

POSTMODERNIST ANALYSIS OF *THE PILLOWMAN*

YASTIK ADAM'IN POSTMODERNİST ANALİZİ

Nehir DEVRİM

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ABSTRACT

Postmodernism is among the most discussed subjects in contemporary world. Despite the criticism, postmodernism has been thriving in many different subject areas after modernism's failure in keeping its promise for a "better life". This paper mainly aims to examine and discuss devices and techniques used in the 2003 play *The Pillowman* by Martin McDonagh in the light of postmodernism. This study will examine postmodernist features and devices such as intertextuality, narratives/grand-narratives, black humor, metafiction, hyperreality, self-reflexivity, irony, paranoia, fragmentation, maximalism, allegory and late capitalism within the play, aiming to bring a better understanding to both postmodernism and *The Pillowman*.

Key Words: *The Pillowman*, postmodernism, in-her-face theatre, Martin McDonagh

ÖZET

Postmodernizm, çağdaş dünyada en çok tartışılan konular arasındadır. Eleştirilere rağmen postmodernizm, modernizmin "daha iyi bir yaşam" vaadini tutmadaki başarısızlığından sonra birçok farklı konuda ön plana çıkmaktadır. Bu makale esas olarak Martin McDonagh'ın 2003 yapımı *Yastık Adam* adlı oyununda kullanılan araç ve teknikleri postmodernizm ışığında incelemeyi ve tartışmayı amaçlamaktadır. Bu çalışma, hem postmodernizmi hem de *Yastık Adam*'ı daha iyi anlayabilmek için, metinlerarasılık, anlatı/üstanlatılar, kara mizah, üstkurmaca, hipergerçeklik, özdüşünümsellik, ironi, paranoya, bölümlendirme, aşırılık, alegori ve geç kapitalizm gibi postmodern özellik ve araçları inceleyecektir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: yastık adam, Postmodernizm, suratına tiyatro, Martin McDonagh

INTRODUCTION

This paper aims to examine Martin McDonagh's 2003 play *Pillowman* from postmodern perspective. *The Pillowman*, written to be staged, and well acclaimed in its stage has been studied under the performing arts, theatre and violence and in-her-face theatre. Differently from the previous studies, this paper aims to focus on the text as a piece of literature (and not performing arts) and dissect it to its elements to both better understand the play and postmodernism. Aleks Sierz, who contributed to in-her-face theatre literature greatly finds some in-her-face plays like *Attempts on her Life* (by Martin Crimp) postmodern (2013). Also, plays of Sarah Kane and Mark Ravenhill has been studied through the theoretical lenses of postmodernism, metaphysical theatre, Artaud's Theatre of cruelty and Lacan (writer.net, 2003). However, *The Pillowman* has not been studied under the theoretical lens of postmodernism. Therefore, I will explain postmodernism as the theoretical background and explain the elements, themes and devices which make the *Pillowman* postmodern.

POSTMODERNISM

Postmodernism is not an easy term to define. Starting in architecture, earliest formulations of postmodernism meant hybridity, pluralism and also, rejection of the previous rules. Blending the traditional with non-traditional, postmodernism showed that "one could produce meaningful and expressive forms through a playful and complex mingling of apparently mutually exclusive idioms, none of which was privileged over all others" (Heuvel, 2001). Postmodernism denies the boundaries between disciplines such as politics, psychology, philosophy, performing arts, anthropology, economics, aesthetics etc. and therefore has an interdisciplinary nature. There are also objections to postmodernism; Blurring the lines between disciplines has not helped anything. Or the postmodern art is simply the product growing late capitalism (Frais, 2008).

Starting in the 1940's as a reaction to modernism's inadequacies, postmodernism made its peak in 1960's and 1970's. Modernist philosophers, scholars and literary critiques and cultural studies analysts gave promises about 'living a better life', 'living in equal, just and democratic society' but these were only the grand-narratives to be collapsed as the modern people grew being unequal socially, economically and politically. The collapse of the grand-narratives means that the idea of rational humankind, objective world, equal and just cultures are no longer valid. Philosophical idea behind postmodern literature is shaped the uneasiness of the century they are living. Lyotard suggests that postmodernism is what best explains the human's condition in today's world (1984).

