"Make America Great Again": From Neoliberalism to Nihilistic Nostalgia in *Superior Donuts* and *Good People*

"Amerika'yı Tekrar Harika Yap": *Superior Donuts* ve *Good People* Oyunlarındaki Neoliberalizmden Nihilistik Nostaljiye

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Abstract
This article analyzes how affective narration and dramatic construction in Superior Donuts (2008) by Tracy Letts and Good People (2011) by David Lindsay Abaire prevent characters' capabilities from understanding or criticizing neoliberal discourse in general. Neoliberalism's presence is difficult to track in many similar daily-life domains, but drama is more advantageous to explore its subversive effects by unfolding it through power relations and personal clashes among characters. Creating an ontological approach, the affective narration in these plays opens the path for an overall nihilist resolution while propagating a character-based understanding in dramatic structures. As a result of the prevalent affective tone, a nostalgic yearning has emerged as a response to the problems experienced. Aiming to forget problems of the present, these characters idealize a mostly fictionalized and distorted past in order to find temporary solace through this wishful habit. The danger of a nostalgic approach is that it prevents characters as well as audiences from generating a critical method to understand the problems of today and tomorrow. Nostalgic vein in Superior Donuts and Good People is a reflection of social and cultural politics within the USA which believes in the project of "Making America Great Again" without a real scrutiny of neoliberal mistakes and their consequences.
Keywords: Neoliberalism, American Drama, Nostalgia, *Superior Donuts*, *Good People*

Öz
Bu makale Tracy Letts'in *Superior Donuts* (2008) ve David Lindsay Abaire'in *Good People* (2011) adlı oyunlarındaki duygusal anlatım ve dramatik yapıların, karakterlerin genel olarak neoliberal söylemi anlama veya eleştirme becerilerini nasıl engellediğini incelemektedir. Neoliberalizmin gündelik yaşam alanlarındaki etkilerini takip etmek zor iken dram sanatı, neoliberalizmin yıkıcı etkilerini, kişiler arasındaki iktidar hırsları ve kişisel çatışmalar üzerinden tespit etmek açısından daha avantajlı bir pozisyondadır. Ontolojik bir yaklaşımı kendisine rehber edinen duygusal anlatım bu oyunlarda nihilist bir çözümlemenin kapısını aralarken dramatik yapılarda da karakter temelli bir anlayışı ön plana almaktadır. Bu duygusal tonun sonucu olarak da oyunlarda tecrübe edilen sorunlara karşılık olarak da geçmişe nostaljik bir özlem duygusunu çözüm olarak sunulmaktadır. Yaşadıkları zamanın sorunlarını unutmayı veya göz ardı etmeyi hedefleyen karakterler de geçici bir sığınak bulmak için daha çok kurgulanmış veya deforme edilmiş bir geçmişi idealize etmektedirler. Nostaljik bir yaklaşımın zararı ise karakterleri ve seyircileri bugünün ve yarının sorunlarını anlamak için eleştirel bir metot yaratmaktan alıkoymasıdır. *Superior Donuts* ve *Good People* oyunlarındaki nostaljik taraf Amerika'daki neoliberalizmin yanlışların ve

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doğurduğu sonuçların anlamlı bir analizi olmadan "Amerika'yı tekrar harika yap" projesine inanan sosyal ve kültürel politikaların bir yansımasıdır.
Anahtar Kelimeler: Neoliberalizm, Amerikan tiyatrosu, Nostalji, *Superior Donuts*, *Good People*

Introduction

Neoliberal policies, particularly since the 1970s, have been grounded in the assumption that governments should be restricted while giving an unrelenting freedom to free markets, and privatization as well as corporatization of small businesses. Although it seems like a well-connected world in terms of economic, political, social and cultural domains, the prevalence of neoliberal discourse in each of these components has been criticized by Cal Jillson, David Harvey, Alfredo Saad-Filo, Noam Chomsky, Jean and John Comaroff and by many others for its ineffectiveness, corruption and repression over relationship within the global network. Neoliberal policies are key factors for reducing the future prospects of characters in *Good People* (2011) by David Lindsay Abaire and *Superior Donuts* (2008) by Tracy Letts and as a result, these policies have generated a nihilism which has deprived most characters of their moral and political values as well as their social needs. The characters have been turned into drifters whose nostalgic feelings have disconnected them from reality without a process of critical reassessment. In other words, personal memory functions as a protective shield against the corrosive political and financial climates, but the past embodies and promises a "cul-de-sac" which prevents the characters from understanding the large abstractions of neoliberal discourse.

Playwrights are usually reluctant to depress their audiences with their characters' financial details with good reason, but when plays that primarily engage with neoliberal market dynamics imply a reliance on sheer luck, it is a gross underestimation or a sign of naivety. Accepting that life and professional career are simply a part of a chain of fortunate events, that they cannot be changed or reversed in favor of other things obviously is a symptom of learned helplessness which epitomizes the subject's acceptance of powerlessness over the order of things. This deterministic appraisal often comes as an indirect consequence of drama's engagement with neoliberalism through an ontological approach rather than a critical one despite the ontological renderings' ability to impose "an intervention in ontology's conditions of possibility, its configuration and arrangement, not in its already existing features and characteristics" (Huehls 19). The problem with ontological investigation in a fictional piece is that it generates an attitude towards fixed essences and boundaries which limit the understanding of social concepts such as sexual identity, power relations, and identity issues. Graham Harman summarizes how ontological approaches damage a text's foundational essence:

> The political problem here is that a consistently relational ontology would only lead to a perpetual ratification of the status quo. For if humans are merely the effect of a ceaseless upheaval of discursive

> practices, if they are merely holograms, then it is difficult to see why any situation at all should count as oppression: after all, the current residents of a dictatorial state would only count as holograms produced by intersecting institutions and disciplinary practices. (194)

