

A Political Reading of *Sticks and Bones*

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David Rabe's play *Sticks and Bones* depicts the encounter between David, the protagonist who returns home from the Vietnam War a blinded and traumatized veteran, and his family, the Nelsons who represent the happy middle-class American family. In general, the play is not about the experiences of David in Vietnam; the focus being mainly on his inability to adapt himself to the ideology of American society on his return. On the other hand, the Nelson family also has qualms about accepting David with his physical and spiritual deformities into the happy family frame as a former member. Hence, following his homecoming David gets detached from the family as a figure emotionally maimed with self-hatred, loneliness and cynicism. As a matter of fact, with his new consciousness David "threatens an entire way of life and to defend that way the family and the nation will do things that debase everything they are meant to represent."¹ This study attempts to explore how and why David becomes a threat for his family and society from the political aspect. 'The politics of race' and 'the politics of class' will formulate the interpretations of the play as two major modes of political reading.

Sticks and Bones is a play in two acts with no scene divisions. The setting of the play is the living-room and the upstairs bedrooms of the Nelson family. Claiming that "stylization is the main production problem" of the play David Rabe qualifies the elements of "farce" or "horror movie" or "TV situation comedy" in his play as components of "form" but not of "content."²

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¹ Berkowitz, Gerald M: **American Drama of the Twentieth Century**, Longman, London & NewYork, 1992, pp.192.

² Rabe, David: *Sticks and Bones: Two Plays by David Rabe*, The Viking Pres, NewYork, 1979, p 226.

When the play opens in the living-room of the Nelson family, Harriet, Ozzie and Rick are occupied with looking at their family photographs. In all appearance a peaceful mood pervades. A phone call comes announcing the return of David who had been fighting in Vietnam. When David does arrive, the family first note that “something is wrong with him.”³ (1:132) and next they are shocked to see him blinded. On his part David too experiences some unease, feeling that “the air is wrong, the smell and sound... all wrong.” (1: 132) Although at first, both sides try to understand each other, their endeavors are inconclusive. With his changed consciousness David tries to have his family regard reality with fresh eyes, but this ‘blindfolded stranger’ only disturbs and bores them with his nonsensical diatribe. As the play progresses, the reader/audience learns that David has had a relationship with a Vietnamese girl named Zung who is left behind – probably with child or a baby. As David is tormented by a guilty conscience, the ghostly image of Zung follows him everywhere. David demands his family to see it and accept the presence of Zung in the house and, when she eventually materializes, Ozzie with his racist odium does not hesitate to strangle her. After the killing of Zung, David is also induced to commit suicide and only then the former status quo of the family is restored.

In his *Author’s Note*, David Rabe elucidates the point with the following comment: “In any society there is an image of how the perfectly happy family should appear. It is this image that the people in this play wish to preserve above all else...”⁴ As understood from the playwright’s words, the play takes the reader/audience to the dream world of a well-off, healthy middle-class American family. Even the setting depicts this archetypal image:

The set is an American home, very modern, with a quality of brightness, green walls, green rug [...] There is naturalness, yet a sense of space and, oddly, a sense also that this room, these stairs belong in the gloss of an advertisement. (1: 120)

In the play, this bright image is enhanced by the symbolic names of the parents; Ozzie and Harriet Nelson – names emblematic of the ideal American family of the 1950s in the world of

³ Ibid. p. 132 (all the quotations taken from the play belong to this edition)

entertainment and fantasy, “consciously modeled, by Rabe, on along-running radio and television situation comedy, ‘The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet’.”⁵ Thus the Nelsons, replicating the popular TV models in the eyes of the audience, assume the same emblematic function – the ideal middle class American family: success oriented, and imbued with wealth and energy – in brief, the living image of the American Dream. However, this pleasant Dream is shattered by the homecoming of the eldest son of the family David as a maimed veteran.

Physically blinded and spiritually traumatized, David does not seem to fit in with the culturally approved image of the Nelson family. As it is, both David and the Nelsons experience great difficulties in understanding the values and standards of each other. Undoubtedly, the play tries to “show the impossibility of adjustment of the traumatized American warriors to the fantasy world of the happy America. Having lived the horrors of reality, the Vietnam veterans could not adapt to the world of dreams America represented.”⁶ No wonder, then, that David should lose his sense of belonging as soon as he enters the Nelson abode:

David: *worried*. You said... “father”... Sergeant, you said “home”. I don’t think so... It doesn’t feel right... (1:128)

However, it is also clear that that the Nelsons on their part are loath to readmit the disabled David into the family frame as a member.

