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## REPRESENTING PRECARIOUSNESS: SIMON STEPHENS'S *PORNOGRAPHY*<sup>1</sup>

Güven(ce)sizliğin Temsili: Simon Stephens'in *Pornography* Adlı Oyunu

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### Abstract

*In recent years, scholars, writers and critics have started to focus on the terms such as precariousness, precarization and precarity. These terms traverse modern society and multiple contexts including industrial and social classes, family relations, politics, migration, otherness as well as interdependency, uncertainty, insecurity and hierarchization. With its non-hierarchical seven scenes, numbered in descending order from seven to one, dependent, uncertain and untruthful characters are represented in Stephens's play Pornography (2007). Within this context Simon Stephens's is being studied in relation to the effects of terrorism, the war on terror, the concerns of certain lives and death, pessimistic vision of violence and face of the other.*

**Keywords:** Precariousness, Simon Stephens, Pornography, the Other, Contemporary British Drama.

### Öz

*Son yıllarda, akademisyenler, yazarlar ve eleştirmenler 'tehlikeli durum/risklilik, tehlikeli olma ve güvencesizlik' gibi kavramlar üzerine yoğunlaşmaya başladılar. Bu terimler çoklu bağlamda sanayileşmeden toplumsal sınıfları, aile ilişkilerini, siyaseti, göçü, içbağımlılık yanında ötekileşmeyi, belirsizliği, güvencesizliği ve hiyerarşikleşmeyi içine alan çok yönlü kavramları ve modern toplumu dönüşüme uğratar. Yediden bire doğru gerileme gösteren düzende numaralandırılan, hiyerarşik yapıda olmayan yedi sahnesiyle, bağımlı, belirsiz ve güvenilir olamayan karakterler Stephens'in Pornography (2007) oyununda yansıtılır. Bu bağlamda, terörizmin, terörle mücadelenin etkileri, yaşam ve ölüm koşullarının kaygıları, şiddetin ve öteki yüzün kötümser vizyonuyla bağlantılı olarak Simon Stephens'in oyunu çalışılacaktır.*

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Güvencesizlik, Simon Stephens, Pornography, Öteki, Çağdaş İngiliz Tiyatrosu.

<sup>1</sup> 25-26 Mayıs 2018 tarihleri arasında gerçekleştirilen 7th International Conference on Language, Literature & Culture (Bucharest/Romania) konferansında İngilizce olarak sunulmuş, ancak tam metin olarak yayınlanmamıştır.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

With its characteristics of change, globalization, consumption, media, metanarratives, technological developments, neo-liberal economies, capitalism, effects of war and terrorism, postmodern world has shaped the modern period. This modern period has witnessed terrible terrorist attacks, which took place on 9/11 in New York and 7/7 bombings in London, and precarious notions such as terrorism, migration, cohabitation, hospitality and vulnerability started to be discussed in society.

Precariousness can be defined as a blurring and uncertain notion, meaning the dependence on another's decision. Butler claims that "everyone is precarious" and men exist "as bodily beings who depend upon one another for shelter and sustenance" (Butler, 2004, p.148). Samuel Johnson explains the term precarious as: "(d)ependent; uncertain, because depending on the will of another; changeable or alienable at the pleasure of another" (Johnson). Ridout and Schnieder describe the term as "a byword for life in late and later capitalism" (2009, p.7). Isabel Lorey clarifies the term precarity as "social positioning of insecurity and hierarchization" (Puar, 2012, p.165). In the last three years, migrant crises and implicitly the precarity movement have started in Europe. War and terror attacks affected the lives of thousands of people who escaped from the war zones; however they started to live in precarious conditions in their new countries. Aragay and Middeke (2017) claims that

*...it is certainly inexcusable not to address the political, social and economic managements of precariousness and examine the ways in which they produce and/or heighten form of precarity. Since the start of 2015, the European migrant crisis has continued to escalate, with more than two million migrants, refugees and asylum seekers having crossed into Europe according to the UNHCR (numbers differ depending on the source) (p. 3).*

It seems crucially important that these precarious conditions create "extreme exposure, defencelessness, vulnerability" (Levinas, 1989, p.83) and also 'the other'.

