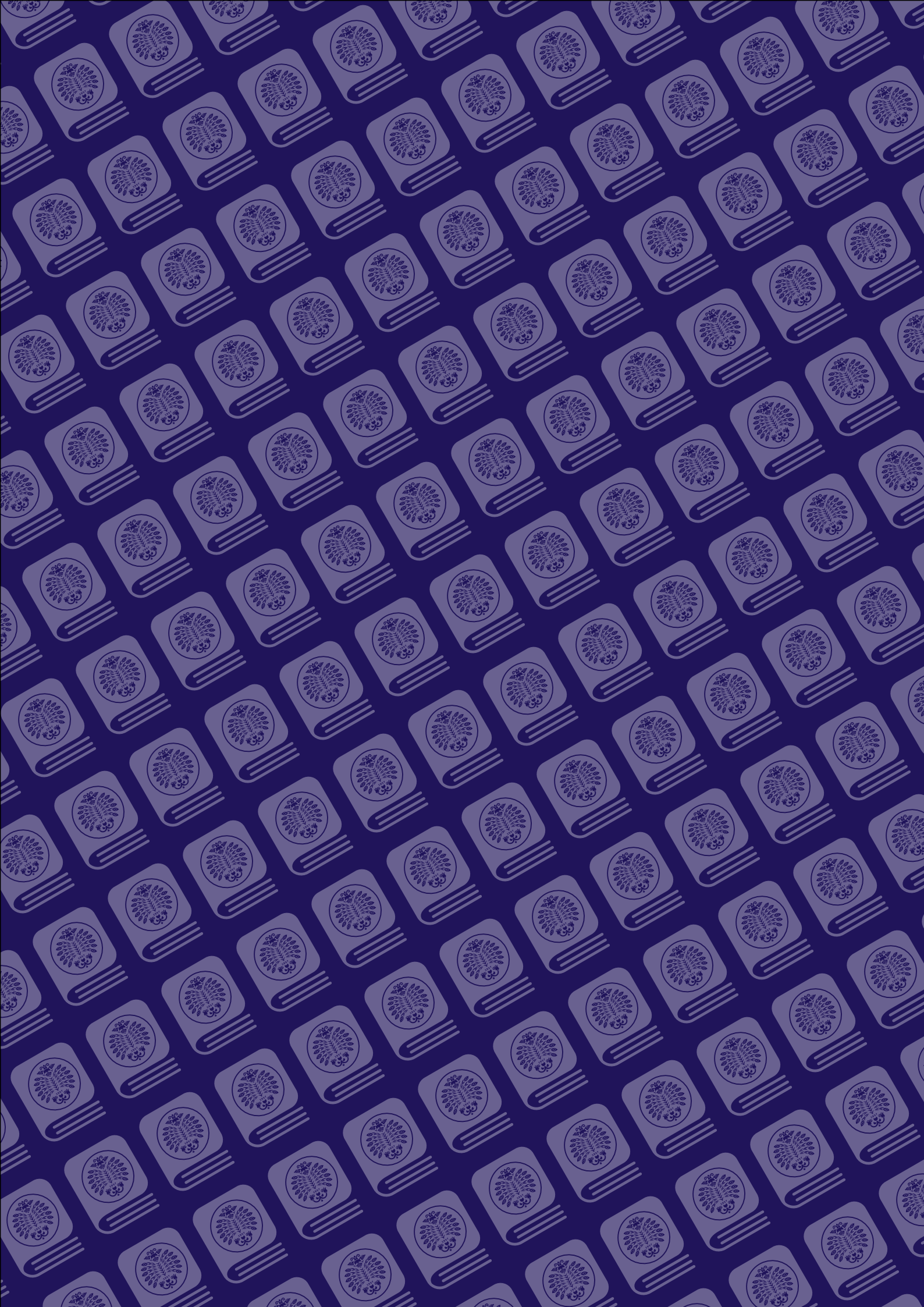
International Symposium

Representations of Pandemic in Literature

Editors:
Assoc. Prof. Yeliz Biber Vangölü
Assist. Prof .Tuğba Aygan

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A PANDEMIC OF ONE'S OWN: GENDERED IMPACTS OF COVID-19 IN SEVILAY SARAL'S *A CASE PER DAY*

