

**SUSAN AND LUCY:
TWO OUTSTANDING HEROINES OF ALAN AYCKBOURN¹**

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Abstract: Alan Ayckbourn (1939-) has an important place among the twentieth century British playwrights. The playwright handles some present-day social problems such as insensitiveness, lack of communication, lack of love, collision, alienation, moral degeneration especially around his heroines. *Susan*, the protagonist of *Woman in Mind*, and *Lucy*, the little heroine of *Invisible Friends*, are among the outstanding heroines of the playwright. The life experiences of *Susan* and *Lucy* reflected from the stage of Ayckbourn is considerable to understand the place of the woman in the modern society and to be able to observe social and familial problems of her. Because the playwright, who believes that he has social responsibilities, knows the women all over the world have similar social and familial problems and he constructs his plays inspired by these global problems. This work provides to get to know both Alan Ayckbourn, a wise theatre man, and evaluate some of the social problems of the women that they experience in present-day through the heroines of two different plays of the playwright.

Key Words: Alan Ayckbourn, playwright, society, woman, heroine

Susan ve Lucy: Alan Ayckbourn'un İki Sıradışı Kadın-Kahramanı

Özet: Alan Ayckbourn (1939-) yirminci yüzyıl İngiliz oyun yazarları arasında önemli bir yere sahiptir. Yazar çoğu kara-komedi türündeki oyunlarında duyarsızlık, iletişimsizlik, sevgisizlik, çatışma, yabancılaşma, ahlaksal yozlaşma gibi günümüz toplumsal sorunlarını özellikle kadın-kahramanları çevresinde ele alır. *Woman in Mind*'in başkahramanı *Susan* ve *Invisible Friends*'in küçük kadın- kahramanı *Lucy*, yazarın sıradışı kadın-kahramanları arasındadır. *Susan* ve *Lucy*'nin Ayckbourn'un sahnesinden yansıyan yaşam deneyimleri kadının modern toplumdaki konumunu anlamak, ailevi ve toplumsal sorunlarını

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gözlemleyebilmek için önemlidir. Çünkü toplumsal sorumlulukları bulunduğu inanan oyun yazarı kadınların dünyanın her yerinde ortak ailevi ve toplumsal sorunları olduğunu bilir ve oyunlarını bu evrensel sorunlardan yola çıkarak oluşturur. Bu çalışma da hem bir tiyatro ustası olan Alan Ayckbourn'u tanımaya hem de yazarın iki farklı oyununun kadın-kahramanları aracılığıyla kadınların günümüzde yaşadığı toplumsal sorunlardan bazılarını değerlendirmeye olanak sağlar.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Alan Ayckbourn, oyun yazarı, toplum, kadın, kadın-kahraman

Alan Ayckbourn (1939-) is always known as a specialist of farcical comedy of modern British Drama. He started his career in 1959 when the new wave was emerging. Apart from the young angry playwrights, who are mostly busy with the political agenda of the second half of the twentieth century, Ayckbourn chooses another way for himself and is labelled as the creator of his own comedy. He is one of the most prolific playwrights within the comic conventions of the traditional West End Stage and also becomes very popular outside London and Britain especially in the last quarter of the twentieth century.

Ayckbourn's success in creating good comedies in his own theatre, Scarborough depends partly on his sophisticated topics which are all related with the British middle class and the society in which he lives. The playwright always gets a lot of ideas from his environment. As being a middle-class man his social comedies are about the usual relationships of the twentieth century everyman; "sexual politics, subconscious longings, frustrations," (Fisher, 1996, p.22) "the domestic wrangles, sterile marital situations, infidelities, and materialistic greed that pervade every profession and every facet" (Rusinko, 1989, p.175) of the English middle class. Therefore according to Sir Peter Hall one who "wants to know about life in England in the 60s, 70s and 80s he will need to study Ayckbourn's plays" (Wandor, 1993, p.67). Beside his social class, Ayckbourn benefits from his own life as a theatrical material. He feels that he has never got a normal family atmosphere. The playwright says that "my mother had a very tempestuous relationship. They had a lot of rows" (Watson, 1998, p.5). Therefore his miserable words prove why his plays contain a lot of problems in marriage and family life.