Harriet: *standing very still*. Can’t see? What do you mean?... No, who says?
No, no...
Ozzie: Look at him. He looks so odd... I’m sure. (1:131)

According to Brustein, David Rabe employs David’s “physical condition and the new relationship with his family as a springboard for examining American values; the standards and assumptions by which [they] live...”⁷ As a matter of fact, perhaps more than David’s physical and mental condition as “somebody sick” (1:120), his re-entrance into the family with

⁴ Rabe, David: *Sticks and Bones: Two Plays by David Rabe*, The Viking Pres, NewYork, 1979, p 226.

⁵ Bigsby, C. W. E.: *Modern American Drama, 1945-1990*, Cambridge University Pres, NewYork, 1992, p.257.

⁶ Tekinay, Asli: *Contemporary American Drama, 1960-2000*, Boğaziçi Üniversitesi Matbaası, 2001, p.39.

a changed consciousness shakes the safe grounds for the Nelson family, since David “brings the war home in the form of a blinded and guilt-ridden veteran.”⁸ And this war brings forth the clash of disparate consciousnesses and ideologies. As Hans Bertens suggests, “subjects cannot transcend their own time but live and work within the horizon of a culture constructed by ideology, by discourse.”⁹ From the very beginning, it is obvious that the Nelsons have a limited horizon encompassed by the ideology of the American Dream and its cultural discourse, and since they do not intend to cross the boundaries they live happy and contented within them. Marxism, we may recall, would explain the case as a misrepresentation of the world by ideology, whereby the subjects of a society live in a “collective delusion” — ideology itself being defined as:

[...]not so much a set of beliefs or assumptions that we are aware of but it is that which makes us experience our life in a certain way and makes us believe that that way of seeing ourselves and the world is natural. In so doing, ideology distorts reality in one way or another and falsely presents as natural and harmonious what is artificial and contradictory... If we succumb to ideology we live in an illusory world.¹⁰

In a similar vein, Marxist philosopher Althusser has interpreted ideology as “the imaginary relationship of individuals to their conditions of existence.”¹¹ And this illusory world would naturally present a “false consciousness”. In *Sticks and Bones*, David “sees his nightmares as reality” whereas the Nelsons “see their dreams as reality.”¹² Accordingly, the Nelsons live under a “false consciousness” and their happy world bounded by a narrow horizon is a fantasy instead of reality. What is more, David too is invited to join this ‘collective delusion’:

Harriet: What are you saying?... We’re a family, that’s all-... We’ve had a little trouble – David, you’ve got to stop... Just be happy and home like all the others – why can’t you? (1:163)
 ...That’s all we’ve ever wanted and done, your father and me – good sweet things for you and Rick – ease and lovely children, a car, a wife, a good job.

⁷ Brustein qtd. in Martin Esslin: **The Theatre of the Absurd**, Anchor Books, New York, 1969, p.22.

⁸ Berkowitz, Gerald M: **American Drama of the Twentieth Century**, Longman, London & New York, 1992, p.142.

⁹ Bertens, Hans: **Literary Theory – The Basics**, Routledge, London & New York, 1995, p. 185

¹⁰ Bertens, Hans: **Literary Theory – The Basics**, Routledge, London & New York, 1995, p. 85

¹¹ Althusser, Louis: **Lenin and Philosophy and other Essays**, New Left Books, London, 1971, p.18.

¹² Bigsby, C. W. E.: **Modern American Drama, 1945-1990**, Cambridge University Press, New York, 1992, p.208.

time to relax and go to church on Sundays ... and on holidays all the children and grandchildren come together, mingling. It would be so wonderful – everyone so happy – turkey... (2:207)

However, this happy family image is only a myth created by the discourse of collective false consciousness which in turn is the product of the American Dream. Since the family members obstinately choose to believe in that myth, they live in a blissful state of denial which blinds them to reality. Beneath this happy and contented façade though, the family members are actually afflicted with a state of alienation which impedes their understanding of each other.

Throughout *Sticks and Bones*, blindness remains a significant motif since the play is about literal and symbolic blindness. David is literally blind whereas the Nelson family – and thus the whole society they represent – is symbolically blind. However, this self-inflicted blindness comes enwrapped in deep irony, since its perpetrator, the society to which David returns is “extremely content with its own blindness and desperately tries not to lose the bliss associated with that state, that ignorant state of bliss...”¹³ This society prefers to reject true vision. For sight, or true vision, would invariably lead to “knowledge – of the horrifying truth, of the harsh reality, and of everything that lies outside the merry fantasy world of peace.”¹⁴ Unlike sight and truth, blindness brings bliss and happiness to this American world of fantasy.

