

ANXIETY, FRAGMENTATION, AND DYSFUNCTIONAL COMMUNICATION IN STEVEN BERKOFF'S *KVETCH*

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ABSTRACT

This study focuses on acclaimed playwright Steven Berkoff's rarely studied play, *Kvetch*. The study argues that Berkoff demonstrates the uncomfortable inner conflicts of human beings at personal and interpersonal levels in *Kvetch*. In this context, the article explores the issues of anxiety, fragmentation, and dysfunctional communication, which are reflected through the internal monologues and overlapping speeches of the characters. The characters in the play suffer from anxieties affecting their actions and interactions. This situation causes a dichotomous tension between their inner selves and their social faces. The mental fragmentation of the characters also gives rise to the problem of dysfunctional communication, creating a more chaotic atmosphere in the play. The study further claims that Berkoff functionalizes both form and content to present the characters' inner struggles. In this respect, it is demonstrated in this study that Berkoff's unconventional and non-conformist dramatic approach in *Kvetch* strengthens the theme of fragmentation structurally as well. By delving into the characters' internal monologues and the complex web of dialogues in the play, the study looks at how Berkoff employs experimental dramatic techniques through which he pushes his audiences to put the puzzle pieces together to be able to understand each character's mind. The study concludes that Berkoff's play displays the mental world of humankind, always in struggle with a pervasive sense of anxiety and fragmentation.

Keywords: Berkoff, kvetch, anxiety, fragmentation, dysfunctional communication

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Introduction

Born in London's East End, Steven Berkoff (born Leslie Steven Berks, 1937–) is a notable playwright, actor, director, and producer who has “expanded from his earlier one-man presentation of East End jobs to attacking the theatrical tradition in the form of Hollywood extras” (Innes, 2002: 427). He has developed his own unusual and experimental theatrical style, which is often referred to as ‘Berkovian’ or ‘Berkoffian.’ Berkoff’s style is known to be highly innovative, daring, satirical, and confrontational. On the other hand, as Patrick Marmion underlines, Berkoff is known to be “[a] notoriously difficult man himself who has been accused of all sorts of sexual transgression,” and “there are aspects of his writing which are gloriously uncomfortable for today’s audiences” (2020). It is due to the fact that while Berkoff focuses on the individual in his plays, he aims to lay bare the problematic sides of social norms and values. In other words, Berkoff’s major aim in writing his plays is to disturb, challenge, and encourage people to think about discomfiting and unspeakable issues regarding the individual and society. As Jeremy Solomons similarly underlines—drawing attention to the playwright’s unusual style—,

[Berkoff] made his own way in the theatre world. [. . .] The character is always the centre of attention in any scene he is in. [. . .] For Berkoff there is no such thing as society, just individuals competing in the same space. He resists stories that need to be told to bring cohesion to community. (Solomons, 2022: 47-48)

After training for the stage at the Webber Douglas Academy of Dramatic Art in London and at the Ecole Jacques Lecoq in Paris in the 1950s and 1960s, Berkoff worked in repertory theatres, where he gained further experience. During his stay in Paris, he was deeply inspired by Lecoq, who was a “remarkable teacher of physical acting and story-telling” (Eyre and Wright, 2001: 364). As Berkoff himself explains, Lecoq’s theatrical techniques provided him with the possibility of finding new ways to present works “whereby all elements of the human being are brought into motion,” which is today known as “physical theatre” or “total theatre” (Berkoff, 1992: 9). He has also been inspired by Brecht, Artaud, Shakespeare, classical theatre, Japanese theatre, and his family’s immigrant and working-class background (BBC Bitesize, 2020).