The 9/11 and 7/7 bombings subjugate "an unbearable vulnerability" (Butler, 2004, p.xi) and "fundamental dependency" (Butler, p.xii) and these terms represent unknown others. However, in postmodern world we or unknown others share the same weakness, suffering and vulnerability for a global community. Levinas clarifies the situation as "the wordless vocalization of suffering" (cited in Butler, 2004, p.135). At the same time,

the suffering and vulnerability formulate precariousness and responsibility: “a responsibility for my neighbour, for the other man, for the stranger or sojourner, to which nothing in the rigorously ontological order binds me – nothing in the order of the thing, of the something, of number or causality” (Levinas, 1989, p.84). Social classes, migration, otherness, uncertainty and insecurity lead to precarity and precarious societies in which

*we live together because we have no choice, and (...) we remain obligated to struggle to affirm the ultimate value of that unchosen social world, an affirmation that is not a quite choice, a struggle that makes itself known and felt precisely when we exercise freedom in a way that is necessarily committed to the equal value of lives (Butler, 2004, p.150).*

People live together without having any choice and they are habituated to a social world, politic and economic conditions which they did not choose, war and terror attacks. Due to these facts, Butler questions how borders of human life are deconstructed:

*Lives are supported and maintained differently, and there are radically different ways in which human physical vulnerability is distributed across the globe. Certain lives will be highly protected, and the abrogation of their claims to sanctity will be sufficient to mobilize the forces of war. Other lives will not find such fast and furious support and will not even qualify as ‘grievable’ (32).*

After the 9/11 and 7/7 bombings, contemporary playwrights, who deconstruct traditional performance and forms, write distinctive plays which reflect the effects of war and terrorism. The German scholar Hans Thies Lehmann reflects the deconstruction of conventional theatrical signs, contents, plots, characters and perception of performance. In this sense, Judith Butler lays bare that “dominant forms of representation can and must be disrupted for something about the precariousness of life to be apprehended” (Butler, 2004, p.xviii). Deconstruction of precariousness means active participation and interrogation of audiences to understand the other in our contemporary world.

Nicholas Ridout explains that theatre imposes to audiences the duty “to recognize that there is a relationship between what is shown in the theatre and their own experience of the world. In responding to this call, spectators take responsibility for making what is shown part of their personal experience” (2012, p.59). Theatre is a crucial place to analyse how playwrights and audiences observe and witness vulnerability, consumer

culture and precarious society. In contemporary performance “we come face to face with the other, in a recognition of our mutual vulnerability which encourages relationships based on openness, dialogue and a respect for difference” (Ridout, 2012, p.59). On the other hand, Lehmann points out that the perception of contemporary audiences has been shaped by the modes of relaying images through various media that encourage a desensitized viewing position and debilitate the viewer’s capacity to respond to the cruelty inflicted on the other (2006, p.185). The fundamental issue, therefore, resides in discovering strategies to redress the damaged relationship between image-receiver and reanimate the audience’s capacity to reflect on their responsibility for the other.

More clearly, after 1990s and 2000s ethical and ontological questions, encircling the value of human life and its precariousness, have been frequently meditated in contemporary British theatre. “The negotiation of precariousness as an ontological and a pragmatic condition is manifest in a number of plays by Caryl Churchill, debbie tucker green, Sarah Kane, Simon Stephens, Martin Crimp and Mike Bartlett, to name but a few” (Fragkou, 2012, p.25). The discussion in this noteworthy body of their plays has centred upon the War on Terror, physical vulnerability, injurability, youth and children at risk, witnessing trauma and violence, and their eventualities in relation to identity and community. Precarity and precariousness form both community and experi(m)entail theatre in British drama and cause devaluation of human relations or create a world in which the need of living with others comes to exist. Specifically focusing on characteristics of the work of Simon Stephens’s *Pornography*, (2007) this study contributes to better understand the relations between precariousness, precarity and contemporary theatre.

## 2. PRECARIOUSNESS in *PORNOGRAPHY*

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century it is inevitably certain that theatre is a distinctive place where stage, lights, sounds, dialogues and players encourage audiences to observe and witness everything on the stage and in the world. In “Theatre and Ethics” Nicholas Ridout distinctly asserts that theatre can be seen “a model of performance as an ethical encounter, in which we come face to face with the other, in a recognition of our mutual vulnerability which encourages relationships based on openness, dialogue and a respect for difference” (Ridout, 2012, p.54). Stage structure, openness, dialogue and differences shape experi(m)entail theatre, deconstruct traditional aesthetics and affect conventional modes and rules of representation.