Ayckbourn's thematic ingenuity helps him creating outstanding dramatic middle-class characters which are apart from the dull characters of old fashioned farces. It is a fact that "there has been a considerable change in playwright's treatment of humour from his first plays" (Almansi, 1984, p.118). Billington asserts that "his special gift is for combing the mechanical dexterity of farce with the attention to character of comedy" (Elsom, 1981, p.237). While

Ayckbourn is developing his play writing, his characters also develop with him. The playwright perhaps gives much more attention to his characters than anything else on the stage. Therefore it is obviously wrong in insisting that "his sole aim is to make us laugh" (Taylor, 1978, p.156) as he is the best creator of original and extraordinary comedy characters.

Alan Ayckbourn who is the live king of the comedy characters of his time is sometimes regarded as if he were one of the famous British feminist playwrights in the theatre arena of the world. This is maybe because of his subject matters are usually related to domesticity. But his style in using characters and subject matters has one important difference from the feminist playwrights'. While the feminist thought usually mirrors really ideal woman characters and make all theatregoers feel comfortable in their seats, Alan Ayckbourn does not create such unrealistic women characters on his stage. Ayckbourn's heroines are all universal characters. According to the playwright he himself portrays women in his plays as real as they are in life. Take, for example, in his portraits Ayckbourn, "shows more sharply and consistently than many feminist playwrights the unequal status of women in marriage, their appalling plight" (Cornish and Ketels, 1986, p.2) as it is in the real world.

Woman in Mind (1985) and *Invisible Friends* (1989) which are based on the imaginations of two outstanding heroines are among the popular samples showing the problems of real universal women in the eye of Ayckbourn. The two heroines of the plays *Susan* and *Lucy* are among the "ordinary troubled-a twentieth century of Everywoman" (Kalson, 1993, p.90). Therefore the playwright lets his heroines interrogate their own relationships at their home and expose the real fate of the ordinary and modern woman. By the help of the experiences of heroines of Alan Ayckbourn one can learn what the world means for the woman much more easily.

Woman in Mind opens with the moans of *Susan* who tries to recover from concussion by a garden-rake. As *Susan* opens her eyes, one realizes that not only she suffers from headache but also she is heart-broken. Her real family and fantasy-family start to appear in turn and the whole action begins to take place inside her head. Instead of *Susan's* real family, Ayckbourn introduces her fantasy-family first: *Andy*, her idealised husband; *Lucy*, her easy-going daughter and *Tony*, her healthy and athletic brother. They all try to please *Susan* at her home where *Susan* is trapped in reality. But when *Susan* sees her self-centred vicar husband *Gerald* and his awkward sister, *Muriel* who unfortunately lives with them, she faints once more. Although the family members are aware of her mental problems, nobody tries to help her find out the reasons of these problems. As *Susan* visits her imaginary world and comes back home more often, it becomes easier to explore her authentic life. *Susan* lives without affection in her real world. Despite her loveless atmosphere at home, she has

some hopes when she learns that her twenty-five-year old son *Rick* is due to make a visit to his family after being away home for a long time. But as soon as *Susan* sees *Rick*, she passes out and visits her imaginary family again. It is not surprising when *Susan* awakens in the arms of *Rick*, she loses all her hope because her beloved son reveals that he has just married a young Thai girl and he wants to leave for Thailand with her.