Although Berkoff worked at various theatre companies for some time, he found them excessively conventional and lacking in creativity. As Taner Can underlines,

[i]t is clear that Berkoff strived, even in the early stages of his career, to create a visual show without much concern about realism, or verisimilitude in theatre. However, he could not find a theatre company where he could develop his dramatic theories. For Berkoff, the productions of the mainstream theatres looked too traditional and non-functional. (2021: 1041)

Since Berkoff was not satisfied with working at theatres supporting conformist and traditional values, he founded his own experimental company, the London Theatre Group, in 1968, where he started to write and perform his own work. He has directed and performed internationally since then. In addition to his own plays, he has directed adaptations of works by names such as Sophocles, Aeschylus, Shakespeare, Kafka, and Poe, “all performed on a virtually bare stage with a minimum of props, but creating, through mime and ensemble acting, vividly sketched, constantly changing scenes and settings” (Morris, 1993). As Craig Rosen additionally notes, Berkoff has been “a mainstay on the British fringe theatre scene” since the 1960s, owing to his unconventional style (2000: iii). Berkoff has also made movies and has taken on many screen roles, including the ones in *A Clockwork Orange* (1971), *Octopussy* (1983), *Beverly Hills Cop* (1984), and *Rambo: First Blood Part II* (1985) (Fisher, 2024).

Berkoffian theatrical style involves extreme physical acts, exaggerated use of mime and masks, unrefined and occasionally aggressive language, and artificial vocal techniques. As Jon Foley Sherman explains briefly,

Berkoff’s plays and his direction require virtuosic physical control, almost always displayed in extensive use of mime. [. . .] His use of costume often serves to highlight the actor’s body, leaving arms, legs, and sometimes torsos exposed. Given the nature of his scripts, the actions enacted are often brutal and exaggerated, involving a ‘large’ style often characterized by freezes and poses of easily identifiable attitudes and actions. In keeping with his belief in mime, Berkoff prefers a bare stage with a few chairs and rarely uses built settings. (2010: 233)

Can, likewise, underlines that "[f]ew or no stage props, unrealistic use of make-up and an extensive use of mime and dancing are the defining features of Berkovian aesthetics" (2021: 1041). Thus, it is possible to argue that Berkoff functionalizes both body and language in a carnivalesque manner on stage.

Berkoff also aims to show "latent, and sometimes explicit, violence" on stage (Eyre and Wright, 2001: 364). In his plays, Berkoff intends to hit "taboo barriers," especially the ones related to "speaking about sex" (Sternlicht, 2004: 188). Berkoff has also been significantly inspired by Brecht and Artaud. In this respect, Berkoff's plays reflect a political attitude, or "utterly fearless expression of outrage at the behaviour of the establishment, political and artistic" (Kirkpatrick, 1989: 49). In other words, Berkoff aims to create political awareness through his style, which has influenced today's "experimental and political fringe productions" (Sternlicht, 2004: 188). All things considered, Berkoff can be regarded as a precursor of the 1990s' In-Yer-Face theatre, which is particularly emphasized by Aleks Sierz, who calls Berkoff "a pioneer" (2001: 26).

In light of this background, this study explores Berkoff's 1986 play, *Kvetch*, which won the *Evening Standard* Award for Best Comedy of the Year in 1991. In the play, Berkoff aims to demonstrate the deepest anxieties of human beings on stage. In the author's note to the play, Berkoff underlines that *Kvetch* is about the effects of anxiety, and he claims that "the dialogue in the back of the head is truer than the one in the front" (1994: 46). In this respect, this study examines the issues of anxiety, fragmentation, and dysfunctional communication in Berkoff's play. The study takes the play's form and content into consideration in order to show how Berkoff uses body language and verbal communication effectively on stage. Thus, the next section of this article involves a detailed analysis of *Kvetch* in terms of the above-mentioned issues.

Anxiety's Nagging Voice in *Kvetch*

"Kvetch" is an English word of Yiddish origin, which simply means "to complain, especially chronically" ("Kvetch," 2001: 1069). In Berkoff's *Kvetch*, kvetching has a deeper meaning, signifying a manifestation of existential anxiety. The play is a satirical comedy with a frantic and tense atmosphere that stems from the kvetch within, spoken out directly to the audience by the characters in the play, in between fragments of conversations. In other words, the play is about the nagging voice of anxiety and fear that will not go away.

The epigraph of the play draws attention to human beings' deepest and oldest fears in this context, ranging from the fear of losing health or money to more primal or archetypal fears like arachnophobia. Berkoff also underlines in the author's note that although *Kvetch* is an American play about anxiety, its major theme is more comprehensive and universal, regarding all kinds of fears binding us all (1994: 46). In other words, by referring to a wide range of anxieties, Berkoff draws attention to a universal human condition transcending social, cultural, and national boundaries. The universality of the main theme is further emphasized by the playwright's dedication of his play to "the afraid" (1994: 43).

