

# **Resistance in *Calm Down Mother* and *We Keep Our Victims Ready*\***

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## **Abstract**

With industrialization, the significance of the body has become remarkable because the productivity of the body is needed to be controlled. Michel Foucault, one of the well-known critiques of the 20th century, focused on power and body and emphasized the relation in his essay, entitled “The Subject and Power”. According to Foucault, power-holders shape bodies and minds through formal and informal institutions, yet his works have been highly criticized and developed by critics, including Sandra Lee Bartky, Susan Bordo, and Judith Butler. These critics have also discussed the relationship between body and power, criticized the patriarchal system that exerts power on women bodies, and claimed that women bodies are turned into desirable objects. Megan Terry’s *Calm Down Mother* and Karen Finley’s *We Keep Our Victims Ready* are examples of feminist works, in which the traditional place of women in society, social pressure on women, and female embodiment are questioned. The purpose of the essay is to analyze *Calm Down Mother* and *We Keep Our Victims Ready* in terms of Sandra Lee Bartky and Susan Bordo’s feminist approach.

**Keywords:** Body and Power, Susan Bordo, Sandra Lee Bartky, Karen Finley, Megan Terry

## ***Calm Down Mother ve We Keep Our Victims Ready*'de Direniş**

### **Öz**

Sanayileşme ile birlikte bedenin üretkenliğinin kontrol edilmesi gerektiğinden dolayı bedenin önemi dikkat çekici hale geldi. 20. yüzyılın tanınmış eleştirmenlerinden Michel Foucault, “The Subject and Power” başlıklı makalesinde iktidar ve bedene odaklanmış ve ikisi arasındaki ilişkiye vurgu yapmıştır. Foucault'ya göre, iktidar sahipleri bedenleri ve zihinleri resmi ve gayri resmi kurumlar aracılığıyla şekillendirir, ancak Foucault'nun eserleri Sandra Lee Bartky, Susan Bordo ve Judith Butler dâhil olmak üzere feminist eleştirmenler tarafından oldukça eleştirildi ve geliştirildi. Bu eleştirmenler aynı zamanda beden ve iktidar arasındaki ilişkiyi tartışmış, kadın bedeni üzerinde güç uygulayan ataerkil sistemi eleştirmiş ve kadın bedeninin arzu edilen bir nesneye dönüştürüldüğünü iddia etmiştir. Megan Terry'nin *Calm Down Mother* ve Karen Finley'nin *We Keep Our Victims Ready* adlı eserleri, kadının toplum içindeki geleneksel yerinin, kadın üzerindeki toplumsal baskının ve kadın bedenleşmesinin sorgulandığı feminist çalışmalara örnektir. Makalenin amacı, *Calm Down Mother* ve *We Keep Our Victims Ready* eserlerini Susan Bordo ve Sandra Lee Bartky'nin feminist yaklaşımları ile analiz etmektir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Beden ve İktidar, Susan Bordo, Sandra Lee Bartky, Karen Finley, Megan Terry

## **Introduction**

With industrialization, the significance of the body has become remarkable in that the efficiency of the body was fundamental in the modern period because the productivity of the body needed to be controlled. Michel Foucault, one of the well-known critiques of the 20th century, focused on power and body and emphasized the relationship in his book “The Subject and Power” (Foucault, 2000). According to Foucauldian prospect, power-holders shape bodies and minds through formal institutions, bound by law, such as schools and prisons, and informal institutions, determined by society, such as family and religious groups. Foucault’s studies were highly criticized and developed by critics, including Sandra Lee Bartky and Susan Bordo.

The relation between body and power has also been discussed by feminists, who criticize the patriarchal system that exerts power on women bodies, and claim that women bodies are turned into a desirable objects. Megan Terry and Karen Finley are significant figures who have breathed a new life into feminist studies with their outstanding performances as female artists. Megan Terry’s *Calm Down Mother* and Karen Finley’s *We Keep Our Victims Ready* are canonical works that criticize objectified female bodies and determined gender roles of men and women. In these two playwrights, Finley and Terry question the traditional place of women in society, social pressure on women, and female embodiment. The purpose of the essay is to analyze *Calm Down Mother* and *We Keep Our Victims Ready* in terms of Sandra Lee Bartky and Susan Bordo’s feminist approach.

