

**SOCIOLOGIES OF DISABILITY AND
BODILY PERFORMATIVES IN
SAMUEL BECKETT'S ROCKABY**

**Samuel Beckett'in Rockaby Adlı Oyununda
Engellilik Sosyolojileri ve Bedensel Edinimsellikler**

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Abstract

In this study, under the light of the recent studies on disability it is claimed that the concept of disability is constructed through discursive practices and it is believed that perceptions on disability must go beyond thinking it as a physical condition. The word practice is used intentionally together with the word discursive in order to underline how language is effective in the formation of social issues and how it stimulates actions that are the representations of the key concepts such as identity, power and ideology. The recent studies on disability criticize the traditional approaches to the body and claim that one must consider the influence of social, cultural and political inscriptions on the body. Thus, it is suggested that disability should be considered not as a physical condition but as "a way of interacting with a world that is frequently inhospitable" that is "as something one does rather than something is" (Sandahl & Auslander, 10). In literature writing the body, except for the feminist writing, does not go beyond the traditional representation of it. Undoubtedly, the theatre stage is the best place to reflect the performative understanding of the body. With the rise of avant-garde theatre that seeks to subvert the traditional norms, the questioning of the idea of the body that is thought full and complete has been arisen. In avant-garde theatre there is an emphasis on fragmentariness and Samuel Beckett is among the best representatives of this subversion of the idea of completeness.. His play Rockaby, through which he portrays a motionless body of a woman with expressionless face, annihilates all of the imposed labels on the body in general and on the female body in particular. Moreover, the play by rejecting to represent the body in a generally accepted framework serves to the findings of this study that has the same purpose in the consideration of the disabled body (the perception of the disabled body that is defined in a general sense traditionally).

Keywords: disability, bodily performatives, Samuel Beckett, Rockaby, Judith Butler.

Özet

Bu çalışmada, engellilik ile ilgili yapılan son çalışmalar ışığında, engellilik kavramı ile ilgili algıların toplumların söylemsel eylemleri yoluyla imal edildiği iddia edilmektedir ve bu algıların engelliliği yalnızca fiziksel bir durum olarak yansıtmaktan öteye geçilmesi gerektiğine inanılmaktadır. Eylem (practice) kelimesi söylemsel kelimesiyle birlikte kasten kullanılmıştır, bunun sebebi dilin sosyal konuların oluşturulmasında ve kimlik, güç ve ideoloji gibi belirli kavramların temsil edilmesinde tetikleyici bir unsur olduğunun altını çizmektir. Engellilik ile ilgili yapılan son çalışmalar, beden kavramının geleneksel algısını eleştirmektedir ve beden algısının üzerindeki sosyal, kültürel ve politik etkilerin de düşünülmesi gerektiğini iddia etmektedir. Böylece, engellilik fiziksel bir durum olarak değil de "çoğunlukla yaşanılması zor olan bir dünya ile etkileşime geçme yolu olarak" yani "hali hazırda olan bir şey değil, birinin yaptığı bir şey" olarak görülmelidir. Edebiyatta, feminist metinler haricinde, beden kavramı ile ilgili yazılar onun geleneksel

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temsilinden öteye geçmemiştir. Şüphesiz ki, beden kavramının edimsel olması anlayışını yansıtmak için en iyi yer tiyatro sahnesidir. Geleneksel kavramları ters yüz etme amacı taşıyan avangard tiyatronun ortaya çıkışıyla birlikte, tam bir bütün olarak algılanan beden düşüncesi sorgulanmıştır. Avangard tiyatrodaki parçalar halinde olmaya vurgu yapılır ve Samuel Beckett bütünlük fikrini en iyi ters yüz eden yazarlardan biridir. Yazarın, ifadesiz bir yüzle, hareketsiz bir kadın bedenini ortaya koyduğu Rockaby adlı oyunu, genel anlamda beden üzerine ve belirgin olarak da kadın bedeni üzerine dayatılmış bütün etiketlemeleri yok eder. Bununla birlikte, bu oyun, bedeni genel olarak kabul gören bir çerçevede temsil etmeyi reddederek, engelli bedeni algısında da aynı amaca sahip (genel olarak kabul görmüş, geleneksel olarak tanımlanmış engelli bedeni algısı) olan bu çalışmanın bulguları için önemlidir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: engellilik, bedensel edimsellik, Samuel Beckett, Rockaby, Judith Butler.