Representational arts create meaning in a conventional method per se, but this approach as Harman mentions, limits the boundaries and strengthens the *status quo* in a text. Object-oriented affirmative synthesis, as a method of ontological approach, renders a text a single unit and meaning. Hence, it creates an ontological evaluation which focuses on the sentiment that it creates rather than discerning its secondary and primary layers such as political outcomes. For example, in *Good People*, years later Margaret (Margie) finds her old fling Mike who has become a wealthy doctor. She is in dire straits and needs a job, but their encounter, unlike her expectations, shows not only the impossibility of any kind of professional interaction between them but brings up many questions about the social, political and cultural status of the society. In the scene where Margie meets Mike for the first time after many years, she points out that luck or coincidental order of things has determined the condition of their lives:

> MIKE: You make too much out of everything. It never got close to that.
> MARGARET: Yes, it did. You know it did. You could be sitting up in Walpole right now, bunkin' with Marty McDermott.
> MIKE: That wouldn't have happened.
> MARGARET: If your father wasn't watching from the kitchen window it would've.
> MIKE: But he was.
> MARGARET: Which is lucky, that's all I'm saying. I never had anyone watching from a window for me. You got lucky. One hiccup, and it could've been you looking for work instead of me. Or you dying up on that sidewalk instead of Cookie. That could just as easily have been you, Mikey.
> MIKE: I don't think so. (190-191)

Margie's statement about being lucky and the possibility for Mike to share the same fate with other "unlucky" characters from their teenage years undergirds the coincidental element stressed throughout the play. Although "one hiccup" seems to underestimate the solemnity of situation, it shows how social imbalance and influence have been effective forces within their lives albeit Mike's disregard. According to Margaret, her adverse situation is connected to her bad luck because she cannot explain how her life has reached this unwelcomed point and she has failed to climb the sliding ladders of the economic hierarchy just like Mike did. Her belief of the world being led by a financial system based on personal fortune and good people making it more bearable in such a socio-economic world is prevalent in the play. In other words, the real problem behind Margie's poor conditions is not discussed here and elsewhere in detail in this play's context because such a discussion

requires playwrights to step out of the affective zone and evaluate their characters without focusing on their emotional realms. However, Lindsay-Abaire is not solely responsible for this attitude as certain caveats operate in the whole genre of American playwriting. First of all, it is more practical for the purpose of writing a play and creating characters under the guidance of Stanislavski's teachings which equip many artists with a highly influential system of dramatic training appealing to emotions of not only audiences but also actors. Personal flaws also suit the traditional character-based tradition of American playwriting in order better to address the most basic questions of how humans organize and govern rather than track the decline of the financial system and welfare state. Above all, the ontological approach to producing and criticizing literary pieces is a long convention in America since the invention of New Criticism whose concern has been in the structure and the mode of being in a literary piece.

Mitchum Huehls criticizes many contemporary authors for being "curiously reluctant to critique the injustice and inequality that they clearly recognize as endemic to twenty-first-century life" (X) despite their zealous engagement with political issues from a broad range of topics. Huehls's point covers mainly fiction, but same tendencies are at work in dramatic world as well. Most playwrights are also keenly interested in political topics which they reflect in their plays and speeches, but a reluctance to critique the injustice and inequality by highlighting foundational roots for social injustice can also be felt in their plays. As Huehls points out, this type of literature "refuses ideological critique, prefers ontological rather than representational value production and views everything in the cosmos with a measured and neutral eye" (XIV). Oscillating between subject and object status disables the analytical potential in these plays as they are under the guidance of the affective hypothesis which Rachel Greenwald Smith defines as "the belief that literature is at its most meaningful when it represents and transmits the emotional specificity of personal experience" (1).

An ontological approach's capability without using analytical instruments for the problems stated in a text is questionable. It is clear that a nostalgic refuge has been created in return for the culmination of individual empathy and aversion to social critique in literature. This nostalgic resort prevents writers from scrutinizing the socio-economic roots of the problems and ushers them to seek shelter in the fictional realms of the past because nostalgic synthesis of contemporary problems and a fictional past fails to locate the origin of neoliberal problems which will be used as a key term to address the problems faced by many individuals and societies in the twenty-first century. Is neoliberalism the only culprit? There are, of course, other elements such as pollution, global warming and virtual world but its role in all these parts is usually neglected because it is difficult to detect the neoliberal influence that has permeated all culture since neoliberalism is "not merely an ideology, not merely an economic perspective, not merely a rationality, but it is the concatenation of them" (Ventura 2).

Letts' and Lindsay-Abaire's optimism on the roots of self-creation, success, and achievement may seem incompatible with the politics of the contemporary neoliberal world, but it serves as a platform to disseminate their vision. Despite the promising resolution of *Good People*, Lindsay-Abaire's imagined environment of possibilities is restricted to those who have the means to be a part of this world. In other words, people, no matter how *good* or bad they are, must be members of either high middle-class or above to possess this element of luck. Therefore, *good people* are not always winners and this perspective offers a vision reminiscent of twentieth century American drama. This traditionalist position, despite the implied positive results of hard work and education, asserts the persistence of unfair and unequal construction of the American climate for lower classes. This, in turn, is recognition of the plight defined in Thomas Piketty's book *Capital* (2014), in which he argues that the majority of wealth is inherited all over the world from generation to generation or accumulated by those with access to large sums of capital, which blocks the lower classes' chance to move within the social hierarchy (78-80). The characters' stories in *Good People* and *Superior Donuts* testify to Piketty's thesis which points at neoliberalism as the source of most conflicts in a modern society.