## **Power and Body Relation**

In “Foucault, Femininity, and the Modernization of Patriarchal Power”, Sandra Lee Bartky criticizes the impositions on women exposed by society can be concluded as

women are obligated to be thin, feminine, ready to be attractive, etc. For Bartky, “[t]he current body of fashion is taut, small-breasted, narrow-hipped, and of a slimness bordering on emaciation...” (Bartky, 1998: 64). Society creates unrealistic beauty standards that limit the freedom of people -mostly women but also men- to perform impractical standards. It causes people to live at the edge of the abyss as if it might befall any time when it is gone out of these standards since it keeps changing and improving itself every day with the new fashion, culture, and consumptive competition of society. Pressures on women do not only appeal only to physical appearance it also narrows the mind, as Bartky states “...disciplinary control of the body has gotten a hold on the mind as well.” (Bartky, 1998: 63). For Bartky (1998), like many others, these are the results of modernization and a patriarchal system which have monitored and controlled women for a very long time. “In contemporary patriarchal culture, a panoptical male connoisseur resides within the consciousness of most women: they stand perpetually before his gaze and under his judgment.” (Bartky, 1998: 72). Despite being exposed to the male gaze, most are not aware of it: women struggle to fit into the standards of the society, and no one can blame them for this; otherwise, they would be alienated from the mainstream society where any women do the same. They are not aware of what they expose to due to the fact that they were forced to accept them a very long time ago when the patriarchy became the sovereign power. They get accustomed to it through official and non-official institutions. Foucault explains these institutions in “The Subject and Power” as follows:

*These may mix traditional predispositions, legal structures, phenomena relating to custom or fashion (such as one sees in the institution of the family); they can also take the form of an apparatus closed in upon itself... (such as scholastic or military institutions); they can also form very complex systems endowed with multiple apparatuses, as in the case of the state. (Foucault, 2000: 792)*

These institutions are so powerful and non-representational that it is difficult to realize since it is embraced in every way. Foucault draws attention to “the objectivization of the productive subject” which is very significant for the modern human when everything turns around productivity. Power holders can be replaced by others and old traditions can be left and replaced by new ones which are produced in line with the needs of the changing society, as Foucault exemplifies: “...the modern Western state has integrated into a new political shape an old technique which originated in Christian institutions.”

(Foucault, 2000: 782). It can be deduced that the modern Western state is a new religion that replaces Christianity. As a consequence of the change at the source of power, the promises of the old-fashioned power are replaced with others as well. *“It was no longer a question of leading people to their salvation in the next world but rather ensuring it in this world... ‘salvation’ takes on different meanings: health, well-being...security, protection against accidents”* (Foucault, 2000: 784).

Susan Bordo discusses the aspects of the politics of the body and deliberates Foucauldian point of view in “Feminism, Foucault and the Politics of the body” (Bordo, 1993). Moreover, she breaks his thoughts into fragments and claims that feminists had embraced Foucauldian terminology before Foucault theorized it. She highlights the significance of biopolitics in order to figure out today’s power relations and their consequences on bodies. So as to make clear the importance of the institutions that shape the body, Bordo uses this quotation from Johnson: *“Population size, gender formation, the control of children and of those thought to be deviant from the society’s ethics are major concerns of political organization -and all concentrate on the definition and shaping of the body”* (Johnson, 1989: 6). She exemplifies the movements, rebellions, and resistances of women against the power holding on to their own bodies and minds, and “No More Miss America”, “bra burners” are the instances of these resistances against patriarchy. Bordo does not believe that Foucault explains his term “resistance” accurately because she says *“I am concerned about the recent theoretical over-appropriation...of some of Foucault’s more ‘postmodern’ ideas about resistance”* (Bordo, 1993: 192). Like many others, Bordo emphasizes that Foucault asserts the body and power terminology; however, he does not emphasize the term resistance.