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Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic has impacted billions of people in varied ways. Recent research shows that the outbreak and the following lockdowns have more significant adverse effects on women's life than that of men. Comprising the majority of health workers, women have been more prone to contracting the virus; because of their gender they have faced increased chores; and many women have become subjects of increasing domestic violence largely due to growing unemployment and financial stress in families. Providing visibility for women and creating forums to discuss their problems, theatre has been one of the most fertile arenas for decades. However, with the advent of the pandemic, theatre-making has also been hit dramatically hard and on-stage performances have been rendered impossible. Notwithstanding, this crisis has also paved the path for exploring a range of innovative strategies. Playwrights, actors, and directors across the globe have challenged the physical barriers by exploring new modes of practices on virtual platforms and have successfully brought together remote audiences through online performances. Written by Sevilay Saral and produced online by BGST, *A Case per Day* (2020) is one of the alternative responses to the current atmosphere. It is a collection of seven stories by seven women from all walks of life and each named after the days of the week. This paper attempts to give an account of the challenges caused by the pandemic and the double burden of women under the compelling

circumstances through the indicated online production. It also sets out to highlight how theatre and the internet may create an efficacious forum for women to unleash their anxieties and to make their voices heard even at the times like the present pandemic.

A PANDEMIC OF ONE'S OWN: GENDERED IMPACTS OF COVID-19 IN SEVILAY SARAL'S *A CASE PER DAY*

Tuğba Aygan[1]

INTRODUCTION

World Health Organization's official live dashboard reports that the unprecedented Covid-19 pandemic has infected 124.215.843 people and claimed 2.734.374 lives globally as of March 25 (WHO Coronavirus, 2021). Causing a profound shock to societies and economies, the outbreak has impacted populations and sectors across the world in a variety of ways; the theatre industry, among others, was one of the worst affected by the pandemic, and this pandemic, like many others throughout the history, has taken its toll on women more than men (Wenham et al., 2020). This study sets out to reflect on the manifold detrimental effects of the pandemic on women with reference to Sevilay Saral's online theatre production *A Case per Day* (2020), which successfully integrates technology into the theatre while propounding the dire effects of the pandemic through seven women's monologues.

According to recent research by World Health Organisation, women who make up 70% of the health sector workers, on a global scale, comprise the majority of front-line workers (Boniol et al., 2019, p. 1). Despite the statistics that more women faced unemployment with the Covid-19 outbreak, their majority in the health sector corresponds to increasing health risks for women mainly contracting the virus. On top of that, as a consequence of overwhelmingly longer shifts in health centres, women working in the field have got their share more from physical and psychological exhaustion throughout this challenging period.

This grim atmosphere has not been hard solely for the outside workers, though. Furloughs, working from home solutions and obligatory lockdowns, forcing all members of the family to stay home, have naturally generated more chores. These chores such as baby-sitting, home-schooling, cooking, cleaning, and taking care of the ill substantially fell on women creating far more burden, particularly for the working ones. Alluding to the growing caring roles women are expected to undertake, which considerably set back the gains on women's equality so far, UN Women Deputy Executive Director Anita Bhatia remarks: "everything we worked for, that has taken 25 years, could be lost in a year" (Lungumbu and

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Butterly, 2020). Following lockdowns, it is very probable to see how pre-existing gender disparities have been exacerbated with a disproportionate share of unpaid care responsibilities in families. The consequent scenario, as Bhatia points, poses the risk of bringing back and validating gender stereotypes in society, as well as confining women back to their houses and chores. This highly possible retrogradation amounts to decades of efforts' going down the drain.