Another motif in the play seemingly contrary to the above is the validity of knowledge acquired through sight as a product of this same culture. Foucault explains the case in terms of discourse:

Knowledge is the product of a certain discourse which has enabled it to be formulated... The ‘truths’ of human societies are the effect of discourses... Their ‘knowledge’ does not derive from access to the real world, to authentic reality, but from the rules of their discourses... It only counts as knowledge because the discourse in question is powerful enough to make us believe that it is knowledge...¹⁵

¹³ Tekinay, Asli: **Contemporary American Drama, 1960-2000**, Boğaziçi Üniversitesi Matbaası, 2001, p.39.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 39.

¹⁵ Foucault, Michel: **Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings**, (ed.) Colin Gordon, Wheatsheaf, London, 1980, p. 76.

Within the Nelson family – an epitome of American society – ‘blindness’ and ‘false consciousness’ are represented in their various aspects by different characters in varying degrees. Ozzie Nelson is the first and foremost representative of false consciousness accompanied by symbolic blindness. According to the dictates of cultural discourse, being a male member and a father he is the head of the family, thus assuming responsibility and patriarchal authority over the Nelsons. He flaunts the fact to his family’s lesser members with the following words:

Ozzie: ... Let people know who I am, and what I’ve done. Someone says to you, “who are you?” You say, “I’m Ozzie’s son.” “I’m Ozzie’s wife.” Who? They’ll say. “Take a look at that!” you tell ‘em... That’s the way I want it; from all of you from here on out, that’s the way WAY I WANT IT (2:212)

In the discourse of a patriarchal society, it is inevitable that the family members should define themselves through the existence of a male authority. As a matter of fact, with his false consciousness this is the only way for Ozzie to define himself: – openly declaring his repressive authority. Besides this declaration, another significant means for Ozzie to assert his so-called functional existence is to define himself in materialistic terms. Ozzie being a representative of the consumerist American society, it is not surprising to the reader/audience that Ozzie should define himself in materialist terms. It is also significant that Ozzie derives his authority and power from his property ownership. In a way, the abundance of his assets provides for him a means for quenching spiritual starvation:

Ozzie: ... And I’ve come at last to see the one that I must try if I am to become strong again in my opinion of myself. (Holding up, with great confidence, one of the many pockets of paper) I have here is an inventory of everything I own. Everything. Every stick of furniture, pot and pan, every sock, T-shirt, pen or pencil. And opposite is its price... (2:211)

However, as the play progresses, it is not difficult for the reader/audience to realize the impoverished role of the father figure beneath his authoritative and strong appearance. His ideology has induced him to believe mistakenly that he is wealthy and powerful and hence, whole and real. Yet, as a victim of his false consciousness, he is no more than a helpless

nonentity. He has realized that nobody in the family takes him seriously or even really cares for him:

Ozzie: And I just stand here, don't I? And let you talk anyway you want. And Ricky gets up in the middle of some sentence I'm saying and walks right out and I let him. Because I fear him as I fear her... and you. Because I know the time is close when I will be of no use to any of you any longer... And I am so frightened that if I do not seem inoffensive... and pleasant... if I am not careful to never disturb any of you unnecessarily, you will all abandon me. I can no longer compel recognition. I can no longer impose myself, make myself seen. (2:203)

Aware of the restlessness and discontent that beset the family, Ozzie is likely to be the most disturbed and troubled member on that account. Outwardly, he seems to be contented with the role bestowed on him. But, far from holding to the stable and authoritative position of the patriarch in the family circle, he dwindles into the role of an insignificant and irresponsible weakling as the play progresses. Thus, he is at peace neither with himself nor with the others. As a result of this situation, he comes to detest his role of father in the family:

Ozzie: I lived in a time beyond anything they can ever know – a time beyond and separate, and I was nobody's goddamn father and nobody's husband! I was myself! (1:150)

Since Ozzie is overly burdened and bored with the social role imposed on him, he cannot formulate a sense of his own being. Deeply troubled by an identity crisis, his repressed frustrations turn into bitter hatred towards his family and in critical moments, this hatred manifests itself in the form of violence:

Ozzie: (*after a pause*) They think they know me and they know nothing. They don't know how I feel... How I'd like to beat Ricky with my fists till his face is ugly! How I'd like to banish David to the streets... How I'd like to cut Harriet's tongue from her mouth. (1:150)

