.

In chapter 4, *Two Women* (2017), I offered a queer reading of stage and body by endorsing a multiplicity of theories. Here, I analysed how patriarchal discourses can be performed and multiplied not only by speech, but also through material entities such as stage design, costume, bodily acts, and male gaze. I argued that although the act of male gaze might not be materialised, its consequences have material effects on the bodies of characters. To my

question of how the audience can resist this male gaze and refuse to perform and multiply it, Semah Tuğsel responded, “In a sober manner all the time” (S. Tuğsel, personal communication, 2020). To which my instant reaction was indeed the male gaze is like a state of drunkenness, and just like drunkenness is a temporary state, so can the male gaze be, and you know alcohol is bad for your organism, so better not to consume it. This play resists the patriarchal discourses around femininity by embodying a character who through her costume, gesture, posture, and movement, resists what is expected to be feminine. This play teaches the spectator how easily the patriarchal discourses and male gaze can be embraced, multiplied, and performed, but it also shows how easily it can be distorted. The emotional and physical dialogue between the two characters offers a non-heteronormative spectacle. An alternative non-hetero agency is presented by the physicality of characters’ bodies.

In chapter 5, *Short Cut Stories* (2017) by Zeynep Esmeray, I wanted to prove how power does not necessarily all the time have to possess negative connotations. Here, I engaged in a conversation of how power can have positive effects and I see the power of resistance as a significant concept. My aim was to show how resistance can become a type of power. Therefore, I have examined how Zeynep Esmeray Özadikti, a trans woman, a playwright, an actress, a feminist, a Kurdish woman, an activist, once a sex worker, performs re-territorialisation strategies through the choice of space in order to subvert the political and cultural discourses against theatre. I also made use of Sara Ahmed’s (2017) discussions about the resistance in form of killjoys and snaps. Because power results from knowledge, I argued that Esmeray’s feminist consciousness educates the environment through these feminist killjoys and snaps. Feminist killjoys and snaps are meant to create a problem by showing what is the problem and while Esmeray engages in a conversation with the audience on stage or with her acquaintances and friends, she sends out messages to show their privileged status and to contest the marginalization of queer identities. The transgender realities are brought up on stage by Esmeray from which the audience not only learns what are the emotional challenges of trans people, but also becomes aware how their actions (audience’s) impact the binary gender construction. This play teaches the spectators how to question their own actions in a heteronormative binary society and how they themselves can contribute to the overthrow of the authoritarian mechanism.

In chapter 6, *The Decision (10)* (2014) by H. Can Utku, I examined the intertwined location of social class and gender and its effects on the body. I looked at the characters’ posture and/or costume to argue how the social class as an identity marker is visible on their bodies. I also spoke about how the patriarchal ‘politics of the intimate’ (Acar and Altunok, 2013) on

having three children, on imposing ‘motherhood’ as the norm, and on regulating women’s sexuality as giving birth machines, have different consequences on the women’s bodies. Later, I situated gynaecologist’s office as a *borderland* (Anzaldúa, 1987) and third space (Pérez, 1999) where the social patriarchal machine of the government is resisted regardless of the politics behind. Be it the politics of fear, pain, disgust, or shame, every character with their stories have depicted what is like to live in a society where societal and cultural norms are regulated by the patriarchal discourses. In this third space, through abortion the JDP’s and/or society’s ideals around “motherhood”, are resisted. This resistance takes material form in the monologues of each character and in this space, the gynaecologist’s office, women succeed to mobilise for social justice.

To bring an overall conclusion, I want to sum up that when the current JDP ruling party attempts to push modern liberal forms of theatre to the edges and even erase them through laws, censorship, and/or hate discourses (Adak and Altnay, 2018), cultural producers are either left to perform self-censorship, leave the country, or look for ways to resist this authoritarian mechanism. With the analysis of these plays, I aimed to highlight how cultural producers that decided to remain and fight for liberal art, refuse to fit into the imposed systems of oppression. How they, regardless of their political stance, can distort the normative constructions of gender, culture, and society. How stage for them is not only a metaphor of power, but also a practical space for dismantling the dominant authoritarian social machine. Women in their plays emerge as subjects and not as objects. Women in their plays create a new field of possibilities. They build sites of oppositional agency. Sites where normative discourses around gender, femininity, violence, rape, abortion, and motherhood are subverted. In these sites, through their art, through their characters, through dissent individuals’ stories, these cultural producers fiercely requote Anzaldúa’s (1987, p.44) words:

I will not glorify those aspects of my culture which have injured me and which have injured me in the name of protecting me.

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Appendix 1

Question 1: How and when have you met with theatre?

Question 2: Have you worked with feminist issues or feminist stage techniques before?

Question 3: When and why did you start engaging with feminist themes in your plays? Was it a conscious choice?

Question 4: Can you say that this play was set as a commercial project or as a raising awareness project?

Question 5: Do you think that the stage where the play is performed is a feminist and safe space?

Question 6: Is theatre for art's sake or for political sake? How do you use theatre in your works?

Question 7: Do you feel that when you work with a play, you take the patriarchal power from traditional theatrical structures and deliberately work against it?

Question 8: When you represent yourself, as a writer/director/actress, do you feel that your comment on the play reflects your positionality?

Question 9: How do you think the concept of "gender" is represented in Turkish theatre?

Question 10: What do you think is the future of feminist theatre in Turkey?