In the play, Berkoff creates a complex web of words uttered out loud, thoughts only the audience can hear, and "sharp and dynamic" movements of the actors to give his messages (1994: 45). The characters express their inner thoughts and feelings in asides while trying to maintain proper communication with other characters. There are sudden freezes in the movement "almost like a freeze-frame" when a character speaks his or her thoughts (Berkoff, 1994: 45). These freezes allow each character to express their underlying kvetches. The characters reveal their anxieties, insecurities, and sexual desires in asides, whereas their conversations with other characters reflect only a small portion of their personal and interpersonal problems. In this respect, through his dramatic technique based on fragmented dialogues, Berkoff aims to display the reasons and consequences of dysfunctional communication, which are visible in the characters' inability to self-actualize and experience psychological fulfilment, as well as their inability to perceive others' thoughts and feelings.

In Berkoff's *Kvetch*, all characters seem to be anxious for various reasons throughout the play. That is why the play starts with a seemingly calm but invisibly chaotic dinner night. Frank is an extremely neurotic person with negative and violent thoughts about his wife, his mother-in-law, and his colleagues. Donna is tired of being a housewife who is meaninglessly busy all the time, is tired of her ulcer, and is extremely tired of being Frank's wife. Donna's elderly mother has digestive problems and is almost always bloated and embarrassingly gassy. The other characters in the play are Hal, who is Frank's colleague and is always insecure about being a divorced person, and George, who is a greedy wholesaler and makes improper remarks to Donna at some point.

Frank spontaneously invites Hal for dinner without asking for Donna's opinion. Since Hal feels very lonely, he accepts Frank's invitation; however, Frank immediately regrets inviting Hal since he is worried that Donna and his mother-in-law will make him embarrassed by their 'unpleasant' behaviours. Donna is constantly anxious about

the timing of cooking meals properly, and she always fears that the dinner will be overcooked or that her husband will wait when he gets home from work, scolding her if the dinner is not ready. Frank and Hal arrive late. The dinner is overcooked, which makes Donna even more anxious, giving her ulcers. While her mother criticizes Donna for the cooking failure, Frank is nervous about having a colleague as a guest. Hal, on the other hand, unaware of the couple's domestic and sexual problems, envies Frank by assuming that he has Donna's companionship—unlike himself—in a peaceful home. Reality is different from Hal's perception. Donna is seriously tired of Frank's toxic masculinity and his endless kvetches. She craves the attention of a man who shows her kindness and gives importance to fulfilling her sexual desires, unlike Frank, who does not seem to care. Frank is such a neurotic character that even his nickname at work is "Kvetch" (Berkoff, 1994: 60). Fed up with such domestic problems, Donna feels attracted to Hal during the dinner as a result, wishing that she had the courage to leave her husband for good. As a result, the characters' conversations are completely "awkward, inconsequential and halting" although "fires burn within" (Guernsey Jr. and Sweet, 1988: 184). Meanwhile, Frank's mother-in-law is also unhappy since she feels she is not respected by Frank and worries that is not wanted in that house. George, on the other hand, is introduced to the audience in Act II as a greedy character who tends to exploit other people.

The characters are constantly disturbed by their neurotic inner voices although they try not to show their feelings to each other. They confess their fears and anxieties about work, family, sex—or life in general—only to the audience. There are even sex scenes—without nudity on stage—in which the couple has wild fantasies about other people. Donna gets satisfaction while fantasizing about garbage men, whereas Frank dreams about other women he saw on the beach, and surprisingly, even about Frank. As the plot progresses, the characters become slightly more comfortable with communication; however, not all of them can get rid of their inner voices completely. Donna leaves Frank towards the end of the play, consequently reaching a phase of mental relief. She confesses her sexual relationship with George to Frank before she leaves the house, which gives her a little peace of mind. Frank, on the other hand, gets rid of the kvetches eroding his mind only for a short period of time when he sleeps with Hal towards the end of the play. However, since Frank is chronically anxious, he is disturbed by the nagging voice in his head soon, due to new problems emerging as a result of his intimacy with Hal.