Introduction

Recent studies in disability show versatile tendencies and approaches in investigating the nature and perception of disability. The meaning and understanding of the term disability has shifted through the effects of poststructuralist thinking, especially by the works of Jacques Derrida and Judith Butler. They suggested that “Western philosophy’s long obsession with ontology has been compromised by insufficient attention to iterative acts—ranging from speech acts to the compartments of gendered performances” (Auslander and Sandahl, 321). According to this new tendency scholars begin to challenge the narratives of disability by means of displaying the discursive construction of the term. Taking their premise from the consideration of performative formation of disability cultures and identities they try to subvert psychological stereotypes of disability and destabilize the cultural image of disability. Instead of a unitary handling of the subject the new understanding investigate the social and cultural aspect of disability and rather than the sociology of disability, it is suggested that one must consider *sociologies* of disability. As Carol Thomas claims there is a clear cut line between the two realms in the sociology of disability and according to disability studies “disability is centrally structured by social oppression, inequality and exclusion. The other, associated with medical sociology, the sociology of chronic illness and impairment and entails suffering and some social disadvantage” (571).

In dealing with the subject of disability it is better to start with the concept of body in general. For the phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty, the lived body is inherently ambiguous, operating as a unity but rent by a series of divergences. The body is simultaneously the perceiver and constructor of the world around it, but also appears as a perceived object within that world (qtd.in Drew, 107). Therefore, it is important to realize the understanding of the space of the body that is a discursive one. In addition to this, “the body is a nexus where power and knowledge are reflected and social currents are played out” (Tatum, 127). When it is seen from this perspective, it is obvious that “all bodies are limited, disabled by language – a metaphorical understanding of disability which can be seen to diminish the actual lived oppression and experience of many groups” (Kuppers, 31). What is underlined with this idea is the materiality of the body in Butlerian sense. The materiality that does not ignore the matter of the body itself but rather materiality that suggests that of the significations and the regulatory frameworks “through which embodied subjects achieve cultural intelligibility (or not)” (Jagger, 11). In other words, Butler’s aim is to free the body from metaphysical constraints and take it as one of contestatory sites of human beings.

Jeffery D. Tatum’s description of the social and cultural understanding of the body is of great importance in dealing with the sociologies of disability:

Since the 1970s, there has been a rise in popular interest in the body. Magazines and newspapers are filled with pictures of beautiful, thin, muscled, youthful bodies ... Media stars and models set the standards for beauty and fitness, and openly enjoy the benefits of their bodies both on and off screen. Commercial media package bodily images of men and women and promote them as commodities to be produced, modified, and consumed (124).

Underlying messages run through these representations create illusions on reaching the desirable body, which is expensive. On the other hand, recent body theorists suggest that the emphasis on the wholeness and beauty of the body must be understood as a kind of fear reflection towards fragmentation and disability and this “may in fact come from the very act of repressing the primal fragmentariness of the body” (qdt. in Lipkin and Fox , 123). That is why, the idea of performativity of the body is crucial in reaching a clear conclusion about the body free from social and cultural constructions. As Butler asserts,

The body implies mortality, vulnerability, agency: the skin and the flesh expose us to the gaze of others but also to touch and to violence. The body can be the agency and instrument of all these as well, or the site where “doing” and “being done to” become equivocal. Although we struggle for rights over our own bodies, the very bodies for which we struggle are not quite ever only our own ... my body is and is not mine. Given over from the start to the world of others, bearing their imprint, formed within the crucible of social life, the body is only later, and with some uncertainty, that to which I lay claim as my own. (*Undoing Gender*, 21).

