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Postmodern Elements in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*

Instructor Dr. Humam Salah Sameen *

College of Basic Education, Salahaddin University

Hamam.saleh@sadiq.edu.iq

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Abstract

Postmodernism is considered a break with 19th-century realism and before that, the project of Enlightenment dealt with the issue of transformation of outer phenomenal reality to an internal consciousness of the human mind. As a result, the using postmodernism subconsciously reveals and manifests their inner consciousness through what they do. It rejects the concept of absolute reality. Mostly, postmodernist writers support the premise that 'irrational is real'. Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1948) is considered to be the leading playwright amongst many others. This play derives its inspiration from European existentialism which was one of the foremost philosophical schools within continental tradition. In *Waiting for Godot*, there are no pre-determined rules or any unity in time, place or action. The ending of it can be interpreted in many different ways. The author of this paper has tried to put the play in the European context and highlighted the features which are considered to be the hallmark of postmodernism.

Keywords: postmodernism, existentialism, rationality, enlightenment, absurd.

عناصر ما بعد الحداثة في انتظار غودو للكاتب صامويل بيكت

م. د. همام صلاح سمين

جامعة جعفر الصادق / كلية الآداب / قسم اللغة الإنكليزية

المستخلص: تعتبر ما بعد الحداثة منفصلة عن واقعية القرن التاسع عشر وقبل ذلك يتعامل مفهوم التنوير مع قضية تحويل واقع الظاهرة الخارجية إلى وعي داخلي للعقل البشري. ونتيجة لذلك ، فإن استخدام ما بعد الحداثة يكشف عن وعيهم الداخلي ويكشف عنه من خلال ما

* Corresponding Author: Dr. Humam Salah, E.Mail: Hamam.saleh@sadiq.edu.iq

Affiliation: Salahaddin University - Iraq

يفعلونه ويرفضون مفهوم الواقعية المطلقة. تعتبر رائدة بين الكتاب الآخرين. تستمد هذه المسرحية إلهامها من الوجودية الأوروبية ، التي كانت واحدة من أولى المدارس الفلسفية في التقليد القاري ، وفي انتظار جودو ، لا توجد قواعد محددة مسبقاً أو أي وحدة في الزمان أو المكان حيث يمكن تفسير الفعل ونهايته. بطرق مختلفة والكاتب هنا يحاول وضع المسرحية في السياق الأوروبي ويسلط الضوء على السمات التي تغير السمة المميزة لما بعد الحداثة.

الكلمات الدالة: ما بعد الحداثة ، الوجودية ، المنطقية ، التنوير ، العبثية.

Introduction

Modernism and Postmodernism as movements as well as literary styles in literature came after the two world wars that engulfed Europe in the twentieth century. It also led to the rise of absurdist tradition related to the theatre where plays depicted absurdity of existence, as well as all-encompassing ideologies, especially in post-war Europe. An example most often cited, is Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1948) which is considered to be the leading playwright amongst many others deriving its inspiration from the existentialist school of philosophy that was gaining momentum in Europe during that period.

Although there are many interpretations of existential philosophy about what it means, varying from being theistic like that of Soren Kierkegaard's view of existence to being atheistic in its interpretation like that of Jean-Paul Sartre. Other interpretations are more ambiguous like that of Martin Heidegger whose existential philosophy has been interpreted in six different ways although his concept of authenticity is still one of the basic tenets of existential philosophy. The other tenet of existential philosophy is that at the root of our being there is 'nothingness' which also has been interpreted in many different ways but does signify the negation of every reality of fact or simply nothingness of being.

After two world wars, the spiritual barriers created within Europe were represented in arts through fragmentation, denial of truths or grand theories and parody of such ideas. Samuel Beckett occupies a specific point of time in literature which between modern and postmodern. As a result, Beckett has troubled literary scholars as he is a person who tries to categorize his work unambiguously as either modern or postmodern. Postmodernism was originally a response or reaction to modernism in the late 20th century. Stephen Wart (2001) writes:

Postmodern theatre is inaugurated by *Waiting for Godot*, or it begins in a period after *Waiting for Godot* and the absurdist movement, or it has not occurred at all. The self-contradictory quality of this history has obtained for some time now. (26)

Postmodernism is considered a break with 19th-century realism and before that, the project of Enlightenment dealt with the transformation of external reality into an internal state of consciousness. As a result, the characters' use of postmodernism subconsciously reveals and manifests their inner consciousness through what they do. It rejects the concept of absolute reality. Mostly, postmodernist writers support the premise that "irrational is real, the reality is irrational". Beckett is considered the last modernist and also part of the commencement of postmodernism. Rodney Simard (1984) has the same view as he writes:

In the history of contemporary drama, Pinter and Albee are among the first generation of postmodernists, accepting the laurels of Beckett, the last of the moderns. (26)

In literary works that are categorized under postmodern, there is no preset convention to have a unity of time, place and action and the ending of such works holds multiple interpretations.