Despite the heavy tone of neoliberalism, Margie's feeling of personal guilt is one of the most vibrant emotions in the play which hints that individuals are responsible for their own choices, so other outside forces cannot be attached to the problems that they experience. That can also be seen as a summary of how the neoliberal system treats consumers. If a person is successful, that success is related to her personal perseverance and determination. As Smith points out, "Neoliberalism's emphasis on the necessity of personal initiative, along with its pathologizing of structures of dependence calls upon subjects to see themselves as entrepreneurial actors in a competitive system" (2). Margie believes that she has lost the competition as an entrepreneur because she was not lucky and determined enough. Neoliberalism sees the individual as an entrepreneur who is uniquely responsible for success or defeat as if she were on a roulette table risking everything. Moreover, affective renderings of these characters' stories "imagine the act of reading [staging in this case] as an opportunity for emotional investment and return" (Smith 2). It is not just the playwright but also the audience who expect to have a wave of emotions so that their personal experience transmits emotional elements. *Good People* in general gives an emotional account of Margie's deprivation, but socio-economical roots of her predicament are never put under spotlight and this affective account shows a strong link between *Good People* and many similar texts that advocate a neoliberal mindset in defense of the system over individuals and feelings over the intellect.

The scenes where Margie and her friends as well as almost everyone in the neighborhood play bingo highlight the significance of luck in this plot. The fact that it takes place in the basement of a church signals that the fortune and other social institutions have been historically linked to each other. Considering the fact that Las Vegas is often thought to be the unofficial capital

of entertainment, the neoliberal America has invested heavily to embed this concept of sudden success/wealth into the psyche of the whole nation. It is relevant in this regard that in Tracy Letts' *Superior Donuts* Franco's gambling history has caused problems with a betting gang. The possibility of having enormous success in the form of a jackpot seems to be the only hope most characters have of ever becoming rich, which is not very intriguing for the financial and social conditions that neoliberalism has created.

Superior Donuts depicts the unlikely friendship between an elderly Polish immigrant Arthur Przybyszewski and a young African-American teenager Franco. Arthur has a coffee shop which is about to close because of management problems and Arthur's new employee Franco initiates a positive perspective on several topics. Their encounter, just like Margie and Mike, unfolds different issues around which the American society revolves particularly in the twenty-first century. Arthur has lost his self-confidence and he, in a way, represents the generation of the Americans coming from an age of relative wealth and prosperity. However, his hippy personality prevents him from fitting into the neoliberal system of entrepreneurship and market. As a "child of the 1960s," (37) Arthur has a conception of business fraught with disillusionment and disappointment. Arthur's learned helplessness does not derive from his perception of luck in life like Margie's, but rather his lack of confidence and self-esteem. His conflicts with his father, his reluctance to serve in the army, his subsequent escape to Canada to avoid conscription, his hippy and, to a certain extent, anarchist life-style are all reasons that anticipate his apparent refusal of commercial prerequisites to further his business.

Arthur does not establish his understanding of failures on a narrative of luck, but he romanticizes his relationship with the past. For him, his past failures with his family members become an obstacle for his personal and financial development. Given the strict emotional background portrayed in the play, it comes as no surprise that Arthur's problems function as a focal point for his personal conduct. Affirmative narration over his poor conditions emerges as a pillar of conformity that focuses on his personal inadequacies rather than social dynamics. It eventually renders readers incapable of critical analysis required to decode the intricate network between the financial web and social life. Franco's inclusion into Arthur's life stirs his understanding and summons him back to real life from his stagnation.

Playing with the Feelings

The notion that socio-economic details are inherently inimical to dramatic literature is one of the beliefs of American playwriting which involves a rejection of the realistic conceptualization of social dynamics. This perception, in general, undermines the authority of playwrights to create a realistic reflection of the dialectic network in daily life. Thus, the play as a medium becomes a selective field to express certain emotional oscillations. This affective approach requires a strong impact that a dramatic piece aims to accomplish in such a narrow time limit, but reflections of authentic human experience has limited access to the components of social interaction.

However, the point that humanity has reached now is totally different than what it used to be in the past. The gap between generations has never been so rapid in progression and it necessitates all of us to transform our mindset in order to grasp the delicacy of the new system surrounding us. As Jason Read points out, neoliberalism is not just "a transformation of the mode of production," but "a new organization of the production and distribution of wealth, but by the mode of subjection, a new production of subjectivity" (29). The attempts to understand this new, but completely different, form of capitalist system, thus, requires fresh approaches to the contradictions between social institutions and the individual. Although both Lindsay-Abaire and Letts also relate their protagonists' problems to the escalation of corporate world as the subversive presence of corporations is conspicuously manifest in *Good People*, and *Superior Donuts*, their notability in the background is still far from being scrutinized. For example, in *Superior Donuts*, the lack of control over corporations is an integral frustration emphasized by Max, in his offer to buy Arthur's store, "I give you the same price I offer before Wall Street douchebags fuck everyone in the ass" (38). Through his broken English and politically incorrect Russian spirit for communication, Max, a fiery émigré, contemplates the American identity entirely through business, and presents a character, born outside the US, but still well aware of social dynamics. His frustration with the Wall Street crisis, however, does not harm his enthusiasm for business. An American resilience added to his Russian dynamism becomes the highlight of the scene rather than an investigation of "Wall Street douchebags".

Max and his crew have a minor role in *Superior Donuts*, but at the end, Max becomes the owner of three adjacent stores, so he potentially embodies the future. However, the opening of a Best-Buy store in the neighborhood is very likely to end Max's business dreams, just as Starbucks is about to bring down Arthur's donut store. In general, compared to Arthur's bohemian and disheartened character, Max's entrepreneurial spirit combined with his pragmatist methods seems triumphant. Nevertheless, it is clear that his victory is only acceptable until another corporate store opens somewhere nearby and takes over his business. Max, as a character, however, demonstrates that the contemporary American identity is closely related to business success. His presence and success as an immigrant highlight the multicultural and pluralist fabric of the global business world as well as Tracy Letts' authorial tendency to employ varied characters from different backgrounds.