By employing the sudden surprises and complexities of satirical comedy as a genre, Berkoff exposes problematic social norms and values that cause anxiety and fear in characters and dysfunctional communication in relation to that. In other words, through his bitter satire in *Kvetch*, Berkoff draws attention to how societal expectations can do harm to human psychology and behaviours as much as they do to relationships. Some notable issues in the play are gender inequality, toxic masculinity, modern-life loneliness and isolation, depression, socio-economic problems, and a lack of meaningful communication. In this respect, through such themes, Berkoff aims to challenge the audience to reconsider societal expectations that are distressing and are shaping lives in problematic ways.

According to Rana Sağıroğlu, "we are all gendered subjects before we are born," and "some specific discourses are waiting for us that produce our gender roles, subjectivities, social positions, and even the schemata of our sense of reality and truth" (2022: 28). In accordance with this idea, Berkoff's audience is introduced to gender-based domestic problems from the very beginning of his play. The play opens with Donna's internal monologue, through which she informs the audience about Frank's toxic masculinity affecting her sense of reality. She explains that she fears "*his wrath ... not physically ... but his scowling tongue ... his looks ... his moods* [all asides given in italics in the original text]" (Berkoff, 1994: 49). Clearly, she suffers from psychological abuse. She even suffers from physical symptoms of anxiety and fear, such as sweating or ulcer pain, even though she knows that she is not guilty. Donna is also aware that Frank often uses abusive language towards her, comparing her to "other wives" or worse, likening her to "a chicken" running around "with its head cut off" (Berkoff, 1994: 49). In this respect, she feels Frank's hostility toward herself all the time. Being tired of Frank's abusive treatment, Donna reflexively compares her situation to Hal's, as he is a divorced person. She also reveals her psychological hunger for companionship and her envy for Hal's relatively independent life in the following aside:

DONNA: *Friends ... lucky man ... seeing people ... new people ... friends ... I'm so hungry for friends I can almost taste the word on my lips ... we never see anyone ... I hate being married to him ... to see his miserable complaining face every day ... I want to run away ... I could leave tomorrow ... if I had the guts I would ... leave the kids and him ... never see anyone ... just him and his guts to fill and the inside of a supermarket three times a week ...* [italics in original] (Berkoff, 1994: 56).

Donna reveals how lonely and isolated she feels in her marriage with Frank. She yearns to socialize with people outside the house. She finds Frank's inconsiderate and rude behaviours increasingly intolerable. She is tired of seeing "*his miserable complaining face* [italics in original]" every day, which is a manifestation of the lack or loss of emotional connection (Berkoff, 1994: 56). Her emotional turmoil—highlighted by an abundance of triple dots and fragmented sentences in the text—eventually leads her to leave her husband and the children off-stage, as an act of self-liberation from the restraints of a toxic marriage.

In the final scene of the play, Donna has finally found the courage to alter her domestic state and bring a solution to her long-running existential crisis. When she confesses her sexual relationship with George to Frank, she does not show any sign of resentment:

DONNA: He sticks it in me, Frank.
 FRANK: Break a chair over his head ... I hold myself back ...
 DONNA: He pulls my panties off and shoves his cock in ... [. . .]
 DONNA: He doesn't even mind my one tit ... says it cute ...
 FRANK: He makes big profits out of me ... Mr Greasy ...
 DONNA: Says he can concentrate better on one tit ...
 FRANK: I'm a man, Donna ... I'll not be spat upon ...
 DONNA: I'm a woman and need a good screw from time to time. [. . .]
 FRANK: [. . .] but I make money for them ... finding them cheap discounted lines ...
 DONNA: Shut up! Shut up! Shut up! Shut up! ... Shut up!
 FRANK: Donna??
 DONNA: He sticks it into me ... the manufacturer ... I had to tell you ...
 FRANK: Wad!!!? Wayasay!!!? Wadya saying? ... Wad's coming out of your mouth??? Donna, am I hearing you??? Is that you??
 DONNA: Yeah ... listen ... it's kvetching me and I have to let it out ... that fat greasy manufacturer ... the one who bosses you around ... well, he really likes me and though he's screwing you, metaphorically of course, he's screwing me ... so we're both being screwed, so put that in your mouth and smoke it ...
 FRANK: Donna ... I never heard you talk like that. (Berkoff, 1994: 83-84)