Postmodernism is also about "a sense of relativism, nihilism, anti-modernism, counter-enlightenment anti-objectivism, anti-universalism, and anti-rationalism" (Lourdunathan, 2017, p.29). The obsession of rational thinking is abandoned once it is understood to be unachievable. Rather, postmodernist thinking include "reactionary, nostalgic, discontinuity, indeterminacy, schizophrenic, over production, inflation, technological realism, discontinuity, escapism, pluralism, relativism, contextuality, anti-positivism, anti-representationism, anti-coherency, anti-formalism etc." (Lourdunathan, 2017, p.30). Thus, the postmodern thinking creates its own form of art and literature along with other subject areas. For example, postmodern art is dark, skeptic and parodic. It does not seek for authenticity but rather utilizes parody, pastiche and fabulation to make its dark, cynical point. Barth (1984) suggests that postmodern literary work will 'rise above' the quarrel between realism, irrealism, formalism, 'contentism', coteire fiction and junk fiction (p. 203).

Some way or other, postmodernism has made itself a place in most subject areas. Due to its rebellious nature, postmodernism in literature is about testing the boundaries while introducing some new styles. Previously, literary movements had set themselves clear boundaries. There was a boundary between high and low culture, even for what was literature and what was not. Postmodernism therefore can be said to adapt normlessness as a norm in terms of what is art and what is not. Some other devices and themes of postmodernism are intertextuality, metafiction, pastiche, maximalism, irony, hyperreality, paranoia, fragmentation, unreliable narration, self reflexivity, fabulation, parody and more.

Intertextuality means a text's relation to other texts and therefore is a network or a system (Orr, 2010). The reader's prior knowledge and understanding is required in order to interpret the given text. Thus, intertextuality creates interrelationship between two or more texts. Metafiction describes a fiction's awareness of its own fictional identity and capacity to reflect on its status as fiction (Hutcheon, 1980). The author intentionally refers to the text's fictitious state and therefore creates a new dimension to the fiction. Pastiche is imitating style or the character of another work. Usually, classical pieces are pastiched to cherish their form or character (Hoesterey, 1995). Maximalism, as a reaction to minimalism is about going at about excesses in literature. In postmodernism, maximalism can be lengthy descriptions of detail or use of wide array of literary devices and techniques (Rebein, 2010). Irony is a technique that is not only used in postmodernism but also in other forms, too. But irony in postmodernism is used to point out the absurdity or the severity of the situations. Hyperreality is inability to distinguish between reality and representation of reality. Especially with the advancements in technology, philosophers like Baudrillard theorized simulation theory by his book *Simulcra and Simulation* (1981), pointing out the blurred lines between what is real and what is not. However, since postmodernism does not necessarily seek for authenticity, hyperreality then can be reality. Paranoia in postmodernism has its roots from the previous World Wars. Unease and distraught brought by the aftermath of World Wars also led people to live in uneasy, distrustful lives (Şimşek, 2016). As in hyperreality, the advancements in technology leading to a consumerist consumerist society also brought paranoia. The dystopic idea of "the big brother is watching you" became one of the major themes of paranoia in postmodernism. Fragmentation means breaking down the text or the other elements of the text into fragments and challenging the audience to piece together the given components. Unreliable narration is another postmodern technique differentiating the genre. When the reader cannot trust the narrator, narrative ambiguity is created and this ambiguity comes as a new postmodern style in literature. Self reflexivity, also found in modernist literature means referring to itself within the fiction. Hutcheon (1980) finds the postmodern fiction 'self-obsessed' because this fiction is 'self-reflective', 'narcissistic', 'self informing', 'auto-referential' and 'auto-representational'. Allegory is another technique that is not only defined by postmodernism but made its unique use in postmodern literature. Allegory is the idea that an item has secretive meanings than its obvious meaning. Like in many other subject areas, postmodernism in literature is not easy to define because there are still many arguments on what postmodern is, whether to totally differentiate it from modernism, where its line starts and ends. However, following the steps of what are considered great postmodern works previously, these techniques can be regarded as postmodern techniques.