Besides bearing the brunt of responsibilities at home, women who are subjected to domestic violence are at the bottom of the heap. Particularly in, but not limited to, the domestic sphere, violence against women has already been widespread occurring at alarming rates. Unfortunately, the rates of violence have spiked with the very measures put in place to mitigate the spread of the virus (Vaeza, 2020). Since the stay-at-home orders, there has been a "horrifying global surge in domestic violence" ("UN Chief", 2020), states United Nations secretary-general, António Guterres, authenticating statistics. Trapped at home with their abusers, many women have been at increased risk of domestic violence that has substantially increased due to growing unemployment and financial stress generated by the pandemic. As opposed to the pre-pandemic period when women had chances of leaving their homes, having some time of their own, coming together with others, and finding solidarity no matter how limited they were, under the pandemic circumstances, millions of desperate women across the globe have been devoid of support and a great majority is locked up with their abusive husbands or partners.

The present pandemic, creating a cultural emergency on a global scale, has also hit the performing arts industry. It mandated closure of theatre halls as they gather crowds in close proximity which may considerably speed up the spreading of the virus. Therefore, as of mid-March in Turkey, England, the United States, and soon after almost in the rest of the world all performances were either cancelled or indefinitely postponed. Nonetheless, the crisis that has rendered performances in situ unfeasible, accelerated the implementation of digital transformation in performative arts just like in all other fields of life. As a matter of fact, not peculiar to the times of trouble, since theatrical storytellers and dances around the fire, the theatre, embracing the methods of related disciplines and mediums, such as dance, fine art, lighting, sound, architecture, and music, has always kept evolving and expanding, by continuously experimenting and implementing society's latest technical achievements into the theatrical performance. Advancing at a breath-taking speed, digital technology, too, has been successfully integrated into the performances for a few decades. From very local to the

world-renowned ones, theatre companies have created digital archives of their plays and at the first stage of the closures, the better part shared these digital archives worldwide. This enterprise enabled far-away audiences to savour high-quality shows even of globally known theatre companies including National Theatre, Shakespeare's Globe, as well as Broadway and Off-Broadway theatre companies in their armchairs.[2] In tandem with the Internet and computer boom, and the ensuing rise of public digital literacy, the last decade of the twentieth century has already witnessed the use of technological communications equipment as methods of creating performance, too. Therewith, "[p]urpose-built theatre buildings came to seem increasingly limited by many in the twenty-first century, while the internet appeared to open almost infinite sites for a new digitised virtual theatre" (Leach, 2019, p. 782). As an extension of this digital turn and a result of an imperative caused by the ever-rising numbers of Covid-19 cases and deaths, theatre artists are steered to imagine novel ways of engaging with the idea of 'liveness' in a digital landscape. Hence, to secure the sustainability of this ancient art form and make a living, freelance and employed theatre professionals across the world introduced a number of responses by making use of technologies of mediation. Ranging from aural dramas to multi-camera films of shows, interactive Zoom performances to online monologues these digital enterprises have created "a virtual subgenre emerging out of pandemic darkness in the form of online dramas" (Akbar, 2020) in *The Guardian*'s chief theatre critic Arifa Akbar's terms.

GENDERED IMPACTS OF COVID-19 IN A CASE PER DAY

Even though women have existed in dramatic literature since the origins of theatre, and a bunch of dramatic texts were written or performed by women since Sappho, it was not until 1960 through the advancement of feminism that playwrights in the world became self-consciously concerned about women's presence on the stage. Immediately afterwards, theatre has accompanied women's movements and always provided one of the safest and most fruitful arenas for women to destabilise the male gaze, make their existence more visible, and seek solutions for their problems by telling their stories on stage. One of the pioneers of feminist theatre and the founders of the Feminist Women's Circle (FKÇ) in Turkey, Sevilay Saral is the contemporary playwright of a good deal of woman plays written and staged by and for women. She has spent most of her recent life in quarantine even before the pandemic due to her husband's health problems. Upon the emergence of Covid-19, the couple tightened