Referring to this deconstructive and unconventional structure, Simon Stephens's play *Pornography*, written in 2007, two years after the 7 / 7 London bombings, contains seven scenes, (in descending order four monologues, two duologues, and a short list describing the 52 people killed and 700 hundred injured in the 7 / 7 bombings), and explains grievousness, incest, mass terrorism, alienation, breaking of the norms and corruption in contemporary society. The effects of bombings on the British Society, the reactions to these bombings and a lack of response have been observed in the play. Michael Billington describes the play as a: "remarkable kaleidoscopic portrait of a London that moved in a few days from the euphoria of Live 8 and the Olympics announcement to the devastation of the July 7 bombings" (2009). Stephens has radicalized and rejuvenated the contemporary British stage with his idiosyncratic work.

The play represents seven scenes, arranged in descending order, starting with scene seven and ending with scene one. Aragay and Middeke describe the structure of the play: "preceded by a brief prologue that reproduces the beginning of one of the 7/7 bombers suicide speech, aired by Al Jazeera television on 1 September 2005" (Aragay and Middeke, 2017, p.15); this reverse order is a final countdown before the bomb exploding. Stephens clarifies the structural parts of his play: "The play is built around seven parts, each part inspired by one of the seven ages of man, that stoical medieval philosophy so forcefully articulated by Jaques in [Shakespeare's] *As You Like It*" (2009, p.xviii). The playwright has represented the openness of the text and the precarious structure focusing on director Sebastian Nübling's productions: "so I wrote him a text that was as open as possible. (...). There are only a few stage directions. (...) There are no character names. It is a play that can be staged in any order using any number of actors" (xix) and supports his thoughts at the beginning of the play: "this play can be performed by any number of actors. It can be performed in any order" (2009, p.214).

Stephens named his play as 'Pornography' in the sense that the characters in the play are only represented as objects, without identity, parallel to women objectivised in actual pornography. In addition to its sexual meaning, *Pornography* epitomises some other different meanings as well, such as inconsiderateness, alienation, cohabitation, isolation, imagery, signs, obligation, uncontrolled emotions and precariousness. These different classifications as it were can be seen in each of the characters as they live by the rules of their society. With regard to this, İlter comes up with an explanation for the play as "although every character in this mosaic of

human lives offers fragments of a different story, the themes of individualization, alienation, and the objectification of humans link their narratives” (2015, p.248).

Due to the reasons mentioned above, Pornography can be evaluated in the light of precariousness. Stephens shows that his characters live in a pornographic society and lose their beliefs and sincerity. The characters are isolated from their society and become desensitized strangers in it, since they only watch the bombings without having any reactions. In this unchosen society “precariousness is indeed a central characteristic in the characters’ lives as different elements emphasise in each case a distinct vulnerability” (Monforte, 2017, p.35).

Different lives of characters are described from scene seven to scene two. Scene seven illustrates a working young woman’s relations with her husband and her employer. She is lost in her precarious society since she cannot make sense of her husband’s treatment and lack of interest and cannot deal with her boss’s unmerciful behaviours. Both her boss and husband’s behaviours cause to the young woman the feeling of loss. Although she is a victim of late capitalist environment, she takes revenge on her boss by sending a classified document to his opponent company. Scene six corresponds to a schoolboy who becomes fixated on his maths teacher Lisa, is a bully at school and thinks that he is part of the Aryan race and superior to other people. His racist thoughts and the violence at home lead to his final attack on his teacher. A sister and a brother in scene five are reunited in London. They commit incest, and after realize that it is impossible relation. Confusing thoughts, feelings and remorse related to corrupt values and the relationship between a brother and a sister are also observed in this scene. Scene four is related to the fourth age and it narrates the suicide bomber’s journey from the North of England to London where he explodes his bomb and “eerily introduces the looming presence of unexpected death” (Monforte, 2017, p.35). A former student visits his professor to ask for help however her main intention is to bring professor to book of the past in scene three. There is an alienated old lady who does not want to speak to anyone and is addicted to porn videos. At the end of the scene she wants some food from an unknown neighbour and walks home eating delicious chicken with tears.