As a matter of fact, Ozzie's false consciousness has been the product of his acquiescence in the dominant discourse and acceptance of its guidance. In this connection, Hank, a former friend of Ozzie, acts out the role of the surrogate father for Ozzie and has a

great influence on the significant choices in Ozzie's life. According to the dictates of the ruling cultural discourse, we can say that it is Hank who directs Ozzie in the path of life and who makes for him decisions even to the most personal. For example, Hank chooses Harriet as a life partner for Ozzie:

Ozzie: I grew too old too quick. I had no choice... I thought, and noone remained to test me. I didn't even know what I was doing... A man... out there, tested himself... I remember... And then one day... on one of those trains, Hank was there, the first time I ever saw him. Hank... and he sees me... down in that car and he orders me off. He stands distant, ordering... I don't understand and then he stops speaking... And he moves to embrace me... and holds me there trembling... We become friends, Hank and me... and far behind me Hank is calling, And I turn to see him coming, Harriet young and lovely in his hand, weaving among the weeds... Swollen with pride, screaming and yelling, I stand there, I stand: "I'm ready, I'm ready... I'm ready." (1:168-169)

There are times when Ozzie achieves self-realization and in such cases, he recognizes the false illumination of his and this society's ideology. However, even in those moments Hank will induce Ozzie to divert from his path and change his decision and thus inscribe Ozzie's life within the confined horizon of their false consciousness and ideology:

Ozzie: *coiled on the coach, constricted with pain.* I remember... there was a day... when I wanted to leave you, all of you and I wanted desperately to leave, and Hank was there... with me... "No," he told me. "No," I couldn't, he said. "Think of the children," he said. He meant something by that... and I understood it. But now... I don't. I no longer have it – that understanding. (2:204)

As a matter of fact, Hank is the embodiment of the dominant discourse in force in that society and, the influence of Hank in Ozzie's life becomes a negative impact depriving him of his capacity of thinking. Which is tantamount to depriving a person of his liberty, since the liberal humanist agenda has it that, "we are essentially free and can remain free as long as we can think."¹⁶ As a result of Hank's influence and surveillance, Ozzie cannot develop a "subjective consciousness"; a concept interpreted as "ideas and actions of our own, that depend on us, not

¹⁶ Bertens, Hans: **Literary Theory – The Basics**, Routledge, London & New York, 1995, p. 84

determined by forces over which we have no control.”¹⁷ Victimized by Hank’s – thus the dominant discourse’s – control over his life, Ozzie cannot develop a mature identity. Hank’s power over Ozzie can be likened to the influence of “body of knowledge” in Foucault’s terms. Defining knowledge as a discourse of expertise Foucault explains its influence on individuals in the following way:

Because of their claims to expertise such discourses then go on to determine the way we talk and think about the field in question... and persuade us to keep ourselves and others under constant surveillance... Since we are all extensions of the discourses that we have internalized, we ourselves constantly reproduce their power, even in our intimate relations.¹⁸

It is obvious that Ozzie internalizes the role and its conditions imposed on him by Hank. Ozzie’s identity is constructed around this internalization and thus, the power and authority of the dominant discourse is re-produced. When Ozzie acts out of free will, he is in reality “acted on by the... system.”¹⁹ This situation can also be regarded as a case in point for Gramsci’s concept of ‘hegemony,’ which he explains as the power of ideology eliciting “the spontaneous consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group.”²⁰ In this case, of course Ozzie represents the “great masses of population” whereas Hank stands for the “dominant fundamental group.” Hence, victimized by the American ideology Ozzie’s life is wasted and thus, contrary to his stable appearance he becomes an unfree, discontented and immature individual.

Another victim of the dominant discourse deployed to produce false consciousness within the Nelson family is the mother figure, Harriet Nelson. She strictly obeys the dictates of the false consciousness implanted in her by the dominant discourse. Therefore, she cannot develop her proper / subjective consciousness at all. One of the most significant reasons of

¹⁷ Ibid.,p 84.

¹⁸ Foucault, Michel: **Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings**, (ed.) Colin Gordon, Wheatsheaf, London, 1980, p. 86.

¹⁹ Bertens, Hans: **Literary Theory – The Basics**, Routledge, London& NewYork, 1995, p. 86

²⁰ Gramsci qtd. in Hans Bertens: **Literary Theory – The Basics**, Routledge, London& NewYork, 1995, p. 88

Harriet's inability to construct a subjective consciousness is that she has to develop first a "subject position" in that society – which she never did or could not. Harriet's strict obedience of the dictates of her subject position, makes her what Althusser calls "a concrete subject" which the theorist has explained in the following way:

