16. "Love Can Sometimes Be Bestial": Reading Anthony Neilson's *Stitching* as a 21st Century Love Tragedy[1]

Gamze ŞENTÜRK TATAR[2]

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Abstract

In *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1600), one of the earliest and most popular romantic comedies by the English playwright William Shakespeare, Helena, the lovesick young woman infatuated with Demetrius, presents the power of love, by saying "Love can transpose to form and dignity./Love looks not with the eyes, but with the mind,/And therefore is winged Cupid painted blind" (2019, lines 239-241). She suggests that love, which requires a strong sense of intimacy, attachment, devotion, and deep spiritual connection, is an extremely complex experience. This dynamic phenomenon, which has the potential to change and transform human beings, is undoubtedly an individual, emotional, spiritual, and physiological one. As old as the history of humanity itself, this strong feeling has become the subject of literary and artistic works, even giving rise to the development of new genres such as romantic tragedy and romantic comedy. However, changing dynamics of history also bring about significant transformation in the dynamism of love. The experience of the sublime in love between two lovers, as portrayed in the relationship between Romeo and Juliet, "star-crossed lovers" (2012, p.23) in Shakespeare's romantic tragedy *Romeo and Juliet* (1597), has lost its grandeur and has been reduced to a more physical dimension. Anthony Neilson, one of the towering names of contemporary British theatre, tells the tragic story of a couple, Abby and Stuart, both consumed their love and traumatized by the loss of their child in his play *Stitching* (2002). In *Stitching*, Neilson portrays a kind of modern love tragedy or "a desperate tragedy" (Sierz, 2002, p.1196), revealing that "love can sometimes be bestial" (Sierz, 2011, p.173). He focuses on the couple's complex love relationship based on passion, sexuality, violence, suffering, and loss, by blurring the boundaries between the past and the present through flashbacks, flashforwards and surreal moments. This paper aims to examine the tragedy of modern love between attachment, satisfaction, sexual coercion and intimate partner

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[2] Misafir Araştırmacı, Sheffield Üniversitesi, İngilizce Okulu (Sheffield, İngiltere); Dr. Öğr. Üyesi, Munzur Üniversitesi, İngiliz Dili ve Edebiyatı Bölümü (Tunceli, Türkiye) / Visiting Scholar, The University of Sheffield, School of English (Sheffield, England); Assist. Prof. Dr., Munzur University, The Department of English Language and Literature (Tunceli, Türkiye) **eposta:** gamzesenturk_26_01@hotmail.com; **ORCID ID:** https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5097-7739, **ROR ID:** https://ror.org/05v0p1f11, **ISNI:** 0000 0004 0399 619X

violence in Neilson's *Stitching*.

Keywords: Anthony Neilson, *Stitching*, love, modern love tragedy

"Aşk Bazen Vahşi Olabilir": Anthony Neilson'ın *Stitching* Adlı Oyununu Bir 21. Yüzyıl Aşk Trajedisi Olarak Okumak[3]

Öz

İngiliz oyun yazarı William Shakespeare'in en eski ve en popüler romantik komedilerinden biri olan Bir Yaz Gecesi Rüyası (1600) başlıklı oyununda Demetrius'a âşık olan genç kadın Helena, "Aşk, basit ve değersiz şeyleri bile/Biçimlendirip onu değerli yapabilir./Aşk gözleriyle değil, hayaliyle görür/Ve kanatlı Cupid resimlerde bu yüzden kördür" (2012, satır 239-241) diyerek aşkın gücünü ortaya koyar. Helena güçlü bir yakınlık duygusu, bağlılık, adanmışlık ve derin bir manevi bağlantı gerektiren aşkın son derece karmaşık bir deneyim olduğunu ortaya koyar İnsanı değiştirme ve dönüştürme potansiyeline sahip bu dinamik olgu, hiç kuşkusuz kişisel, duygusal, ruhsal ve fizyolojik bir olgudur. İnsanlık tarihi kadar eski olan bu güçlü duygu, yüzyıllar boyunca edebi ve sanatsal eserlere konu olmuş, hatta romantik trajedi ve romantik komedi gibi yeni türlerin gelişmesine de yol açmıştır. Ancak tarihin değişen dinamikleri aşkın dinamizminde de önemli dönüşümleri beraberinde getirmiştir. Shakespeare'in romantik trajedisi Romeo ve Juliet (1597) oyununda "yıldızları barışmayan âşıklar" (2012, s.23) olan Romeo ve Juliet arasındaki ilişkide tasvir edildiği gibi iki âşık arasındaki aşkın yücelik deneyimi ihtişamını yitirmiş ve daha fiziksel bir boyuta indirgenmiştir. Çağdaş Britanya tiyatrosunun yükselen isimlerinden biri olan Anthony Neilson, *Stitching* (2002) adlı oyununda hem aşklarını tüketmiş hem de çocuklarının kaybı yüzünden travma yaşayan Abby ve Stuart adlı çiftin trajik hikâyesini anlatır. Oyunda Neilson, "aşkın bazen vahşi olabileceğini" (Sierz, 2011, 173) göstererek bir tür modern aşk trajedisi ya da "umutsuz bir trajedi" (Sierz, 2002, s.1196) ortaya koyar. Yazar geri dönüşler, ileri sıçramalar ve gerçeküstü anlarla geçmiş ve bugün arasındaki sınırları bulanıklaştırarak çiftin tutku, cinsellik, şiddet ve acıya dayalı karmaşık aşk ilişkisine odaklanır. Bu makale, Neilson'ın *Stitching* oyununda bağlılık, tatmin, cinsel baskı ve yakın partner şiddeti arasında kalan modern aşk trajedisini incelemeyi amaçlar.

Anahtar kelimeler: Anthony Neilson, *Stitching,* aşk, modern aşk trajedisi

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1. Introduction

In his article "Noble Errors: Examples of Love and Tragedy from Literature, Philosophy, and Psychoanalysis", the literary scholar David Stromberg states "loving intimacy is a human need, and while the need is one-- directional, its fulfilment requires the participation or at least presence of an other" (2018, p.97). In this way, he touches on the essential nature of love, one of the deepest emotional experiences of human and marks the fundamental need for a warm, intimate, secure and lasting bond in the maze of human experience. As a kind of deep feeling, passionate attachment and affection for the subject of love, love is a great feeling that cannot be easily defined and explained. This phenomenon, marked by the unity of being for the oneness, can be divided into two basic categories as divine love and earthly love. In this regard, different types of love can be discussed. For example, according to the American psychotherapist Albert Ellis, love "itself (…) includes many different types and degrees of affection, such as conjugal love, parental love, familial love, religious love, love of humanity, love of animals, love of things, self-love, sexual love, obsessive-compulsive love, etc" (1954, p.101). Love is, by its very nature, a concept that "ha[s] opposing tendencies with potential for either destruction or creativity" (Stromberg, 2018, p.97). As an irrational feeling, it manifests itself in various forms by transcending all the boundaries like spatio-temporal, societal and cultural expectations. This inclusive phenomenon, characterized by a liminal state between the good and the evil in both conscious and unconscious contents, is driven by both physiological and psychological motivations. It is a part of an inner and mystical experience that is uncontrollable, inevitable, and irrefutable.

The idea of love has been a concern for centuries across many disciplines, including philosophy, psychology, metaphysics, ethics, literature, and art. Its mythological origin is represented by Eros (Cupid), the god of Love and Desire, who is often depicted as a winged child or a young man, throwing his love-carrying arrows at both gods and mortals to strike their hearts to make them fall in love (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 2024). Its philosophical origins can be traced back to Ancient Greece. Until Plato's views of love, it is contextualized in 'cosmic, sensual, ethical, and spiritual' aspects. In his work *Symposium* (360 B.C.E), the ancient Greek thinker Plato defines the phenomenon as a quest for ideal beauty by giving a place to its mythological origins. The thinker highlights its virtue-based dimension to achieve a harmonious and just life by associating with the concepts of goodness, beauty and happiness. His philosophy for love is the source of agapism, the ethics of love in Middle Ages (Aydın, 2018, p.34). The other ancient Greek thinker Aristotle, the disciple of Plato, defines love in a dualistic relation to the concept of hatred. He manifests 'two bodies, one soul', by asserting that "love is composed of a single soul inhabiting two bodies" (Paludi, 2012, p. xvii). In this way, he forms his philosophy of love in earthly matter by rationalizing its nature and pointing up its ethical and spiritual dimensions (Stojkoski, 2018, p.104). He views love as "an altruistic desire" (Konstan, 2008, p.212). In his work *Nicomachean Ethics* (350 B.C.E), Aristotle also classifies the concept of love into three types including utility, pleasure and virtue and suggests that friendship love (*Philia*), based on mutual respect and care, is the perfect form of love. He defines it as "the friendship of men who are good, and alike in virtue; for these wish well alike to each other qua good, and they are good themselves" (Book VIII, Ch.3, 1156b/2002). Like Aristotle, the other ancient Greek thinker Empedocles also treats love in a reciprocal relationship with the feeling of hatred. He argues that love is the raison d'être of the universe, by emphasizing the opposition of these two basic emotions and stating that "double is the birth of mortal things, double their death" (Kranz, 1994, p.111).