These different characters in the play reflect alienation, loneliness, corruption, consumer culture, uncertainty and dislocation. Eric Monforte (2017) reveals the characters’ situation in *Pornography*:

*All the characters in Pornography live in “the culture of dislocation and disaffection” that encourages a complete “suppression of empathy, (...) the inability, or refusal, to imagine what is like to be the other” (Bolton, 2013, p. 119). Indeed the characters embody different aspects of the newly created precariat, suffering from extreme vulnerability and injurability, which become physical on account of the actual threat to their lives posed by the terrorist attacks (35).*

They suffer from the terrorist attacks and they become desensitized or become ‘the other’ in a precarious society. Vulnerability, suffering and the feeling of loss mean to live dependently. Uncertainty, vulnerability and the feeling of loss are featured by the young woman in scene seven. After shopping, the woman returns home and her husband is out however she does not know why he is out:

*Where were you? Where were you? Which shops? What were you doing? What were you doing there? What were you buying? What are you going to paint? I want to know what you need paint for. I want to know what you want to paint. I want to know where you’ve been (Stephens, 2009, p.217).*

When the woman reaches her office, her boss asks her about an important report without caring about her since report and business continuity are crucial in capitalist society. This society and the social classes cause insecurity and uncertainty:

*(...) There is a photographic paper in the machine and I don’t check and he roars at me. Don’t I realise what I’ve done? Don’t I realise how much more difficult it is to shred photographic paper? Why didn’t I check? Wasn’t I thinking? Don’t I think? Don’t I ever fucking think? (220).*

Scene six precariously explores both the utopian feeling of a schoolboy who tries to coexist with his maths teacher (the other) and his dangerous and violent side. He becomes fixated on his math teacher and bullies her. Because of his family relations, his laying bare inhospitality feelings for his other neighbours, he threatens other races. What a schoolboy wants when he goes to school is to continue this violence and his teacher suffers from extreme injurability. The schoolboy portrays the social positioning of insecurity in his society.

Love can eliminate vulnerability and blurring facets of life, however

in scene five incestuous love cannot guard sister and brother's lives from precariousness and meaninglessness. When she asks him to come to bed with her, they make love until morning and she says to him: "I love you so much it's like my body is bursting out of my skin and all I want is for you to love me in the same way and for it to be like this forever" (Stephens, 2009, p.244). However her brother rejects her sayings and offerings. Confusing thoughts, feelings and remorse related to corrupted values and relationship between brother and sister are observed. The brother realizes this corruption, and wants his sister to leave him in peace. The sister is really surprised and sorrowful for his words. She threatens him to kill herself, yet her brother does not believe her. The brother and sister say goodbye to each other. She asks him how long they will have to wait to see each other again: "how long do you think it'll take" and the brother answers "hundreds and hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of years" (248). Sister's desire is to see her brother as soon as possible. Apart from vulnerability, injurability, uncertainty and insecurity, hospitality and dependence of the other are illustrated in this scene.

Scene four is a monologue containing a suicide bomber's journey. Stephens describes a suicide bomber's thoughts and feelings while he is going to London to fulfil his mission. Dependency on the other and other nation and hospitality "something to be desired" (Derrida and Dufourmantelle, 2000, p.127) is particularly being observed in Scene four. Here, the bomber goes out of the house while it is still dark outside. He kisses his wife and children. He is carrying a bag and starts to walk. His bag is so heavy that he thinks "my bag slices into my shoulders" (Stephens, 2009, p.249) and later he gets on the bus and encounters a young Bangladeshi boy and describes him:

*A young Bangladeshi boy with a Walkman slumps in the middle of the bus towards the right-hand side. Stares out of the window. His feet are rested on the seat in front of him. I sit on the other side. Behind him. I watch back of his head (249).*

He encounters other people going to their work while he is going to London and he also gives information about potential bombers: "We have reserved seats in different carriages. (...) We don't need to check that each other is here. We trust one another" (250). Stephens tries to give the message that everything has already been planned among the suicide bombers. While travelling, he starts to drink "bad black coffee from upper crust" (p.251). Apart from coffee, he also desires mineral water and to eat a croissant: "Where the fucks are your almond croissants, you fucking bewigged,



myopic, prurient, sexless dead?” (252). At the same time, he tries to sleep but all of a sudden, he wakes up and worries about “how far we’ve come” (252) and he thinks that he’s forgotten something: “there is definitely something that I’ve forgotten, I’ve forgotten, can you help me, is there something that I’ve forgotten? I think it’s a word. Is it a word?” (252). It is clear that he is anxious whether his plan will function properly or not. He always thinks about whether he has forgotten something or not. He changes his train somewhere, but cannot remember this place exactly. He continues to criticize the West and illustrates whatever and whoever he sees, in other words the decadence of the Western culture:

*Here there are food-makers and the food they make is chemical. It fattens the teenage and soaks up the pre-teen. (...) In the sunshine of mid-morning in the suburbs of the South Midlands heroin has never tasted so good. Internet sex contact pages have never seemed more alluring. Nine hundred television channels have never seemed more urgent. And everybody needs an iPod (pp.252-53).*