Waiting for Godot: Postmodern Analysis

Since Estragon and Vladimir, the play's central protagonists, represent the idea of postmodernism, *Waiting for Godot* by Beckett exhibits some postmodernist traits. These play's protagonists largely serve as examples of the idea of having "hope" in circumstances that do not seem to offer it. They occupy their time while waiting by engaging in amusement. Berger (1998) writes:

Waiting for Godot shows us two tramps, Vladimir and Estragon, waiting on a nearly empty stage for a mysterious figure named Godot to keep his appointment with them. For two long acts, virtually nothing happens. The second act almost repeats the meagre actions of the first, as if the two tramps were doomed forever to repeat themselves in a kind of postmodern hell. (40) Thus, the work explores static situations from beginning to end as the premise being that there is no absolute truth, rather phenomena or sciences or facts are relative in their nature and the so called truth is not reflected in human understanding; rather, the mind is constructed to try to understand its reality. The universe can be ordered by a God who is considerate of his creations, or the universe can be controlled by chance or cruel fate. The characters in *Waiting for Godot* show the futility of everyday activities. They are easygoing, yet hopeful and patient. These features show the real thing in the first place characteristics of real people. This work shows the activities of daily life. It is intended to show and emphasize the point of view that people have no meaning for the future. One can give meaning to any action that is currently taking place.

Elements of Postmodern Play

Some of the key features of postmodern literature related to Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* are irony, satire, playfulness, dark humour, metafiction, fragmentation, existential absurdity, nihilism, no plot or narrative, abrupt endings, etc. It challenges the traditions of a well-made play with intrinsic unity. The language is tricky and ambiguous.

The most important issue that the play deals with is the concept of 'waiting' in itself. The irony of the concept of waiting is that his two characters, The characters just wait without trying to understand the purpose of their waiting and claim to be waiting for existing/non-existing entity called Godot. In the Lucky Pozzo scene, Pozzo is the master and Lucky is the servant whereas Pozzo later goes blind in the second act. The outside position looks the same, but Pozzo's reins are in Lucky's hand and yet ironically, Lucky is still unaware of his power and status and remains a servant. It is implied that he is more used to being a servant than being independent. Some many funny moments and actions make the reader laugh, but these actions and gestures convey the message of spending time in an absurd world that makes no sense in a European context. The scene of Vladimir and Tarragon playing with their hats is another example of spending time in an absurd world or a reference to those acts that are considered to be of some inherent value. Then in Act One, when Lucky is crying and Vladimir asks for a handkerchief, Estragon declines playfully. Black humour is also strongly expressed in this work. The first is Estragon's memory, which looks comical but has a deep philosophy with the implication that everyone is hit with

unknown life problems every day. It may sound silly, but it raises serious questions about the monotony of life's stagnation. Quoting from the text:

“ESTRAGON: Well, shall we go?

VLADIMIR: Yes, let's go.

(They do not move).” (45)

Tanaka (1997) writes:

The characters in that play do not have a clearly defined self and they question who and what they are to each other. They are sometimes, as is mentioned, “Adam”, the symbol of the whole human being, but sometimes, they are nobody with no certainty about who they are, where they are, and why they are there. They are not sure of themselves... there always exists a tension and an anxiety about their situation, which pulls us back to the modern sense of what is Man. (55)

Noorbakhsh Hooti (2011) in his article writes:

The phenomenon of postmodernism cannot be enunciated in purely temporal words. It somehow shackles most of the obvious epistemological points in various scientific points. In postmodernism, unlike modernism, we are not dealing with any scientific rules, but it is the absolute incredulity toward Metanarrative, which became popular, mostly after the Second World War. It postulates working without rules in order to formulate the rules of what will have been done and this is something quite ordinary in Beckett's works. Each one starts anew, inventing its own rules as it goes along... Postmodernism relies heavily on fragmentation, paradox and questionable narrators. It puts science and technology at bay. It refers to the state that lacks a central hierarchy. (40) In this aspect, various elements, plot, characters, themes, imagery and factual positions are disjointed. The vocabulary used to describe sentence structures, characters, and the plot is fragmented. Although there are too many brief lines, the discourse still proceeds because there are no embellishments in the text. An example of fragmented language as well as the thoughts within the mind of characters is as:

Sometimes I feel it coming all the same. Then I go all queer. (He takes off his hat, peers inside it, feels about inside it, shakes it, puts it on again.) How shall I say? Relieved and at the same time . . . (he searches for the word) . . . appalled. (With emphasis.) AP-PALLED. (He takes off his hat again, peers inside it.) Funny. (He knocks on the crown as though to dislodge a foreign body, peers into it again, puts it on again.) Nothing to be done. (3)

This and many other such dialogues show fragmented language and thereby the fragmented circumstances of the character's psyche. For example, when Lucky begins speaking in the first act, he How urgent you start talking! They seem to say whatever comes to mind. Character fragmentation can also be seen. For example, in Act Two:

"Vladimir: Do you want me to go away? (Pause) Gogo! (Pause. Vladimir observes him attentively) Did they beat you? (Pause) Gogo! (Estragon remains silent, head bowed) Where did you spend the night?" (2)