Ayckbourn creates a lot of mothers who are incapable of being responsible at home and *Susan* is another usual example for Ayckbourn. Although *Susan* seems a very considerate mother of a daughter who is about to get marry in her unreal world never tries to listen and understand *Rick*. She is such a mother who does not care about the demands and passion of her son but her own wishes and interests. After hearing her son's wishes, *Susan* blames her husband as usual. It is certain that there are always problems about the discipline of their son in the family and these problems cause a set of conflicts between the wife and husband before. Henceforth, *Susan's* imaginary family begins to control all her actions. Although *Susan* has some suspicions of her unreal family, she is always driven back to them. From this point, she suffers a complete mental breakdown. Lost somewhere between her real and unreal world, *Susan* is left alone with the siren light of an ambulance after making an incomprehensible speech at the end of the play.

Ayckbourn draws the world of *Lucy* much simpler and more reasonable in *Invisible Friends* than *Susan's* world in *Woman in Mind*. *Lucy*, an ordinary but wise and lovely teenager heroine, is unhappy with her own family members and brings a considerate and coeval friend, *Zara* back to her life. In fact, she wishes a better family atmosphere by the help of *Zara*. After *Zara's* father and brother appear and show *Lucy* how to make her real family disappear, *Lucy* begins to pass a lot of time with her invisible friends in her mind. But things do not go as *Lucy* expected. Because the fantasy family is not as perfect as she has imagined. Therefore having being taught by *Zara* how to make things happen like a magician, she manages to vanish *Zara* and the unoriginal family of her in order to restore her own family life. Unfortunately *Lucy* loses all her energy and she faints at home at the very end of the play. When she collects herself all her real family members are seen beside her and they feel anxious about her. At the time, *Lucy* realizes that her real family seems much warmer and more understanding than they have been before. Therefore, the final unity of the family makes *Lucy* much luckier than *Susan*.

Originally both *Susan* and *Lucy* who are emotionally alone in their own families are one of the 'everywoman' of present time. They are absolutely neglected and disappointed by their families. *Susan*, the heroine of *Woman in Mind*, is "a very individual character and emblematic of the oppressed housewife" (Slover, 1993, p.5). She "feels that each member of the household is

avoiding proper human love in their own formularized self-interest, and by so doing they are the authors of her unhappiness” (Holt, 1999, p.42). It is a fact that her husband *Gerald* who is always busy with a history work of the local Civic Society, her sister-in-law, *Muriel* and her son, *Rick* are never emotionally next to her. It is certain that there is no way for *Susan* except for inviting a fantasy-family to her mind to solace herself in her domestic unhappiness. Furthermore, *Susan* particularly thinks that *Gerald* never tries to understand her. He is the most convicted person in her life. Even if *Susan* tries to get help from him, her husband never comforts her. *Gerald* thinks that her wife is just physically tired. According to him everybody has similar physical problems in the catastrophic world atmosphere. In fact *Susan* is mentally ill at home and especially her husband does not care about her. There is actually a constant lack of communication between the wife and husband:

Susan : Has it ever occurred to you why I can't sleep at nights?

Gerald : Insomnia?

Susan : Perhaps it's because I'm not very happy, *Gerald*.

Gerald : Well, who is? These days. Very few. (Ayckbourn, 1986, p.23)

Similarly *Lucy*, the heroine of *Invisible Friends*, feels very lonely in her real family in which there is not absolutely real communication. In the opening scene of the play, after a school day *Lucy* is not able to share her happy news with her family. She has just become a member of the school swimming team and it is an important success for her but not for her family. *Lucy* has not got an understanding family. She says that “they were just in another plane, like in another universe, practically the same as the one we're in, only running alongside it. But quite separate” (Ayckbourn, 1991, p.37). Her family remain emotionally detached from her. Her busy mother, *Joy* always talks about the events in their block, her TV addict and “the current *Guinness Book of Records* twenty-four-hour sleeping champion” (Ayckbourn, 1991, p.6) father, *Walt* and a musicoholic elder brother, *Gary* never listen to *Lucy*. Like *Susan*, *Lucy* “has a dreary family” (Allen, 2002, p.243) and as a result, she invents a set of imaginary family members in her mind who really listen her.

