



INTERNATIONAL

**JOURNAL of HUMAN STUDIES**

ULUSLARARASI İNSAN ÇALIŞMALARI DERGİSİ

ISSN: 2636-8641

Cilt/VOLUME 6 Sayı/ISSUE 12 Yıl/YEAR: 2023 Alındı/RECEIVED: 16-03-2023 – Kabul/ACCEPTED: 21-09-2023

## Silence of Bystanders as the Accomplice of Domestic Violence: Dirty Butterfly and Born Bad by Debbie Tucker Green

*Aile İçi Şiddetin Suç Ortağı Olarak Seyirci Sessizliği: Debbie Tucker Green'in Dirty Butterfly ve Born Bad Oyunları*

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### Abstract

Debbie tucker green, one of the most remarkable playwrights on the twenty-first century British stage, deals with the role of the silence of bystanders in perpetuating domestic violence and abuse and aggravating the suffering of victims in her debut plays, dirty butterfly and born bad, based on the triangle of victim, perpetrator, and bystander. In both plays, tucker green puts more focus on the unresponsive attitudes of bystanders towards the sufferings of victims succumbing to the repeated intimate partner violence and parental sexual abuse than the persecution of perpetrators. Bystanders do nothing to intervene in domestic violence and ease the

### Öz

Yirmi birinci yüzyıl İngiliz sahnesinin en dikkat çekici oyun yazarlarından biri olan debbie tucker green, kurban, fail ve seyirci üçgeni üzerine kurulu dirty butterfly ve born bad adlı çıkış oyunlarında aile içi şiddet ve istismarın sürdürülmesinde ve kurbanların acılarının ağırlaştırılmasında seyirci sessizliğinin rolünü ele alır. tucker green iki oyununda da failerin zulmünden çok seyircilerin mükerrer yakın partner şiddetine ve ebeveyn cinsel istismarına yenik düşen kurbanların acılarına karşı tepkisiz tutumlarına odaklanır. Seyirciler aile içi şiddete ve istismara müdahale etmek ve kurbanın acılarını dindirmek için hiçbir şey yapmazlar. Aksine, sessizlikleri, kayıtsız tavırları, kurbanı suçlama ve gerçeği inkâr

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pains of victims. On the contrary, they collude with perpetrators, condoning the persecution through their silence, indifferent demeanors, tendencies to blame victims and deny the truth, and lack of empathy. The ramification of their silence is the perpetuation of violence and abuse. In this regard, the current study aims to delineate how bystanders play a pivotal role in normalizing and perpetuating domestic violence and abuse, aggravate the sufferings of victims, and act as the accomplices of perpetrators through their deafening silence in dirty butterfly and born bad.

**Keywords:** Bystander, Perpetrator, Victim, Domestic Violence, Abuse, Silence

etme eğilimleri ve empati yoksunlukları ile zulme göz yumarak faillerle iş birliği yaparlar. Seyircilerin sessizliklerinin sonucu şiddetin ve istismarın devam etmesidir. Bu bağlamda, bu çalışma, dirty butterfly ve born bad adlı oyunlarda seyircilerin aile içi şiddeti ve istismarı normalleştirme ve sürdürmede nasıl önemli bir rol oynadıklarını, mağdurların acılarını nasıl ağırlaştırdıklarını ve sağır edici sessizlikleri ile failerin suç ortağı olarak nasıl davrandıklarını göstermeyi amaçlar.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Seyirci, Fail, Kurban, Aile İçi Şiddet, İstismar, Sessizlik

## Introduction

As a stylistically innovative and experimental playwright on the twenty-first century British drama who subverts conventional structures, violates grammatical rules, and uses repeated silences and fragmented sentences, debbie tucker green<sup>2</sup> is concerned with the issues such as domestic abuse, the violation of human rights, racism, and misogyny and expresses her anger towards injustice, violence, and persecution in her plays. While dramatizing those problematic issues in her plays, tucker green does not display persecution and violence with unpleasant images directly but disturbs the audience through off-stage violence and staggering dialogues to raise awareness about the problems underestimated. In other words, she “opt(s) for a theatre of shock and provocation which aims at the ear rather than the eye” (Sawyers, 2018, p.1). Her debut plays, *dirty butterfly and born bad* premiered at Soho Theatre and Hampstead Theatre in 2003 respectively, revolves around domestic violence ranging from intimate partner violence to parental sexual abuse in the atrocity triangle of perpetrator, victim, and bystander. green draws more attention to the heart-wrenching sufferings of victims and the deafening silence of bystanders who remain neutral to intervene in the persecution of perpetrators than explicitly showing the violence inflicted by perpetrators in both plays.