[2] For some lists of these online performances see Feldman, 2020 https://www.timeout.com/newyork/theater/the-best-theater-to-watch-online-today-streaming; Wood and Perks, https://www.whatsonstage.com/london-theatre/news/stage-shows-musicals-opera-free-stream-online_51198.html; Wiegand, 2020, https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2020/mar/17/hottest-front-room-seats-the-best-theatre-and-dance-to-watch-online

precautions, yet, Saral has never cut her ties with the women and their problems across the country throughout the pandemic. Though she is "a traditional playwright" (Çelik, 2020, 8:15) and is used to the traditional staging of the plays as she herself puts it, Saral successfully weathered the unprecedented storm caused by the pandemic. She kept up with the aforementioned propensities of the time and decided to produce her latest play *A Case per Day* online as the pandemic grows apace. Produced by Boğaziçi Gösteri Sanatları Topluluğu (BGST), the play presents a collection of seven video monologues by seven women from all walks of life, all of whom the pandemic affected differently. Monologues are performed and recorded by the actors in seclusion and all of them have initially streamed on the BGST YouTube channel. Later the play was reproduced by the actors on a socially distanced studio to be streamed online at Istanbul Foundation for Culture and Arts' (IKSV) 24th Istanbul Theatre Festival.

Many feminist plays "use stage […] to break the silence" (p. 3) Helene Keyssar (1984) remarks regarding the function of theatre for feminist writing. Within this framework, it could be argued that *A Case per Day* presents a feminist response to Covid-19 as it mainly draws on the experiences of so-far silenced women who decide to talk upon finding a platform to share. Each named after the days of the week, these women deliver monologues that centre upon the dire and miscellaneous impacts of the virus from their vantage points. Based on people Saral has personally known or come across with (Çelik, 2020, 15:55), each monologue encapsulates how differently the pandemic affected the lives of these women. Hence, the whole production provides a common platform for making their voices heard and ultimately creates a web of solidarity between the speakers by way of sharing their stories.

Despite leaving the whole world equally destitute health-wise, the pandemic, on the other hand, has reinforced socioeconomic and racial inequities. Exemplifying such injustices, Saral's play starts with the video of the first woman, named Ms. Monday. This opening monologue unfolds the story of a Moldovan cleaning lady who lost her job due to the pandemic and is deprived of social security besides any government subsidy for lacking Turkish citizenship. Living with three other cleaning women with foreign nationalities, Monday divorced from her husband and came to Turkey for better job opportunities to be able to support her daughter's education financially. Much like the succeeding six monologues, her monologue proceeds in the form of problem sharing. She shares her concerns over the existing plight and expresses her distress as the virus cost her a job. Thus, Monday's monologue provides insights into the reception of the pandemic from a Moldovan

cleaning lady's perspective, and in the meantime, it gives voice to many more who has lost their jobs due to the pandemic and trying to make their ends meet. This way, while highlighting the fragile financial structures of low-income groups in any of the adversities, the monologue equally sheds light on the double alienation of the community that Ms. Monday belongs to, for being a woman and a foreigner besides their low-socioeconomic status. Despite being faced with the Covid conundrum and its grim realities, she is desperate to find a job to linger on. In an address to her listeners, she reiterates her search for a job and ends her video by saying: "keep this in mind" (Saral, 2020, Bayan Pazartesi, 6:29-6:92).[3] The closure hints that even pandemic is not treating people equally because as the Covid-19 is still ravaging, and while plenty of people grumble to each other about being bored at home or forced to go work, yet a bunch of invisible others struggles to go out to work by hell or high water.