While Donna tries to tell him the truth and to get rid of kvetching, Frank is too self-absorbed to hear Donna's confession until she starts screaming. Shockingly and cruelly, for Frank, finding a way to stop his own kvetching seems more interesting than listening to Donna's story of betrayal to him:

DONNA: I decided to kick kvetching ... and suddenly like a dam ... it all comes tumbling out.
 FRANK: You kicked *kvetching*!!!!!! How?????
 DONNA: By deciding to do what I want and let the guilt go fuck itself ... you know ... at that Christmas party for the wholesalers ... you introduced me and he's been after me ever since but I've been afraid 'cause of my one tit and he's been afraid in case he couldn't make it after his wife walked out ... So we put our two minuses together and came up with a plus ... It's OK ... I told you ... I let it out ... I won't kvetch any more ... I'm sorry, Frank ... I'm sorry ... My suitcases are packed ... and your dirty laundry has been done ... and there's three pints of milk in the fridge ... (DONNA leaves.)
 FRANK: *Deciding what I want and let the guilt go fuck itself ... hmmmnn ...* (Berkoff, 1994: 83-84)

Donna leaves the house to meet George. For Donna, letting her feelings out has been a solution to the kvetching. She has finally freed herself from the burdensome responsibilities of marriage and tiring existential anxieties. Thus, Donna's potential change for a better life and better mental health can be regarded as a positive message of the play.

After Donna leaves, Frank invites Hal immediately. Like Donna, Frank also wishes to release his thoughts and feelings and get rid of the nagging voice in his mind. Meanwhile, to the audience's surprise, Hal also seems to be interested in Frank, but he is afraid to make a move, as he confesses in his aside:

FRANK: So you see, Hal ... she's been betraying me all this time ...
 HAL: You can't trust them, Frank ... [. . .]
 FRANK: *What is this? ... I got a hard-on up to my chin ... I wish I could tell him how I felt ...*
 That's kind of you, Hal ...

HAL: Hell, kind ... I've been alone ... I know what it's like ... *God, he's manly but I'm afraid in case I'm making a huge mistake ... Why doesn't he get closer or at least make some signal? ... Brush my knee or something? ... Maybe I'll make a move ...*
 FRANK: You do know what it's like ... *Suppose I revolt him ... Suppose I'm crazy and he runs out screaming ... No, I must suffer it ... These are evil disgusting thoughts but I can't stop thinking about ... it ...*
 HAL: What will you do?
 FRANK: What will I do? ... I dunno ... I'm alone ... at forty I'm alone ... (Berkoff, 1994: 85).

Frank and Hal eventually sleep together, which soothes Frank's kvetching for a short time; however, new anxieties kick in before too long, as soon as Frank suggests moving in together with Hal. In other words, he has found a new reason to get anxious about:

FRANK: Hal ... why don't we set up together? ...
 HAL: Are you sure? ...
 FRANK: May as well. . . only don't spread the word ... OK? ... About us ... I don't need any more kvetches! Hey, Hal ... you know what? ... I don't feel as if I have one any more ...
 HAL: Did I help you get rid of it?
 FRANK: You sure did ...
 HAL: Kvetches gone now, huh? ...
 FRANK: Oh, yeah ...
 HAL: Y'know, Frank ... I'll give up my apartment if it's all right with you ... It's an expensive dump ... We can split expenses ... Listen, it'll be so much cheaper ...
 FRANK: Listen, we'll save a fortune ... *We get on fine ... but suppose after a while we don't get on so good? ... I mean it's possible ... maybe I should move into his and rent mine out ... but I like my house ... Shit, I've just got my freedom! [. . .]*
 FRANK: [. . .] *Oh shiiiit! ... G'night, Hal ... I don't want him to give up his place and I don't want to move ... What's going on? ... I should tell him ... but I don't want him to take it bad ... but I suggested it ...*
 HAL: Frank ... aren't you going to kiss me goodnight?? (Berkoff, 1994: 86)

Frank has just gotten his freedom from a marriage he has been complaining about all the time, unlike Hal; however, his unexpected suggestion shows that he still needs genuine human connection. On the other hand, Hal finds Frank's suggestion reasonable, especially due to economic concerns. Frank is already confused although he does not have the courage to change his mind and express his fears openly. Thus, the nagging voice in Frank's mind starts to disturb again, showing us the cyclical nature of anxiety.

