

**“Presenting it, as it is”: Poetics of Realism and Politics of Representation in Carol Ann Duffy’s Poetry**

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**Özet:**

Çağdaş İngiliz şairi Carol Ann Duffy şiirdeki amacını çağdaş İngiliz yaşamını “olduğu gibi anlatmak” olarak belirler. Bir şiir projesi olarak “olduğu gibi anlatmak” hem çağdaş yaşamdaki çok sesliliği yansıttığından hem de şair şiirinde mümkün olabilecek değişik yorumlara atıfta bulunduğundan bir çoğulluk yaratmaktadır. Bu makale Duffy’nin “olduğu gibi anlatmak” diye tanımladığı şiir anlayışının aslında mevcut geleneksel fikirleri ve düşünceleri yeniden ele alması ve geleneksel olarak marjinal olanı merkezileştirmesi açısından anlatım politikalarıyla ilgili sorunsalları da kapsayan bir gerçekçilik gösterdiğini tartışmaktadır.

**Anahtar kelimeler:** Çağdaş İngiliz Şiiri, Carol Ann Duffy, Çağdaş kadın şairler, anlatım politikaları

**Abstract**

Carol Ann Duffy’s poetry commits itself to the representation of contemporary living “as it is”. As a poetic paradigm, Duffy’s devotion to “presenting it as it is” creates a plurality which Duffy reckons with both as part of her project to present the plurality of voices prevailing in contemporary Britain and to present the potential plurality of representation(s). This paper argues that Duffy’s poetry of “presenting it as it is” is a poetry of realistic representation engaged with politics of representation because Duffy’s project involves a re-visiting of the old assumptions and realities in its attempt to centralise the traditionally marginal and to scrutinise the traditional.

**Key Words:** Contemporary British poetry, Carol Ann Duffy, contemporary women poets, politics of representation

In a 1988 interview, Carol Ann Duffy situates her poetry and her poetic position in close relation with the everyday experience of contemporary living: “What I am doing is living in the 20th century in Britain and listening to the radio news every day and going out every day and reading the newspapers every day” ( 1988: 70). Positioning one’s poetry as the account of a witness, Duffy argues further, requires a necessary objectivity central to the mediation of experience:

I don’t want to write the kind of poetry that tells the reader how I feel when I see a rainbow. I don’t want to write the kind of poetry that tells the reader that I as a feminist think that this guy should have his prick cut off because he was the Yorkshire Ripper. What I want to do is present it, as it is (1988: 72)

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Duffy presents her poetic vocation as one of mediation of the experience of the contemporary society without recourse to any moral or political signposting. Her poetic paradigm advocates, on the one hand, capturing the contemporary living as it is as the achievable goal of poetry but it at the same time recognises the “mediated” nature of contemporary experience. By investing experiences, like listening to the radio and reading the papers, with the authority of “living life,” Duffy already permits the conflation of the representation of reality and the represented reality as reality itself. Duffy clearly suggests that the news can be used “as a barometer of the world”, but as Armitage states, “there are issues of selection, presentation, authorial judgement” in the presentation of the news (1999). While re-assessments of contemporary life invite the observers to reckon with “the erosion of post-war consensus and greater economic and social division” (Kennedy, 1996: 7) as representative realities of the 1980s and 1990s in Britain, Duffy’s affirmation that her poetry aims to “present” the contemporary living as it is is worth considering for it suggests an investigative approach to poetry’s potential to “present it as it is” in a period when “poets rallied to mount a defence of class politics, language, feminism, regional identities, and social difference as well as diversity (Childs, 1999:156). This paper therefore is concerned with the significance of Duffy’s poetic paradigm in the face of Duffy’s protection of poetry’s function as objective reportage and her commitment to re-presentation of contemporary facts of life as ideologically constructed representations.