In his book *Everyday Life in Ancient Mesopotamia*, Jean Bottéro addresses love as basic human impulse, by reporting "just like the imperatives and rites of eating and drinking, the love and the

sexuality that govern them are inherent in one's deepest and primal nature" (2001, p.90). This natural phenomenon, mostly associated with the private sphere, was viewed positively in ancient times; however, it could not become the basic material of classical tragedies. According to E. Schultz Gerhard,

> The position of woman in Greek society made the Greek tragic poets miss the refining influence of woman-one of the most fertile themes of tragedy. Romantic love, the staple of the modern novel and the modern drama, was almost wholly unknown to the classical tragic poets. The nearest approach to romantic love in the extant classical tragedies is the love between Haemon and Antigone. But, even here, it is subordinate to the State and to divine law. Euripides has given some tender scenes of conjugal and sisterly love; he comes very close to the subject of romantic love in his Hippolytus. But the love which these writers depicted has hardly any resemblance to the passion of the same name which arose simultaneously with chivalry in modern Europe. Too often do the classical writers represent love as a fervor, or a fit of insanity, and not as something like that refined and ennobling love which existed between Romeo and Juliet (1924, p.21).

As Gerhard argues, the concept of romantic love was not dealt with sufficiently in the theatre of Ancient Greece, because it was primarily associated with order and divine power. On the other hand, during the Middle Ages, under the impact of strict structure, sexuality-based love became taboo because it was believed to be associated with sinfulness and forbidden behavior. In the Middle Ages and its theatrical productions, the virtue of chastity was stressed through women, with the belief that women were more prone to sin by their many evil desires, as well as their weakness, sensibility, and fragility (Just, 2014, p.2). Unlike the theatre of Middle Ages, William Shakespeare, the iconic name of Renaissance literature, "compos[ed] his plays and poems within a Christian culture that often polarised love and lust, setting spiritual aspiration against physical appetite, and this is reflected in much of his early work" (Hall, 2021, p.1). While he presents romantic love leading to marriage in his comedies, his poetic drama is "frank about sexual desire, its varieties and vagaries" (Hall, 2021, p.2). In Shakespeare's plays, female sexuality is not represented in simplistic ways. In his tragedies or tragicomedies, women often find a middle path between the contrasting stereotypes of the lustful whore and the icon of chastity (Hall, 2021, p.5). On the other hand, with the changing dynamics of life, romantic love becomes more overlapping with sexuality, especially since the mid-19th century, and is treated as "a passionate desire for 'total merging between lover and beloved'" (Hall, 2021, p.6). Love based on physical intimacy, which has functioned as a symbol of power dynamics and masculinity, has gradually shifted from the private sphere to the public sphere from Ancient to modern times. The Victorian morality also brought prohibition to sexuality, associated with sin and shame. In this strict structure, women's virginity and fidelity were among the main elements associated with morality. They were expected to protect their chastity and to be both a good wife and a good mother in domestic sphere. Thus, the Victorian era became an age of sexual repression, which paved the way for sexual and moral decay (Mason, 1994, p.5).

The idea of love, which has defined and theorized differently by various thinkers/scholars since ancient times, and which has often been sublimed or romanticized, has become an object of consumption in modern times. This consumer culture, in which love is increasingly commodified, has condemned this phenomenon to marketable and transient commodities of the hookup culture and thusly, as "an object of desire" (Lacan et al., 1977, p.15) for consumption, and romantic love has been replaced by the commercialization of love in modern era. This 'liquid love' in the consumer age, coined by the Polish sociologist and thinker Zygmunt Bauman, makes us question the uniqueness and permanence of love at the point of rapid consumption of emotions (2017, p.26). As Bauman suggests that love -encompassing a range of positive and intense feelings and expressions such as its emotional intensity, permanence and sublimity- has been reduced from the infinite soul to the finite body with the changing dynamics of the modern period, thus highlighting the instrumental value of the body as a means of pleasure and desire. Thus, love in consumer age is reduced to sexuality (2001, p.200). In this respect, in liquid modern age,

love is seen as a product that is expected to bring novelty, variety, and disposability like the other items people buy without emotional attachment (Jeffries, 2003). Sexual love of the liquid modernity, driven by worldly desires and emotions such as pleasure, lust, and consumption, has featured the relationship of sexual gratification. It has also been associated with 'pure or confluent relationship', coined by the British sociologist Anthony Giddens, in which the relationship continues in accordance with the sexual satisfaction, sexual attraction and emotional needs (Giddens, 2018, pp.61- 67).

Image 1. John Allan Lee's Theory of Colours of Love, (2016). (Retrieved from https://foxhugh.com/communication/color-wheel-theory-of-love/)

In his book *Colours of Love: An Exploration of the Ways of Loving* (1973), the Canadian psychologist John Alan Lee conceptualized love, by categorizing six styles of interpersonal love through colours. According to him, the three primary colours of the rainbow, including red, blue, and yellow, are the three main colours of love. According to his colour wheel theory of love, these are passionate/romantic love (*Eros*), game-playing love (*Ludus*) and familial/friendship love (*Storge*), respectively. Besides these primary types of love, he also proposes possessive/dependent love (*Mania*), logical/shopping list love (*Pragma*) and all-giving/selfless love (*Agape*) as the secondary types of love. *Eros* refers to passionate, romantic, sensual or erotic love based on physical attraction, intimacy and sexuality. *Storge* refers to the love between family members or friends while *Ludus* refers to playful love, based on fun, seduction, pleasure and polygamy. Lee defines *Storge* as "love without fever or folly" (1973, p.77). As the combination of *Eros* and *Ludus*, *Mundus* in purple is an obsessive love or a love of extreme possessiveness which puts jealousy, irrationality, and obsession in the center. *Pragma*, a practical love which regards social and economic benefits such as profession and education level, refers to "the love that goes shopping for a suitable mate" (Lee, 1973, p.124). As a combination of *Storge* and *Ludus*, the colour of *Pragma* is green. As the combination of *Eros* and *Storge*, *Agape*, an unconditional or altruistic love based on sacrifice and intimacy, is orange (Lee, 1973, pp.15/16-23). As the realms of human experience in modern relationships continually shift, the colours of love also change rapidly, lighting the the ephemerality of love as an emotional and devoted closeness in the face of the ebb and flow of the world.

In the modern period, in favour of dualist view dividing body from soul/mind, love has been associated with the body around physical impulses or components such as beauty, aestheticism, attractiveness, charm, sexuality, eroticism, pleasure, and desire. At that point, the female body has been idealized as an object of desire, based on eroticism and sexuality in accordance with standardized body politics. Accordingly, the female bodies, controlled in terms of reproduction, pleasure, nutrition, beauty and

clothing as a "durable and flexible strategy of social control" (Bordo, 1989, p.66), become "docile bodies whose forces and energies are habituated to external regulation, subjection, transformation, and improvement" (Bordo, 1989, p.166). The female body, "as a site of oppression, (…) [that] has always been the means by which patriarchy exerts control over women" (Sanchez-Grant, 2008, p.78), has been "not only culturally defined and interpreted, but also culturally and economically altered in a physical sense" (Zhang, 2022, p.16). Classically romantic love, associated with emotional connection, spirituality and personal happiness, is replaced by bodily experienced love, associated with physicality and transience in modern times. The female body, associated with reproduction and creation from classical perspective, has also become a site of pain and suffering. Accordingly, the female body has become a site of sexual and physical violence as well as "a locus of sexuality, (…) [that] site of visual pleasure, or lure of the gaze" (de Lauretis, 1987, p.110). It is "the source of titillation and invasion" (Cronje, 2001, p.60). Both denied the chance to discover herself and subjected to violence, the female body becomes a battlefield shaped by gender and power dynamics.