At first *Susan* and *Lucy* invent their new romantic families intentionally in order to fill in the gaps in their dull lives and both of them manage to be comfortable and happy with them. For a while everything is satisfying for both *Susan* and *Lucy* because their new families are affectionate, sociable, helpful, understanding and entertaining unlike their original families. Take, for example, *Susan*'s imaginary husband, *Andy* always expresses his love to *Susan*. After *Susan*'s garden-rake crash *Andy* says that “We'd all be lost without you...I'd be losing a wife. And that I'd never get over. Not one as dear and as precious as

you” (Ayckbourn, 1986, p.16). Like all women *Susan* just expects to hear some words full of affectionate from her husband but she only hears such words in her imaginary romantic world. Similarly, when *Lucy* complains that nobody hears her at home, *Lucy*’s imaginary friend *Zara* says that “I know. I know. It’s all right. I’m here now. I’m with you, now” (Ayckbourn, 1991, p.23). Although it is important for all children to be listened at home, the parents neglect them. In fact, the parents have a lot of responsibilities in the act of bringing up their children. If they were not aware of their own responsibilities, they might harm their children unintentionally. The children do not only need food or drink but also they always need a happy, comfortable, peaceful and confident family atmosphere. And this atmosphere can only be built up in harmony with the parents. In *Invisible Friends*, *Lucy* finds such an atmosphere not in her real family but in her imaginary family.

Susan and *Lucy*’s dreams do not last forever. In their romantic worlds both *Susan* and *Lucy* find perfect lives but both heroines are manipulated by their unreal family members as the fantasy families mutate from ideal ones in to evil ones near the very end of both plays.

Being mentally weak and tired *Susan* and *Lucy* are not able to see the real faces of their fantastic families for a while but both heroines loudly begin to react what happens around them later. It is true that “almost every character in Ayckbourn’s plays is a victim of circumstances or of his own ineptitude” (Almansi, 1984, p.120). *Susan* and *Lucy* almost lose the control of their homes like their minds in time. When *Susan*’s son, *Rick* comes, she is not allowed to see him and have lunch with him so that she feels disturbed and asks her apparently ideal friends: “Why won’t you understand? Why won’t you let me go inside?” (Ayckbourn, 1986, p.47). Similarly, *Lucy* becomes a ‘Cinderella’ at her own home. Her fantastic family begins to make her cook and clean every time. Therefore she complains about her imaginary family’s invasion of her house: “I was beginning to get a bit fed up with these three. I mean this is my house. I’ll do what I like in it” (Ayckbourn, 1991, p.57). According to Kalson the imaginary families “are for a time an idealized one” (1993, p.173) but expose their intentions unfriendly in a short time.

Although two heroines make similar complaints about their fantasy families, when they are betrayed by them, they act differently. While *Lucy* is well aware that “clones cannot be better than the original” (Wu, 1995, p.152) ones and returns her original life and family with the help of the playwright, *Susan* does not manage to get back to her real family easily. Her fantastic play causes much serious mental damages on her. Ayckbourn is not generous for *Susan*. *Woman in Mind* is the play of a middle-aged heartbroken married heroine, so that an inevitable tragedy waits for *Susan* in the end. *Susan* is surrounded by all unreal characters as if she were their prey in the end. According to Holt, “surely the

fawning, considerate and charming ideal family is far too good to be real, but they are much more comfortable to be with than the suburban, authentic alternative” (1999, p.42). Therefore *Susan* is collapsed as she believes in them a lot and loses her mind.

