

*The Use of Forum Theatre & Discourse Analysis in Solution of the Women's Issues in Turkey*

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**Abstract**

A period of time, Forum Theater, known as a kind of 'Theater of the oppressed' is being used to express, to represent and to find solutions to women's issues in Turkey. In that way, by a selection of certain neighborhoods in a given city, after exploring the potential women issues like violence, family pressure, neighborhood pressure, etc. the fact that women develop solutions to their own problems themselves by the role played on the scene is intended.

The main aim of this study is at the same time to present an example of this kind of forum theatre to be realized in the next December, in a neighborhood of Istanbul and to demonstrate in this way the impact and the contribution of the forum theater that could have on the solution of the problems. The first part of this research is already completed. So, in that district concerned women were interviewed about their problems and general information about common and uncommon problems was obtained.

The impact and the contribution of the forum theater to the potentials solutions by women themselves will be discussed and studied in two levels as language and behavior changing; On the one hand, around 20 of women's interviews will be analyzed and be compared to the way of expressing while performing on the scene from a pragmatic point of view on a linguistic level, and on the other hand the performance ending with the participation of an expert on the issues will be presented and analyzed on a didactic level.

**Keywords:** Forum theatre, women issues, discourse analysis.

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## **Introduction**

Throughout the history of society, there have always existed problems and questions concerning a clear definition of the status of being a woman and how they could become part of the system regarding their positioning in the patriarchal structure. Women, no matter in what system and at which developmental stage they have been witnessing themselves, have gained recognition and existed with the roles, either imposed or determined, by and within the rules established by the same the patriarchal structure. The degree of equality of men and women is measured by women's abilities of influence, power, and enforcing authority and the parameters of social role and social actions appropriate (permitted) for both sexes. (Berkday:15).

Some of the research on women's issues reveal that status of women -both in public and private sphere- and their ways of accepting authority are defined in accordance with their roles in society which deems appropriate for them. One of the definitions Rassam suggested indicates that women's status should be identified taking into account three dimensions: First, social organization of the power; second, the quality of ideological and institutional instruments which control women's bodies; and, finally, sexual division of labor in society. (Berkday:16 quoted from Rassam). The relation of women with the notion of religion, which is the leading the corporate/organizational instrument, emerges as a prominent factor in determining the status of women being accepted as the most effective means of controlling the women's body.

In short, the appraised roles for women and women's place in society till today have always been a contentious issue and women, in that sense, have always taken part in struggle especially to become a free individual. Also, the emerging problems in this study indicate that aforementioned process still goes on. As long as the problems continue, efforts to find solutions to the problems will continue and should. In this study, the main concern is about one application of the forum theatre method, which is commonly used today and is a part of the Theatre of the Oppressed as one of the ways of solution.

### **1. Theatre of the Oppressed**

South American Augusto Boal was influenced by Paulo Freire while he formed the "Theatre of the Oppressed". While Freire had developed the program in order to teach literacy to agricultural workers, Boal associated this to theatre and created a new method where this program could be used as a language. In his "Pedagogy of the Oppressed" Freire writes about two educational models in the methodology he created in order to teach literacy to agricultural workers. In one of these models Freire mentions the presence of a hierarchical structure between the teacher and the student, where the former claims to know everything and the latter admits to not knowing anything. The student sits in the classroom just like an Aristotelian viewer and transfers the right to act and to know to the other party. He is passive. He watches the stage, i.e. the teacher motionless without speaking or acting. He takes in whatever is

offered and unquestioningly accepts them. The teacher either lectures about a stagnant, fragmented and predictable subject detached from reality or goes on to explain at length about topics which are completely foreign to the existential experience of the student. His task is to fill the students with the contents of his narrative. The words are hollowed out and knowledge becomes empty, alienated and alienating verbiage. Its hallmark is the resonance of the words, not their transformative power. Because people perceive the world as passive beings, education has to passivize them further and make them conform to the world. An educated person is a conforming person. This concept suits the purposes of power holders, that is the oppressors. Because their peace of mind depends on how much they have conformed to a world created by the oppressor and on how little they question this world (Freire: 1998: 62-63).