Love, which is sometimes defined as a cosmic or sublime power, sometimes as a means of reproduction, sometimes an aesthetic and mystical experience, and sometimes as a pathological condition, is a multi-dimensional phenomenon with its nature of healing, protecting, transforming and constructing as well as its nature of damaging, destructing and devastating. A love based on affection, attachment, and respect is extremely essential for the healthy couples. Effective or good communication between the couples is a significant tool for long-term and smooth relationships. Aggression and violence which occur in a romantic relationship, is among the greatest obstacles to building a stronger and healthier partnership. The different types of violence such as physical, psychological, verbal, sexual, economic, economic, and cyber violence, destroy healthy relationships. For example, the types of physical violence such as pushing, hitting, scratching, burning, shaking, choking, hair-pulling, slapping, biting, scratching, and using weapons can cause injury, pain or death (Saltzman et al., 2002, p.35). As one of the most common forms of domestic violence, psychological violence refers to any threat of violence by means of offending, humiliating, upsetting, mocking, pressuring, jealousy, threatening, invading personal space, and damaging personal belongings (Follingstad et al., 2015). Sexual violence against women is one of the most underreported crimes, and as one of the highest rates of impunity, it occurs in the form of physical abuse, sexual assault, rape, sexual exploitation, forced prostitution, forced pregnancy, forced abortion, cheating, forced viewing of sexual movies, non-consensual sexual activity, unlawful sexual activity, and sexual intercourse without consent (Watts et al., 2002, p.1232). Sexual violence is defined by the World Health Organization [WHO] as "any sexual act, attempt to obtain a sexual act, unwanted sexual comments or advances, or acts to traffic, or otherwise directed, against a person's sexuality using coercion, by any person regardless of their relationship to the victim, in any setting, including but not limited to home and work" (2010). These types of violence in intimate partner relationships, which both leave physical and emotional scars and have serious and lasting effects on the victim, not only diminish the quality of the relationships but also raise ethical and human rights concerns.

The British playwright and director Anthony Neilson (1967-), who describes himself as a "purveyor of filth", presents his relationship with the term 'In-Yer-Face', by stating "In-Yer-Face was all about being horrid and writing about shit and buggery. I thought I was writing love stories" (2007, p.23). He explores the nature of love in his play *Stitching* (2002) as a couple-in-crisis play (Sierz, 2011, p.172). *Stitching* is based on a love story that reveals the finiteness of both life and love, exploring the realms of affection and loss (Neilson, 2009a, p.353). The play can be read as "a contemporary play about love accompanied by dangerous liminal states" (Maćkowiak, 2018). This paper aims at examining *Stitching* as a modern

tragedy of love between attachment, satisfaction, sexual coercion and intimate partner violence.

2. Unraveling Love in Anthony Neilson's *Stitching* as a 21st Century Love Tragedy

Anthony Neilson, one of the towering names of contemporary British theatre, is known as "the forerunner of a 'New Brutalist' theatre" (Bull, 2011, p.346) with his 1991 play *Normal*. His theatre is characterized by a blend of darkness, violence and sexual explicitness, by "exploring the darker side of the human psyche" (Sierz, 2001, p.68). As British theatre critic Aleks Sierz notes, Neilson's play is "haunted by recurring images of sex and violence" (2001, p.86). Neilson's theatre allows the audience to confront and mediate on moral issues viscerally, featuring "[the] unsettling immediacy of the physical theatre" (Rabey, 2003, p.197). According to Pia Zammit, Neilson is "the most moral of modern playwrights" (Fleri-Soler, 2018). Neilson's 2002 play *Stitching*, produced in three weeks, is also "a grim and emotionally exhausting drama about a troubled young couple" (Ng, 2014). Performed at Traverse Theatre, Edinburgh on 1 August 2002 and then transferred to the Bush Theatre, London on 12 September 2002, the play is based on sexual and power politics. Marked by sexually and violently explicit scenes, the play problematizes the extent of affection, love, brutality, and aggression in our relationships. It is not to everyone's taste because of its extreme representations of sexuality and brutality. *Stitching* is "a play the central image of which is of a bereaved woman sewing up her own vagina, and thus hardly conforms to most people's expectations of romance in the theatre" (Reid, 2017, p.5). The play focuses on the tragic story of a young couple, Stu and Abby, who are expecting a baby and struggling to heal their relationships. It explores "the perennial problem of heterosexual desire" (Reid, 2017, p.9). Their story is one of love stories including the extreme moments of intimacy, violence, tenderness and humour (Reid, 2017, p.9). It is so "private, personal, erotic, violent" (Reid, 2017, p.14) that it invites the audience to experience the most primal and mental states of the lovers' relationship.

Revolving around a modern love story, *Stitching* explores "a young man and woman tangled in cruel mutual abuse, unable to communicate other than by creating provoking verbal scenarios of child abduction and death" (Verena, 2002, p.1616). While theatre critic Toby Young describes the play as "a mesmerising two-hander about a dysfunctional sexual relationship" (2002, p.1196), the other theatre critic John McMillan characterizes it as "a (…) two-hander that goes straight to the heart of the matter by asking why so much of the allegedly sexual imagery of our time -on the web, in porn magazines and in our own minds- is deeply sado-masochistic and, at its worst, obsessed with horrific images of degradation and mutilation" (2002, p.1655). While theatre critic Andrew Burnet describes it as a play that "explores the damaging compulsions that may underpin a sexual relationship" (2002, p.1200), the Australian actor and performance maker Lara Lightfoot describes it as "a beautiful twisted love story about two people dealing with something incredibly tragic and incredibly beautiful" (Gorman, 2014). As can be understood from all these descriptions, the play reveals a distorted sexuality, violence and a tragic love affair, which makes the audience confront both the most primal and emotional aspects of human nature and the contrasting capacities of love as creativity and destruction.

In this tragic love story, the audience witnesses both the emotional distance and the intimacy between the lovers. The play both deals with "the love between these wounded souls" (*The Sdyney Morning Herald*, 2005) and leaves the audience with a series of extreme sexual and violent imagery to shock them out of their indifference. As "something of a shock-fest" (Hawkins, 2015), it also draws public attention to corporeality and engages the audience with serious questions rather than easy answers. At that point, Neilson poses the following questions: "From where do we derive our sense of what's acceptable and what's not? How do we accommodate the darker side of our sexual consciousness? Which should we

obey when our heart and our sexual imagination disagree?" (Logan, 2002a, p.1199). His fundamental objective is to resonate in the minds of the audience. They are invited to reflect on these questions and find their own answers, even after leaving the theatre building.

Stitching has received several negative reviews from some theatre critics and spectators. During early productions of the play on European stages, some audience members also left the theatre, and some walkouts and religious protests occurred as part of the audience's response (Cremona, 2015, p.251). Neilson also makes the following statement in response to this attitude towards leaving the theatre: "I feel bad that audiences walked out, but I can't write for cowards. If something shocks me, I don't just walk away from it, I ask myself why I am shocked by it. (…) It is not my job to tell audiences a rose is beautiful. Everybody knows that. My job is to see if there is a way to make a turd beautiful" (Lunn, 2015). Throughout his career, Neilson highlights that he aims at pushing the boundaries of classical theatre and defying societal norms by daring the audience to critically meditate on social issues and their beliefs. He argues that in this play as in his other works, he encourages his audience to confront moral and existential questions and expand their horizons.

Stitching was banned by the Board of Classification for Film and Theatre in Malta in 2009 for addressing several controversial themes including obscenity, blasphemy and sadomasochistic imagery (Haydon, 2009). Considering any restriction on art as a kind of an obstacle on freedom of expression, Neilson reflects his frustration at this ban on his play in Malta: "I was angry but also amused, to some extent, I'll admit. Such censorship is a denial of truth. Art is about reflecting the truth. (…) The denial of truth is the negation of art and, by extension, of humanity itself" (Young, 2011, p.24). According to the playwright, the objective of the art is to confront the audience with the truth without any restrictions, and if it cannot achieve this objective, it loses its real value. Accordingly, he tries to convey the truth to the audience, by using the artistic ways and experimenting new theatrical innovations in his theatre. Lisa Thatcher highlights that *Stitching* "asks us why we go to the theatre. Art is the one place morality can be played out along side its contradictions" (2014a). It allows the audience to "examine [their] extreme thoughts, desires and actions" and "ask [them]selves tough questions" (Thatcher, 2014a). The play was staged almost nine years after the court's decision to ban its production. It was also staged in 2024 by Pax Theatre in Türkiye as well as in the United States, Germany, Brazil, Australia, Italy, Poland, Slovenia, Belgium, and Greece. In other respects, Sierz celebrates his success in creating such an innovative, experimental and visceral play by alleging that "Neilson is a writer who has the courage to explore the dark side of humanity, and the imagination to create vivid stage pictures of joy as well as distress. Without doubt, *Stitching* is one of the best British plays of the past decade" (2009). Making the playwright win the Evening Standard's Best Promising Playwright Award, it also opens the issue of censorship in art to discuss at an international agenda.