<sup>2</sup> As debbie tucker green spells her name and the titles of her plays in lowercase, the name of the playwright and the titles of the plays were intentionally written in lowercase throughout the article.

In 1964, Kitty Genovese was murdered in front of thirty witnesses who did nothing to stop the violence lasting for thirty-five minutes despite her repeated calls for help. After that tragic event, many researchers have studied the reasons why bystanders stand idly by in the intervention of violence and to what extent passive bystanders are responsible for the violence they witness. Some argue that bystander apathy stems from moral decay, dehumanizing effects of urbanization, alienation, anomie, and existential despair (Darley & Latane, 1968, p.377). Additionally, factors such as victim blaming (Gracia & Herrero, 2006, p. 124) and empathy avoidance (Shaw, Batson, & Todd, 1994, p.880) have been underlined to explain the reason why bystanders witness yet do nothing to intervene in violence or abuse. In the same vein, Tucker Green shows that bystanders do not take an active role in preventing domestic violence due to their tendencies to blame victims and less empathic responses to the sufferings of victims in *dirty butterfly* and *born bad*. In the plays, bystanders become the accomplice of perpetrators by keeping passive and silent rather than becoming allies of victims to intervene in the persecution of perpetrators and to dull the sufferings of victims. Tucker Green “considers how witnesses might be deemed to collude in abusive situations by failing to speak out about what they know” (Goddard, 2015, p.78) and invites readers to realize that the unsupportive and indifferent attitudes of bystanders condone perpetrators’ violent and abusive actions and aggravate domestic violence in her plays.

### **Silence of Bystanders as the Accomplice of Domestic Violence in *dirty butterfly***

In *dirty butterfly*, Tucker Green portrays Jo as the victim of brutal acts of domestic violence, and Amelia and Jason, her black neighbours, as bystanders of domestic violence. The violent husband is never seen on the stage; however, his threatening presence is always felt by Jo’s screams in pain and pleas for mercy. Though Jason and Amelia hear Jo’s screams and witness the nightly ritual of domestic violence in the next door, they never dare to intervene in violence. Amelia feels disturbed by noises, sleeps downstairs, and goes to work earlier to avoid witnessing domestic abuse. Jason unperturbedly listens to Jo’s screams through thin walls but never responds to her suffering. As Goddard notes, Jo, Jason, and Amelia live closely to each other; however, Jason and Amelia are “individualised and distant” to fulfil any responsibility of preventing their abused neighbour from domestic violence (2015, p.75).

As the play begins with Jo’s plea for mercy, “sorry...I’m sorry...sorry...sorry I’m sorry”, Amelia “starts to sing, increasing her volume to try to drown out the repetitive sound of JO” (Green, 2013, p.3). Amelia always escapes to hear Jo’s screams and complains that Jo interrupts her privacy. What discomfords her is sleep deprivation stemming from Jo’s shrieking rather than her fellow’s physical and psychological suffering from a violent man as shown below:

Amelia: I can’t stand the wakin up to hearin you. I can’t stand you. I can’t stand the you and your him nex door to me. You and your bad both a yers nex door to me- you and your bad-sex-nex to me- nex door to me, nex door to my bedroom. I just can’t stand the bad a that (Tucker Green, 2013, p. 8).

She is so indifferent to violence inflicted upon Jo beyond paper-thin walls that she does not even feel pity for Jo, let alone protect her from the violence. Instead of doing something to tackle

violence heating up more and more and condemning the actions of Jo's intimate partner, she always accuses Jo of exaggerating the situation and performing attention-seeking behaviours and thus calls her "a drama queen" (tucker green, 2013, p.18). Amelia is inclined to blame Jo for what happens and declares that Jo's predicament is her fault, thereby marginalizing the victim and undermining the sense of solidarity. She also minimizes the severity of domestic violence and excuses the persecution of the perpetrator through her senseless anger, lack of empathy, and denunciatory reactions to her neighbour's suffering. Thus, she establishes an alliance with Jo's violent intimate partner although she does not directly get involved in violence.