David Lindsay-Abaire refrains from integrating such details in his characters' background, and does not highlight the dominance of corporations, but Margie's absolute submission to her manager to keep her position hints at her impoverishment and the total subjugation of her psyche to the Dollar Store where she works. She tries to convince her manager to withdraw all the raises and promotions she has received when she says, "I never asked for those raises. I only got them because you were required by law to give them to me. It wasn't much, god knows—a nickel here, fifteen cents one time—but I knew when I went over nine dollars, you were gonna start looking for an excuse to

get rid of me" (15). Margie's lack of appreciation and respect for her own labor stems from her internal psychological issues and pressure to keep her position. In other words, she feels estranged and does not value her contribution to the business. According to her character-based and socially decontextualized perception of her position in this big chain of stores, she feels that she is the main culprit in her situation, and she cannot have those raises.

Despite the historical contribution that corporations have made to the growth of the US, each time a corporation is mentioned in these plays, there is a complaint or cynicism about the way it conducts its business. Whether it is Starbucks in *Superior Donuts* or Dollar Store in *Good People*, characters are negatively affected by these companies' labor practices although the plays do not directly criticize or hold them responsible for the tragic events. On the contrary, they are often mentioned as an inevitable corollary of the melting of the future and a direct accusation, which would be uniquely un-American, is often avoided.

Despite the veiled criticism of corporate culture, realistic drama in its American form does not purport to explore social dynamics like its European counterparts, but rather focuses on personal conflicts through affective rendering. This perception might be one of the major differences with British theatre, whose plays are imported whenever Broadway needs a strong statement about a social conflict.[1] The intention of this article is not to criticize playwrights for their artistic choices, as no writer has any kind of obligation to include any kind of social criticism. What it is difficult to grasp is the lack of a broader social analysis while showing these characters in dire conditions. Although some scholars believe that the age of American exceptionalism is long gone, fascination with the American system can be observed in this situation. David Harvey links this situation to a conceptual apparatus which has become so embedded in common sense as to be taken and not open to be questioned (5). Can it be that overconfidence in the American way of life that establishes an invisible wall for the playwrights to shy away from national politics or is it so embedded within the American psyche that nobody tries to act against it?

Neoliberalism in Drama: Now and Then

Because neoliberalism is not a mode of production, its influence on society can be observed better in literary texts. Thus, dramatic texts play an important role to show how the American neoliberal rationality ramifies from the economic realm to the cultural realm. After all, politicians since the 1980s have not succeeded in restoring confidence and opportunity broadly throughout the society and economy. The emergence of the Bretton Woods Institutions which would later turn into the World Bank, the IMF, and the WTO, the melting of Keynesian principles which suggested that the state should get involved in regulating markets and capitalism, the stagflation caused by the high cost of

[1] It would be clarifying to see that how important problems of the American society have been reflected through the European playwrights. *Enron* (2009) by Lucy Prebble, *Stuff Happens* (2004) and *The Power of Yes* (2009) by David Hare are some major examples of the British plays that have brought direct criticism to American politics and life-style.

the Vietnam War and oil crisis, and the elimination of taxes on the wealthy are considered to be some of the major reasons for the neoliberalism to get more aggressive. (Hickel) This aggravated situation on average citizen constitutes the extra burden on the protagonists in contemporary plays. On the other hand, the loss of promise in the present has compelled the characters to take refuge in the past. This nostalgic desire for a fictional past has resulted in a nihilistic attitude, which in turn has disabled the characters to make decisions for their lives or to take action.

Superior and *Good People* mainly differ from the perception of hope in modern drama and cause characters to seek refuge in their memories. Protagonists in *Superior* and *Good People* are outcomes of several failures, whereas modern drama often portrays characters on their way to destruction and its subsequent results. The criticism of the transition from being a "salesman" in twentieth century plays to a corporate employee working for minimum wage in contemporary drama embodies the very spirit of neoliberal policies. One of the common points of Margie, Franco, and Arthur is that they either work for minimum wage or their income is not sufficient to maintain a decent life. Furthermore, different from twentieth century business plays, the emphasis is on psychological damages rather than the implications of a consumerist culture criticism. Most protagonists in business-related plays, for example, Willy Loman in *Death of A Salesman* and Shelly Levine in *Glengarry Glen Ross,* are victims of their greed and ideals whereas Margie in *Good People* and Arthur and Franco in *Superior* are hard workers who can't make ends meet despite their efforts. What they need to accomplish their goals does not solely depend on their personal merits but involves other elements such as establishing a bond with people, understanding the dynamics of financial and cultural environment or finding ways to cope with alienation. Loman and Levine are honorable characters who don't accept defeat or seek a way out of their miseries without admitting their failure. They are losers because their dreams have perished. Loman's rejection of his brother Charley's job offer or Levine's effort to get good cards for faster sales show these characters' sense of dignity and self-confidence to preserve their dreams. Where both plays show the path to failure, *Good People* and *Superior Donuts* analyze post-failure. Both Levine and Loman are out of their context, and a surreal psychology leads them to their destruction. On the other hand, Margie and Arthur have fallen into reality's trap and do not have the power to get out. However, while accepting the presence of an experienced catastrophe of a financial meltdown, these plays seek for some moments of relief. These contemporary mainstream plays—successful in terms of box-office and being restaged—tend to restore or repair the plight of those characters by offering bits of optimism. For example, at the end of *Good People*, the protagonist, Margie, receives some money from a benefactor to be able to pay her next rent so that she will not be left in the street with her disabled daughter. In *Superior Donuts*, the belief for a better future is revived through the novel draft, *America will be*, that Arthur has sent to an editor to be reviewed and published for his African-American employee, Franco. This situation is reminiscent of Allan Bloom's words on the American

way of transferring European forms: “We have here the peculiarly American way of digesting Continental despair. It is nihilism with a happy ending” (147).