Undoubtedly, the coming of the Internet has not solely changed the ways of communication. This ground-breaking invention has also transformed the ways that customers shop. Following the Amazon and eBay launch in 1995, internet retail has become overwhelmingly widespread. Even though it was a popular choice, with the coronavirus outbreak, online shopping has become almost an imperative. Online buying method by no means has provided a great convenience over the course of lockdowns and slowed down the spread of the virus. This convenience has had very disparate implications for specific groups including online retailing shop workers and couriers, though. The second monologue on the line, reveals this other and 'the ugly' side of the medal that the pandemic elicited. It starts with the statement "I am Ms. Tuesday," and continues with an announcement that everybody dreads in the current climate: "I have tested positive for Covid-19" (Bayan Salı, 0:06).

An ex-convict and homosexual, Ms. Tuesday is also an 'Other' even, one may argue, an outcast. She has had a job in the delivery sector which blatantly explains how she contracted the virus. Tuesday speaks of the drastic increase in cargo deliveries as a consequence of the above-mentioned online shopping boom. Even though she respects the steep surge in online shopping due to people's anxiety over indoor places, closure of many physical stores, and the lockdowns, she says that she cannot make sense of buying a pair of very fancy night-out shoes as the entire world is hanging by a thread and a precarious future awaits (Bayan Salı, 1:25). Her rightful reproach exposes society's insensitivity towards other

[3] As it streams online, further citations from the performance will be given with the video title followed by the related minutes and seconds.

people's distress even in extraordinary circumstances. Putting a spotlight on a Covid-19 positive courier in this monologue, Saral hints that the ramifications of any inconsiderate act in particular times may cost way much to those who work hard to serve people and keep them safe. In addition to "widespread calls encouraging people to give priority to public health concerns over their self-interest and to support those who are most affected" (Cappelen et al., 2021, p. 1), to that end, she reminds her listeners once again that we owe one another.

Ms. Wednesday is a Covid-19 negative, seventy-year-old retired teacher, suffering from strict curfew in Turkey for people over sixty-five. Unlike others who are relatively younger and dissatisfied with enormous changes taking place in their lives following the pandemic, Wednesday is one of the elderly who is furious as their lives have not changed at all. Considering their former lives in cities which are indifferent to them, Ms. Wednesday says: "We have already been in an imposed-unwilling isolation" (Bayan Çarşamba, 5:30). Therefore, alluding to the confinements for the senior citizens, she expresses her dissatisfaction with the "so-called" solution in the form of exclusion of the useless for not being "agents of the economy" (Bayan Çarşamba, 6:15). Through her monologue, Wednesday attempts to raise concern over the neglected elderly who essentially need better and more professional care.

Ms. Thursday is a Covid-19 positive nurse. Saral builds up this character drawing on the health workers she met during her stay at a private hospital sitting up with her husband. Nevertheless, nurse Thursday is the spokesperson of all health workers who have provided care throughout the entire process of the pandemic. Based on her monologue, one can infer that, even though they have perpetually been on the field closer to the virus from the very first day of the pandemic, many health workers have been left outside the essential protection circle. Embodying one of them, Ms. Thursday is exhausted from hard work and infected with the virus; even worse despite showing symptoms of Covid-19, she was not allowed to take a test and obliged to work until eventually being hospitalised. An obvious implication of the nurse monologue is that the government has had faults in the process and this fact is specified in a nutshell by her following words "they did not protect us" (Bayan Perşembe, 5:16). Thursday's case bears resemblance to Ms. Tuesday's as it brings the issue of how we owe to each other and how authorities, as well as the society, fail to pay to those they owe the most.

