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A.E. HOUSMAN'S BIO-DRAMA(TIC) JOURNEY IN TOM STOPPARD'S *THE INVENTION OF LOVE*

Tom Stoppard'ın *Aşkın İcadı* Oyununda A.E. Housman'ın Bio-Drama(tik) Yolculuğu

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Abstract

This study highlights the compulsive sexuality of Housman for his love towards his classmate, Jackson. The moral codes of the era enforced Housman to keep his feelings secret since Victorian society prohibited homosexual affairs. Therefore, Housman was compelled to hide his desires stemming from his desperate love. The Invention of Love turns around the ambition of Housman for his homosexual identity. At the same time, Stoppard's play is one of the best examples of bio-drama which consists of the words "biography" and "drama". In this respect, the aim of this study is to reveal how the playwright uncovers Housman's homosexual tendencies from Foucauldian perspective through bio-drama.

Keywords: Stoppard, Foucault, homosexuality, love, bio-drama.

Öz

*Bu çalışma, Housman'ın sınıf arkadaşı olan Jackson'a duyduğu derin aşkıdan dolayı takıntılı hale gelen çarpık cinsellik dürtülerini yansıtmaktadır. Viktorya Döneminin ahlak ve toplumsal kuralları eşcinsel ilişkileri yasakladığı için, Housman duygularını bütün koşullar altında gizli tutmak zorunda kalmıştır. Bu nedenden dolayı Housman, hem cinsi olan Jackson'a karşı duymuş olduğu derin aşktan kaynaklanan arzularını gizleyerek toplum koşullarına ayak uydurmaya çalışmaktadır. *Aşkın İcadı* adlı bu oyun, Housman'ın eşcinsel kimliğine yönelik tutkusunun etrafında dönmektedir. Stoppard'ın bu oyunu aynı zamanda, biyografi ve drama kelimelerinden oluşan bio-dramanın en güzel örneklerinden biridir. Bu bağlamda çalışmanın amacı, yazarın Housman'ın eşcinsel eğilimlerini Foucault'un bakış açısıyla birlikte bio-drama aracılığıyla nasıl ortaya çıkardığını göstermektir.*

Anahtar Kelimeler: Stoppard, Foucault, eşcinsellik, aşk, bio-drama.

1. INTRODUCTION

I write plays because writing a dialogue is the only respectable way of contradicting yourself. I am the kind of person who embarks on an endless leapfrog down the great moral issues. I put a position, rebut it, refute the rebuttal, and rebut the refutation. Forever, Endlessly. (qtd. in Gussow, p.3).

Tom Stoppard's life has a profound influence on his works. His

experiences as a refugee during World War II, enduring the loss of a parent, a culturally eclectic education in India and England, his career as a theatre critic, and finding his own creative voice in the chaotic decade of the 1960s have affected his works for the stage (Nadel, p.7). Tom Stoppard, also known as Thomas Straussler, was born in 1937 in Czechoslovakia. After the loss of his father, her mother married Kenneth Stoppard, a British officer who adopted him and moved them to England.

A rootless British existence, disrupting the comfortable and predictable patterns of school may have affected Stoppard's attitudes about education. Reflecting upon this period, Stoppard talks about his early life as an English schoolboy: "I was thoroughly bored by the idea of anything intellectual, Shakespeare and Dickens did nothing but bore and alienate me. I would gladly sell all my Greek and Latin classics to George's Bookshop" (Rusinko, p.2). After his completion of the most basic British scholastic conditions, Stoppard gained employment as a newspaper journalist for Bristol's *Western Daily Press*. He spent his four years at the paper developing from covering municipal meetings and bus strikes to writing regular arts features.

Graduating to the *Bristol Evening World* as a drama critic gave Stoppard the opportunity to enter the theatre community of Southwestern England. He started to produce sensational plays which are mostly about political independence, censorship, liberating tradition, and human rights. In addition to all these, it is true that he is courageous enough to cope with topics that defy established norms of the societies. As a matter of fact, the subject of his works changes from moral philosophies to metaphysics.