The belief in American way of living has significantly eroded, and compared to contemporary pieces, modern versions contain more promise and integration for protagonists or people around them. It does not mean that contemporary plays do not offer hopeful resolutions at the end, but they rather highlight the pessimistic surroundings in which they take place. Loss of belief and awareness of the plight, which have equipped these plays with a nihilistic message, have caused characters to fail at turning critical light back upon themselves. The main settings described by the playwrights also echo this loss of faith. For example, *Good People* starts behind a Dollar Store, which is known for selling second-rate products for cheap prices, and the presence of a big trash container in the first scene is not coincidental. The stunning house in the second act does not convey a promise, but conversely increases the conflict between these two settings. The last scene, where characters play bingo at a church’s basement, does not offer a consolation at all. The symbolic erosion of the American setting is also visible in *Superior Donuts,* which takes place in a vandalized old-fashioned donut shop.

As a comparison point between the twentieth and the twenty-first centuries, the shifting optimism in plays should be noted. *Salesman* and *Glengarry* are intrinsically about their protagonists’ delusions, and they portray the moment of truth in which the protagonists recognize *hamartia*—their own flaws after a long struggle of survival. They initiate a reaction which shortens the path to their ends. On the other hand, *Good People* and *Superior Donuts* highlight the aftermath of struggle as playwrights show a strong awareness of the deteriorating conditions of lower middle classes. Both plays depict characters that have already lost their dreams while trying to survive. In other words, they have reached the end of their deadlock and have nothing left to find a way out.

Another key aspect of these protagonists linking them with twentieth-century drama is the prevailing concept of illusion. Although characters in *Glengary* and *Salesman* have a self-deception which merges economic success with social and emotional validation, contemporary writers are more cognizant of their characters’ plight. Arthur sells his donut store and gets some money, but Letts does not endorse this as a final relief from his problems. For Margie, the future is unpredictable, as the play has an open ending without a final promise. Miller and Mamet point at twilight and a threshold, but Letts and Abaire highlight the wounded state of their characters. The change is designed to reflect the illusory situation as well as the real problems of neoliberalism’s impact. Hope constitutes a filter for these protagonists’ self-discovery and dignity, which alerts the audience to how these plays situate themselves around the absence of hope.

Are Winners Really Winners?

The key for success is a frequently scrutinized topic in American society. In his best seller books, *Outliers: The Story of Success* and *The Tipping Point*, Malcolm Gladwell analyzes several success stories from computer programmers to famous hockey players and succinctly concludes that there are several factors governing personal achievement: date of birth, familial support, demands of the market, and timeliness. Playwrights also seek answers from a fictional point of view to the question of what makes a person successful. The concept of financial success in its American context is embodied by way of characters presented as acceptable and admirable in opposition to others presented as unacceptable.[2] Bequeathed by twentieth century dramatists to their contemporary successors, this contrast between winners and losers shifts the focus from social forces to personal attainments and competitive skills. *Good People* and *Superior Donuts* form a trajectory between successful and unsuccessful characters because philosophical contrasts between them highlight the uncompromising dialectic of capital and labor. As a result, financial hardship and other difficulties are often considered as a proof for careless abdication of responsibility for the characters. The emphasis on the survival of the individual creates a strong parallel between the logic of neoliberalism and drama. As Smith warns, "In other words, neoliberalism, with its expansion of market rationality to nonmarket activities, leads to a situation where individuals are encouraged to see themselves as the outcome of a range of investments and returns" (37). Those whose investments are not well-placed are inevitably destined to fail.

Good People and *Superior Donuts* contain winners and losers: losers who are at the bottom of their lives and fully aware of the fact. Their efforts to get out of this vicious cycle seem, if not impossible, mostly futile. The vitriolic tone describing the difficulty of upward mobility in social and financial levels in American drama suggests a cynical and contentious approach to winners and wealth. It would not be correct to think, however, that American drama has a consistent anti-business stance, despite the reformist impulse. If we look back at *Death of a Salesman*, winners, in contrast to Loman, are happy and seem to have a better life. The managers in *Glengarry Glen Ross* are die-hard capitalists, but no critique other than calling them "stupid" is directed toward these characters. At least they are the ones who give orders and have the privilege of looking down on everyone else. On the other hand, there is a clear decrease in the life quality of winners in *Good People* and *Superior Donuts*. Mike in *Good People* and Max in *Superior* are not pleased with what they have. As Wendy Brown points out, "Neoliberalism normatively constructs and interpellates individuals as entrepreneurial actors in every sphere of life. It figures individuals as rational, calculating creatures whose moral autonomy is measured by their capacity for 'self-care' –the ability to provide for their own

[2] For example, in *Death of a Salesman* Willy Loman's older and wealthy brother, Ben, is a successful businessman, and in *Glengarry Glen Ross* everybody envies Tony Roma, who has better sales records than everyone else in the office.

needs and service their own ambition" (43). According to this formula, these characters have accomplished their mission in a rational method, but because their financial success is equaled to their capacity and ambition for self-care, there are problems arising. These characters who are successful in their careers have failed to maintain a good relationship with their relatives. There is no family stability, as their lives are prone to frequent crises. Mike in *Good People*, as the wealthiest among these "winners," has family problems; he cheated on his wife, and there have been trust issues within the family as his marriage is also questionable because Mike's father-in-law, who is at the same time his former boss and academic adviser, has facilitated his son-in-law's career goals. Another winner character, Max, owns three stores at the end of *Good People,* but he is not appreciated by the community because of his aggressive character. In addition to local aversion, Max, as a Russian immigrant, is clearly homesick, lonely, and estranged from American daily norms and society despite his success in business life.