In fact, the clash between Frank's speeches and thoughts is visible in his internal monologues throughout the play. He wants to leave the house, like Donna; however, he does not have enough courage. He is depicted as a character who is always angry:

FRANK: *I wish they were dead. Both of them. I married the mouth and inherited the belch. Could I have done better, I ask myself. I'd like to leave ... I haven't got the guts ... I swear I could leave right now ... yes, right this minute, I could scream and jump out of the window ... closed or not ... go screaming down the street ... me screaming and running shouting ... fuck fuck fuck fuck ... shit and fuck ... you stupid fucking belching cunt ... shut up ... but I can't ... I sweat and squirm instead.* (Berkoff, 1994: 52)

Furthermore, although he tries to behave properly during the dinner, he is embarrassed by Donna's sarcastic speeches and his mother-in-law's behaviours, to the point of having violent thoughts against them: "*Don't embarrass me ... I'm sweating in shame ... Oh God!* (MOTHER-IN-LAW belches.) *Oh God, may the earth open up ... may a bomb drop on this house!* (Berkoff, 1994: 52). He is full of hate towards both women, and he sometimes wishes they were dead. He also thinks that Donna is an "idiot" (57), while he dreams of killing his mother-in-law, acted through a mime scene in the play:

FRANK: [. . .] *Oh, fuck and shitass, don't make me say the bastard thing now ... I can't remember, fuck it, or maybe I can ... The stink is still awful ... yukk! Wish I could shoot her ... sometimes if I had a knife ...* (Mimes stabbing MOTHER-IN-LAW violently.) *Horror horror horror ... Oh, I feel a bit better ... Fuck it, I'll tell the fucking joke ... So, there was an ...* (Berkoff, 1994: 61).

To extend the discussion further in a more structural context, the direct reference to the themes of horror and terror in Shakespeare's *Macbeth* (1623) in the sentences above, brought together with the use of mime and internal monologues, reveals Berkoff's artistic ability to combine different aspects of dramatic performance. While Berkoff's reference to *Macbeth* enhances the poetic quality of the play, his use of mime in this scene presents a metatheatrical experience to the audience, breaking the 'fourth wall.' It also presents a more physical, visual, and expressive portrayal of Frank's inner struggles, extending the complexities of performance on stage. In this respect, this scene can be regarded as a proof of Berkoff's creativity and his art, combining the traditional and the contemporary to create a multi-layered experience for the audience.

Frank's hidden sexual desire for Hal becomes another source of kvetching for him until the confession scene at the end of the play:

FRANK: [. . .] *What's happening here? ... Why are you in my fantasy, Hal? ... Go away ... [. . .] get out of my fantasy.*
 HAL: *But I am your fantasy ... Relax, don't fight it ... No one knows ... only you ... Even I don't know ...*
 FRANK: *You sure?*
 HAL: *Of course. I'm only a fantasy ... They're supposed to be good for you ...*
 FRANK: *But only in fantasy, you understand ... This is to go no further ... I couldn't even think of it in reality ... Phahhh, it would make me sick ... yuk! The idea of even kissing another man ... [. . .]*
 HAL: *Come on ... Enjoy it without the pain and the guilt [. . .]*
 (HAL disappears.)
 FRANK: [. . .] *Was that nice for you?*
 DONNA: *Yes, honey ... Was it OK for you ...?*
 FRANK: *Yeeeh ... g'night ...*
 DONNA: *'Night ... (Berkoff, 1994: 70)*

Frank continuously complains about Donna and their marriage throughout the play; however, the real cause behind his inner struggle is not fully understood until he suddenly starts to fantasize about Hal while having sexual intercourse with Donna, as given in the quotation above. From this scene onwards, it becomes obvious that the underlying cause of Frank's endless kvetching and his dissatisfaction in marriage has been his hidden sexual desires. On the other hand, his repressed sexuality comes to surface in a complicated way through the feelings of guilt and disgust, in addition to sexual satisfaction. He has been in a constant fight with himself, which has caused a neurotic state of mind and has manifested as anxiety, fear, anger, self-doubt, phobic thoughts, and the use of vulgar language.