As for Jason, he is always busy listening to what happens next door; however, he does not step in to intervene in the physical and sexual violence and to provide safety nets for Jo. Instead, he "tacitly consents to and secretly enjoys Jo's suffering, getting aroused by the sexual violence and masturbating while listening to it" (Riedelsheimer & Stöckl, 2017, p. 118). Jo recognizes that Amelia and Jason overhear her suffering yet are unwilling to bear a hand with her. She says: "I know you know what happens. I know you hear it often enough" (tucker green, 2013, p. 21). Neither can Jo escape from the tyranny of her partner nor do Jason and Amelia intend to respond to her mayday call. Jason and Amelia's deafening silence and inactiveness aggravate Jo's pains day after day. She needs to piss but she is afraid of going to the toilet in case her husband wakes up. She wakes up every new day wondering if she will survive. Throughout the play, she repeatedly asks Amelia and Jason to empathize with her; however, she casts stones against the wind:

Jo: You ever woken up of a morning wonderin this was gonna be your last? You ever got that feelin in your stomach as you lay there wonderin?

Jason: found yourself feelin that?

Amelia: No.

Jo: Like butterflies. Like butterflies gone ballistic. Butterflies gone wrong (tucker green, 2013, p.3-4).

Butterflies in Jo's stomach do not stem from excitement. Instead, as a battered woman, the reason of fluttery sensation in her stomach is her anxiety that today can be her last day (Goddard, 2015, p.73). Jo asks her neighbours to bear a hand in despair. However, they always refuse to sympathize with Jo and turn blind eye and deaf ear to her concerns and agonies. While Jo suffers within the four walls, they hear yet never raise the alarm for Jo's safety.

In act II, Jo desperately wants to take shelter in the café Amelia works as a cleaner. As a result of her husband's violent acts, the blood heavily runs down her legs. In this scene, for the first time, Amelia directly witnesses Jo's husband's deadly and bloody violence she always escapes to hear. She is not only an ear witness of Jo's victimization anymore, but also an eyewitness of her bleeding to death. However, Amelia does not answer Jo's urgent need for help again and says: "Get out...Shut up Jo, I don't need to hear" (tucker green, 2013, p.38). Instead of taking care of her severely damaged neighbour and fellow, she is just worried about the blood polluting her clean floor of the café (tucker green, 2013, p.38).

Amelia: look what you're doin - where you're drippin - look at my floor!

Jo: Look at me.

Amelia: No.

Jo: Look at me.

Amelia: Wha' for?

Jo: Look what he/done -

Amelia: why? Jo?

Jo: Let me show you *Amelia*-

Amelia: nah, cos- again - thank you -and - no./So.

Jo: Amelia- (tucker green, 2013, p.40-41).

Amelia strongly refuses to see and listen to Jo: "I don't wanna see. I don't need to see. I don't have to see- you" (tucker green, 2013, p. 41). However, Jo's respond, "But I am here", implies that the violence inflicted upon women is a chilling truth beyond dispute no matter how blind and deaf bystanders are (tucker green, 2013, p.41). No matter how strongly Amelia refuses to see and hear Jo, the truth stands there. She gives Jo towels not to pollute the clean floor with her blood rather than listening to her and alleviating her pains. Although she attempts to clean Jo's blood from the floor, "she doesn't notice that she has Jo's blood on her own feet, so every step makes a bloody footprint" (tucker green, 2013, p.48). The scene where Jo's blood is smeared on Amelia's steps strikingly shows that no matter how brutally and systematically Jo is damaged by her husband, Amelia is also an accomplice of this bloody act because she keeps still and indifferent to violence. Amelia blatantly refuses to mind her neighbour's corporeal vulnerability and "eschews empathy" (Fragkou, 2012, p. 30). Thus, she shatters the solidarity as a silent bystander, and this is enough to leave bloody footprints behind herself.

Throughout the play, neither Amelia nor Jason is in alliance with Jo. Jason's obsessive listening and Amelia's ignorance and tendency for victim blaming paralyze the intervention of domestic violence, dragging Jo into succumbing to the physically and sexually violent acts of her husband. Jo disturbingly compensates her neighbours' ignorance and silent witnessing with suffering. Their silence is like the underbelly of an iceberg. It is not seen and felt; however, it rips Jo's life open and sends her to the bottom of the sea to die. Therefore, they act as an accomplice in perpetuating the abusive and violent acts towards Jo, being indifferent to the goings-on next door. In the play, green asks "what greater guilt than to passively endorse the crime- what else is Jason... entertained by pressing an ear to the wall beyond which another's suffering is played out" and Amelia turning a deaf ear to her fellow's pains? (Abram, 2014, p. 130). While the responsibility for domestic violence lies with the perpetrator, bystanders also play role in exacerbating the violence against Jo because they are unwilling to intervene in intimate partner violence against their neighbour. Furthermore, as a black playwright, she prefers a black couple as passive bystanders and a white woman as sufferer of domestic abuse and violence. Thus, she points out that domestic violence and its greatest ally, silence, are global problems regardless of race. Staging the dehumanizing effects of only spectating the repeated brutal acts of domestic