The insignificance of these characters' lives suggests that success in the business world neither depends upon personal merits nor guarantees happiness. Playwrights question and, to a certain extent, ridicule wealth as none of these "successful" characters is portrayed as free of major problems. Success in business life might be an important tool for social acceptance and upward mobility, but the way it has been crowned by neoliberalism is clearly undermined on stage. It would, however, be misleading to think that these characters are depicted as malicious or patronizing, but the playwrights' treatment of them is an outgrowth of the view I ascribe to illusion. These characters, maybe more than the protagonists, have reasons to believe that they are the winners of this society albeit the lack of connection with others. Mike's disillusion with his past and Max's disconnection from people around him and probably his motherland point at the conflict caused by the perception of wealth as a sign of better living conditions. This might be a dual characteristic of mainstream American drama, which on one side undermines the aspect of affluence, but on the other sells an average ticket for one hundred dollars.

The life conditions of characters whose financial and social accomplishments are less satisfactory compared to others are justified without an objective reasoning. These characters consider themselves as a detached unit within the society. This should be a significant result of a neoliberal mindset that glorifies individual effort and lack of a social mechanism. This partially functional social mechanism has undermined the protagonists' ability to identify their positions within a historical context. Patricia Ventura points out that the reason for holding individuals accountable for their own actions, but not seeing the responsibility that network of system and structures have is a result of neoliberal rhetoric and policy (4). The vulnerability that Margie, Franco, and, to a certain extent, Arthur experience comes from the neoliberal assumption which regards the poor as lazy, given to criminality, and generally without morals. In a way, "they deserve their misery even though the system is at least partly responsible for creating it" (Ventura 4).

The inability of suggesting an attainable solution to the protagonists' failures has nourished a nihilistic philosophy which has undermined the ability of characters to confront their challenges or question the foundation of unfair treatments. As the prospect of a better life fades, the diminution of these protagonists' personal traits dominates contemporary plays. Allan Bloom relates this situation to nihilism:

> Nihilism as a state of soul is revealed not so much in the lack of firm beliefs but in a chaos of the instincts or passions. People no longer believe in a natural hierarchy of the soul's varied and conflicting inclinations, and the traditions that provided a substitute for nature have crumbled. The soul becomes a stage for a repertory company that changes plays regularly—sometimes a tragedy, sometimes a comedy; one day love, another day politics, and finally religion; now cosmopolitanism, and again rooted loyalty; the city or the country; individualism or community; sentimentality or brutality. And there is neither principle nor will to impose a rank order on all of these. All ages and places, all races and all cultures can play on this stage. (155-156)

Lack of confidence, quiet nature, and passive lifestyles are dominant traits for Margie and Arthur. For example, Arthur is questioned by Franco about his nihilistic character when Arthur advises him not to dream because dreaming is "dangerous," and he is "going to get crushed" (68). Franco opposes Arthur's inactive demeanor: "You don't talk, you don't vote, you don't listen to music. Why do you bother to get outta bed in the morning?" (68). Arthur, the most progressive protagonist, later breaks this cycle by fighting Luther, who cuts Franco's fingers for his unpaid debt. Although Arthur pays Franco's debt later with the money he gets from selling his store, saving Franco's life, the finale does not provide a vision of the future. Despite Arthur's individual advance, the fact is his future, at least the financial one, is as unpredictable as Margie's. Indicative of his determination to change his life, Arthur's transformation is a momentary triumph, but also reflects his impulsive character and chaotic state on stage.

A transformational turn like Arthur's cannot be observed in Margie because she does not have such a climactic reversal in her story. She suffers within a social system, which refuses to help her to take better care of her disabled daughter or give her a chance for an improved life. Even a simple mention of such solutions might increase the utopian character of American drama and enrich the philosophical soil for playwrights. However, it seems that the only remaining option for her survival is working for corporations like Dollar Store or Gillette, which pay minimum wage and provide little or no benefits. Although the act of discharging her from her position is justified because she has been late several times, had she been a member of a union, she could probably receive more assistance to keep her position. Her manager, Stevie, is concerned as his superior pressures him about Margie's tardiness. He seems to be considerate of Margie's situation as he is one of the "good people" who helps

her at the end of the play, but corporate policies require him to fire her due to her inefficiency.

Unlike the situation where Arthur sells his own store to help Franco, along with other reasons, corporations have eliminated personal connection between employees because ultimately corporate profit maximization is more important than anything else. Despite the dominant role of corporations on plot, there are no figures of authority in terms of representation. No characters take the role of bosses or employers. The ultimate decline of such superiors in a workplace is a sign for the meltdown of business under neoliberal policies. Although management is an essential feature of a legally authorized entity owned by shareholders, the lack of a corporate authority on stage has caused an underestimation of their impact. The scene that David Mamet added for the movie version of *Glengarry Glenn Ross* exhibits a ruthless Alec Baldwin whose infamous "Coffee is for closers" statement has had echoed through the business world. However, there is no more die-hard-Rolex-wearing capitalists whom we can detest. Those who represent the corporations are again one of those people. The physical disappearance of corporations on stage, at least at the level of top managers, tones down the criticism of consumerist culture, as there is no actual person or place to be critiqued. Although this seems to be a subtopic of both plays, the demanding nature of corporations has influenced all their characters adversely. They have lost connection with each other and in response, they have created psychological shields to maintain their dignity. There is no evil or malicious face of uncontrolled capitalism as it is represented through every one which makes the situation more tolerable. This is also a consequence of a prevalent affective narration which interferes with dramatic construction with the intent of forging an emotional consciousness. Another reason these playwrights are criticized lies in their failure to comment on the lack of political and social programs despite the presence of an ideally suited situation for constructive criticism. For example, Margie's hard times with her daughter's disability might not be a problem in England and Franco's problem with his college tuition would not be as challenging in Scandinavian countries or in another Western country. The lack of a comparative analysis or a hint of a socially motivated resolution weakens the utopian character of these plays. Patricia Ventura links the denial of a social inquiry into the characters' problems to neoliberal culture:

> That denial enables neoliberal subjects to avoid operating in an antagonistic relation to any other ideologies or to formal structures of power, and allows those individuals and groups who have assumed a friendly relationship with the powers-that-be to blame victims of social, economic, and political ills for their own problems—as when the supposed laziness of the poor is said to be the cause of poverty. As a result, everyday life is depoliticized. (12)

Far from providing a futuristic vision for the problems discussed in the plays, the depoliticized atmosphere playwrights create does not direct audiences' attention into these problems. For example, in *Good People* when Margie visits

Mike's house, she is told that their vase is really expensive and insured. This instance is used to enhance the comic side of the play. The absence of artistic intervention to highlight these moments of inequality and social injustice lessens the impact of theatre on society because it does not challenge idealistic notions of neoliberal culture as the base of many problems.