Stoppard has been examining man's power of self-determination and his capacity to deal with oppressive situations. This remains one of his principal themes, along with the variability of memory and the unreliability of the lessons of history. Additionally, there are generally two consistent themes in his plays. The first one is the nature of identity and the next one is the transformative power of ideas. As a person who was separated from his country, enduring the loss of a parent, Stoppard's exploration of the nature of identity has been an ongoing process. Having personally experienced the simple, and yet, the life-altering process of changing names, Stoppard has addressed this point numerous times in his works. To illustrate, changing names and roles in life is the focus of the *Real Inspector Hound* which was written in 1968. Similarly, *Rosencratz & Guildenstern Are Dead* can be given as an example since two theatre critics are pulled on stage and become differently named characters within the play (Nadel, p.201).

Moreover, Stoppard's dramas are formed in a clever way. He uses the dramatic form as well as words and language quite effectively, and therefore his plays are not only performed well but also read easily. As a matter of fact, the plays are extremely understandable. The devices Stoppard uses and the tricks he plays all serve some end in achieving the impact of his themes (McNabb, p.8). Stoppard explains how he regards the audience with his own words upon a question in his conversation with Mel Gussow. He states: "I mentally define my audience as people like the jokes I like" (p.4). This statement strongly proves that he takes the audience into consideration while writing his works, and he has a good sense of humor.

Stoppard is always unpredictable in terms of subject matter, that is, one never knows where he will alight next. With his early plays, he found an identity in the world of philosophy, then moved into areas of science. Through his characters, he offers opinions, but he leaves conclusions to his audience. Tom Stoppard is well-known for his gift to make fun of the ironies of life. In his plays, he challenges the watchers to catch up with a kind of English intellectualism which enjoys the accepted ideals from the classical world. In other words, Stoppard lets the audience see far beyond the ideal into paradox (Haill, p.5).

2. THE THEORETICAL BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

The Invention of Love (1997) is a good example of bio-drama which consists of the words "biography" and "drama". In this play, Stoppard reflects his homosexual inclinations by constructing the work under the category of bio-drama. In this respect, the purpose of this article is to demonstrate how Stoppard succeeds in showing homosexual tendencies via bio-drama by focusing on Foucault's understanding of sexuality.

The term "bio-drama" is applicable to any theatrical activities that have at its center the people's private life known to have emerged and about whom all the action of the performance turns around. In fact, bio-drama would essentially be categorized under historical drama even though it presents a narrow and limited vision because of its emphasis on the specific person. Although it is not completely the same, bio-drama usually employs identical construction as other forms of realistic plays.

Sex has always been thought as a biological activity. People approach sex for candid emotional pleasure rather than new generation of the society. In this way, the main function of sex turns into secondary to its main aim as a medium for satisfaction has gradually expanded over the last decades, From this perspective, modern societies changed into society of sex

for Foucault. In other words, the right of sexual choice became the target of individuals. In the scope of sexuality, homosexuality should not be ignored since it is the product of sexual sensibility. In his *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault gives his detailed theory on the idea of sexuality. He states that sexuality is the result of historical power which is employed upon the body. He maintains that sex is a cultural construct:

We must not make the mistake of thinking that sex is an autonomous agency which secondarily produces manifold effects of sexuality over the entire length of its surface of contact with power. On the contrary, sex is the most speculative, most ideal most internal element in a deployment of sexuality organized by power” (p.155).

The subject of sex has always been rooted in human history. In specific cultures, individuals even refrain from talking about it since they regard it as taboo. As a matter of fact, being silent has dominated the concept of sex and folks prefer not to reveal their zeal towards sex in order not to disregard the general moral tendencies. According to Michel Foucault, "if sex is repressed, that is, condemned to prohibition, nonexistence, and silence, then the mere fact that one is speaking about it has the appearance of a deliberate transgression" (1998, p.12). The social codes restrict people's pursuit of independence and reality. In other words, homosexuality comes into existence as an inverse discussion and entails great attention to expose its legitimacy. This means that homosexuality should not be considered as an established part of knowledge instead of an invented identity for Foucault.