Duffy’s pronounced engagement with the representation of contemporary British society as the creative objective of her poetry does not present itself as experimental. In this sense, Duffy is continuing a markedly British tradition of social realism. Gregson argues that, despite the post-structural emphases shaping the poetry, contemporary British poetry “has also persisted in believing in the reality of the political and moral issues it addresses” (1996:5). In terms of tradition, the realistic legacy preserved in Duffy’s statement can be traced back to the involuntary head of a poetic movement dubbed as “the movement poetry”, Philip Larkin. Larkin’s poetic manifesto encouraged “fidelity to contemporary experience and ordinariness of diction and perception” (Bradley, 1993:3-6). Larkin insists that the poet “never tried to make poetry do things,” poetry is “using words and syntax in the normal way to describe recognizable experiences as memorably as possible” (1982: 74, 75). Larkin argues, “...in fact poets write for people with the same background and experience as themselves, which might be taken as a compelling argument in support of provincialism” (1982: 69). Larkin’s gesture towards commitment to the representation of contemporary life of a “provincial” character in his poetry, because of the marked certitude of his convictions that poetry can speak to people out there by “using words and syntax in the normal way to describe recognisable experiences”, signposts a major shift towards a re-examination and reconstruction of the subject and the audience of poetry in the contemporary British poetry since the 1980s. As Gregson states,

where the Movement poetic assumed that writers and readers were white, English middle-class males, contemporary poetry is acutely aware of voices that insist on their differences from that model and draw attention to their class, gender, nationality or race (1996:5).

In his mapping of the contemporary world of poetry as a world of constant erosion of stable values and ideals, Michael Hulse argues that

throughout the century, the hierarchies of values that once made stable poetics possible have been disappearing...In the absence of shared moral and religious ideals, common social and or sexual mores or political ideologies, or any philosophy on the conduct of life, plurality has flourished (1993: 15).

The contemporary poet is keen on carving himself/herself a position from which to “speak as” rather than to “speak for” people. As Kennedy suggests,

the contemporary poet’s work is judged increasingly by the degree to which it observes or voices the suffering or the painful truth to self of others ...

The poet is no longer an outsider granted access to eternal truths or some transcendental reality neither is his or her poetry part to a larger cultural project to, say, resist the bourgeois and humanize the materialist spirit; he or she now has a job like everyone else and poetry is actually more like the press or photojournalism (1996: 242).

In this formulation, writing poetry becomes concerned with, in Simon Armitage’s words, “...a situation and what its human consequences are” (1991-2) while poets offer no “solutions, poets are recording human experience” as Carol Ann Duffy puts it (1988 :72). Duffy, in fact, defines her position as a poet as one of an outsider in these considerations, yet her assertion that “...all of us are outside of everything else” (1988:70) provides instructive implications for the position of her poetry, too. In Duffy’s case, positioning the poet as an outsider as the norm of her poetry (Roberts, 1999: 184) creates a poetry “explicitly concerned with the social and political fabric of contemporary living” (Kennedy, 1996: 228), and is accordingly “located in a tension between ironic social naturalism and confrontational political work” (Hulse, 1993:17).

As Kennedy argues, in many Duffy poems, the reader is made to “reconsider the rafts of prevalent attitudes”; the poems function as deconstructions of cliches and “investigate the truth behind an appearance” (1996: 228). In her oft-quoted poem, “Moments of Grace”, Duffy’s comparison of the past and the present human experience is in terms of language: “These days/we are adjectives, nouns. In moments of grace/we were verbs, the secret of poems, talented” (1993:26). Duffy’s poetry is informed by “current theoretical concerns”(Thomas,1988:78). Kinnahan argues that “language is her subject”; in Duffy’s work “the ideological functions of language in the production of meaning are explored” (1996: 253). Duffy’s poems

Often insist upon the contextuality of meaning, exploring language’s role in the production and maintenance of dominant ideologies and charting the complex independence of signs and structures of authority linked to regulatory practices of race, gender, class, and nationalistic or religious belief (Kinnahan, 1996: 249).