Yet what is special about knowledge is that it can make education functional and lead to a transformative change in power. The idea that "knowledge is gained through critical questioning and is an experiential process" which Freire offered in his problem based learning model forms the basis of his educational model. It is composed of a series of acts of awareness creation. This process of gaining awareness is at the same time a process of emancipation where oppression is stopped. Transfer of knowledge is replaced by mutual learning. The teacher offers material to form a basis for thought and discussion and they form a critical ability to think about their ways of being in the world. So both parties learn mutually through acts of reasoning, investigation and questioning and use information functionally. This is the method borrowed and applied by Augusto Boal in his theatre. In his poetics, theatre is not a space where information is received passively. His theatre is a field where knowledge is collectively questioned and investigated, where solutions are sought for problems and where collective decisions are taken as to whether knowledge can be applied. (Boal: 2003: 40)

The scientific and technological innovations and developments brought about by the Renaissance and the Enlightenment introduced a new aesthetic, artistic and literary understanding. In our current globalising world where borders are becoming diffuse these changes have naturally reflected on art and thus theatre. The social structure triggered by this interaction was gradually redefined and found an artistic expression. This process led to the emergence of a specific drama style known as the "Theatre of the Oppressed" in the early 1970<sup>s</sup> with an underlying theory created by Augusto Boal (Kuyumcu: 27).

Apart from its compatibility with the 20th century social structure, the "Theatre of the Oppressed" overlaps with a way of being where the borders between the spectator and the actor are diffuse through the intervention it makes on this very structure. Boal argues that Aristotle does not grant the spectator the right to think or act while Brecht gives the spectator the right to think but not to act. He takes one step further and wants the spectator to stop being a spectator and to become an spect-actor; he wants them not only to think but also to go on stage, act and change the current world. The stage is at the spectators' disposition. In all drama styles under the Theatre of the

Oppressed, everyone joins in the play, intervenes and acts on their own behalf. The goal of the Theatre of the Oppressed is not to calm down the spectators by offering them peace and balance, on the contrary, the goal is to open way for action and reveal imbalances. The goal is to make the spectator dynamic. These dynamics remove all the obstacles which block action. Therefore the spect-actor is cleansed through action. In Boal's theatre catharsis is not an act of cleansing which passivizes and calms down the individual (Boal 2003: 40). The Theatre of the Oppressed includes a multiplicity of techniques such as Forum Theatre, Invisible Theatre, Newspaper Theatre and Legislative Theatre.

### **1.1 Forum Theatre**

The spectator in Forum Theatre learns how to cope with oppression on stage by trial. So the problem to be tackled must be familiar to the whole group of spectators. The spectators are composed of homogenous groups such as students or teachers from the same school, doctors or nurses working at the same hospital or adult students of a community literacy course.

In the preparation phase a sample group among the spectators attend a workshop or discussion in order to identify the problem to be taken up. The purpose of the meeting is to realistically identify and dramatize a problem experienced by the spectator group in all of its dimensions. It is important for the spectators to see themselves as mediated through a familiar problem, to gain awareness about the problem and to understand that only they themselves can solve the problem. The problems thus identified through preliminary interviews, discussions or workshops are translated into 10 to 15-minute plays.

This pre-play should reveal the problem in all of its dimensions. The spectators must clearly see the causes of the problem, the positions of the various parties, the social and political motives and the conundrums. The pre-play is performed, the Joker appears on stage and asks the spectators for a way out of the conundrum the protagonist finds himself/herself in and asks for help. This is the transition to the Forum. Once spectators start suggesting solutions from their seats the Joker invites the spectators on stage and asks them to replace the actor and show the solution by acting. This turns the spectator into a spect-actor. From this moment on, the play is re-written and re-performed through improvisation. The actors portray the suggestions of the spect-actors and the possible outcomes realistically vis-a-vis new situations these may lead to.

The spect-actor realises what s/he can do at the point. After the intervention is over the Joker turns to the spectators and asks whether the suggested solution is feasible. Spectators then assess the suggestion and either accept or reject it.

The spectators now have an idea about what would expect them in a similar situation. This is their rehearsal for the outside world. This quest for a solution brings a form of cleansing as the spectators experience a rehearsal of reality, they interact with different parties, realise their possibilities and react and respond to various reactions. They have become better equipped and stronger as they leave the theatre.

## **2. Project & Theme selection for the Forum**

The fourth edition of Documentarist, Which Human Rights Film Festival was held on 8-12 December 2012. The festival chooses a particular theme each year and holds activities around it. This year's theme was "Right to Life" with short films, documentaries and a Forum Theatre featured in the program.

### **2.1. Target Group and Sample:**

The target group chosen for identifying the problem was the Mavi Kalem (Blue Pen) Association while the sample was a sub-section functioning in the framework of the "Fener-Balat Women's Solidarity Point" project.

Mavi Kalem Association is an NGO which was established in 2000 with the goal of supporting women, children and youth in issues such as education and personal development, violence, women's health and health care rights. The "Fener-Balat Women's Solidarity Point" project has been offering free advice to women in the Fener-Balat districts and its surrounds. Its main goal is to address current and future information needs of women.