*Calm Down Mother* written by Megan Terry was published in 1966 during the period of second-wave feminism, yet the issues Terry discusses are still current. In the play, three women act out multiple characters who have different problems, the reason for that is the main problem is the same for most women which is oppressing women. *Calm Down Mother* celebrates differences of sexes rather than refusing differences between men and women and considering two different sexes as the same. She gives place to variegated female characters each has peculiar stories; therefore, Terry’s *Calm Down Mother* praises

diversity by showing divorced, young, old, conservative, and black women. In the first act, two women struggle to determine their identities; one says that she is Margaret Fuller, yet she does not decide it by herself but rather the identity suggested to her by her father. Repetitively she mentions that she had better if she is Margaret Fuller: “You had better. You had better. Carlyle said that you had better. You had better. You had better. You bet your butter, Carlyle said that you had better” (Terry, 1966: 258). Terry, in *Calm Down Mother* (1966), criticizes the mindset that a woman had better accept the identity given to her by a man.

The scene about the hair, also, demonstrates the “proper appearance” assigned to women and it is criticized by Terry in the playwright. The character, Esther, says that “*All girls got hairs*” (259) and it can be concluded that it is a notion for women: they are supposed to have hair because “[i]t’s important to a girl for God’s sake” (260). As Bartky says: “*There are significant gender differences in gesture, posture, movement, and general bodily comportment: women are far more restricted than men in their manner of movement and their spatiality*” (Bartky, 1998: 66). At this point, in the play, hair takes an important place; Sophie is a woman who has had no hair since she has surgery. There is a notion that is ingrained in society that womanhood is related to hair. Bartky explains it “*The disciplinary project of femininity is a ‘setup’: it requires such radical and extensive measures of bodily transformation that virtually every woman who gives herself to it is destined in some degree to fail...the body she inhabits is deficient: she ought to take better care of herself*” (Bartky, 1998: 71). As Bartky conceptualizes, women are constrained to behave according to the beauty standards of the societies in which they live. In different circumstances, those who are not ‘appropriate’ are alienated from society.

Birth control is as significant as the other issues in the play: in scene six, three women characters discuss the idea of birth control, and the scene passes in a tenement between prostitutes. While the two characters have opposed the idea of birth control, one of them supports it and claims that women can decide what they want and determine their own future:

*Guys got seeds and girls got seeds, and if that old old garden planter all the damn seeds in the first place, he fixed it so’s they wouldn’t all grow. They fall on the*

*ground of their own accord, so then? So then, who the hell, then, then who the holy hell are all these priests and magazine writers to say it's wrong? Who the hell are all these guys on platforms to say you can't take pills, you can't use rubbers, down with Vaseline, out with diaphragms, who the hell then are they? For God's sake. They're all preventing life!* (Finley, 1966: 276)

Another woman, Sak, rejects this idea by saying: *"Make her stop talking like that, Ma. It's just you, Sue, you feeling guilty. You, 'cause you're taking the pills and you know you shouldn't ought"* (276). Sak considers that she is not supposed to take those pills, and she imposes them as if it is a rule. From the Foucauldian perspective, it is the instance of the family institution that disciplines its members. *"...and the relationships of power are adjusted to one another according to considered formulae, constitute what one might call, enlarging a little the sense of the word, 'disciplines'"* (Foucault, 2000: 788). Even if the family is an informal institution, the mother, puts pressure on her daughters, and one of them is successful at resisting it. Sue is the one who advocates her ideas on birth control contrary to her mother and sister. She resists the idea that anyone has a right to comment on the female body. Terry accentuates it not only through Sue but also through transformations. At the end of scene four, the women transform into a subway door, and they open and close. At the same time, they say: *"Please keep your hands off the doors"*. Since its image, it resembles a vagina. Terry gives an important message to the audience that they are untouchable. As the female body has been objected to for a long period, she wishes those who touch it to take their hands off. Women do not consent to bare any longer pressure or borders even if that border is a "tailpin". In the end, all women say: *"Our bellies,/ Our funnies,/ Our bellies,/ Our eggies, / Our eggies in our begins,/ Are enough,/ Are they"* (Terry). It is a strong resistance against patriarchy, institutions, female embodiment, and objectification of bodies. All the characters that actresses act in different ways turn into one, and all together they repeat these stanzas. Women become one in the face of ones who are against their existence. As a radical feminist, Terry tells them: *"Accept existence or expect resistance"* through her play.