Duffy thus throws into doubt not only the agency of the poet by implying that her position is subject to construction but she submits also her own poetic subject to the scrutiny of Althusserian proposition that “experience is a product of ideology. It is a sign mediated by other signs” (Fuss, 1989:114). In Duffy, this way of positioning the poetic self as the mediator of a mediated reality can be subversive of conventional regulatory social structures. Accordingly, Duffy’s presentation of the contemporary reality is one that theorises its inherent subjectivity while itself is an instrument of the objective reality. Duffy attests to the fact that the poet’s attempt to “present it as it is” involves a necessary investigation of the dynamics of representation while it also marks “a significant engagement with social discourse” (Kinnahan, 1996: 246). Hence, many of Duffy’s poems call attention to their own processes of fiction making to point to the constructed nature of their agendas. In “Poet For Our Times” (1990:15), Duffy’s presentation of the persona who writes “the headlines for a Daily Paper” has an ironic allusion to the “mediation of experience” in contemporary poetry. The persona states, among claims to “right” presentation of the headlines, that “I like to think that I am a sort of poet/for our times”. The poem’s equation of “The instant tits and bottom line of art” displays not only that language’s power of representation can be alarmingly repressive but also that any such representation of contemporary living is at the same time a comment on it. It is at this juncture in Duffy’s poetry that her disavowal of solution is transformed into a criticism of the present paradigms as Duffy makes sure that the poem re-creates the experience at the same time that it witnesses the process of its becoming a poem. “In Poem in Oils” (1985:47), the speaker asks: “is this what I see?” and answers the question recognising and voicing the power and the role of mediation: “No, but this is the process of seeing.” Similarly, “Words, Wide Night” (1990:47) centralises the difference between what is and what is presented as a major concern of fiction making: “For I am in love with you and this/is what it is like or what it is like in words”. The continuous comparison of actual experience with its representation, the awareness that language not only describes the world as its correspondent but also constructs it fundamentally (Kennedy, 1996: 227) provides a play of discourses against one another enabling a negotiated acceptance of their ideologies.

Duffy’s concern with language does not extend to the form, as she draws particularly upon traditions of the dramatic monologue and the lyric as her favourite poetic forms for the representation of contemporary living. Duffy in fact does not provide a self-presentation as a poet to foreground her experimental objectives. On the contrary, considered as a poetic manifesto, Duffy’s commitment to the representation of contemporary life invites clearly a scrutiny of traditional representations. Duffy’s presentation of contemporary living is marked by a strong presence of the politics of representation. Duffy repeatedly draws attention to the processes of poetry making not only through her active involvement of “words” in the construction of meaning but also through creating a kind of democratic forum for the “unrepresented” and the “unvoiced”.

If we turn to Duffy’s “Standing Female Nude”, (1985:46) we see that the poem’s several levels of representation: the poem’s representation of the model, the model’s representation of her experience, the artist’s representation of the model, the museum’s

representation of the painting (Kinnahan, 1996: 258), introduces it as a poem about representation. It takes an interrogative look into the relationship between art and commodity or art as commodity through the represented body of the nude modelling for the starving artist. The rather incoherent yet significant train of thoughts, totally disconnected from the concerns of the artist as he paints, re-presents the art world and introduces the possibility of re-interpretation to the governing politics of art. As the nude poses the possibility: "I shall be represented analytically and hung /in great museums. The bourgeoisie will coo at such an image of a river-whore. They call it Art", Duffy creates a spatial freedom for the underprivileged young woman to voice her own politics of identity and recognition. Thus, as the poem reveals the consumer politics involved in the art world through the represented it also enables a comparison of the two worlds and emphasises their difference. Duffy manages here to have different discourses speak to one another and thus to expose the temporality or the contingency of each. The speaker states of the artist who paints her that "Little man, you have not the money for the arts I sell" while simultaneously striking a fellowship in the similarity of their situation: "Both poor, we make our living how we can". However, this poem is instructive in its particular emphasis upon not only its subject standing "Six hours like this for a few francs.", thus granting her a voice in the world of representation, but also on its presentation of several forms of representation. The dramatic monologue functions as a site where disparate discourses of "Art" compete for dominance, albeit through a speaker who meditates on the economical value of "arts I sell". In this poem, Duffy's claim to "presenting it as it is" in the person of the "standing female nude" invites a scrutiny of the subject of art "analytically", for ironically, the presentation of the speaking self is incomplete or disadvantageously arbitrary without the poem's inclusion of other representations.