The forces and relations of production have shaped a competitive and individualistic culture which has nourished a nihilistic attitude that does not strive for a broader understanding of individual problems. It would be illuminating here to mention a minor character in *Superior Donuts* to illustrate the issue of social injustice. Arthur allows a homeless woman, Lady (Boyle), to come inside and have a free donut with coffee any time. A recovering alcoholic, Lady summarizes what it looks like to be unfortunate and how addictions can take a person to the bottom of the social order: "You never see the bad stuff coming. Just always comes up behind you and pow! Socks you behind the ear with a glove fulla marbles. Sets you back a few steps" (85). She takes refuge in several places on a regular day, but her statement at the end summarizes her problem: "I guess I gotta find someplace else to go" (87). This is not her place and she is not wanted anymore. Her situation is unknown as the play ends and nobody questions where she might go instead of Arthur's store. The misery of losers is an accepted concept in neoliberal societies although the need to further investigate it is often ignored. Lady becomes a part of the affective narration which aims to enrich the emotional content of the play.

Here is Your Prescription: Yearn for the Past

Before the term was even coined to describe the situation of Swiss soldiers living abroad in the seventeenth century, nostalgia has always been a central feature since the times of Homer. Often dismissed as a sentimental reaction to modernity, nostalgia refers to a growing fondness for the past, which is becoming a strong trend in America. Some miss the days of FDR, some Reagan, some the days of Woodstock, and some lament incapable politicians for not being able to bring the prosperity of those good old days, which might help explain Donald Trump's presidential campaign slogan "Make America Great Again". Clearly, many people believe that America was a great country in the past and they want it back.

There have been several incidents in the twenty-first century that might have triggered such nostalgias; 9/11, Afghanistan and Iraq wars, Hurricane Katrina, and the financial crisis were some of the most significant. Although these events initiated a difficult term for many people, the strong sense of nostalgia in contemporary American drama has been independent of these crises. The longing for a fictional past has long been a common theme in literature. This tendency can also be read as a trait of postmodern phenomena, which Frederick Jameson defines as picking certain images to create a certain memory instead of reminding of the historical realities of the desired era (*Postmodernism* 281). For example, South Boston (Southie) embodies this kind of a nostalgic appeal for Margie in *Good People*. She recalls Southie as a much better community, where people used to support each other, although her

stories clearly contradict other people's perception. For example, the story Margie tells to prevent her manager, Steve, from firing her illustrates the inaccuracy of her assessment:

> MARGARET: We grew up together, me and your mother. If she knew what you were doing right now …
> STEVIE: You know what, Margaret? I *do* actually remember that story about her stealing the turkey. But you know what you forgot? The part where you called the cops. You forgot that she spent Christmas Day down at Station Six. That was always how *I* heard it. You should ask my sisters how funny that story was. (17)

Margie's feeling of guilt and embarrassment filters her memories to suit her illusion which can summarize her and Arthur's condition. The shift from realities of her youth to imagined or inaccurate portrayals of the past is part of the overarching grand illusion of the play. The lost society or the past for which she nostalgically longs, is deeply flawed in ways she omits or never even existed. The loss/absence of a dream(s) in this text is a main reason for an illusion, but the difficulty of accepting current situation, which would make it necessary for Margie to surrender the dream, exacerbates her condition. Although it is misleading, this habit of manipulating personal history helps Margie survive. The problem and danger of nostalgic narratives, as John Su points out, are "that they offer readers the illusion of utopian idealism without providing knowledge of legitimate alternatives to present circumstances" (8).

Margie has distorted her past and started to believe the illusion with which she has replaced her bitter memories. Moreover, this illusory and nihilistic attitude in response to real problems is heavily associated with neoliberalism. Arthur's situation in *Superior Donuts* is more complex than Margie's, as his memories embody a different tone of bitterness, stemming from the Vietnam War draft and his relationship with his father. However, his retrospection clearly portrays a better country:

> The city was true working class, and the bars were clean and well lit, and immigrant factory workers would sit and have a beer after a day's work. And sleeping outside with my family, with all the families, on the lawn at Jefferson Park on sticky summer nights. Every Sunday hanging out in someone else's basement, food all day. Or a trip to a forest preserve, all free back then. Polish the only language I'd hear, twenty pigs spinning in fire, and every friend I made became my parents' friend, just because they were my friend. Coming back from a family trip, driving along the Eisenhower, I'd see the giant neon lips of Magikist and I knew I was home. (28)

This romantic portrayal of old Chicago from his childhood days clearly contrasts with what Arthur experiences at the moment. However, rather than a comprehensive analysis and smooth transition, he prefers to yearn for the things he had lost. Arthur's escape to Canada destroys his relationship with his

father who takes a central role in his monologues. Compared to his father, Arthur, a failure at business and family affairs, has been overwhelmed with the burden of business and family. This pervasive sense of defeatism, which explains the protagonists' insignificance in their work places, has undermined confidence and resilience while establishing a fragmented identity, centered in nostalgic illusions.