3. PORTRAYAL OF A.E. HOUSMAN'S LIFE IN *THE INVENTION OF LOVE*

The Invention of Love is about A.E. Housman who passed away at the age of 77, in that, it concentrates on his ultimate homosexual feelings for his school friend, Jackson. It mentions the life of poet Alfred Edward Housman as a classical scholar. This play starts with Housman's dead, standing close to the River Styx. Stoppard presents AEH at the opening of the play when he rests on the bank of the Styx staring at the approach of the ferryman: "AEH, aged seventy-seven and getting no older, wearing a buttoned-up dark suit and neat black boots" (1). Stoppard's description is indicative of Housman as a repressed man entangled in the tomb. The audiences understand later that he is just hallucinating even though he is on his deathbed.

The dream of Housman and his speech with Charon act as a frame

throughout the play which starts by bringing the audience back to his college days at the end of the 19th century. People come to the realization that Housman is deeply in love with a man named Moses Jackson. Throughout the play, Housman endures an inner fight between being truthful about his emotions towards Jackson and hiding his suffering as a homosexual man in the depth of his heart. Housman states that “I have decade-long un-requested love for Jackson” (p.7). This expression is adequate to understand that he is homosexually in love with Jackson although he just approaches Housman as a close friend.

The play consists of two acts. The first one involves a dream-like narration between Housman and his younger self. The dream turns back a few times to a bout trip which is accompanied by Housman, Jackson, and one of their friends, Pollard. The second act is about Housman’s failure of graduation exams, and he spends his time with Jackson who acts quite indifferent to his feelings. Housman is compelled to reveal his love which Jackson cannot accept and as a result, they are separated. Housman returns to his literary career as a classical scholar at Cambridge and writes a sophisticated long poem conceivably mused by his affair with Jackson. The playwright puts the life of A.E Housman at the core of his work. He focused on the life of scholarship and discovers the aspects that old writings are slanted during the times. Stoppard also searches how sexual identities are imposed on the specific individual. In the same way, Foucault highlights that “homosexuality appeared as one of the forms of sexuality when it was transposed from the practice of sodomy onto a kind of interior androgyny, a hermaphroditism of the soul” (p.43). As a matter of fact, homosexuality is simply a personal choice which reacts against the hegemony of heterogeneity since it comes into existence as a reverse context.

The playwright depicts Housman as a naïve man who has ardent love and passion for a classmate. Housman admits his real senses while he goes across the river Styx: “AEH: ... Oh, Mo! I would have died for you but I never had the luck. [...] My greatest friend and comrade Moses Jackson” (p.5). This shows that Stoppard puts the life of A.E. Housman at the core of his play. Additionally, it reveals Housman’s inner challenge of admitting to Jackson while both were students at Oxford. He senses restricted by the traditional law which refrains a man from revealing his homosexual interest to another man. Housman symbolically highlights that the same-sex appeal is denied by the male vicinity at university: “The statutes warned us against drinking, gambling, and hoop-trundling” (10). Housman feels that something is missing since hoop-trundling, inferred to be homosexual acts, is

transgressive, and hence refused. Furthermore, the play is told from Housman's point of view. It consists of his memories through the end of his life. At the beginning of the play, Stoppard states that the variety of characteristics attests to the presence of homosexuality as a probable sermon that merits a place inside society. Once Housman presents himself to Charon, Stoppard employs the impression of numerous identities to advocate approval of one's otherness:

Charon *A poet and scholar is what I was told.*

Housman *I think that must be me.*

Charon *Both of them?*

Housman *I'm afraid so.*

Charon *It sounded like two different people (p.2).*

Housman's split self equals the reason for sexual diversity which is at the core of heterosexuality. He genders his broken self, concerning his intellectual face as manly and his poetic persona as feminine (Albayrak p.132). He struggles to suppress his poetic side and presume a masculine view. Housman's scholarly personality is reliant on the assumed deficiency of his poetical identity. Stoppard dramatized the conflict between a romantic and classical sensibility with a single character. Category. In *The Invention of Love*, Stoppard describes "Housman as literally two men, played by two different actors: the old man of seventy-seven at the end of his life and the young man between the ages of eighteen and twenty-six" (Kelly, p.192). In addition to this, the affair of homosexuality and heterosexuality is intermingled as it is understood from the dialogue between Housman and Jackson:

Jackson *The girls were pretty, and the tunes, it was only the story.*

Housman *The whole thing was silly.*

Jackson *Jolly, you said. You don't have to agree with me all the time.*

Housman *I don't! (p.55).*

This speech highlights that Housman does his best to cover his feelings toward his friend. Actually, he unknowingly shares the same ideas with Jackson in all aspects. Interrelating with Jackson displays Housman's inner longing repressed due to social order. Housman does not take his inner feelings into consideration in order not to be labeled as an "outcast" in society. In other words, he refuses his homosexuality since he is afraid of being punished. At this point, it is important to highlight that homosexuality

“must be viewed as a constructed category of knowledge rather than a discovered identity” (Spargo, p.17). This means that should not be excluded as it is based on free will according to Foucault.

In his dream play, Tom Stoppard goes beyond the boundaries of space and time, in that, there is no chronological order throughout the play. As a matter of fact, the story is told from the frame of a dreamer in a non-linear way. In other words, *The Invention of Love* is episodic and hardly ever follows a linear narration. Additionally, Stoppard does not give specific descriptions of the setting which takes place in Oxford. Housman appears as an undergraduate student; however, the specific place and time persist ambiguously. Although Stoppard gives vague setting descriptions such as garden, and river from time to time, he does not give exact descriptions.

Furthermore, the uncertain, fragmented nature of life and the contingency of the categories readers use to deal with it is a key theme in *The Invention of Love*. The subject of scholarship is versus repressed love theme. The play's title clearly points toward the constructivist worldview that plays such a big part in Stoppard's art. It is comforting to believe that love is a constant in history, but Stoppard's title problematizes this assumption. Housman and his friend Pollard agree that Catullus created the love poem, and the implication is that by inventing the love poem, he invented romantic love. Pollard in the play states that “[l]ike everything else, like clocks and trousers and algebra, the love poem had to be invented” (p.13). Housman suffers from grief that stems from his remediless love for his friend, Moses Jackson. “This is true,”(p.87) Housman responds. Chamberlain begins quoting from Housman's work:

Chamberlain *I'm word perfect. "Oh were he and I together, shipmates on the fleeted main, sailing through the summer weather ..." What happened to Jackson?*

Housman *He retired, settled in British Columbia, died of cancer.*

Chamberlain *Well, early though the laurel grows, it withers quicker than the rose.*

Housman *This is a revolting habit, Chamberlain—I forbid you* (p.88).

When Housman encounters Wilde in his night thoughts, he is filled with grief. He tells Wilde: "Your life is a terrible thing. A chronological error. The choice was not always between renunciation and folly" (p. 96). He is, of course, referring to their society's intolerance towards homosexuality

and his own refusal of his homosexual love. Wilde, or rather a part of Housman's mind, responds: "Better a fallen rocket than never a burst of light" (p. 96). A little later, Wilde adds: "You didn't mention your poems. How can you be unhappy when you know you wrote them?" (97). This illustrates that contrast is one of the devices that Stoppard uses in his plays. In *The Invention of Love*, it is said that Oscar Wilde has got lots of friends contrary to Housman. This is the contrasting point that Stoppard employs.