It is important to note that the poem's concern with representation involves a questioning of the possibility of "presenting it as it is". Poetry as an art form questions its own ability to reflect reality, its own reliability as a medium of representation. According to the nude's account, "when it's finished,.../... *It does not look like me*". It is difficult to attribute this negation to the failure of art to represent, for art emphatically does represent through the artist. Clearly, what the speaking subject alludes to is the power of art to transform, an important process for representation. As the poem's frequent returns to the issue illustrate, the river-whore of the self-presentation is no longer herself in the artist's representation of her. She finds herself a stranger in the world of art, at best misrepresented by art's agents. Hence, although the poem aims at a plurality of perspectives to facilitate the viewing of the subject in all its aspects, it also recognises the limits of such a project to the extent that, in the final negation of the speaking subject, it re-introduces the issue of negotiation inherent in representation: "It does not look like me".

As Robinson states, Duffy's poem of representation has to reckon with the political implications of gender bias and its social ramifications:

Duffy reminds us that icons of female sexuality are not transparently natural, created disinterestedly as if by divine fiat, but instead are social constructs that arise from the

complex intersection of economic forces whose formative influence is deceptively absent from the finished work (1988:198).

Duffy’s poetry thus offers two interconnected platforms from which one can view the contemporary reality. Duffy’s investigation of “how language constructs rather than reflects meaning” underlies her interrogations of “gender norms...racial intolerance, religious bigotry...and the political indifference...toward the unemployed and the underprivileged” ( Thomas, 1988: 78). Duffy’s devotion to the presentation of contemporary British society requires a deconstruction of the power relations in the assignment of the subject positions in society. In “Psychopath” (1987:28-9), Duffy’s use of the dramatic monologue draws attention to the power of the subject to construct and present the facts as he/she wishes. The poem is ideologically tempting in its invitation for a reconsideration of the presentation of the facts. The split between what the persona speaks and what his words present him to be is a striking example of consequences of (mis)construction of facts. The speaker in the “Psychopath” presents himself as a “Ladies’ Man” and compares himself to the rock’n roll and movie stars of the 1940s and 50s. The psychopath’s self-presentation clearly clashes with the general views about psychopaths and in that it not only challenges the widely accepted truths but also problematises the very idea of “presenting it as it is”, as the psychopath himself presents an alternative discourse, a way of presenting it as it is by the psychopath himself. The psychopath’s challenge to conventional truths by facilitating multiple points of view presents some very fresh and so far unmediated outlooks on contemporary life and the ways in which it can be re-structured. It points to the fact that significant in Duffy’s re-shuffle is not only the poetic material that she deliberately selects from the lives of the marginal and the “unvoiced” but also the restructuring that such a selection works on the way she presents it. As Gregson states on the play of signifiers and subjectivities in the poem, “Playful though this is it is a political statement that reveals one of the most important motives of Duffy’s work- the desire to give voice to those who are habitually spoken *for*” (1996: 99).