Invisible Friends, on the other hand, is the play of a thirteen-year-old heroine. Ayckbourn frankly indicates that he rewrote “*Woman in Mind* with children in mind” (Wu, 1995, p.152). Although *Lucy* is a little girl, she always seems so strong both physically and mentally. *Lucy* and all children theatregoers are lucky and feel peaceful at the end of the play because Alan Ayckbourn is really sensitive for children and creates a world in which they live happily. The playwright says that “you have to be responsible and try to say something positive” (McAfee, 1991, p.24) for all children. Unlike *Susan*, Ayckbourn never lets any kind of irreparable breakdowns happen to *Lucy*. Besides, in the *Invisible Friends*, the playwright, not only has some warnings for the parents, but also for all the little children. They are taught that family members, while imperfect, are nevertheless to be cherished. After returning home *Lucy*’s words briefly certify her happiness and the positive change in her real family:

The next few days were great. They were all running all over the place for me. Nothing was too much trouble. I lived like a princess. Mum brought me hot meals in bed every two hours. Garry stopped playing his music. And Dad only had the TV programmes on that I wanted to watch. More important still, they all started actually talking to me. It was amazing. A miracle. Of course, it couldn't last forever. But it was great while it did. I mean, I'd love to be able to tell you that after that we were all tremendously happy for ever like the end of some romantic movie-you know... (Ayckbourn, 1991, p.71)

While constructing a winner and a loser heroine, Ayckbourn indicates the power of *Lucy* and the weakness of *Susan* clearly. Even if Ayckbourn feels responsible for the children and prepares a happy ending for his heroine on purpose, *Lucy* always seems regretful for what she does to her real family as well. She tries to reject her imaginary world many times. *Lucy* never forgets her original family. They are always somewhere in her heart. She usually expresses her feelings about her own family: “Even if I hate them, I’ll probably miss them, too” (Ayckbourn, 1991, p.35). In fact, as *Lucy* is a child, Ayckbourn intentionally shows that his heroine cannot do without her real family and deserves them.

On the other hand, *Susan* is always pictured as a powerless woman by Alan Ayckbourn because according to the playwright *Susan*’s life has already come to an end with her traumatic marriage. Ayckbourn is well aware of writing about madness and menopausal female frustration. The play “ends in

nightmare” (Kalson, 1993, p.110) for his adult heroine. In fact, Ayckbourn always creates ironically poor married heroines with children. He never tries to help them solving their problems and lets them go back their lives happily. Because the playwright criticizes the modern woman as they are by the help of the married heroines on his stage. Like his other married heroine characters *Susan* is totally destroyed in marriage. Ayckbourn says that “the marriages I do see are either fraught or dull. There are one or two very happy ones, but that’s probably because they’re new” (Watson, 1988, p.94). As if he tried to prove his thesis, *Susan*’s marriage is really fraught and dull, similar to the marriages that the playwright observes around himself. Therefore, *Susan* is one of the usual victim heroines who forgets what to do as a wife and mother at home and in the beginning confesses that she has already lost his identity in a regretful way:

I don't know what my role is these days. I don't any longer know what I'm supposed to be doing. I used to be a wife. I used to be a mother. And I loved it. People said, Oh, don't you long to get out and do a proper job? And I'd say, No thanks, this is a proper job, thank you. Mind your own business. But now it isn't any more. The thrill has gone. (Ayckbourn, 1986, p.24)

In conclusion, Alan Ayckbourn, whose both character comedies are thought-provoking and entertaining with two outstanding heroines, *Susan* and *Lucy*, can be considered as one of the most important British playwrights. The playwright considers the nature of everywoman of the twentieth century as a matter in his plays. Ayckbourn works like a wise psychologist in order to show the sufferings of his heroines in his plays and makes a deep analysis of the present-day woman. *Susan* and *Lucy* are sample women characters in order to reach and analyze the apparent problems of the everywoman in the modern world. The two heroines show the obscure subconscious of the woman in detail. As a little girl, *Lucy* builds a huge imaginary world for herself. She is lost in this world but finds her way to her real world in which she realizes that she is happy with her real family. On the other hand, *Susan* always wants to see an ideal husband and father and an ideal son around her to be happy and she is lost but cannot find her way in her utopian world that she constructed instead of her original world. Ayckbourn indicates once more that the woman being emotionally weak always tends to idealize the relationships especially within the family. But if she did not get whatever she expects from her utopian world, she would be the most suffering individual in it.

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