violence inflicted upon Jo, Tucker Green emphasizes that though the one who pulls the trigger is the perpetrator, the one who causes life-threatening blood loss of the victim is the silent and indifferent spectator of violence.

*Dirty butterfly* evokes a social experiment by Fine Acts<sup>3</sup> revealing a bloodcurdling truth about bystanders of domestic violence. In 2017, a woman was murdered by her husband in Sophia. Although she was attacked for 50 minutes, the neighbours listened to her screams but did not react. Then, an apartment was rented in the same building to make a social experiment. The social experiment aimed to measure the neighbours' reactions about what they would do if the noise coming from next door was loud music. The neighbours were disturbed by the irritating bass beat, and it took only 1.52 seconds to react to their noisy neighbours. While they witnessed femicide for 50 minutes, they could not stand on loud music only for 1.52 seconds. They are far more concerned about the noise of drums than domestic violence as Amelia and Jason are. In this vein, Tucker Green draws attention to a global problem in which thousands of women are sentenced to death in the complicity of their neighbours and bystanders as a result of lack of solidarity, responsibility, and empathy. She emphasizes that if bystanders disregard domestic violence and do nothing to intervene in it, the persecution of the perpetrators will thrive in silence of bystanders.

#### **Silence of Bystanders in the Complicity of Domestic Abuse in *born bad***

Tucker Green's next play, *born bad*, consists of six members of a black family- Dawta, Mum, Dad, Sister 1, Sister 2, and Brother-and revolves around the incestuous abuse the eldest daughter has been subjected to for years. Dawta is sexually molested by her father and betrayed by her mother, sisters, and brother who repeatedly witness Dad's abusive behaviours yet do nothing for the cessation of sexual abuse. Dawta harbors anger towards the silent spectators of her sexual maltreatment as they always avert their gaze from sexual abuse and never stand up to mitigate Dad's abusive behaviours. Throughout the play, she attempts to confront her mother, sisters, and brother and unveil the truth ignored and swept under the rug.

The play begins with Dawta's verbal attacks on her mother. She is so outraged at Mum's long-standing silent witnessing of her sexual abuse that she repeatedly calls her bitch as reflected in the following dialogue:

Mum: Call me what I am.

Dawta: You actin like a bitch, I'm a call you it.

Mum: call me what I am.

Dawta: You lookin like a bitch I'm a call yu it.

Mum: Come on.

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<sup>3</sup>The video of social experiment is available in the following link:  
<https://fineacts.co/blog/2019/4/29/our-social-experiment-reveals-a-chilling-truth-about-domestic-violence>

Dawta: Bitch yu are.

Mum: Come on. Call me what I am. Call me- what I am...Call me mum, then (tucker green, 2013, p.6-7).

Dawta experiences intense anger that spirals out of control because her mother colludes with Dad allowing him to perpetuate his abusive behaviours through her silence while she needs maternal support and protection. She feels betrayed by her mother for not fulfilling her role as protector and doing nothing to heal her daughter's incest wounds. In *born bad*, green does not portray Mum as "an archetypal nurturing black mother, lynchpin of a warm close-knit family who aids her daughter's quest for survival" (Goddard, 2015, p.80). Instead, Mum is portrayed as the greatest accomplice of Dawta's abuse since she lets Dad to exploit her and does nothing to create a safe environment for her daughter. She is the blind eye and deaf ear to her sufferings in the grip of sexually abusive acts; therefore, Dawta persistently denies calling her mum. Throughout the play, Dawta tries to confront the silent bystander of her abuse, Mum, rather than the perpetrator of incest, Dad. She always questions about how Mum consents to her incestuous abuse rather than how Dad exploits herself:

Dawta: And if that was your choice how come I had to figure- if that was the choice how come I had to feature at all?...

How come you never chose for me to do that.

How come that then?

How come you did me like that?

How come you played me like wifey when I shoulda stayed playin dawta? Cos dawta was what I was.