Unlike Frank, Hal is depicted as a highly sensitive person who is extremely self-conscious and constantly worried about what other people will think of him. He expresses his inner struggles to the audience, in between the fragmented dialogues of other characters, an example of which is as follows:

HAL: *OK, I'll come.*
 FRANK: *Oh shit! ... good!*
 HAL: *I don't know ... should I go there? ... At home it's quiet and I know who I am ... why should I sit with them? ... what can I say? I'll choke up ... they'll find me boring ... He's happily married ... two kids ... I'm forty ... separated ... can't hold a wife ... living alone like a monk with a cat, and I should watch them with their kids ... warm laughter, gaiety ... fulfilling hours ... growth ... struggle ... achievement ...*
 MOTHER-IN-LAW: *You bought such skimpy chops, will it be enough?*
 HAL: *I'll sit there and feel like a lump ... like a leech on society ... incomplete ... fruitless ... dull. I'll choke ... she'll ask me what I do at nights ...*
 DONNA: *Oh God, the latkes are burnt ...*
 MOTHER-IN-LAW: *I told you, cheap oil.*
 HAL: *What do I do? ... Sit and watch TV ... sit in the local bar ... visit a hooker ... or sit in with Ma ... What do I do, she'll ask me ... Oh god! ... (Berkoff, 1994: 51)*

Although Hal fears that the other characters will find him boring, he is the one who feels himself boring, barren, isolated, and incomplete. He even has suicidal thoughts (Berkoff, 1994: 63). He is very anxious about Donna's possible questions to keep the conversation going; however, Donna's mind is busy with her own domestic and sexual problems:

DONNA: Ah! You have no one to clean for you? ...
 HAL: No ... I don't ...
 DONNA: *I clean every day ... I clean and scrub and launder and wash up for the ungrateful bastard who won't even fuck me any more ... I would clean for him, poor guy ... I wonder if he's circumcised?* (Berkoff, 1994: 57)

Hal tries to relax and “*feel OK*,” but he cannot get rid of the nagging voice of anxiety (Berkoff, 1994: 62). He even talks to himself, personifying his inner voice:

HAL: [. . .] *See, I'm warming up ... I feel OK again ... Maybe one day I'll have them over to me ... Yeah, I'll make dinner for them ... but I'm not a good cook ... Oh, no, I've got the demons coming on ... go 'way, go 'way!! I was happy before ... Go away! ...* (Berkoff, 1994: 62)

The discrepancy between Donna's and Hal's perspectives reveals a basic aspect of human communication: one's self-perception can be different from another person's thoughts about him or her. In other words, communication can be ineffective, and it can lack meaning, which is, in fact, a result of unspoken thoughts or feelings.

Berkoff's play draws attention to socio-economic problems as well. The play showcases the struggles of the working class, especially in Act II, Scene I. Frank is afraid to “*look at the bills*” and “*brown envelopes*” (Berkoff, 1994: 71). He is also afraid of not having enough money when he needs it. The dialogue between Frank and George further underlines the hardships of working-class life. They do not even have enough time or money to read a book or see an opera. They are always worried about earning enough money to live a moderate life:

GEORGE: Come on ... just kill yourself for dough ... same old talk ... same old grind ...
 [. . .] No time to pick up a book ... enjoy your life ... just money money money ... or worry if you're left with stock ... When did you last see an opera?
 FRANK: An opera? ... Well, to tell you the truth ... it's not really my cup of tea ...
 GEORGE: What are you reading at the moment?
 FRANK: Reading ... reading? ... yeah, well, I just finished a book ... yeah I just finished one ... a week ago ... No, I tell a lie ... it must be two maybe three weeks ... yeah ... It's essential to keep your eye on the world ... It's not all about dough ... you're right ... or you'll turn into a pumpkin ... hahahahaha! [. . .]
 GEORGE: So what was the book you were reading?
 FRANK: The book? Oh, it was a great book ... a very, very good book ... (Berkoff, 1994: 72).