...the ideology addresses us as 'concrete subjects'... In so doing, it may 'interpellate' us in the different social roles that we play, or the different 'subject positions' that we occupy. One and the same woman could be 'interpellated' as a mother, as a member of a particular church... and so on. The way ideology addresses us creates that subject position for us, yet simultaneously that position is already familiar to us because it is part of what we know. Ideology convinces us that we are whole and real, that we are the 'concrete subjects' we want to be. ²¹

Throughout the play, Harriet maintains her subject position by internalizing her gender role imposed on her by the cultural discourse. This gender role dictates her to be a perfect mother and wife within the boundaries of the private-service sphere. Therefore, in that limited sphere her role is to be the nourisher of the family. In order to experience wholeness, she devotedly takes care of her children and husband. She experiences self-gratification only by cooking and providing food for the family. Thus, throughout the play, she is rendered in the act of serving cakes, chocolate puns, ice cream and fruit juice. Even at the moments of crisis, she appears on stage with a tray full of various foodstuff:

Harriet: Oh, no, no, you've got to eat. To get back your strength. You must. Pancakes? How do pancakes sound? Or wheat cakes? Or there's eggs? And juice? Orange or prune: or waffles. I bet it's eggs you want. Over, David? Over easy? Scrambled? (1:140)

Although Harriet is aware of her subject position, the family members remind her of her place by constantly sending her to the kitchen even during the most important incidents. She is depicted as a perfect cook. Yet, on another level, her cooking and serving food signify the spiritual hunger of both herself and her family. She tries to quench the spiritual cravings of her family with the rich foods she offers them. As a mother, she regards herself also as the healer

²¹ Althusser, Louis: **Lenin and Philosophy and other Essays**, New Left Books, London, 1971, p.22.

of the ailing. Thus, she often offers her people sleeping pills, aspirins and other remedies to comfort them. However, she is unaware that the family members need not only food or medicine supplies, but also spiritual support. Devoted to her ideology and mired in her false dreams, she even takes the quarreling voices of Ozzie and David as ordinary conversation between two male members of the family:

Harriet: *hurrying into clean up more of the party leftovers.* Oh, it's so good to hear men's voices in the house again, my two favorite men in all the world – it's what I really for really. Would you like some coffee?... Your humble servant at your command; I do your bidding, bid me be gone.
(2:202)

As a matter of fact, throughout *Sticks and Bones*, the role of Harriet as nourisher and healer achieves a grotesque turn within the patriarchal system of values. She has been rendered as a menial figure whose services are not appreciated, though they are essential for the maintenance of life. Despite all this however, Harriet is allowed to link up with the family's collective delusion by regarding herself as an indispensable member of the family.

The last member of the Nelson family who is another happy victim of the cultural ideology is the junior son, Rick. Since Rick experiences the collective delusion to a great extent, he is always unconsciously happy; “everything is all right”, and “there's no problem” for him. His only responsibility is to immortalize the happy moments of the family by taking photographs with his camera. Besides taking photographs, he is ever busy with eating something since he is always “starving” – which also signifies his spiritual emptiness. Living in a world of delusion, he is disinterested in the events going around him and is incapable of comprehending the family problems. He even sees David as “healthy” whereas David is regarded as “somebody sick” by the other members. He does not like to talk much, and he never stays at home for a long time. With his guitar in his hands he wanders around as a spiritual drifter. He does not share any spiritual unity with the family. He sneaks off even when Ozzie expects his support at the peaks of his feelings:

Rick: *suddenly coughing and coughing – having gulped down beer – and getting to his feet.* Excuse me, dad; excuse me. Listen, I've got to get going. You don't mind, do you? Got places to go; you're just talking nonsense anyway.
Ozzie: Where's... he ... going? Where does he always go? Why does he always go and have some place to go? Always!... (2:202)

However, in spite of Rick's irresponsible attitudes and unconcern towards his family, he is the favorite son of Ozzie and Harriet since he is always contented, happy and joyful. He is an ideal figure to complete the blithe image of the family in their collective delusion. While Rick brings happiness to the family with his merry manners, David brings dilemmas, unhappiness, restlessness and distress. David firstly criticizes and then attacks the ideology of his parents, therefore, he becomes a threat to the well-being of the family. Berkowitz interprets David's new condition at home in such a way:

The presence in their home of a son who is imperfect, who has killed and still seems to capable of killing, loved one of an alien race, calls into question every assumption by which they define their family and themselves.²²

When David returns home from Vietnam, at first the family happily welcome him and then expect from him to wipe away all his memories of Vietnam and resume his life course in his own culture where he had left it:

Harriet: It must be so wonderful for you to be home. It must just be so wonderful. A little strange, maybe... just a little, but the time will take care of all that. It always does. You get sick and you don't know how you're going to get better and then you do. You just do... Just know that you're home and safe again. Nothing else; only that we're altogether, a family... (1:141)
I just think we must hope for the fine bright day coming when we'll be a family again, as long as we try for what is good, truly for one another, please... Just be happy and home like all the others – why can't you? (2:206)

²² Berkowitz, Gerald M: **American Drama of the Twentieth Century**, Longman, London & NewYork, 1992, p.143.