No attempt at presenting it as it is can be exhaustive, but Duffy clearly tries to make her project exhaust such a potential. Her attentiveness to politically interested naturalisations of contemporary truths creates a poetry that is careful not to exclude any of the contemporary issues as contradictory, embarrassing or particularly as improper. Indeed, Duffy’s poetic world is populated by subjects that attest to Terry Eagleton’s pronouncement on the contemporary British poetry that “the marginal becomes somehow central”(quoted in Huk, 1996: 3). Concerned with origins, the speaker in “Originally” (1990) considers linguistic difference as the most important identity marker that the poem shows dematerialise eventually. The poem alternates views of language as both a barrier and a facility that alternately obstructs the individual’s personal development or enhances the chances of social and cultural integration. The child’s “otherness” is signified through a series of vocal gestures that emphasise her inability to fit in. The poem allows the corrective authority to declare “Your accent [is] wrong”. The painful experience of discrimination coached in these words is returned to the person who experiences it as a mistake she/he needs to correct,

thus offering a debilitating interpretation of an apparently personal experience. The linguistic discrepancy identified and attacked by pronouncements like “Words you don’t understand” represents the experience as the linguistically alienated person’s own fault. Accordingly, “presenting it as it is” requires an acknowledgement of the poem’s reconciliation of the linguistic “other” with the rest as an experience of inevitable loss. In fact, the poem voices an almost complete alienation from the speaker’s original language. It makes a note of the articulate contrast between “I remember my tongue”, “..my voice,” and the speaker’s final admission that she is “sounding just like the rest”. The poem witnesses a transformative process that finalises in cultural assimilation and complete erosion of the linguistic identity marker that revealed difference. Accordingly, the speaker’s meditative gesture towards a reconsideration of the constitutive elements of national/racial identity does not merely present the situation, it comments on it. The closing lines of the poem make rather large statements about one’s culture, one’s roots: “Do I only think I lost a river, culture, speech, sense of first space and the right place? Now, Where do you come from?”. The speaker’s hesitation perhaps is the poet’s ambivalence about the political implications of the loss indicated in not knowing. In a way, the poem’s presentation of “originally” as a prevalent preoccupation in a world of increasing diversity and accelerated change in geographical and cultural terms marks the ambivalence surrounding such an experience. The poem questions the relevance of “originally” when origins are more important than ever.

The presentation of the details in “Originally” as incoherent frequent notations of impressions or half-remembered, fragmented experiences represented in accordance with their significance to the experience of the poem is a characteristic Duffy strategy, which, it seems, exemplifies Duffy’s view of contemporary Britain. As in “Recognition”, (1987) where the middle-aged, overweight woman speaker sums up her life as a life spent between the supermarket and home, with a recognition that her young girl dreams of the world and the married life were but dreams. The speaking subject identifies a waste land of hopes and expectations. The speaker in “Recognition” reveals an incoherent mind presenting signifiers of social conformity “Children? I have had three” and subverts the very norms that dictate the realities of her life: “and don’t even know them”. Her remembered self is finally apologised to by her present self: “My face is swollen with regrets”. The life observed and recorded is a life “wasted”. The speaker reflects, “what a waste”. The speaker’s questioning of motherhood and wifehood as ideal fulfilling roles for women preempts the discourse governing many women’s definition of female life style.

Duffy’s challenge to official truths and representation is clearly present in the multiculturalism of the contemporary British society as instrumental not of integration and unification for a harmonious existence but as a site constituting a space for the individual groups to experience their isolation and displacement. The experiences of displacement and strangeness in Duffy’s poetry find further articulation in a poem called “Comprehensive”(1985:8-9). “Comprehensive” provides a panorama of multicultural Britain through seven short monologues spoken by teenagers in an English school. Three of the boys are white and four of them are from ethnic minorities. The poem’s monologues are true to Duffy’s commitment to representation of contemporary reality. The poem also scrutinises its own rules of making by allowing