Women in the centre are provided assistance on general medical problems, gynaecological diseases, domestic violence, law, information on accessing free health care services, urban transportation etc. Women are provided daily advice in addition to training and other activities. Experts offer regular training on health care and women's and reproductive health, organize film screenings and fairs. Activities include courses on English and computer skills, among other subjects. The project is supported by International Women of Istanbul (IWI).

The Fener-Balat neighborhood is one of Istanbul's oldest districts in the inner shores of the Golden Horn with a population of prominently rural migrants. While this was a mainly Greek neighborhood until the 1940s, it underwent a social transformation as its residents moved to other parts of Istanbul such as the the Prince's Islands, Kadıköy, Yeşilköy and Şişli. The factories, manufacturing houses and workshops set up around the shores of the Golden Horn also contributed to this transformation. At present, the income and educational level of the population is quite low. The population is largely composed of immigrants from Eastern and Southeastern Turkey.

### **2.3. Interviews and the Workshop**

During the first pre-workshop meeting consisting of 18 women who attend regularly to the association's activities, the participants first introduced themselves and afterwards, were presented rather detailed information on the study to be done. Within the chatting environment, women have been observed to bring to the agenda the current problems holding on from the past besides the current issues they encounter such as routine problems with their children, interparental conflicts, or discord between mother-in-laws and brides. Furthermore, family planning has been expressed among these current problems.

#### **2.3.1. Confirmation of the Women Issues Observed by Discourse Analysis**

Recognizing that they have commonalities in life, women expressed themselves in a relaxing atmosphere although at first they had a reserved manner to declare their opinions. Utterances mostly used nearly in the same way by women during the interview also led to their common affective stances they have been experiencing. Common emotions and thoughts observed as a result of the analysis of the first interview records which have been gathered from the women living in the aforementioned province before starting Forum Theatre Performances and the general women and men profiles were classified basing on the utterances and words mostly used in their discourses.

##### **2.3.1.1. Women's State of mind**

Women answered the question posed in the face to face talks and interviews "Do you have pressure on you (What sort of pressures do you feel on you)?" by telling their short life stories. Common expressions women uttered nearly all the time in their life stories indicates that their emotional states are related mainly to five conceptual areas: "desperation", "fear", "loneliness", "burnout"(table 1). As illustrated in the table, women used a great variety of idioms or expressions for their past or present time such as "being forced", "helplessness", "be unable to do anything"referring to their feelings and the stance "desperation". They also described their educational background with expressions such as "desperation", "to have nothing to do, no word to say, or no place to go" in accordance with their maintaining situation with no diploma or unemployment.

It has been observed that the main characters to the anxiety which turned into the fear before and after marriage are the characters called either implicitly or explicitly. These are among the close family environments and also dominant in making decisions in the name of women. The subjects of the sentences referring to before-marriage expressions such as "to be beaten" or "to be locked at home" were older brother and father; and for the after-marriage life stories, mother-in-law, father-in-law, and neighbours were added to those characters in limiting women's freedom and exposing pressure on them.

<b>WOMEN'S STATE OF MIND</b>				
<b>Helplessness</b>	<b>Solitude</b>	<b>Fear</b>	<b>Culpability</b>	<b>Exhaustion</b>
Be constrained Become helpless Be in desperate straits Not able to do anything Have nowhere to go Take care of oneself	All alone Be disclaimed	Older brother, husband, relatives, neighbours	Stew in one's own juice Make her life miserable This is self-punishment (not getting divorced)	Deceive the self Unable to know what to do
To be in need of her husband To be in need Depend on somebody	unprotected	Get beat up Atrocity Being secluded Being locked	Pull the family apart I was giving harm to my family Cut the family down size	Everything coming down on themselves Get suffocated
Unable to say anything Cannot resist	Unable to have a chat	To break up, To get divorced Be left Embarrass the family Children left off and fallen in the gutter	Could not even succeed it (suicide)	Be sick of living
Consent, To handle To endure	Have to live a prisoner life	To beg for	Not able to look the family in the face	Get exhausted
unwealthy	Be left	Spread rumor, spread gossip, assertion of breaking up.	This (life style) is my own choice, thus I have to endure it. I even do not deserve to die.	Unable to endure, so escape
Not have economic freedom, income, a job	Shelter	Be blamed or accused	Not dare (shame) Embarrass the family	Cannot even succeed it (suicide)

The analysis based on the common expressions and adjectives that are frequently uttered by the women whilst they refer to themselves and/or their spouses reveal how women identify themselves and their husbands as is shown in the table below:

<b>PROFILES BY WOMEN DISCOURSES</b>					
<b>MEN</b>			<b>WOMEN</b>		
<b>Dominant</b>	<b>Egocentric</b>	<b>Threatening</b>	<b>Inexistent</b>	<b>Valueless</b>	<b>Captive</b>
Presenting often with a fait accompli terrorizing offensive	disinterested indifferent	presenting often with a fait accompli Threatening with leaving	no time for her serf	considering herself as servant & nanny	having no right to speak
colling always to account	excessive alcohol consuming AMATEM (Rehabilitation center)	threatening with beating	no plans for her self, Having plans only for children	not to be listened by her husband, by her parents Not to be interesting to her husband	living under the auspices of men Imprisonment; Having a prisoner life
guided by his parents	interested in other women	issuing death threats	<b>having not economic freedom</b>	<b>having not economic freedom</b>	<b>having not economic freedom</b>

### 2.3.2 Abortion as the matter selected for the forum

In May 2012 the government announced new decisions restricting the right to abortion followed by the slogan “three children per family” which was a precursor of an anti-abortion government policy working largely against women. While previously the woman and her spouse had the right to decide on abortion in the absence of medical risks, the new legislation expanded the mandate of the doctors and introduced obstacles against abortion. Furthermore, women were psychologically pressured against having legal abortions. The new law enabled health care workers to refuse to take part in “voluntary abortion”. The fact that the legal period of abortion stayed at 10 weeks (despite women having to overcome more obstacles) became a further challenge for women. This forces women to have illicit abortions in illegal and unhygienic establishments which appears as the only way out for many women and poses a great health threat. This was the background on which the theme for the Forum Theatre was chosen and women were asked to identify their problems, birth control methods and abortion-related issues.

Interviews were held with 18 women attending the Centre on two major topics. The first topic was contraception methods and the sharing of the contraceptive responsibility between spouses and the second topic was factors affecting decisions about abortion.

The interviewees mentioned that they were not free to take any radical decisions about their bodies and what is more striking, they all seemed to agree that this was natural. This is accepted as normal in a patriarchal family and religion is shown as the decisive factor in relationships. “Mono-theistic religions base themselves on values dominant in patriarchal class societies where they have flourished when it comes to the norms shaping the nature, status and role of women. As long as the patriarchal system prevails in historical development, men’s right to control women, their bodies and their access to birth control and sexual health care services will remain institutionalised.” The consequence is that women have to solve their problems on their own or in line with religious impositions and their husbands’ requests.

The majority of the interviewees (12/18) said that they had to take contraceptive measures and that their husbands refused to use condoms for a range of reasons. Pregnancy was a source of worry for women more than for men who were not intimidated by it regardless of their economic conditions. Women or men who are against abortion act with deterministic drives and believe that God will always support even larger families. When women demand their husbands to use contraceptives (due to allergies, bleeding etc.) men regard particularly condom use as an insult and humiliation, raising objections claiming that “real men don’t do that”.

The reasons for their objection was summed up as follows:

- Men take contraception as an insult on their personality, claiming that they are strong men and can look after their families.
- Condom use is associated with manhood where men refuse to use condoms saying “they can’t be bothered”.

In terms of the second topic, i.e. factors influencing abortion, women mention their husbands, mothers in law and the fear of committing a sin as the major obstacles. 8 out of 18 women mentioned that they believed abortion to be a sin and that they would never have an abortion. Their opinion was firm, even when others in the group stated that it was even a bigger sin to bring a child into a world full of poverty. 2 women in the group had 2 children, while the others had 3 and more children each and they all had poor socio-economic conditions. Their mothers in law were as influential as their husbands in their ideas on abortion.

The remaining women were not against abortion, in fact 5 had had previous abortions and the majority stated that they would have an abortion if they fell pregnant again. The women who were against abortion showed “sin” as the biggest reason.

Older relatives in the family also had a big impact on the decision to have an abortion in addition to the husbands. Women especially mentioned their mothers in law as having a bigger influence than their husbands. Therefore couples usually hide abortions from older relatives.

Most mothers in law have 6-7 or even more children, low expectations and no prospects for children. They are against abortion because

- The believe that it is a sin;
- They believe that their sons can take care of their families and they see the opposite as a threat on their son's and their own power;
- They regard their grand children as a form of guarantee (especially grand sons);
- Since they have raised so many children they claim that their daughters in law should be ready to do the same.

As for their husbands, husbands accepting contraception are not all against abortion. The ones against abortion believe that it is a sin and they believe that it is a good thing to have many children.