Neilson asserts that he tries to break the supposed boundaries between art and life in *Stitching*, as well as in his theatre. According to the playwright, the art should not hesitate to make the audience confront the most primal impulses of human beings in understanding their complexities and true selves, and if needed, it should challenge cultural norms. He underlines that "there's so much theater in which sexuality is removed to please audiences. I don't see the point of toning it down. I think we should be truthful about it and explore it" (Ng, 2014). By rejecting any restrictions on the art and shattering artistic boundaries and societal taboos, he strives to portray human nature in its rawest state. According to Chris Gatt, *Stitching* is also "written to be purposely confusing until one realizes that things are not always what they seem to be, and that life and the theatre is not always as linear and predictable as one imagines" (2018). He allows his audience to confront with the truth of love of modern world in *Stitching*

as "a brave piece of theatre about the mess we have made of modern loving" (Bruce, 2013, p.378). The play intensifies the intrigue of sexuality through its violation of boundaries, blurring the lines between art and life (Reid, 2017, p.36). *Stitching* is a piece that "celebrates women's sexuality and points up an anxious masculine response to it" (Reid, 2017, p.40). According to Keith Bruce, the play is "a two-hander about a couple whose disintegrating relationship is bound up in a history of sexual role-playing, unwanted pregnancy and the death of a child- an example of so-called in-yer-face theatre that has lost little of its impact" (2013, p.378). It tells the tragic love story of the young couple named Abby and Stu, as "a couple consumed by their own fetishistic fantasies" (Logan, 2002a, p.1199), by blurring the boundaries between the past and the present or between reality and fantasy through its non-chronological narration. According to Trish Reid, the playwright employs theatre "to help (his audience) contemplate issues around sexual transgression, pornography, and the violence of sexual passion" (2017, p.37). The playwright invites them to witness the complex relationship of the troubled couple based on a phantom child, love, affection, sexuality and violence, by revealing "a serious and persuasive account of the blind alleys lust and love can lead us down" (Spencer, 2002, p.1199).

Stitching portrays the distorted love relationship between the couple Abby and Stu in a non-linear narrative structure via flashbacks, flashforwards, and surreal moments, by revealing their love and their conflicts. Neilson points that "the play itself plays tricks with chronology" (Cremona, 2015, p.249). The First Scene centers on the couple's debate about whether to have a child to save their relationship. The early dialogue between Abby and Stu reveals that the main issue in their relationship is poor communication. They are struggling to fix their exhausting relationship; however, nothing seems to work. The unborn/phantom child appears to be the only thing that could tie them together. Thusly, their relationship comes to an end when their child dies. Thus, their complex relationship is "a volatile relationship of extremes, which steadies when, after some hesitation, they have a child, but needs to be recreated when the child dies, probably out of their neglect" (Herbert, 2002, p.1190). At that point, the child appears as a part of "the love that binds families together" (Gupta, 2024) and "the most natural form of love" (Gupta, 2024). Abby seems the only person who desires to have him. For her, the child means being a family with Stu. Stu, on the other hand, seems that he is not ready to have a child because he views it as a burden. According to Thatcher, "most of all we see it played out in the battle for the child, the entity that is the one true product of the coupling, another creature on whom we bestow all the pressure to sanctify and justify our love, the child often carrying the burden of loveless and painful marriages that are continuing on its behalf" (2014a). In their troubled relationship, having a baby is seen as a means of fixing their relationship issues, fostering emotional intimacy and creating stronger bonds between them; however, they truly explore their broken and irreparable relationship because, as Sierz stresses, "their attempts to recapture their original feelings are desperate" (2011, p.172).

For the first time, the audience learns that Abby is pregnant and witnesses their struggle between having a baby and not having one. Abby's pregnancy raises some daunting questions, such as whether they should have the baby, whether they are ready to become a parent, or whether their relationship will survive. During the play, they undergo an "emotionally exhausting examination" (O'Hanlon, 2016). Theatre critic John Peter considers *Stitching* a modern tragedy, by stating "No, tragedy is not dead, it has merely moved its headquarters. You create your own tragic flaw" (2002, p.1200). Abby and Stu become tragic protagonists by creating their own fatal mistakes within their inner worlds and their relationship. Throughout the play, the audience witnesses their debates about the child, their traumas from the loss and the complexities of their love in a casual relationship. It is like "a glimpse into the future at a baby that may 'never have existed -never rived, never died'" (Thaxter, 2002, p.1196). Though they seem to love each other, this couple hurts each other by committing extreme acts of violence and

sexuality throughout the play. Thus, the play, addressing the contrasting phenomena, is described as "moving, tender and deeply humane as well as shocking and stomach-turning" (Herbert, 2002, p.1190).

Neilson "creates a theatre that makes you feel that you are thinking deeply about a subject" (Sierz, 2001, p.88) in *Stitching*. He finds out all kinds of dynamics between a couple, by focusing on love, loss, extreme fantasies and brutality. As Peter stresses, the play is "about violence in love and love in violence" (2002, p.1200). In producing this play, Neilson is inspired by a pornographic magazine in an Amsterdam shop, showing a disturbing photograph of a vagina (Ng, 2014). Reid underlines that *Stitching* is "about the breakdown of love and trust under the combined pressure of personal tragedy and degrading pornographic fantasy" (2017, p.37). The play, exploring the dark sides of human psychology, makes the audience to occupy with uncomfortable truths. Neilson's objective in *Stitching* is to "set out to arouse emotions in the startled spectators, which the latter then take beyond the theatre doors" and to "challenge spectators' thinking as well as feeling", "to challenge one's own moral grounds", "to review their tolerance of objectionable behaviour and consequently renegotiate, within themselves, the norms and standards that guide their ethical judgements and, consequently, to affirm or reject them" (Cremona, 2015, pp.255-256). The audience also witnesses how Neilson's characters are both vulnerable and indifferent, and how they suffer from the deplorable consequences of their actions.

The narrative of the play progresses in two directions. The first one is their attempts to make decision about the future of their relationship after the discovery of Abby's pregnancy and the second one is their sexual fantasy games in flashbacks and flashforwards to mend their relationship. According to Joao Morais, "the divide acts more like a battleground rather than a common ground" (2012). In this perplexing narration, Neilson encourages his audience to follow the complexities of the couple, making them active participants in the piece, because the audience is left with "a struggle to keep up with them and ultimately obtain a clear view of what the story is about" (Brody, 2008). In non-chronological storytelling, the playwright provides the audience with the process of their decision-making on assuming the responsibility for a baby and their sexual fantasies or games based on client-prostitute relationship, "starting in anger and violence and ending in passion and confusion" (Morais, 2012). All of these elements serve to reveal the great tragedy of their troubled relationship. According to David Ng, "their emotional conversations alternate with scenes from another period in the characters' lives when they meet for no-strings sex, gradually escalating to something more brutal" (2014). At the beginning of the play, the couple seems to be at a crossroads in their relationship and the baby emerges as a turning point for this relationship. However, their love gets more complicated in their sexual games as the play progresses. According to Sierz, "under the mind-games beats the hurting heart of this couple, who have both been unfaithful to each other more than once, and whose recriminations have turned love into a blaming match" (2002, p.1196). Throughout the play, they attempt to revive this exhausted relationship. From this perspective, their relationship seems to begin as a romantic love (*Eros*), and then it is marked by "the pained and hurtful love relationship that is unravelled before them, and that can rebound in their own awareness" (Cremona, 2015, p.254). In advance, their relationship turns into "a claustrophobic sexual relationship in which no holds are barred, no punches pulled, no fantasies unexplored" (Spencer, 2002, p.1199). They appear as *ludic* lovers in their game-playing love while the audience are witnessing "private-public exchange" (Cremona, 2015, p.254) in disturbing elements of sado-masochistic extremes.