the boys voice their own worries and aspirations as representatives of cultural differences: While Ejaz is concerned about eating a pork sausage by mistake and thus betraying his own religion, the main concern of Wayne is supporting “the National Front” and his pastime activities include “Paki-bashing and pulling girls’/knickers down”. Wayne’s trust in future is shaken and his view of the future is bleak: “I don’t suppose I’ll get a job”. The poem’s portrayal of multicultural Britain does not suggest a comfortable smooth fitting in by the immigrants, nor are “the English” welcoming in their attitude to the new British. The comprehensive school is a significant site where young people of diverse persuasions and different cultural backgrounds inhabit the same world of values which ironically operates on the assumption that these diverse worlds converge. The brief monologues of the pupils reveal that it is otherwise. Duffy’s presentation of contemporary living in Britain is decisively questioning the traditional discourses of cultural plurality and diversity. As Childs argues, “Duffy is particularly astute when she is revealing the ways in which politically motivated ideals –of family life, marriage, sexuality, femininity, community- are naturalised” (1999: 177).

In “Translating the English, 1989” (1990:11), the poem’s collage of what the poet finds as representative of the English: the clash between the high and the low, the cultural and the popular, the recommendable and the avoidable, provides a representation of the country where culturally significant signs are played against one another to stimulate the idea that contemporary British society is a society of diversity, complexity and change. The poem’s registration of Britain’s diversity however has strong implications of subversion as it challenges stability as a possible paradigm and introduces in its stead an unhealthy confusion of the cultural and the political and the commercial:

Welcome to my country! We have here Edwina Curry  
And the Sun newspaper. Much excitement... Daffodils (Wordsworth up  
North)...  
Shakespeare or even Opera we have too the Black market...  
A tour of our wonderful  
Capital city is not to be missed. The Fergie, the Princess Di and the football  
hooligan...

The poem is deliberately overdoing its attempt at inclusiveness and its aim to convey the diversity and change that characterise British society. Duffy’s apparent mish-mash of attractive aspects of Britain makes an equal use of discourses of tourism, nationalism, high culturalism, journalism to evoke a series of paradigmatic national truths that invite closer scrutiny:

...Plenty culture you will be agreeing.  
Also history and buildings. The Houses of Lords. Docklands.  
Many thrills and high interest rates for own good.Muggers.  
Much lead in petrol. Filth. Rule Britannia and child abuse.  
Electronic tagging. Boss, ten pints and plenty rape. Queen Mum.  
Channel Tunnel. You get there fast no problem to my country



My country my country my country welcome welcome welcome

Duffy's apparent randomness in bringing together the high and the low, the ethical and the immoral, the lawful and the illegal in the presentation of the English and England is a poignant illustration of the underlying assumption that "the act of representation involves selection and arrangement that is ...ideologically interested" (Kinnahan, 1996: 254). Moreover, Duffy's representation, by the virtue of its claim to "presenting it as it is", involves a parodic fidelity to reality that insists on applying no principles of selection. Listing England's attractions produces a list of the contradictions and uncertainties in the prevailing nation-making truths so that "Rule Britannia and child abuse" are coupled together and Queen Mum is situated in close relation to sexual crime: "plenty rape. Queen Mum."

"Translating the English, 1989" can be considered as an ironic justification of Duffy's devotion to objective representation of contemporary British society: It avoids comment; it is inclusive of the current discourses and their respective representations; it purports to introduce Britain and the ideal way to introduce it. While the poet's outsideness presents the poet, as Childs suggests of Simon Armitage, observing and observe herself observing (1999: 157),<sup>1</sup> the poem invites a necessary deconstruction of the objectives of the coherence targeted despite the obvious disparities. As Duffy states of her poems in *The World's Wife* "I think the poems are looking for the missing truth, rather than accepting the way we've been taught." (1999), Duffy's poetry scrutinises what it represents and that is what "presenting it, as it is" ultimately signifies.

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<sup>1</sup> Duffy's strategy of speaking to the reader through the mediation of a "you" that both is and is not identifiable with the poet is considered to be one of Duffy's contributions to the contemporary British poetry. See for instance, Michael Faherty.(1997). "They Say, They Say, They Say: Some New Voices of the Nineties" Gary Day and Brian Docherty. (Eds). *British Poetry From the 1950s to the 1990s: Politics and Art*. Macmillan: 268-279. pp. 274-75.

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