To perceive body as performative results from the re-evaluation of the body as a starting point for subject formation. The subject that is under the influence of language, culture, society and psychology. As stated by Petra Kupperts, “social actors perform social scripts, with all the reiterations and incrementally changing repetitions” (32). In *Bodies That Matter* (1993), Butler criticizes the understanding of the body as an indication of some other world beyond itself and suggests that the materiality of the body should be re-considered by subverting the imposed references on the body. Butler questions the issue of the materiality of the body in relation to the performativity of gender. She argues that the materiality of the body should be re-evaluated in its relation to the regulatory norms of power relations. The force behind the regulation of normative imperatives is the result of its being repeated through time. Butler investigates the ways to link gender performativity and materiality of the body. She argues that the connection between these two concepts shows itself in revealing how regulatory forces and discourse of power determines the rules for these notions. In the idea of gender performatives she explains that the repeated actions are the bases of gender formation and for the materiality of the body she tries to free the body from any hegemonic imposing. As she states, “what constitutes the fixity of the body, its contours, movements, will be fully material, but materiality will be rethought as the effect of power, as power’s most productive effect” (Butler, *BTM*, 2).

Findings and Comments

It is obvious that performance space is the best realm through which performativity of the body can be revealed. Within performance space, as David Harradine questions, “is not

the body always performing body, a body that performs its own presence, its own material status?" (69). Moreover, prior to performance there is the process of writing the fictive body, that is to mean writing the external and physical details and descriptions of the body. Writing fictive body "has lent itself to gender-inflection. There has been little conception of the body itself, at the 'deep-structural' level, except in the realm of feminist writing" (Val, 9). Therefore, writing the fictive body is a kind of repetitive action of some other repetitive actions (like gender formation). However, writing the disabled body is unlike writing the fictive body because

our most basic conceptions of the body will need to be rewritten...Like the normative ideologies of the body to which they often stand opposed, theoretical discourses of the body already contain within themselves a series of unacknowledged and/or disavowed assumptions and theories about disability. Bringing these out for inspection is one way that body theory can begin to learn something from disability studies and can intervene in them in turn (qtd in Samuels 72).

In the performance of disability "the truth of the bodily expression is manipulated, cited and rewritten by the performer. The show is an act. It is time to investigate the cultural narratives, opportunities and stagings of this act" (Kuppers, 30). Through the performance space the disabled body creates alienation for the spectator and it is this very moment that the narratives on the body begins to be subverted. In *Bodies in Commotion* Sandahl and Auslander analyze disability performance within a wide range of meanings and they also explore the new renderings disability studies provide for the readings of disability in dramatic literature, new media and performance studies in general.

At one level, the question of disability is a question of the deployment of bodies in space, the question of which deployments are normative and which are not, together with the articulation and enforcement of norms. At another level, because of their unique cultural and somatic experiences, disabled bodies relate to and define space differently than normative bodies. Performance provides a valuable conceptual model for the consideration of disability because it, too, is fundamentally about the deployment of bodies in space (Sandahl & Auslander, 9).

Therefore, when disability is the subject matter, the operations and functions of the body and how these qualities of the body is constrained by normative experiences must also be considered. The actions of the body constructed under the normative relations cannot occupy the space of that body without limitations, since norms become the limit for the actions of these bodies. That is why, normative bodies are unable to be aware of difference between the spaces of their bodies and that of the disabled bodies. In this sense, performance context provides a unique platform on the subject of the different spaces of the normative and disabled bodies. On the performance ground (that belongs to the world of the stage) the repeated actions, which form the basis for the restricted world of the body under certain regulations, can be juxtaposed not only through visual reflections but also through emotional representations.