While describing this corruption, he also criticizes the feeding system, the substance abuse, the media, and this culture of consumption. He also daydreams about bombing those he is witnessing. These bombers were born in England and they are the same product of British society like Simon Stephens. Stephens (2009) himself clarifies this:

*I couldn't share others' horror that the boys who bombed London were British by birth. Rather, it seemed logical to me. Their actions seemed to be absolutely a product of the same Britain I'd grown up in. They were born and raised in a Britain built by one prime minister who denied altogether the existence of society and another who made a passionate plea for understanding to be valued less than unthinking condemnation of others (p.xviii).*

Like the terrorists, Simon Stephens was Thatcher’s children. They grew up under Thatcher’s political and cultural effects. “In this respect, the fact that all the 7/7 terrorists had been born and raised in the United Kingdom – in Thatcher’s and Major’s Britain – together with the horror of the attacks undertaken on British soil” (Monforte, 2017, p.37). Margaret Thatcher, imposing monetarism, corporatization and market on the society, tore down political, social and economic concepts of post-war Britain and did not support community life. This can be understood this from her famous saying as “there’s no such a thing as society. There are only individuals” (1987). They have no experience, no religious beliefs, no moral values, and

no family relationships. Instead of getting lost, these individuals strengthen themselves or choose “to destroy the uniqueness of the body, tearing at its constitutive vulnerability” (Cavareno, 2009, p.8). They also witness violence, wars and terrorist attacks and they are uncertain about political discourses and their future. In such societies, people do not trust especially those who migrated. While sharing everything, Western countries label these people as the other or as guest, thus they cannot entirely accept them. “This is what happened to the parents of the bombers, who perhaps, deep down, were never accepted as visitors in their new country, were never offered an unconditional type of hospitality” (Monforte, 2017, p.38). They cannot be loved for their real selves.

Dependency on ‘the other’ in a precarious society is also clearly narrated in scene two with an old woman. This elderly woman is a widow and she lives alone. She writes articles and prepares her last article for Dr Schults. She also admits that she does not speak to anybody and if she has to speak with people, she worries that people can sense her fear: “I don’t speak to anybody. And God, the fucking horror if I were forced to. I wouldn’t know what to do with my hands” (Stephens, 2009, p.269). While returning home on foot on the day of bombing, she realizes that her neighbour is barbecuing chicken, so conquering her fear, she knocks the door uninvited and asks whether she might have a bite:

*I walked past your house. I could smell chicken. (...) It smells delicious. (...) Can I have some? (...) I just wanted you to know that I think your chicken smells delicious. (...) And I wondered what would happen if I just knocked on your door and said, your chicken smells delicious, please can I some of it? (...) Don’t laugh. (...) Don’t laugh at me (273-74).*

This old woman’s visit makes her neighbour laugh and ridicule her: “you’re completely fucking retarded, sweetheart, aren’t you?” (Stephens, 2009, p.274) but after a short time, the woman gives the chicken to the old woman, but no napkin or beer. The hospitality of the neighbour is limited and conditional. The old woman “seems to be constantly trying to touch someone” (2009, p.xxi) and she is in need of touching others. Thus, the old woman starts crying in a vulnerable and injurable way yet her tears make no sense to her since she is unaware of her dependence and precariousness: “I can’t understand why there are tears pouring down the sides of my face” (pp.274-275). The second scene shows that there is no connection or dialogue among neighbours and community. The precarious society creates dependence; however it offers no solution for communication.

### 3. CONCLUSION

This study illustrates how *Pornography* can be analysed within the context of precariousness, precarity, violence, the other, hospitality and uncertainty. As a consequence of the terrorist attacks, all characters in the play exemplify the recently formed precariat, suffering from extreme injurability and weakness which become corporeal following the concrete threat to their lives. Simon Stephens's indecisive and conflicting representations of characters force us to question public, political, economic, ontological conditions, and human values in society. All characters in the play are marked, directly or indirectly by the war. Representing "an interest in dramatizing a world that seems to be more atomised and fractured than it has been in the past and subsequently scorched by a need and an inability to connect" (Stephens, 2009, p. xxi), his play *Pornography* precariously illustrates the dependency of the other and the conditional hospitality. With its non-hierarchical, fragmented and experiential structure, *Pornography* has the potential to trigger the member of the audience into interrogating the precarity around them. The play indeed represents uncertainty and precariousness and it indicates that communities should scrutinize their politics and raison in the world.

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