As a matter of fact, the expectations of the family from David represent the way the dominant discourse monitors the actions of those individuals under its hegemony. Within the Foucauldian context, such an expectation defines the process of how “power works through discourses and, like ideology, gives the subject the impression that to comply with its dictates is the natural thing to do and thus a free, autonomous decision.”²³ Yet, this situation can be accepted as another collective delusion of the society in question. However, David, during his absence from this society has been exempt from the impact of its ideology and, has developed a subjective consciousness in the course of his confrontation with another culture. With this new consciousness David is able to reject the old ideologies he was administered:

David:... there were old voices inside me I had trusted all my life as if they were my own. I didn't know I shouldn't hear them. So reasonable and calm they seemed a source of wisdom... and now I know that I was not awake but asleep, and in my sleep... there is nothing. (1:177)

David begins to criticize the ideology of the society embodied in the life style of the Nelson family. In his physical blindness he tries to show his family how they in turn are mentally blinded to reality with these words: “You don't know how when you finally see yourself, there's nothing really there to see.”(2:214) He tries to show them the big illusion they are living in and declares his desperate desire to change this order:

David: This house is a coffin. You made it big so you wouldn't know, but that's what it is, and not all the curtains and pictures and lamps in the world can change it... Do you know, Dad, it seems sometimes I would rise and slam with my fists into the walls of this house... In time I'll show you some things. You'll see them. I will be your father. (1:194 -195)

These attitudes of David signal his intention to subvert the conventional order of society. His actions are in fact, a challenge and resistance to the powerful hegemony of the dominant discourse. Towards the end of the play, he makes a confession to that effect: “I wanted... to change... to kill you... all of you” (2:222) David's stance is proof to his desire to change and

²³ Foucault, Michel: **Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings**, (ed.) Colin Gordon, Wheatsheaf, London, 1980, p. 179.

re-construct the actual hegemony as well. This character's case can be taken as an example for Raymond Williams's interpretation of the concept:

Hegemony is not singular... its own internal structures are highly complex, and have continually to be renewed, recreated and defended... they can be continually challenged and in certain respects modified...²⁴

David's situation can also be interpreted as the "emergent strain" which offers an alternative perspective to the dominant discourse. As for Williams, the dominant culture is

never more than one player in the cultural field... There are always residual and emergent strains within a culture that offer alternatives to what Gramsci called the hegemony... In other words, the dominant culture is always under pressure from alternative views and beliefs...²⁵

When the family realize that David is serious in his destructive intentions they turn defensive and make it clear to him that their order cannot and shall not be changed. They are happy in their collective delusion and they will continue to live that way. Even Rick who has been indifferent to the family problems shows his reaction:

Rick: *savagely he smashes his guitar down upon David, who crumbles*
Let Dad alone. Let us alone. We're sick of you. What the hell is the matter with you? We don't wanna talk anymore about all the stupid stuff you talk. We want to talk about cake and cookies and cars and coffee... We're sick a you and we want you to shut up. We hate you, goddamn you. (2:216-217)

The constant struggle between David and the family can be explained in Raymond Williams's perspective with "its far more flexible notion of ideology, hegemony and counterhegemonic tendencies [which] struggle with each other in a... culture [and are] constantly in motion."²⁶ Although David is not the winner of this struggle between

²⁴ Williams, Raymond: **Culture and Society**, Penguin, Harmondsworth , 1961, p. 146.

²⁵Higgins, John: *Raymond Williams: Literature, Marxism and Cultural Materialism*, Routledge, London and NewYork, , 1999, p.186.

²⁶ Williams, Raymond: **Culture and Society**, Penguin, Harmondsworth , 1961, p. 189.