In twentieth century the “foregrounding of the body as an artistic means of expression that is deemed capable of exceeding the norms of established (and specifically, linguistically dominated) discourse has marked avant-garde theatre practice” (Spackman, 8). Samuel Beckett, as one of the representatives of avant-garde theatre, is very much concerned with the representation of physical and mental disabilities. His play, *Rockaby* (1981) is a play written for Billie Whitelaw and it is first performed under the direction of Alan Schneider in New York². The play presents a woman (W) seated in a rocking chair on a dark stage. The woman is “prematurely old” with grey hair and has huge eyes in a “white expressionless face” (Beckett 433). There is spot on her face which stays constant throughout the whole play. Beckett describes the attitude of the woman as “[c]ompletely still till fade out of chair. Then in light of spot head slowly inclined” (433). The characterization of the play is innovative in fragmenting the female body from its voice. In this play Beckett, who is considered as obsessed with the idea of the prerecorded voice, creates another dimension to the fragmented body: the body of a female character. Therefore, *Rockaby* is considered as a play which exemplifies Beckettian subversion of the traditional understanding of the female body and gender in general.

Beckett's interest in female representation in theatre began with his *Happy Days*, which is considered as his first female-centered play. In the play Winnie, half of whose body is seen by the audience, interacts with the items in her handbag. This catastrophic representation of the characters is described by Ayşegül Yüksel as characters' having “post-tragic position”. His characters are like the shadows of a catastrophe that has taken place long before the beginning of the play. According to Jennifer M. Jeffers, Winnie is a “gendered-female mirror image of Krapp” (135) and the play starts a new process in Beckettian theatre in which female characters speak not for themselves but “for a community and a site of memory” (136). Thus, beginning with *Happy Days*, Beckett deals with the subversion of the conventional understanding of the female body as socially constructed. In doing so, Beckett either fragments or hides the female body, thus, the female body does not serve to the requirements that are traditionally constructed. In other words, the female body is not used either as a sexual object or as a representation of pain that a female suffers. Like the language in his plays, the body does not do anything. The relationship between the body and its being far from having a meaningful signification is also analyzed by Önder Çakırtaş and Ömer Şekerci and they claimed Beckett's characters' “reaction-based inferences lead sometimes to identity distortion, and sometimes bodily/physical depressions” (194). Beckett's original way of representing the body serves best in the subversion of the woman body that has been constructed under the norms imposed by power structures. As Jeffers explains,

Beckett denaturalizes the image of an ideal Western woman in order, not to “woman speak,” but in order to destroy a normative idea of women, men, and gender performatives. Through his female characters' often grotesque performances, Beckett shows that gender is imitative and predicably conforms to a patriarchal heteronormative. (139)

The woman's body as hidden under a black “high-necked evening gown” with long sleeves reveals the body used against itself. In other words, the woman's body is materialized in order for the body to be saved from its cultural and social constructions. Her posture throughout the play is still and constant, she does not even move to rock the chair. The chair is rocked mechanically without assistance from her; therefore her body is not used.

² For the discussions on *Rockaby* see Eşberk, Hatice (2013). *Metadrama, Theatricality and Performativity in Samuel Beckett's Late Plays*. Diss. PhD. Ankara: Middle East Technical University.

Not only is her body hidden under the black gown but it is also made motionless. As Jones has noted,

[t]he body plays a unique role on Beckett's stage as the contestory site of the subject's very possibility and simultaneously as the performance of its dissolution. Inasmuch as spectacle foregrounds the materiality of the body, it provides Beckett with a space within which to perform subjectivity in its corporeal presence. (179)

The presentation of the woman's body as far from "a source of narcissism or fund-raising" and its being free from the descriptive chains of language illustrate Butler's understanding of the gendered (female) performative body: performative in the sense that it is not depicted as a passive and submissive body but as a performing, functioning, speaking body. Through emptying all of the implications adhered on the body itself, Beckett reflects that one cannot think of a body that is "prior to performance, but one [body] is constructed as a theatrical space through and upon the body of the actor, and finally, that no coherent character is 'achieved' by the Beckettian actor" (qtd. in Jeffers 13).