Neilson deliberately shifts the order of the events to create a shocking effect on his audience's mind and build the tension of the play. According to Vicki Ann Cremona, "Neilson deliberately scrambles the timeline to intensify the shock value of the language and confuse the audience temporarily into believing that Abby was asking for an abortion and Stu was asking for sex for money" (2015, p.249). The

playwright invites his audience to resolve the nature of this complex relationship within the temporal distortion. The distorted/twisted time-line is quite effective in "produc[ing] one shock wave after another without giving time to the audience to react rationally" (Cremona, 2015, p.250). At this point, as Cremona points out, Neilson does not offer the audience a psychological resolution but instead expects them to realize for themselves what is truly happening (2015, p.250). The hybridization of the past and the present throughout the play helps the audience both comprehend and question the sexual politics and the power dynamics between man and woman. *Stitching* narrates a love story amidst extremes of brutality and compassion, by shattering taboos like sexual fantasies. According to Reid, the play generally portrays "the difficulty for the individual subject of achieving emotional stability in an unstable world" (2017, p.44). Neilson points that "the sexually violent play dives deeply into the intimacy of a faithless violent and dark relationship to witness the birth of a tender love" (*The Hague Online*, 2011) and leads a profound shock on the audience during their discovery process. It summons the audience to explore the boundaries of empathy and understanding by facing the chaos of bilateral relationship through the lens of dramatic storytelling.

Neilson represents power relations and gender politics by following a time strategy and combining memory, reality and fantasy. Throughout the scenes, the audience engages with both the dilemma of the couple in bringing a baby into the world, and their troubled love relationship based on their prostitute-client role-play. These parallel narratives and their ambiguous relationship function as an instrument "to explore the complex relationship between heterosexual love and violent sexual fantasy, and consequently to provide an 'unflinching excavation of alienated relations between women and men'" (Reid, 2017, p.40). The relationship becomes even more tragic as the action progresses and the audience discovers the current state of their affairs. Neilson categories it as "a reactionary play depicting a relationship that began as a commercial encounter, was seeded in fantasies, and so was bound to come to no good" (Taylor, 2002) and makes his audience as both an observer and a witness. He allows them to observe all the events and make their own meaning from this observation by using their heads. In other words, they are expected "to stitch the pieces together themselves" (*Pope Dose*, 2008). In her interview with Caridad Svich, the playwright Laura Wade asserts that *Stitching* is a play chronologized "in a way that requires the audience to work hard to piece the story together" (Svich, 2006, p.248). According to Wade, the non-linear narration of the play helps the audience understand "the characters' turbulent emotional state" (Svich, 2006, p.248). This spatio-temporal narrative strategy is also a useful way to introduce the paradoxical nature of Abby and Stu's relationship. According to Reid,

> Stu's determination to force Abby to exceed the limits of her own sexual tolerance seem at least partlymotivated by love, by a desire to challenge her obsessively masochistic behaviour, her need to atone for the neglect she believes led to the death of their son. His actions might therefore be seen as an attempt at a kind of therapy or correction. The prostitute/client sequences are the conscious invention of Abby and Stu, and initially, at least, each is in possession of an assumed role and each is playing this fantasy role to and for the benefit of the other (2017, p.43).

These parallel narratives allow the audience to both empathetically and critically evaluate the motivations and internal conflicts that drive Abby and Stu. Reid highlights that only scenes based on the prostitute/client fantasy are the most disturbing and shocking moments; however, the essential motivation of this couple is their grief shared over the loss of a child, which makes them intelligible and sympathetic. At that point, it seems to be so extremely touching, tragic and functional to finally rethink the relations between their fantasies and their ways of coping with their traumas of the loss (Reid, 2017, p.39). Their fantasies can be interpreted as one of the elements that keep these characters together after their exhausted love.

Stitching, "one of the most provocative [plays]" (Thatcher, 2014a), is also "much meatier, much darker and much more provocative as a study of male-female relationship models" (Herbert, 2002, p.1190). In his play, Neilson employs some shock tactics to shake or disturb the audience by presenting a raw, unflinching portrayal of reality and taboo subjects on stage. He encourages his audience to engage critically in both their own beliefs and issues of social life by staging uncomfortable truths and moral complexities. According to Robert Dawson Scott, "after a decade establishing himself as a leading member of the brutalist school, Anthony Neilson has gone romantic" (2002, p.1199) in *Stitching*. Although it is woven with extreme sexual and violent scenes, it tells the tragic story of a couple who were expecting a child and lost that child due to neglect. It also "provides a deeply mesmerising, if shocking, experience, as a couple smashes through taboo after taboo in a harrowing sexual tug-of-war" (Halliburton, 2002, p.1200). It is "a play about destructive love as much as sick fantasy, (…) rais[ing] about the division between sexual games and unpalatable reality" (Halliburton, 2002, p. 1200). They "fight like wild beasts to arouse one another" (Logan, 2002a, p.1199) and attempt to mend their troubled relationship by using role-play fantasies as a part of game-playing love (*Ludus*).

According to Reid, "the couple's relationship was born of an unhealthy financial transaction and steeped in sordid fantasy from the outset" (2017, p.37). In contrast to the intimacy and sensuality of the first scene, the second scene presents the audience with a cold atmosphere of Abby and Stu's sexual game, based on the relationship between the prostitute and the client in an emotional void. It "suggest[s] that their relationship is simply one of a whore and her client, a client who feels free to practise any humiliation he fancies provided he pays in advance" (Thaxter, 2002, p.1196). In this sexual game, Abby appears as a mature student and prostitute, and Stuart as a client to make love. "As Stuart begins to explain what he wants, we get a nasty insight into the darker recesses of the male mind" (Hari, 2002, p.29). In this scene, Abby is represented as both a student who struggles financially and a prostitute who accepts money to make her living. She meets Stu to have sex and asks him to pay for money beforehand as the exchange of sexual service. In this respect, they negotiate in line with Stu's sexual fantasies. Then, Stu tells Abby that "the moment I put this money in your hand you'll be a whore" (Neilson, 2002, p.16), and if not, she will be just a woman who meets a man and has sex with him. Revealing attention to the binary distinction between purchasable sex and institutionalized sex within relationship and "an abuse of a woman's body" (Dworkin, 1993, p.3), Neilson can show that female body for the sexual service turns into an object of male consumption and "a saleable commodity" (Cremona, 2015, p.254). In this fantasy game, Stu approaches her as only sex object or the object of desire and Abby is indifferent to his attitude by requesting payment. Stu searches for bodily experienced love. Stu's emphasis on the word 'prostitute' presents "[the] full weight to the misogyny" (Reid, 2017, p.40). As Reid suggests, it refers to "dramatization of misogyny as a specific pathology of misrecognition and disturbed sexual fantasy, or as a more structural generalization about the disturbing assumptions of power in male-female relations" (2017, p.41). Abby sells her sexuality or body in a consensual manner for her cost of living, by creating emotional distance. She becomes the subject of "sexual exploitation" (Stolz, 2005) as a kind of violence against women. Stu uses money "to purchase the illusion of intimacy" (Hammond, 2011, p.75). Her body turns into "a sellable commodity" (Dworkin, 1993, p.4). Her body appears as an object of desire, beauty, attractiveness, eroticism, sexuality, and pleasure. Her body is both economically and culturally defined body. She also appears a woman "who has a purely sexual function under male dominance" (Dworkin, 1993, p.6). As the American radical feminist and activist Andrew Dworkin points, she "lives the reality of being the dirty woman" (1993, p.6) in one sense. She experiences "dominance and submission, oppression and victimization (…), built into the practice [her prostitution]" (Overall, 1992, p.722). She feels the objectification of the body that ensures Stu's satisfaction and power.

Both sexuality and violence are two impulses related to the dark side of human beings. They can become Neilson's concern in *Stitching* as a kind of "a peepshow" (Cooper, 2002, p.1655). He portrays these two basic impulses in a confined and inescapable space to reflect the complexities of human nature (Sierz, 2001, pp.88-89). He creates the fascinating moments of enlightenment to help the audience confront ethical dilemmas and societal issues (Sierz, 2001, p.88) and drastically question the place of these impulses within our lives. According to Sierz, "we're deep into the classic tangles of a couple, with verbal twists, argumentative contradictions and emotional blackmail" (2002, p.1196). The play is not only a kind of romantic love but also an erotic love, as Neil Cooper asserts that "theirs was never a hearts-and-flowers romance, but rather a need born from a strictly sexual premise, in which tenderness comes from a consensual brutality drawn from fantasy made flesh to fill an absence" (2002, p.1655). In *Stitching*, Neilson invites his audience into the bedroom of a young man and woman, as the playwright "specialises in violations of intimacy, in flaying relationships to the bone, and we are both exhilarated by his dissections and disconcerted by the events portrayed and by our own responses to them" (Shuttleworth, 2002).