### 3. Progress of the workshop & Reactions

**COALESCENCE/HARMONIZATION/INCLUSION:** In this study, after the inclusion and warm-up exercises, the work of rendering was adopted. In the process of rendering, primarily small groups are formed, and they were asked to bodily create frozen pictures as images of family members such as a mother, father, older brother, son, daughter, or husband etc. This activity revealed the fact that whilst the body language regarding women referred to their being introverted, confined/secluded, and having defensive attitudes, on the other hand the body language for men (including male kids) expressed an overlooking, open body stance having an imperious manner.

**PICTURIZING/ILLUSTRATION:** When they were prompted to draw a picture about the problems/difficulties they experience in daily life, and the pictures exhibited, it has been observed that there occurred an image of women who were under the menacing gaze of and left alone in the face of husband or mother-in-law. Those people in the pictures were easily recognized since these role characters have a place in the lives of theirs in some way or other. When the picture was reenacted, the portrait illustrated the desperation of a woman, who seeks to abort her 4th pregnancy, against her husband and mother-in-law who object to abortion for various reasons.

#### 3.1. The Play

The pre-play is composed of two parts and is 12 minutes in length. In the first part, a young couple watch TV in the evening. The woman is crocheting while the man watches a soccer game. The game is over, the TV is off and the husband courts the wife trying to lure her into bed. The wife realises the man's intentions and reservedly takes out a condom she had been hiding. The man reacts. The woman tells him, softly and trying to raise compassion in him, that she tried all kinds of contraceptive methods but that they gave her allergies and that she was really afraid to become pregnant. She tells him that she is not only afraid of going through an abortion but that they are not fit to have another baby in terms of their age and finances. The husband listens to but does not take her seriously and objects to using the condom.

The second part begins with a morning scene. The man is on his way to work, having a quick breakfast. The wife is frowning and the mother in law wants to know what is wrong. The wife reacts and says “we have no money, the man has no proper job, how can we have another child while we cannot even take care of our three children? You says it is a sin, but isn’t it a sin to bring another child into poverty?” Then man says that the baby must be born and leaves for work. The neighbor woman arrives and finds out the reason for the tension in the house. She is very sorry to learn about the new pregnancy. The wife says that she cannot have an abortion without her husband’s consent but that it will be even worse to have another child in their poor household. The neighbor then tells her that she knows of a doctor who carries out abortions without the husband’s consent but the conditions are not very good. This is an illicit abortion clinic operating under bad conditions. What is the wife to do? How can she convince her husband and mother in law? Should she agree to have the abortion in the illegal abortion clinic?

#### **4. Forum**

Intervention: The first suggestion was made by a university student. The student threatened the house to leave her husband. This suggestion was not accepted by the audience because they were not as strong as the university student.

Intervention: The spectator as performer intended to convince the mother-in-law thus she would affect the husband over his mother. Bride offered to solve the problem by the help of mother-in-law’s authority over her son by saying “your son reveres you, he respects you”. Mother-in-law could not reject the offer because the concept was invaluable in patriarchal family structure.

Intervention: The spectator as performer approached her husband with love. She tried to persuade her husband by saying that the children are already grown-ups, so they would feel more comfortable and pass great time as they used to in the early years of their marriage. The performer as the husband laughed at it and could not refuse.

Intervention: Spectator as performer went on to explore ways to convince over the mother-in-law. Therefore, she tried to exert a person, who the mother-in-law cannot disoblige, or get offended, to influence mother-in-law. Mother-in-law could not take objection to it.

Intervention: Woman very flatly declared her thought against her mother-in-law that she wants to give birth in no way, and if mother-in-law did not give permission for abortion, or convince her husband for it, then she would go and have abortion illegally and in unhealthy conditions. She also mentioned that if she passed away in such unlikely conditions, all the family members would suffer or even wretched. Mother-in-law was lost in thought because of such a emphatical speech.

## **Conclusion:**

The results of this study can be summarized under 2 main titles, which are “The women’s benefits via Forum Theatre” and “the validation of the effect of using forum theatre as a method in problem solving”.

The very general benefits of women can be counted as to find an opportunity to express themselves, to raise awareness about their problems, to improve an attitude for easy expression of self because they recognized the opportunity to express themselves and thus gained the ability to offer suggestions as solution.

After all, it has been witnessed that using forum theatre as a method proves to be functional and fruitful regarding the benefits mentioned above. By all means, it is essential that problems be correctly identified and analyzed during the interviews and workshops. The discourse analysis completed within the scope of this study forms an important phase of the study in order to correctly determine the problems. Therefore, applying discourse analysis in such academic studies significantly contributes to laying a more strong ground for the forum theatre.

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