Surprisingly W's performative body not only displays itself through its inanimacy but also through the detailed description of the motions of her eyes. Beckett writes at the beginning of the play, "Eyes: Now closed, now open in unblinking gaze. About equal proportions section 1, increasingly closed 2 and 3, closed for good halfway through 4" (433). Thus, not only W's body as a whole but also her eyes, as parts of her body, are made to perform. In the her recorded voice says: V: till the end/the day came/in the end came/close of a long day/when she said/to herself/whom else. The voice of the woman seems to imply that there has been someone else before just as the same as the woman. This someone is again a female performing her role on the stage. This idea suggests the iterability in the construction of femaleness and of gender in general.

Through foregrounding the material body in performance, Beckett "serves to disfigure the biological vision of woman and the traditional reading of the gendered body" (Jones 192). Since Beckett's materiality underlines nothingness, it also forms the rejection and erasure of the idea of the original. The woman's body cannot be considered and evaluated in relation to any original body. Her body is evacuated as much as the stage and the language the woman uses.

Beckett's originality in reflecting the body is his paradoxical way of representation. As suggested by Jones, in the play "the controlled performance of the body's subjugation has psychologically emancipatory value" (196). By representating W's body as hidden and motionless Beckett resists conventional visual metaphors of the female body. When the body is not represented in the way it has conventionally been represented, it starts to be more and/or less than what it has been understood. In *Rockaby*, this being more of the body is achieved through the nothingness of the body. The woman's body *is* and *does* nothing. The only thing that is noticeable about the character is that she is white and old. As Jones claims, "*Rockaby* is a particularly powerful example of the role of presence in staging absence. In this piece, the actor, like the lights, the sound, the costume, is part of the larger body of performance rhetoric" (184). The use of the body in the play is ironic because it presents absence. Since the body does not fulfill its constructed functionality (it does not even move) the existence of the character itself is also questioned. In addition to the lack of reference of the woman's body, we have no idea about her inner qualities. Neither physically nor psychologically does the woman exist on the stage as a theatrical character. Although she is defined as a woman by Beckett in the written text, "[a]ll of the gendered affections hung upon the actor's body conspire to upstage it, or cover and

negate it" (Jones 186). Thus, the woman's body does not allow us to impose a female identity on this character.

Conclusion

The concept of the body needs to be re-evaluated since Western philosophy's ignorance of the normative restrictions on the understanding of the body is subverted through the recent studies on disability. The relationship between the disabled body and the body of the women is of great importance in disclosing how these norms act upon the expected actions of the body. If it is seen that these processes of normative regulations do not serve anything other than labeling the body, it would be clear that to be able to be aware of the differences (and not the labels) is of great importance. This paper does not have quotations from the play itself since the analyses just covers how woman's body is represented. The words of the character serve to the representation of it's body as fragmented. However, these words has nothing to reflect how and why the body is distorted. As Beckett makes the woman repeat many times in the play "time she stopped". The woman is stopped and made without any motion. Her body is on the stage waiting to be described (and therefore to exist) through different interpretations.

Therefore, Beckett's *Rockaby* exemplifies performativity of the body in both Derridian and Butlerian senses. It displays a Derridian understanding of performativity in representing materiality through the woman's body. The woman's body is materialized through emptying all of the signs that are thought to belong the body of a woman. The play is also performative in Butlerian sense since Beckett represents the force behind the performative gender formation (that of repeatability) and the body as free from the established norms of language. The actions that are believed to be done by women are the productions of the repeated actions that have long been framed by the power relations. The representation of the body of woman does not meet the requirements of traditional portrayal of the body of woman. As for the relation between materiality of the body and the matter of sociologies of disability, it is concluded that disability must be perceived as the productions of various biological, psychological and social forces. Moreover, as Tom Shakespeare and Nicholas Watson declares everyone is impaired, in varying degrees which must lead us to dismantle socially constructed divisions between 'the disabled' and the so-called 'normal'. Therefore, it is seen that Beckett's *Rockaby* provides us one of the best ways to annihilate the constructedness of the perceptions of the body and through this emptying of the traditional meanings that are adhered to the body we may re-consider how we perceive the disabled bodies.

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