The following monologue belongs to Ms. Friday who is a housewife and mother of three. "I have tested Covid-19 positive" she announces smiling at the very beginning of the

video. Shortly after she revises “no, no, negative. But I have made it positive myself” (Bayan Cuma, 0:13), still smiling. These paradoxical statements fall into place as Friday’s story unravels. Victim of domestic violence, she has been beaten up occasionally since the day she got married. With the advent of the virus and subsequent lockdowns, she has to spend long hours with her abusive husband and she is exposed to increasing assaults. Driven to the edge, Ms. Friday pretends to be sick and deceives her husband over contracting the virus. This way, she has the chance to quarantine herself in a room without having her husband around to touch her. During her monologue, she refers to the steadily mounting numbers of femicide and how wheels of justice turn even slower these days referring to juridical reverberations of the pandemic. Friday alludes to the pathetic conditions of the women of her kind and finalises her monologue stating: “from the very first day of my life to this day, for the first time I have a room of my own” (Bayan Cuma, 6.06). Her pseudo infection turns into a saviour isolating her from abuse and the abuser, as well as creating her a safe space that is hers alone.

Isolated at home with her twins and husband, Ms. Saturday is a positive personal life coach. Luckier than the rest, she has a decent house and career. In her monologue, she initially spreads positive vibes with a smiling face. After she becomes target of increasing assaults on the Internet, Saturday bursts with anger and turns into a completely different woman. This Saturday complains that she is expected to undertake all of the responsibilities at home without any support from her husband. This way, she reveals the reality after her ostensibly perfect life and proves how the current atmosphere increased pressure on women and their responsibilities without exception: no matter how educated, wealthy or old they are, women have all confronted deepening gender inequality.

The production culminates with Ms. Sunday who has left her acting career after contracting the virus in a film set. She highlights the dangers in any sector where greedy employers risking employers’ lives. As her closing remarks, Sunday gives a shout-out to women for online sharing and solidarity setting the scene for more sharing and summarising the ultimate goal of the production.

CONCLUSION

When the pandemic first entered into people's lives and ensured its gravity through casualties, almost everyone was convinced that it was a great equaliser treating everyone alike. The assumption, however, soon has proved to be disillusionment as the negative returns of the pandemic have become more visible. In a very short span of time, it has upended life and magnified all existing inequalities namely gender, social, economic. Convulsing daily life most, impacts of the pandemic have been particularly dire for women. They have been first to be laid off, expected to shoulder increasing households most, closer to the contracting virus due to their great numbers at health sectors, and suffering from domestic violence more. Turkish feminist playwright Sevilay Saral's most recent play *A Case per Day* brings forth these gendered impacts of the pandemic by way of keeping an account of women's experiences with different socio-economic backgrounds.

Due to physical distancing requirements and to curb the surge in infection, governments closed many places down early in 2020. These closures had significant impacts on the theatre industry mirroring their impacts across all performing arts. However, as many performances have been curtailed, many others have been transferred to digital platforms marking them as the new hub of theatre besides lots of others. In the wake of an unforeseeable continuum, Saral embarks upon digitalism in theatre by shifting her medium for storytelling from onstage to virtual space. It incorporates stories of seven different women in form of video monologues. From a gay courier to a retired teacher, a Covid-19 positive nurse to a victim of domestic violence, the play creates a panorama of women in Turkey amid the pandemic and keeps a record of gendered impacts of it. On this wise, Saral both makes these impacts more visible through a digital performance and creates a web of solidarity between women through performance.

Each of the seven aligned videos stands on its own, allowing the reader to engage with them separately. Except for their names, everything they share is real (Çelik, 2020, 16:14). This aspect adds universal quality to characters and, through them, holds a mirror to many more undergoing similar experiences. Ms. Monday becomes a mouthpiece of low-paid foreigner women who strives hard to stand on their feet, Ms. Tuesday embodies women couriers exhausted by hard work amid the pandemic, Ms. Wednesday reminds people of the elderly who are marginalised more in these times, Ms. Thursday gives voice to health workers', Ms. Friday to housewives' plight, while Saturday elucidates the reality of married

life for women without exception, Ms. Sunday unearths injustices in another sector. Through each dialogue, A *Case per Day* opens existing gender inequalities into question and, with its timeous characters and their experiences, manifests how pandemics worsen already troubled situations of women.

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