The relationship between Stu and Abby is associated with a complex blending of the extreme experiences of violence and sexuality. In their sexual dynamics, the couple seems to take pleasure from hurting each other. It forces the audience to confront disturbing truths about eroticism, violence and power dynamics. As Rowena Hawkins states, *Stitching* transforms the audience into voyeurs within some scenes of sexuality and violence, where the couple, Abby and Stu, appear to kill each other before they can bring a new life into the world (2015). For pain and pleasure, they harm each other both physically and psychologically. Their ambivalence between sexuality and violence is, according to Sierz, "a moment of cruelty so intense it slows down your breathing" (2002). These violent acts seem to both hurt them and keep their love alive, which manifests itself as a paradox. Ken Urban also notes that Neilson's *Stitching* "portray[s] victims as complicit in their own oppression (…) obsess about the crisis of masculinity, shun clear political statements, and reject any notion of political correctness" (2004, p.354). Referring to Urban's statement, Reid also confirms this idea by stating "each takes as its subject matter unusually intense and dysfunctional personal relationships involving troubled men; utilizes misogynistic language and violent and pornographic imagery; fails to make its politics explicit or manifest; and troubles progressive assumptions about gender relations" (2017, p.14). She infers that like his plays such as *Normal* (1991), *Penetrator* (1993) and *Censor* (1997), *Stitching* tells the intimate stories about experiences, private, erotic, and violent, rather than addressing broad social or political issues, and engaging with larger ideological narratives. From this aspect, Neilson manifests that sex and gender are "a field that remains fluid and unfixed, or even opaque, but nevertheless extremely vexed" (Reid, 2017, p.15).

In the third scene, Neilson allows Abby and Stu to look back on their relationship via their debate about the unborn child. Abby explains the discovery of her love for Stu, stating "I had a dream we were living with each other. And in the dream, we loved each other; and it felt all right, it felt good. And then, when I woke up –all of a sudden, I did. Loved you. (…) All right, not loved you, not right away, but I felt close to you; and suddenly it was a possibility that I could" (Neilson, 2002, p.18). Abby expresses that she slowly came to love and start a family with him after a dream. She emphasizes that having a child means becoming a family in terms of the future of this relationship. She highlights the happily-ever-after in family life by dreaming of being a complete family with Stu. She considers the presence of a baby "[their] possible future" (Neilson, 2002, p.20) and the continuity of their relationship. At that point, Neilson opens gender or body politics up for discussion, asserting that "Abby's burden of reproductive responsibility and choice is that which all women carry within heterosexual relationships. (…) The

mixture of biology with social and sexual politics is a potent one. It is also deceptive in its instant familiarity" (Brown, 2002, p.1200). In other respects, it seems that Stu is not ready for this future his rational view. Abby believes that if they lose this baby, they will lose their relationship. Abby's love displays a kind of a familial/friendship love (*Storge*), by emphasizing the presence of a baby as both "the very tapestry of family life" (Guo, 2023, p.390) and a connecting factor. Unlike Stu, she proposes the baby as a subject of happiness and satisfaction across the family life cycle. In the fifth scene, Stu argues that he does not have the time, stating that having a baby is too expensive due to costs like babysitters, nannies, prams, clothes and nappies, and that it would restrict their spontaneity. Meanwhile, Abby is driven by the desire to have a child and create a family life. Stu insists that he is not ready for a child. However, despite listing all these negatives, Stu tells Abby that the only positive aspect is that "like just -having a kid; having something that you love and that loves you back, it'd be– nice" (Neilson, 2002, p.31). In his words, Stu also emphasizes the emotional core of familial love. In eleventh scene, Abby also highlights the significance of having a baby in a familial life, as a way of "see[ing] [something and each other] through the baby's eyes, like new" (Neilson, 2002, p.49), by featuring the power of familial love.

As Mark Brown raises, in *Stitching*, "Neilson draws us into the darker, disturbingly ambiguous realities of modern sexuality. The fears and conflicts of nominally 'normal' life become intertwined with the collusions and coercions of pornographic fantasy. The line between consent and control is blurred to the point of confusion" (2002, p.1200). For instance, the fourth scene is very striking to see the pornographic fantasies. Associated with masculinity as 'a ritual of manhood' and "structures of masculine domination, or patriarchy" (Butler, 2019), different forms of male violence are also culturally and socially depicted in this scene. In this scene, Stu explicitly tells Abby the ways of satisfying a man by a woman such as wearing high heels, walking by pushing her breasts and pulling her buttocks in, dressing in a schoolgirl style, making up, wearing garters and corsets, and slowly undressing before sexual intercourse, and inflicts psychological and sexual violence on her. According to Lyn Gardner, such kinds of scenes force the audience to confront "the fact that men fantasise about schoolgirls, and women sometimes enjoy playing the whore" and the idea "that women frequently acquiesce to things, particularly in bed, out of either love or emotional neediness" (2002, p.1199). In addition, scenes involving games with sexual toys and inflicting violence on woman by pulling her hair are the other examples of physical and sexual violence against woman. Stu also humiliates Abby, by putting some money in her mouth. In this idea, Stu both manifests male passion for visual quality and reflects bigotry of reducing woman to body and sex object and female body is seen as a battlefield of gender and power dynamics.

As Johann Hari highlights, the play is "a terrifyingly honest play in a culture saturated with internet porn. Neilson has, in effect, taken us to the websites that flash across every computer before being (in most cases) closed swiftly" (2002, p.29). In the same scene, Stu shows some pornographic photographs taken from the internet to Abby and tells her that "it's a wonderful thing, the internet, don't you think? I mean, when I was a kid, we had to hope we'd find some hidden in a bush somewhere. Now it's all right there; all the perversions known to man, right at your fingertips. You name it, someone's out there fucking it and sticking pictures of it on the web" (Neilson, 2002, p.23). By emphasizing how the internet makes sexual content easily accessible and how sexuality is becoming ubiquitous today, Neilson reveals how sexuality turns into sexual violence through the internet. The borders between private life and public life are blurred through internet, which violates personal autonomy. He can argue that sexuality has been simplified, materialized and turns into something pornographic. *Stitching* explores how characters hesitate between their desires and their vulnerabilities in a world increasingly shaped by digital media, which blurs the boundaries between the personal and the public, while neglecting

emotional intimacy. Thus, Neilson both disturbs his audience and underlines that people can be indifferent and insensitive to life because of violent and sexually explicit images that can be easily accessed on the internet (Reid, 2017, p.42). Abby only says "Stop" (Neilson, 2002, p.28) in the face of his increasingly extreme fantasies and the photograph of a woman with her vagina sewn up, downloaded from the internet by Stu. In the final point, Stu introduces a disturbing mixture of male dominance and sexual aggression by means of his fantasies and his graphic descriptions by pushing boundaries, which is one of the most extreme points of sexual violence in modern society.

The extremes of sexuality, consensual violence and affection in Abby and Stu's love relationship can reflect the contradictory nature of love in the consumer society. The couple is both cruel and inconsistent in their sexual and emotional connection. Violence is central to both their love and sexual relationship. Throughout the play, the couple reveals what people often hesitate to talk about in their own lives explicitly. *Stitching*, Neilson's "psycho-sexual drama" (Logan, 2002b), shocks the audience via its sexually and violently explicit or obscene language, which "places this play at the limits of the grotesque in its negative aspects" (Cremona, 2015, p.254). Neilson also confesses that "in [his] plays, sex is a language, used by [his] characters to express all sorts of different things. (…) In *Stitching* it's about guilt and self destruction" (*The Standard*, 2012). Stu is quite brave and ruthless in revealing his masculine fantasies. For example, at the same scene, Stu mentions that immediately before Abby's arrival he is looking at a book about Auschwitz and the image of naked women, selected for death to the Nazi gas chambers and thinking something obscene (Neilson, 2002, p.29). His comments include the female body and the fantasy he develops over it, rather than seeing a victim. The victimized women of Auschwitz in Stu's fantasy world turn into an object of desire for his gratification. At that point, Abby seems to experience a deep shock and mental turmoil by being subjected to look at these disturbing and shocking images. In court, Neilson highlights that "this reference has nothing really to do with Auschwitz, but actually reveals that the character 'is confessing, he is saying I knew nothing about death, I did not look at the atrocity of life, I saw only the nudity'" (2009b, p.9). The playwright seems to emphasize the troubling place of female body as a site of pain, suffering and male pleasure. In an interview with Lisa Thatcher, Mark Westbook, who directed the play, characterizes the play as a "kind of deal with the battles we have on a daily basis that are not political on a grand scale, these social battles we have with people we say we love" (2014b). As Westbook points out, the play addresses the struggle for love that we all face in our individual lives, but it also touches on cultural references such as references to Holocaust victims and sex crimes against children. At this point, Westbrook underlines that the immediateness for the audience varies culturally, which is an extremely important issue in terms of the reception of the play (Thatcher, 2014b). Thatcher, on the other hand, underlines that Neilson's play creates an individual, collective and ethical questioning of violence and sexuality by stating that the play presents "the evidence of our incapacity to deal with the darkest parts of ourselves" (2014a) in the representations of "the severe exploitation of prostitutes through our hysterical vilification of pedophiles or our equally hysterical tolerance toward rapists" (2014a).