What I am and I weren't you. I shouldn'ta been doin what you shoulda done-what you wouldn'ta done was it? And you shouldn'ta chose me to. (tucker green, 2013, p.31).

Her mother's consent and silent witnessing of incestuous abuse have more repercussions on Dawta than the abuse itself. Her pain is aggravated not only by the sexual abuse itself, but rather by the silence and denial of her mother to intervene in the exploitive actions of Dad. Furthermore, Mum makes negative judgements about Dawta rather than easing her daughter's pain and claims that she "was born bad right from the beginning" (tucker green, 2013, p. 33).

Throughout the play, Dawta also strives to make her family members confess the bitter truth that is known yet unarticulated: Dad abuses her in the complicity of Mum. She urges her siblings, Sister 1 and Sister 2, to acknowledge Dad's sexual harassment and Mum's accomplice of incestuous abuse. Sister 1 rejects to deny what happens and confesses that Mum chooses Dawta as a sexual object for Dad as follows:

Sister 1: she picked.

She did.

She chose to choose she did.

She chose you.

Deliberate. Decisive. How she does. She did” (tucker green, 2013, p.9).

She also confesses that she expresses her gratitude to God that Mum does not choose her to satisfy Dad’s sexual demands. Furthermore, she says that she prays for Dawta not to fall pregnant every night while Dad abuses her. However, Dawta replies that she will not thank her because her sister’s nightly ritual of praying in her pyjamas on her comfortable bed does not save her from abuse and sufferings. She needs her family’s active reactions to intervene in Dad’s sexual assaults since their silence enslaves her to the hell of exploitation.

Sister 2 refuses to accept Dawta’s sexual harassment. When Dawta asks her to tell what she witnesses about her abuse, she resists not answering her sibling’s questions: “don’t mean I gotta answer... move from mi- move from me wid your mout’ and yu bad mindedness” (tucker green, 2013, p.13). Although she knows the truth, she denies confessing it. She stands on living in alignment with the concealment of sober reality yet cannot dare to confront it:

Dawta: you wanna know?

Sister 2: No!

Lissen-she manipulates- she manipulating-she done manipulating you, gone from you- and now she’s trying her fuckries on me

Dawta: you wanna know?

Sister 2: no I don’t. And don’t fuck with someone who can fuck you back worse

Dawta: exactly (tucker green, 2013, p.14).

She is aware of the abuse Dawta is subjected to; however, she blames Dawta for raking up the past and damaging her happy memories. She asks Dawta for keeping silent because she does not want to disrupt stability in her life. She cares for herself, Mum, and her childhood memories, not her damaged sibling. She does not take responsibility to reduce the prevalence of sexual violence against her sister. She is also an accomplice of Dad’s sexual harassment because remaining silent is to condone the abuse committed against Dawta.

In this sense, tucker green reveals that bystanders connive at the sexual abuse of even next of kin through their deafening silences and tendencies for denials in *born bad*. Dawta’s family witness Dawta’s physical and psychological vulnerability; however, none of them intervenes in the domestic abuse, either denying the reality or being neutral. Dawta’s primary objective is “to force witnesses to respond to the victim’s call and acknowledge their complacency” (Fragkou, 2012, p. 29) because their silence normalizes Dad’s abusive acts and inflames her anger towards Mum and Sisters. As they aid and abet Dad to commit the offense through their neutrality and silence, they are the accomplices of the perpetrator.

### Conclusion

In a nutshell, debbie tucker green shows the dire repercussions of the silence of bystanders who stand idly by in the intervention of domestic violence and abuse on victims in *dirty butterfly* and *born bad*. Focusing on the role of bystanders in the perpetuation of persecution, green condemns those who do not lift a finger to help victims instead of fastening the blame on only perpetrators. What victims need is the support and intervention of bystanders. However, neither neighbours of Jo nor family members of Dawta take the side of the victims and share the burden of their pains. Victims are swept into a tornado of violence and abuse as bystanders do nothing and lapse into silence. Their silence encourages Jo and Dawta's perpetrators to maltreat them repeatedly. Criticizing tendencies of bystanders to blame victims, deny the reality, and avoid the sense of empathy, tucker green aims to heighten awareness of being active bystanders in the intervention of domestic violence and gives a clear social and global message that if bystanders remain to be silent, they perpetuate the on-going violence, thereby acting as accomplices of perpetrators. She also implies that the vicious cycle of domestic violence and abuse will continue until bystanders upstand to intervene in the persecution.

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