Karen Finley is a sensational performance artist who has a broad repercussion in the press and society. She puts different materials on her body in front of her audience while performing to draw attention to the female body and its marginalization. Similar to the

characters of Megan Terry, Karen Finley herself transforms into different characters on the stage. In *We Keep Our Victims Ready*, Finley begins with the criticism of censorship since she is censored like the artworks in the museum. In the first scene, a woman is at home talking: “*even though my husband goes to work there every day. I am a committed waitress and mother, who looks forward to purchasing a new thousand dollar sofa set. Isn't that what working is for?*” (Finley, 1990: 104). Finley, from the beginning, declares the gender roles assigned to men and women; while men belong to the business world, they can work, and women are supposed to be mothers and be at home. Moreover, she says: “*No wonder the entire psyche of women is universally coached to be as desirable as possible, as boring as possible, as cute as possible. Obviously, it's for the survival of the female species*” (104). Finley discusses that a woman can survive only if she is cute, desirable, and boring, in this way, she shows the expectations of society from women. Furthermore, Finley questions the inequality of genders as follows: “*Women are discriminated against from not working the dinner shift for their option of hiring men. Equality?*” (Finley, 1990: 105) Finley as a liberal feminist wants to have rights and equality. She reveals that people can find the female body abject. Finley criticizes by saying “*...customers find a pregnant woman serving food unappetizing*” (Finley, 1990: 105). Patriarchy makes the female body the other which is not the same as the male body.

In *We Keep Our Victims Ready*, Finley reminds the women who died, as she says that the women who were killed by an important men like Kennedys, in the past are forgotten now like Marilyn Monroe and Mary Jo Kopechne. While Marilyn Monroe was a popular cultural figure, which makes it easy to remember, Mary Jo Kopechne was a teacher and secretary who was killed. Besides these women, Finley remembers the women “who have been raped and murdered” in Central Park. From the most popular to the less known, Finley salutes all women who have lost their lives led by men. Their rights were not taken from them, instead, they were never given to them. Women even cannot control the decisions of their own bodies; abortion is one of the prohibitions that they are not allowed to decide. The female body becomes grotesque/ abject. “*She lay dying in the basement— they found rats eating her insides out*” (Finley, 1990). It makes the audience disgusted. The abject is a term used by Julia Kristeva that means “the state of being cast off”. In this case, the female body becomes the cast-off. As long as women behave properly for the



norms of society, she has a place in it. “*A woman must always be a mother*” (Finley, 1990) is an intensity of the standards of society welcomes if one is a mother. Finley discusses who has power over the female body. “*It’s my body / It’s not Pepsi’s body / It’s not Nancy Reagan’s body / It’s not Congress’s body / It’s not the Supreme Court’s body / It’s not Cosmopolitans’ pink twat body*” (Finley, 1990). Finley defines the institutions that have the power to discipline the female body. These institutions are media, society, history, religion, justice, etc. It is everybody but not women themselves. As the scenes pass, Finley adds other materials to her body, and she uses her body as a text since she wishes to give a message. Finley embraces all kinds of people who are exploited and excluded, such as homosexuals, blacks, and women. They feel each other’s pain, loss, and grief as Finley says: “I feel your pain”. She opens her arms to those isolated from society and its unrealistic standards. As a significant resistance, she transforms all these people into one who suffers together.

*We Keep Our Victims Ready* and *Calm Down Mother* are the plays that influenced American society deeply. In a period when women do not speak and are quite for being accustomed to the expositions of patriarchy Karen Finley and Megan Terry stand for their existences/voices, which, as a result, whether it would penetrate them or they would resist it. It is because women have been criticized for being too feminine, not enough feminine, being mother, not being mother, being pretty, not being enough pretty, for being attractive, for being shabby. In a society where a person feels insecure people do anything to make him feel more insecure since power is nourished by others’ insecurities. Foucault has a role in the feminist discourse, which makes him related to the plays. In order to understand the theories of feminism, Terry and Finley’s perspectives, and Foucault’s conceptions should be analyzed deeply. The missing part in Foucault’s theories, which is criticized by Susan Bardo has been carried into effect by Terry and Finley, resistance.

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