Psychologically traumatized because of the loss of their child, the couple opens the power dynamics between the sexes to discuss, by bringing up some questions about life, sexuality, marriage and morality to agenda. The audience witnesses Abby and Stu's relationship based on mistrust and infidelity and faces their psychological misery, extreme sexual and violent acts. Their relationship is "a relationship in which love is undermined by distrust" (Logan, 2002a, p.1199). Their sexual games exceed the limits of sexual tolerance in love relationship. The role reversal between the sexes in the sixth scene is so striking to rethink the gender politics, by "focus[ing] on the gulf between what men and women want, and what happens when sexual fantasy is a substitute for intimacy" (Gardner, 2002, p.1199). Exploring themes of

sexuality and violence in *Stitching*, Neilson unearths "the existential blackness at the hearts of these characters" (Lunn, 2015). The play can problematize traditional norms of masculinity by suggesting both strong and vulnerable relation between man and sexuality/violence. Reid pronounces the portrayal of masculinity in the play, by highlighting "Neilson is clearly an artist alert to the times in which he lives, and to shifts in attitudes to gender and sexuality but the topicality of his plays is manifest not so much by means of overt political argument, as by subversions and disruptions, and by the way he transforms the object of social disquiet into subjective concern" (2017, p.45). According to Reid, *Stitching* puts the power relations between the sexes and their imbalances in the center. In his play, both men and women fight to control their sexual and emotional lives. They are in "a gender battle in which men and women struggle for control of physical, sexual and emotional space" (Reid, 2017, p.45). Neilson does not present male power as a dominant authority in the play; instead, he questions gendered relations by incorporating female perspectives and challenges traditional notions of gender roles, while addressing feminist concerns. The play "suggests that some sexual fantasies are an excuse for not moving on emotionally - and that some tragedies can destroy your relationship completely" (Sierz, 2002, p.1196). Like the other scenes of sexual fantasy, the couple "find[s] themselves involved in a surreal re-enactment of a previously imagined sexual fantasy" (Morais, 2012). In this scene, Abby tells Stu about her more extreme sexual fantasies, such as pedophilia, consensual violent sex activities, and inflicting pain. Turning into a sensitive man unlike the early representations of this character, Stu tells Abby that she has gone too far and asks her to stop playing this stupid game that "was fun at first but now it's getting boring" (Neilson, 2002, p.35). He invites Abby to be more compassionate and receptive in their relationship. In this scene, the sexual attraction between them progresses through violence again. Through this role reversal, Neilson seems to emphasize that sexual and violent oppression can be made visible regardless of gender. The couple continues achieving emotional and sexual satisfaction by hurting each other. Even though they violently hurt each other and fight against each other, they reconcile by kissing, having sex, and dancing tenderly.

Mellieħa Winston Azzopardi stresses that the scenes, meant to disturb the audience, are those that intricately intersect sexuality and violence: "The only disturbing moments are scenes when the author delves into a fine line between love and violence; love in the form of the dialogue used, violence in the imagined and achieved through sexual fantasies. An all too familiar issue of how some sections of society live with domestic abuse" (2009). They always produce psychological violence on each other in deciding the fate of a baby. Moreover, he dies of neglect. Their problem pushes the couple to the extremes of violence and sexuality. In some scenes, the couple violently and shockingly discusses their sexual fantasies and plays love games: "The dangerous games are a form of desperate self-punishment, a regression back through their sexuality" (Taylor, 2002). The couple, in fact, suffers from their disbeliefs and insecurities, and oppresses each other, and the result is their unhappiness.

The fact that they love each other is not enough to keep this couple together (Neilson, 2002, p.42). They do not know how "to heal [them]selves" (Neilson, 2002, p.42) and they "don't trust each other" (Neilson, 2002, p.42). They separate after the loss of their child and adultery and at that point, the play begins to turn into a tragic love story. According to Sierz, "under the mind-games beats the hurting heart of this couple, who have both been unfaithful to each other more than once, and whose recriminations have turned love into a blaming match" (2002, p.1196). The audience begins to comprehend 'the complexity of human suffering' in love relationship. As the title of the play introduces, their relationship reveals a stitched love affair between Abby and Stu. In the last scene, sexually dressed Abby and Stu meet for the first time after a long separation and share their painful feelings because of the traumatic loss of their child. Abby insufferably shows Stu her vagina stitched in blood. In this scene, she repeats these lines,

"We will fix it/We will mend it" (Neilson, 2002, p.47). In this very moment, Stu tries to comfort her by embracing Abby. Despite their emotional bonds, their love causes a profound emotional turmoil. As Jason Grote points, the concept of stitching refers to "particularly grim body modification. (…) the play is toggling between an (at first) undisclosed emotional trauma and the intense, sadomasochistic role-playing of a grieving couple" (2008). Besides, Cremona asserts that the dominant figure over the body is in constant state of change throughout the play. According to her, female body in their sexual games refers to "the objectification of the woman's body, (…) here not only accomplished by the male, but by the female character herself, who looks upon her own body as an Other" (Cremona, 2015, p.254). On the other hand, the body-object also becomes "a focus of pain and punishment" (Cremona, 2015, p.254) in the stitched vagina. Abby and Stu attempt to fix their relationship by means of painful stitch this time. Their chaotic relationship results in a reconciliation in a tragic point. The repetitive lines of the play, 'We will fix it/We will mend it" (Neilson, 2002, pp. 10/47) in fact, confirm their agreement by offering a sense of hope amidst the turmoil. Sierz asserts that it "refers not only to the way a relationship can be unpicked, stitch by stitch, but also to the stitching up of Abby's vagina" (2002, p.1196). In this scene, the audience witnesses the couple's trauma so profoundly for the first time, which can force them to be estranged from their comfort zone and to develop empathy towards this couple. Both their relationship and her body transform into the sites of suffering and pain. This pain "is expressed by the two protagonists through their aggressive attitude and vehement exchanges, where subjects from violent sex to child murder are broached" (Cremona, 2015, p.250). Neilson makes his audience confront the characters' true pain and vulnerability for the first time. This scene, according to Morais, is "in danger of alienating some with its bold brutality" (2012). The question posed by Faye Stockley in response to Abby's action immediately arises in the mind of the audience: "In the light of a pregnancy, a faithless couple pick apart their relationship, stitch by painful stitch. Can it be mended?" (2015). The playwright leaves his audience with an ambiguous ending, and this question, in fact, is a creative way of leading the audience to think about their future and relationship, and indirectly modern love relationship in the consumer age.

In the nineth scene, their loss of the child and their separation is viewed as "[a] terrible dream" (Neilson, 2002, p.45) or a nightmare for the couple. At that point, Stu is aware of Abby's fear of the past and the present and mentions that their relationship is "not this game; pretending to be strangers, pretending he never existed – never lived, never died. It's not right" (Neilson, 2002, p.45) and that the loss of their child leads to "lock [them] together, even tighter than before" (Neilson, 2002, p.45). Stu also emphasizes that they "have to go forward (…) [and] be something new" (Neilson, 2002, p.45). She also expresses "All'll stitched up like new" (Neilson, 2002, p.47) in the objectification of body. In the tenth scene, Abby and Stu reunite after a long time, and Abby expresses her happiness, saying that Daniels, the phantom child, is happy with God and has forgiven them (Neilson, 2002, p.48). Abby's goodbye in this scene means "something funny" (Neilson, 2002, p. 48) and "goodbye for ever" (Neilson, 2002, p. 4). Similarly, in the eleventh scene, Stu tells Abby that he does "not want to love anyone else" (Neilson, 2002, p.51). He wants her "to be the last person [he] love[s]" (Neilson, 2002, p.51) and hugs her. Abby responds by saying she "know[s] [he] can be quite romantic in (his) own twisted perverse fucked-up way" (Neilson, 2002, p.51), sparking a new dynamic between them, which appears to offer a hopeful step for their future love relationship. However, Reid highlights that this ending can create a quite superficial and tenuous optimism despite characters' blaming themselves and hoping that things will resolve (2017, p.36). On the other hand, Hari asserts that the audience experiences "lacerating and unbearable" (2002) moments at the end of the play. These moments can be "deeply romantic ones of the couple as they could have been and once were, in love, making love, planning a life together; and oddly" (McMillan, 2002, p.1655) and "more heart-rending than all the violence they can do to each other or themselves" (McMillan, 2002,

p.1655).