Like Frank, Donna also has economic concerns. She worries about the health insurance they need to pay both for themselves and the two children, the car that needs to be fixed, the roof that leaks, their Christmas holiday plan, and the mother's treatment (Berkoff, 1994: 75). Furthermore, Frank must hold himself and speak carefully with George so as not to lose his job, which is also another criticism of the capitalist system that affects social and professional relationships. It should further be underlined that *Kvetch* is described as “An American Play About Anxiety” in the title by Berkoff, which is directly related to Act II, Scene I. While it is not coincidental, it might be a reference to the loss of the American Dream and the failures of the modern world.

Lastly, Berkoff uses the chorus as one of his outstanding theatrical devices in *Kvetch*. In Act II, Scene II, “Chorus of the Fearful” appears, represented by Hal, Frank, Donna, and George (Berkoff, 1994: 79). While the chorus functions as a collective commentator on the human condition, it reveals the anxieties of the characters once more. In this respect, it is possible to argue that Berkoff uses the chorus to blur the lines between individual experiences of kvetching and the societal aspect of it in general. Thus, towards the end of the play, it is clear that “Chorus of the Fearful” draws the audience's attention to how common anxiety—or kvetching—is.

Since *Kvetch* is an intense play in which Berkoff demonstrates his genuine dramatic style in all its glory, there are endless examples of anxiety, fragmentation, and dysfunctional communication in almost every single sentence throughout the play. Therefore, this study has focused on the main issues that are highlighted in the play, such as gender-based problems, psychological abuse, repressed sexuality, and socio-economic issues.

Conclusion

To conclude, the characters in Berkoff's *Kvetch* suffer from a pervasive feeling of void that is left by the absence of meaningful and sincere communication. They embody the anxieties and vulnerabilities of modern life that fail individuals in many ways. The play also highlights that anxiety—or kvetching—is a human condition that repeats itself endlessly, depending on endless reasons. As seen in the examples from the play, these anxieties are usually independent of what other people think or how they react. Therefore, this study has shown that Berkoff's *Kvetch*, as a satirical comedy that reveals the playwright's extraordinary artistic abilities, underscores the idea that it is meaningless to let one's insecurities rule one's actions and to worry about other people's reactions.

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STEVEN BERKOFF'UN *KVETCH* ADLI OYUNUNDA ANKSİYETE, PARÇALANMA VE İŞLEVSİZ İLETİŞİM

Ash KUTLUK

ÖZ

Bu çalışma ünlü oyun yazarı Steven Berkoff'un nadiren incelenen oyunu *Kvetch*'e odaklanmaktadır. Çalışma, Berkoff'un *Kvetch*'te insanın rahatsız edici iç çatışmalarını kişisel ve kişilerarası düzeylerde gösterdiğini savunmaktadır. Bu bağlamda bu makale, karakterlerin iç monologları ve üst üste binen konuşmaları aracılığıyla yansıtılan kaygı, parçalanma ve işlevsiz iletişim konularını incelemektedir. Oyundaki karakterler, eylemlerini ve etkileşimlerini etkileyen kaygılardan muzdariptir. Bu durum, içsel benlikleri ile toplumsal yüzleri arasında ikilemli bir gerilime neden olmaktadır. Karakterlerin zihinsel parçalanmışlığı, işlevsiz iletişim sorununu da doğurarak oyunda daha kaotik bir atmosfer yaratmaktadır. Çalışma ayrıca, Berkoff'un karakterlerin içsel mücadelelerini göstermek için hem biçimi hem de içeriği işlevselleştirdiğini iddia etmektedir. Bu bakımdan bu çalışmada Berkoff'un *Kvetch*'teki alışılmadık ve konformist olmayan dramatik yaklaşımının parçalanma temasını yapısal olarak da güçlendirdiği gösterilmektedir. Çalışma, karakterlerin iç monologları ile oyundaki karmaşık diyaloglar ağının detaylarına inerek, Berkoff'un izleyicilerini her bir karakterin zihnini anlayabilmek için yapboz parçalarını bir araya getirmeye zorlayan, deneysel dramatik teknikleri nasıl kullandığını incelemektedir. Çalışmada, Berkoff'un oyununun, daima yaygın bir endişe ve parçalanmışlık duygusuyla mücadele eden insanın zihinsel dünyasını sergilediği sonucuna varılmıştır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Berkoff, kvetch, anksiyete, parçalanma, işlevsiz iletişim