‘hegemony’ and ‘counterhegemony’ he is presented to the reader/audience as a nonconformist character going “against the grain, offering dissidence that makes us hear the socially marginalized and expose the ideological machinery that is responsible for their marginalization and exclusion.”²⁷

Besides the ‘politics of class’ which accompanies the interpretation of *Sticks and Bones* up to this point, a ‘politics of race’ can also be observed throughout the play centered on David’s relationship with the Vietnamese girl, Zung. The invisible Zung who symbolizes the transformed consciousness and guilty conscience of David is the surreal element in the play. Zung as the representative identity of a minority group, a member of a different culture and an alien race can be accepted as ‘the Other’. She is different and her difference is accepted as a potential threat to the Nelsons and their ideology. From this perspective, she is also the embodiment of “the emergent strain” in Raymond William’s terms, the alternative view which mounts an immediate attack on the dominant culture. The social order and the ideology of the family are threatened when they realize David’s inclination to and intentions about David’s inclination to and Zung because, the probable unity of David with Zung would be inimical to the cultural ideology that used to inscribe the conventional institutions of marriage and family. Thus, both as an act of refusal and a defense mechanism, the racial hatred of the family members is directed towards Zung:

Ozzie: roaring down at David, I don’t want to hear about her. I’m not interested in her. You did what you did and I’m no part of it... (And his voice is possessed with astonished loathing) LOOK... AT...HIM! YOU MAKE ME WANT TO VOMIT... I MEAN I JUST CAN’T STOP THINKING ABOUT IT. LITTLE BITTY CHINKY KIDS HE WANTED TO HAVE. LITTLE BITTY CHINKY YELLOW KIDS!... FOR OUR GRANDCHILDREN. LITTLE BITTYYELLOW PUFFY – CREATURES. (1:173-174)

²⁷ Ibid. p.187.

As the playwright David Rabe also mentions, the prejudices of the Christian religion directed towards Zung are embodied in the identity of the priest Father Donald who from time to time makes an appearance on stage mainly to console the family:

Father Donald: It was demonstrated beyond any possible doubt that people – soldiers – who are compelled for some reason not even they themselves understand to establish personal sexual relationship with whores are inferior to those who don't; they're maladjusted, embittered, non-goal oriented misfits. The sexual acceptance of another person, David, is intimate and extreme; this kind of acceptance of an alien race is in fact the rejection of one's own self – it is sickness... (2:188)

In Vietnam, the relationship between David as an American soldier and Zung as a native girl reminds the reader/audience of the relationship between “the colonizer” and “the colonized.” As already mentioned above, David has developed a new consciousness and constructed a new identity for himself during his stay and experiences in Vietnam. This changed self is structured partly under the influence of Zung; in other words, drawing on Lacan's views, his “identity is constructed in interaction with ‘others’ and with ‘the Other’.”²⁸ At this point, even Homi Bhabha's example of the encounter between colonizer and colonized would seem to come relevant. Bhabha explains:

The colonial experience also affects the colonizer. More specifically... the colonizer cannot escape a complex and paradoxical relationship with the colonized... The identity of the colonizer... cannot very well be separated from that of the colonized, or at least from the supposed identity of the colonized... Instead of being self-sufficient with regard to his identity, the colonizer at least partly constructs it through interaction with the colonized. The colonizer's identity has no ‘origin’ in himself and is not a fixed entity, but is differential...²⁹

From this perspective, Zung's power over David and his new consciousness and identity becomes an implacable influence. This influence becomes evident when David speaks to the invisible Zung in the following manner:

²⁸ Bertens, Hans: **Literary Theory – The Basics**, Routledge, London & New York, 1995, p. 84

David. I didn't know you were here... I have lived with them all my life. I will make them not hate you... They will see you. The seasons will amaze you... There will be time... And it will be as it was in that moment when we looked in the dark and our eyes were tongues that could speak and the hurting... all of it... stopped, and there was total understanding in you of me and in me of you... and... such delight in your eyes that I felt it... 'She's the thing most possibly of value in my life' I said, 'She's all of everything impossible made possible'... (1:176-177)

The influence or power of Zung over David can also be interpreted in the light of Frantz Fanon's observations about the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized. Fanon suggests that the native takes pride in demonstrating that "he has assimilated – that is mastered – the culture of the occupying power."³⁰ Yet, in this case the proud native is not a 'he', but a 'she.' In other words, if David stands as the representative of "occupying power," Zung the she-native has clearly overpowered him.

Another trope that may be relevant to the relationship between David and Zung is Bhabha's concept of "colonial hybridity" which he explains thus:

[...] the cultural interaction of colonizer and colonized leads to a fusion of cultural forms that from one perspective, because it signals its 'productivity', confirms the power of the colonial presence...³¹

In the context of the play, an instance of colonial hybridity might be the possibility of a hybrid grandchild being born to the Nelson family. However, Harriet's reaction to this possibility reflects both her racist odium towards and also her fear of being conquered by the 'Other':

Harriet: The human face was not meant to be that way. A nose is a thinness – you know that. And lips that are not thin are ugly, and it is we who

²⁹Bhabha, Homi K.: 'Postcolonial Criticism', in Stephen Greenblatt and Giles Gunn (ed) *Redrawing Boundaries: The Transformation Of English and American Studies*, MLA, New York, 1992, p.438

³⁰Fanon qtd. in Bertens, Hans: *Literary Theory – The Basics*, Routledge, London & New York, 1995, p. 106.