Neilson's *Stitching* offers an extremely insightful look into the nature of romantic relationships. According to Patrick Marmion, this play is Neilson's "most intimate and explicit work to date" (2002). At that point, Ian Shuttleworth underscores that "Neilson specialises in violations of intimacy, in flaying relationships to the bone" (2002). The play presents the couple's "intense sexual and emotional relationship with a number of references to extreme sexual acts" (*Herald and Times Archive*, 2002). In this respect, their relationship does not have a solid foundation of trust, respect, and friendship. It is a guide for the audience to find out the true meaning of love and commitment or the bonds of love in our relationships. Despite all their contradictions, the couple expresses themselves sincerely to each other. According to Sierz, "both are searching for an emotional truth that constantly eludes them; both are trying to rediscover their early sensations of love for one another. Both are frank because their feelings are still raw" (Sierz, 2009). Although this couple seems to be in love with each other or to start their relationship with a romantic love, their biggest problem is the lack of communication. This couple is a dysfunctional couple who is in love with each other but cannot communicate with each other. Their relationship includes both a romanticism in terms of having a child, repairing their relationship and building a life together, and a harshness and ruthlessness in their eccentricities in sexual fantasy games (Wolfers, 2014). Their games are "vindictive blame games" (Murney, 2014). From this perspective, their relationship is like "a nightmare relationship (…) despite sharing a deep love" (Brody, 2008). The couple plays dangerously dark games while trying to connect in the debris of a worn-out relationship. Throughout the scenes, the audience sees Abby and Stu both coming from the past, reaching into the future, and living in the present. In this context, the couple is testing each other in their relationship, where the boundaries between reality and fantasy are blurred. Based on the couple's relationship with viscerality and physicality, the play both "challenges the notions of modern romance in an increasingly complex world" and offers the audience "a surprisingly tender, often humorous, brutal romance" (Gans & Jones, 2009).

Stitching allows the audience to witness "the tale of a paralytic relationship that is wedged somewhere between love and bitterness", by "navigating through the tatters of an irreparable relationship and the grief of a lost child, though peppering his path with more grit and masochism" (Murney, 2014). Their relationship seems to begin in a romance; but it is damaged by the disillusionment that triggers conflict. The couple tries to fix this relationship, very likely to break down. According to Jane Reiner,

> What gradually emerges is that the play isn't about sex but the difficulty of sustaining intimacy and love. The mounting fantasies are a substitute for a missing vital connection -and commitment- that neither character (especially Stu) is able to make. Love, they both admit at one point, is not enough without trust. (…) Both characters can be viewed as casualties in a gender war whose most serious damage takes place in the heart (2009).

Reiner underscores that Neilson's play invites his audience to comprehend what the lack of feelings of deep attachment, intimacy, affection, commitment, and trust in their love relationships can cause. They create some sexual fantasy games, based on their mutual desires or satisfaction, not classical pattern of romantic love, by making their love commercialized. At that point, the female body turns into a means of sexual satisfaction, attraction, pleasure, lust and desire without any emotional bonds between the couple. It turns into an object of the erotic desire or the object of 'ars erotica' (Giddens, 1992, p.62). Thatcher talks about the body politics in *Stitching* by considering it as story of "the battle played out on the body all around us all the time through marriage, the battle for reproductive rights, monogamy, fertility issues and sex and this definitely turns violent at times" (2014a). Their troubled relationship is

based on Giddens' pure/confluent relationship, "where men and women can have an emotional give and take relationship" (Duaqui, 2015, p.155). Their relationship is based on their benefits and desires to satisfy their sexual or emotional needs. Their love turns into a commodity. Their sexuality also turns into Giddens' 'plastic sexuality' (1992, p.2), by freeing from the needs of reproduction (Giddens, 1992, p.173). Wolfers describes Stu as "both a gentleman and a rabid animal, caring and sex-crazed, compassionate and fucked up" and Abby as "incredibly versatile, from a the-clock-is-ticking mother to a nihilistic prostitute and a range of weirdnesses in-between" (2014). They continue this relationship for their sexual, intimate and emotional needs. The sexuality in their relation seems to turn into a means to be a "communicative code" and "a medium of self-realization and as a prime means, as well as an expression, of intimacy" (Giddens 1991, p.164). Their love is the combination of both sweetness and terror. As erotic lovers in the scenes of their sexual games, they are "eager to get to know the beloved quickly, intensely - and undressed" (Lee, 1988, p. 50). They are also *ludic* lovers, who see sexual activity as "an opportunity for pleasure rather than for intense emotional bonding" (Regan, 2016, p.90). The colours of their love in terms of Lee's colour wheel theory of love are both red and blue. In her emotional bond to Stu and her desire to have a child, Abby also turns into a *storgic* lover, by loving Stu without erotic attraction and talking about their shared interest, and thus, the colour of her love is yellow. Although Stu has become a romantic lover after the role reversal, their relationship is now temporary or exhausted.

3. Conclusion

Love is an extremely multi-faceted and complex phenomenon, encompassing physiological, psychological, and sociological dimensions. With changing times and values, it has shifted towards a more shallow and liquid interpretation in the modern age and the romantic or sublime concept, as seen in William Shakespeare's classic love story *Romeo and Juliet*, where lovers make sacrifices for each other, risk their lives, and value their feelings more, has been replaced by temporary relationships that reflect the fragmented structure of modern life. In the modern era, love has been confined to a narrow framework where sexuality, desire, passion and lust replace emotional intimacy and commitment, and has been marked by superficiality, shallowness, and transience. It has been detached from its emotional dimension and reduced to only a physical or bodily experience. The romantic nature of love seems to have lost its dynamism in modern times. The romantic tragedies of the classical period, which told the stories of lovers who could not be reunited despite their strong emotional bonds or deep love, have transformed into love tragedies, characterized by the unbearable lightness of contemporary relationships. The love tragedies of the modern era have been reduced to physical satisfaction, attraction, pleasure, lust and desire without any emotional bonds. Couples' relationships in modern times have shifted from passionate love or romanticism to sexual intimacy and connection. The concept of love, which is narrowed down to the sexual realm only because it speaks the language of physical intimacy rather than emotional intimacy, has become questionable in modern times. Accordingly, in these modern love tragedies, where commitment has weakened, the body has become an object of desire and a site of violence and suffering, turning into a story of alienation that reflects the emotional emptiness of the modern individual.

The British playwright Anthony Neilson also explores the nature of love in modern epoch in his play 2002 *Stitching*, which can be read as a modern love tragedy. In this love tragedy, the playwright reports the tragedy of the troubled lovers, Abby and Stu, who struggle to fix and mend their relationship, or who attempt to restore trust, intimacy, deep attachment, affection, and commitment in their troubled relationship. This bold play dares the audience into the private sphere of the couple or their bedroom to

explore the dark nature of our relationships. In *Stitching*, as one of "[his] psycho-dramas" (Logan, 2002b), Neilson shows violence and sexuality as the darkest facets of human nature with the most striking images in love relationships by pushing the boundaries of art. During the play, the audience witnesses the couple's explicit sexual and violent fantasies and emotional emptiness, by following a non-linear narrative structure that relies on flashbacks, flashforwards and surreal moments. Having a scandalous history, the play portrays Abby and Stu as both victims and perpetrators in their sexual and emotional relationships, and their power dynamics. The play revolves around parallel narratives that include their prostitute-client relations, their traumas and agonies because of their loss. The play is both challenging and provocative in reflecting troubling sides of intimate relationships and underlying societal and psychological factors that affect bilateral relations. Neilson can encourage his audience to explore how sexuality and violence intertwine within the modern concept of love, gradually eroding the deeper meaning of love. The play underlines that love has moved away from its deep emotional roots - such as attachment, intimacy, affection, commitment, trust, emotional intensity, permanence, and sublimity- and has instead evolved into a more liquid and superficial form in the modern era. It portrays the couple in various ways: sometimes as romantic lovers, other times as erotic lovers, sometimes as playful (*ludic*) lovers, and at times as affectionate (*storgic)* lovers, reflecting the plastic nature of modern romantic relationships.

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