Indicating mostly homesickness and pain, Arthur's monologues, in which he recalls his earlier years with his family, construct a nostalgic narrative between now and then. However, his engagement with the past, unlike Margie's, leads to a personal transformation toward self-respect, action, and an approach to overcoming his difficulties. Although his nostalgia has a somewhat transformative impact on his character, Arthur's monologues can easily be considered as instances of his illusory tendencies and his drug addiction. Arthur is unquestionably delusional. His business is about to go bankrupt, his wife and daughter have abandoned him, and he ignores everyone else around him, including the female police officer who has been courting him for months. His newly hired employee, Franco, becomes a catalyst for Arthur to see the outer world again, and help others while restoring himself. Arthur's selling his store and getting out of business is the emancipating solution in the play, though it is also a capitulation to the corporations and neoliberal policies. Encouraged by the emotional tone in the play, nostalgic transitions from the present to the past shape the characters in a particularly incompetent manner.

Margie's affective approach to incidents impairs her abilities to understand how her life has failed and she wants to believe that it still can be saved by taking refuge at her disillusions about people. It is clear that Margie and Arthur made significant mistakes in familial and financial choices, but none of them questions primary sources of their problems. This lack of investigation recurs as a *leitmotiv* in each of these plays. Thus, their misery seems fortuitous as the playwrights omit a general contemplation in favor of personal flaws which weakens the realistic vein in these plays. Cultural critic bell hooks insists on a significant distinction between memory and nostalgia for a "politicization of memory that distinguishes nostalgia, that longing for something to be as it once was, a kind of useless act, from that remembering that serves to illuminate and transform the present" (147). A purely nostalgic dissatisfaction with the present cannot help envision genuine solutions to crises because it assumes solutions are found in past societies. John J. Su states that nostalgia linked with "the economic, social and political forces associated with late modernity" (3) signifies "inauthentic or commodified experiences inculcated by capitalist or nationalist interests" (2). The longing to restore an imagined past inhibits protagonists from gaining greater knowledge and engaging in activist practices about their situations, questioning institutions of authority or status quo, and maintaining a progressive dialogue with the audience.

Svetlana Boym, in her ground-breaking study, *Future of Nostalgia* (2001), defines nostalgia as the "ache of temporal distance and displacement" and divides it into two zones as restorative and reflective (39). While restorative

nostalgia embodies the memory of home, *nostos*, reflective nostalgia aims to embody the processes of longing, *algos*, rather than the memory of home. Thus, evoking "national past and future" becomes a mission of restorative nostalgia whereas "individual and cultural memory" is about reflective nostalgia (49). The problem of nostalgia comes from its reflective nature, which avoids the restorative, nurturing potential of memory for the individual who feels threatened with the hardship of present. It impedes an inclusive perception of social matters rather than provide a fuller understanding on the negotiation between the present and the past and how it has shaped the self and the society. Milan Kundera defines nostalgia as "the suffering caused by an unappeased yearning to return," (5) but if it is a non-existent paradise only good for remembering, what is the point of returning there?

Conclusion

Despite their reluctance to highlight neoliberalism as the main culprit of the protagonists, contemporary playwrights should be acknowledged for dramatizing current conditions as they are. Documenting the hardship of these characters' experience can be helpful in identifying the problems first and seeking for causes and solutions later. Boym attributes a utopian quality to the nostalgic desire that has been on the rise since the 1960s. "The twentieth century began with a futuristic utopia and ended with nostalgia," she states and adds that "Nostalgia itself has a futuristic utopian dimension, only it is no longer directed toward the future" (74). Susan Stewart, who defines nostalgia as a "social disease," joins Boym to associate nostalgia with an idealized world. Stewart argues that "Nostalgia wears a distinctly utopian face, a face that turns toward a future-past, a past which has only ideological reality" (122). Therefore, despite nostalgia's subversive impact on their characters, playwrights express their characters' individual disappointments which, in turn, could initiate a search for articulating an alternative narrative that calls others and audience members to question what they witness. As Su points out, "The alternatives provided by nostalgic narratives are valuable less for their potential to provide a blueprint for a better or more utopian world than for their potential to offer hope that alternatives continue to exist" (176). It is nostalgic longing that enables the characters at least to articulate the frustration that haunts them all the time.

Margie and Arthur have high esteem for their nostalgic stories which they have turned into personal mythologies. The stories they tell on stage sound far from the truth, but they are stuck at the time and the place those stories took place. Margie's recalling of the past in Southie is not accurate. What she believes is a distorted version. Arthur's Chicago does not exist anymore and the place he describes has caused him to run away. These narratives are all products of these characters' ways of coping with the difficulties they have endured. The commitment to these personal stories keeps the characters sane and focused on their missions, just like the American Dream is another socially-constructed narrative that keeps the society on a specific path. While one serves a whole

nation, personal mythologies, as an extension of the concept of the American Dream nourished by nostalgia, engage individuals.

The problem with a nostalgic and illusory aspect of the past is that it makes all these protagonists yearn to relive it through a romantic vision. Nostalgia has turned into an illusory force that playwrights use as a fuel for their protagonists. The affirmative tone in the plays lead the plot into a tearful twist where the audience do not have much other than feeling pity for the characters. This emotional burden on characters lessen the details and significance of an invisible social network that imposes its regulations on everyone. The poverty of the present is so overpowering that their dream is more comforting than anything else. However, the transformation of characters under the influence of their illusion does not promise any hope or conceptual relief for them. Still, none of these protagonists should be understood as suffering from a psychotic disorder. Their stories are not about rags-to-riches, or winner-takes-all-stakes. Their stories are about survival. Illusion is what dragged O'Neill, Miller, Williams' and Mamet's most characters to their end, but in *Good People* and *Superior Donuts* it is the fuel for characters. *They dream, therefore they are*. In a world where they are not financially, psychologically, and socially capable of producing change, they prefer to live in their dreams, which keep them alive but at the same time bring on a slow destruction. The illusions that they have bred to flex their psyches will eventually become their masters. After all, illusions are a combination of consumerist culture, unemployment, lack of social services, and all the other difficulties a neoliberal age has left on our threshold.

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