It is visible here how absurd this conversation is and in addition, fragmentation can be seen here as well. There are pauses which occur continuously, sudden and unexpected pauses when characters are speaking. It shows her shattered mind. Lucky is an example of a fragmented character that just falls and then suddenly sleeps which reflects the mindset and orientation of grand narratives not able to work properly. The philosophy that some ideology may help in the betterment of the condition of slaves but as is seen in the play it does not seem to work either. The way the pieces are arranged is also inept. There is only one road, which has sparse trees and is unsteady. All of these fragments in some way convey the frustration, hopelessness, and futility

of all learning, labour, life, and the entire universe. Intertextuality within such fragmentation plays an important part in Postmodernist literature. Similarly, a reader finds intertextuality working within fragmentation in reference to the context of the Bible. For example:

"Vladimir: Did you ever read the Bible!"

"Vladimir: Do you remember the Gospels?"

"Vladimir: ...one of the thieves was saved..."

"Vladimir: Our saviour. Two thieves. One is supposed to have been saved and the other... (he searches for the contrary of saved)... damned."

"Vladimir: I tell you his name is Pozzo.

Estragon: We'll soon see. (He reflects.) Abel! Abel !"

"Vladimir: I beging to weary of this motif.

Estragon: Perhaps the other is called Cain. Cain! Cain !" (4)

Therefore, it has a very close relationship with the Bible. The references to Jesus Christ, and the two thieves, Cain and Abel indicate the intertextuality between "Waiting for Godot" and the Bible. Postmodernism often professes individualism toward God and nation, describes freedom to establish individual truths and allows each person's choices to be tolerated: The work may be called a highly controversial work because it supports Christianity - either religion or individualism. "Individualism" is, according to the dictionary, "the pursuit of personal goals" or "personal character traits." There's no particular plot here, so it's hard to tell what the characters' purpose is because they're in a nonsensical state. While playing with "Hat" and Tarragon and "Boots", Vladimir is shown to have higher thinking, spirituality, intelligence and ambition. , have a materialistic mind, and contentment. Both have their way of thinking. Then Pozzo is rude, but he is intelligent and he can feel things through intuition.

Lucky becomes annoyed when the submissiveness reaches its peak. His slavery infuriates us. Here everyone has their own beliefs, truths, and justifications (but not stated directly). There is no ultimate truth in postmodern literature. Again, Vladimir and Tarragon are on the same path, but you can see that they have different mindsets and levels. Still, no one is wrong. The boy's personality also has its personality and place.

Postmodernist literary writers throw convention overboard. Her work does not have a specific plot, story, or related plot. This work of hers, *Waiting for Godot*, is similarly unconventional. One can arrange plots or plots as one wishes. Yet again, symbolism does not work the traditional way. For example, Act one is set on a scrap of rough road and a bare tree without a single leaf. Comparatively, in Act two the tree has four or five leaves which is a symbolic yet not in a traditional sense. However, it cannot be said here traditionally or customarily that these leaves are a symbol of hope and life. Therefore, all that can be said about leaves is that natural world is indifferent to human pain or suffering, similarly it is indifferent to human happiness and other emotions.. There is no human or natural rationality in this work. There is all the absurdity. If there is a question, it cannot be answered, and if there is an answer, the question is irrelevant. There are truths and lies, and both stay together.

This is how postmodernism elements are seen to be working in the play *Waiting for Godot*. In a sense, it seems to be close to deconstruction. Whether it is the plot of a literary text, its characters, setting, language, or its symbols – these all challenge the systematic writing of early writers. They follow their style and personal mindset. They also discarded this rule that style and language must fit the message or philosophy of the work.

Conclusion

Postmodernism is a term used to suggest a response to modernism in architecture, painting as well as literature, especially in late 20th century Europe. The movement is characterized by opposite elements to that of traditionalism and realism. Generally, those writers that write from this perspective believe or portray the premise that "irrationality is reality, and reality is irrationality." Also, different from modernity, it celebrates 'fragmentation' rather than lamenting it as is the case with modernism. It does not engage in the zero point of its framework. There are no predetermined rules and even its claim that there are no established long-term principles that could explain events, activities, thoughts and manners as it believes that such things cease to exist in a postmodernism world.

In contradiction to traditionalism especially in literature, these themes are subject to change as Postmodernism claims it is difficult to ascertain absolute truth in the universe. The characteristics of literary works that are considered to be a part of postmodernism are broad in their scope and are not subject to classical literary rules. Similarly, such literary works lack some basic features including unity of time, place and action. Unlike classical literary works, there are no main characters. Moreover, the characters in such literary works generally are seen to belong to the middle or lower classes rather than the upper richer class or nobility, although the characters seem to be normal people. The subject of literary works is the inner world, thoughts and problems of these ordinary people. The ending of a literary work can be interpreted in many ways as it happens to be the case with *Waiting for Godot* as well. The results of literary works differ from person to person. Classical literary works, on the other hand, have tight endings.

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