Besides, the focus is on the ideas rather than action which is also against the rules of traditional narrative. Moreover, there is another homosexual character named as a well-known scholar, Oscar Wilde. The difference between these characters is that Wilde did not repress his homosexuality while Housman represses his feelings. For Foucault, "where there is power, there is resistance" (p.93). This demonstrates that While Wilde enjoys the freedom of his sexual choice since he metaphorically fights against the strict norms, Housman suffers from his homosexuality due to his weakness in society. As a matter of fact, Housman's duplicity with himself inhibits him from getting both real friends and sincere relationships, unlike Wilde. Interestingly, there is not much happening in the play. What is important is that old Housman and the young one sit together. One man is presented as two different characters. They are doubling each other, and Housman tries to find his own gender identity. Since the play emerges in Housman's head, it can be claimed that it represents a dialogue between numerous aspects of fading brain.

4. CONCLUSION

Charon is seen ferrying Wilde across the Styx in the last scene of *The Invention of Love*. Stoppard inserts Wilde through the end of the play to exemplify the choice rooted in society. Wilde acts as an essential image that makes individuals reconsider their notions as well as misinterpreting homosexuality. The last words of Wilde are examples of Stoppard's constructivist aesthetics and the playfully defiant attitude they engender towards life: "Wickedness is a myth invented by good people to account for the curious attractiveness of others" (Stoppard, p.102). It is evident that Housman's intellectual interests are encroached upon by his elegiac side which he connects with his gay yearning; the purportedly oppressed spirits put their mark on his required straight reflection which he attempts to accomplish via believing a career that is supposed to deal with his same-sex zeal; the social structure of the natural does not necessitate the elimination of the natural by the social in Housman's issue; he sees his homosexual longing as natural and his direct image as fabricated.

Consequently, *The Invention of Love* suggests readers an opportunity to reassess the perception of homosexuality from a Foucauldian perspective. In this respect, it deals with the life of the poet and scholar, Housman. The play reveals a compilation of short scenes that mark, mainly, Housman's rapport with Jackson, for whom Housman entertained a lifelong, unreciprocated love. His love and rejection shape his entire life. Homosexuality plays an important role since Housman's inclinations are repressed because of the moralities of Victorian society. From this angle, Housman's case can be closely linked to Foucault's *Panopticism* which means "an experimental nineteenth-century prison design in which inmates could be kept under observation at all times" (Booker 125) since he is constantly afraid of being gazed by the others, and thus, he feels imprisoned by his own environment. If he had evidently confessed his love for Jackson, he would have been rejected as an aberrant man by his own society. In this respect, the play is about an old man reconstructing the story of his life, and Stoppard reflects the realities of that period by adding his sense of humor into the play.

5. SUMMARY

The Invention of Love by Tom Stoppard is about the obsessive homosexual feelings of A.E Housman for his friend, Jackson. The moral understanding of his society enforces him to hide his homosexuality. The 19th Century society is strictly against such affairs, in that, they never tolerate homosexuality. In this respect, Housman is forced to keep his homosexuality secret. The play discusses the ambitious feelings of the famous poet for his homosexual identity even though only heterosexual ones are accepted by his society. For this reason, his unavoidable desire to be together with Jackson is never satisfied. From this perspective, the purpose of this study is to demonstrate how the playwright succeeds in revealing Housman's homosexuality by referring to Foucault and bio-drama.

At the end of the study, it is found that the play gives the readers a chance to reevaluate their understanding of homosexuality. It is a clear-cut crystal that Housman's whole life is shaped by his love and denial of Jackson since the Victorian's approach to homosexuality prevents him from living as he wishes. If Housman had lived in today's contemporary world, he would not have had to suffer from the strict doctrines of his society. In other words, he would have been more independent since the 21st Century is more flexible to such unacceptable (!) affairs. All in all, *The Invention of love* focuses on reforming the story of A.E Housman by bringing Foucauldian approach to homosexuality through bio-drama.

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