³¹Bhabha, Homi K.: 'Postcolonial Criticism', in Stephen Greenblatt and Giles Gunn (ed) *Redrawing Boundaries: The Transformation Of English and American Studies*, MLA, New York, 1992, p.112

disappear, David. They don't change, and we are gone. It is our triumph, our whiteness. We disappear... They take us back and down if our children are theirs – it is not a mingling of blood, it is theft. (2:208-209)

This possibility is the biggest threat to – or in Raymond Williams's terms the “pressure of the emergent strain” on – the dominant culture, and it can never be tolerated. In order to thwart this ‘loathsome’ possibility, Zung is strangled to death and David is invited to commit suicide so as to wipe out all traces of this dire prospect. It is also very ironical that Rick – David's insensible and irresponsible brother – should be the one who forces David to kill himself in the way of restoring the lost order:

Rick. Hey Dave, listen, will you. I mean I know it's not my place to speak out and give advice and everything because I'm the youngest, but I just gotta say my honest true feelings and I'd kill myself if I were you, Dave. You're in too much misery, I'd cut my wrists. Honestly speaking, brother to brother, you should have done it long ago... Do you want to use my razor, Dave?... I have one right here and you can use it if you want. (2:220-221)

The parents also join in with Rick in his inducement of David to commit suicide. Thus, David kills himself with the whole-hearted support of the Nelsons as in a family ritual:

Harriet: Go ahead, David. The front yard's empty. You don't have to be afraid. The streets, too... still and empty. (2:221)
Ozzie: And then, of course, we die, too... Later on, I mean. And nothing stops it. Not words... or wall... or even guitars. (2:222)

Following David's suicide, the preservation of ideology and the maintenance of order and harmony in the family are schematized by the playwright David Rabe in the *Author's Note* in the following style:

At the start, the family is happy and orderly, and then David comes home and he is unhappy. As the play progresses, he becomes happier and they become unhappier. Then, at the end, they are happy.³²

³² Rabe, David: **Sticks and Bones: Two Plays** by David Rabe, The Viking Pres, NewYork, 1979, p 226

As a matter of fact, this happiness or false illusion gained by the maintenance of the old order is interpreted by Foucault as a self-imposed imprisonment suffered by individuals: “In the modern world we, the citizens, are ‘the bearers’ of our own figurative, mental, imprisonment.”³³ For the same situation, Althusser comes up with a similar diagnosis: “We are complicit in our own confinement.”³⁴ In like manner, at the end of the play the Nelsons, after obliterating all the threats inimical to their ideal family image, are doomed to be imprisoned in their wrong ideology and remain mired in their false happiness.

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³³ Foucault, Michel: **Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings**, (ed.) Colin Gordon, Wheatsheaf, London, 1980, p. 68.

³⁴ Althusser, Louis: *Lenin and Philosophy and other Essays*, New Left Books, London, 1971, p.22.

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Abstract

David Rabe's play Sticks and Bones depicts the encounter between David, the protagonist who returns home from the Vietnam War a blinded and traumatized veteran, and his family, the Nelsons who represent the happy middle-class American family. In general, the play is not about the experiences of David in Vietnam; the focus being mainly on his inability to adapt himself to the ideology of American society on his return. This study attempts to explore how and why David becomes a threat for his family and society from the political aspect. 'The politics of race' and 'the politics of class' will formulate the interpretations of the play as two major modes of political reading.

Key Words: *Political reading, Vietnam syndrome, David Rabe, social ideology, American family.*

Sticks And Bones Oyununun Politik Okuması

Öz

David Rabe'nin oyunu Sticks and Bones, Vietnam Savaşından dönen David'in ailesiyle ilişkilerine ve savaş travmasıyla nasıl yaşayacağına, topluma nasıl uyum sağlayacağına dair meseleleri sorgulamaya odaklanır. Bu çalışma David'in ailesine ve topluma nasıl ve neden bir tehdit oluşturduğunu politik yanı açısından inceleyecektir. "İrkçi politikalar" ve "sınıf politikaları" politik okumanın iki temel unsuru olarak oyunun yorumlanmasını biçimlendirecektir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Politik okuma, Vietnam sendromu, David Rabe, toplumsal ideoloji, Amerikan ailesi.*