MARTIN MCDONAGH AND POSTMODERNISM

To understand the postmodern nature of *Pillowman*, it is incumbent to examine the writer Martin McDonagh's life. Irish born British writer uses Ireland as a setting for his plays. His only play that did not take place in Ireland in fact is *Pillowman*. McDonagh was born in 1970 to a working class family in Elephant and Castle area of London which was heavily inhabited by the Irish. He grew up in London and Connemara, Ireland. McDonagh tried to pursue a career in writing but he received constant rejections which led him to turn to writing plays for theatre (Thorson, 2009). McDonagh

wrote seven out of eight of his plays in a short period of time in 1994 while he was unemployed and doing nothing besides sitting at home. McDonagh claims not to know much about theatre. Some claims also support this, McDonagh has been criticized for lacking authentic, deep stories or characters (Thorson, 2009). Yet, McDonagh is remains a critically acclaimed writer: His scenarios for the films *In Bruges*, *Six Shooters* and *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing Missouri* have been critically acclaimed and has won many awards. This is a fine example for what postmodern is. The line between high and low culture, educated art and spontaneous art is blurred. Rather, eclectic, and even chaotic forms of art which may be controversial at times is welcomed in today's world. According to Brian Cliff, "Lyn Gardner complains that *The Pillowman* "seems like a vanity project about Why Writers Are Very Important People, by a Very Important Writer called Martin McDonagh" (Russel, 2007, p.135). This is another fine example of a postmodern condition of today's art. Lyn Gardner's statement also points out the self-reflexive state of the play.

Growing up in both London and Ireland and being shaped by Irish nationalism and rigid codes of Catholicism brought McDonagh a hybrid identity which is also explainable by the condition of today's postmodern world. In reflecting his condition, McDonagh says "I don't feel I have to defend myself for being English or for being Irish, because, in a way, I don't feel either. And, in another way, of course, I'm both" (qtd. in Jordan & Chambers, 2006) According to Russell (2007), "McDonagh is cosmopolitan in his literary and dramatic influences, having cited Jose Luis Borges, Vladimir Nobokov, David Mamet, and Harold Pinter as exemplars" (p.3). As can be seen, conditions leading McDonagh rising as a critically acclaimed writer are the same conditions that created today's zeitgeist: hybridity, pluralism, post-truth, blurred lines of definitions and disciplines, disorder. McDonagh himself breaks down the high and low forms of art. Indeed, Nicholas Greene poses this question about McDonagh: "Is McDonagh to be considered a self-consciously postmodern parodist, an ethical satirist or an anarchic cultural bother-boy?" (Russell, 2007, p.3).

THE PILLOWMAN AND POSTMODERNISM

The play takes place in an unknown Eastern European totalitarian police state. The play begins *in medias res* where main character blindfolded Katurian is being interrogated under torture. Katurian assumes the only reason why he is being interrogated could be that the state found his stories political. Despite his attempts to convince police that his stories has no political content, he keeps being tortured. McDonagh leaves the audience wondering what Katurian had done to be in position. At first glance, it looks like a merciless interrogation for an innocent man, but later story unfolds that the interrogation is not about political content of Katurian's short stories but it is an investigation of a murder in which the murderer mimics the deaths in Katurian's short stories in killing small children. Katurian has very dark stories; in one story a boy who helped a stranger gets his toes chopped off by the stranger as for a thank you. In another story, a little girl places razors to his abusive father's apple to get rid of him. However, later the razors turn hostile to the little girl and cut her throat too. And in another story, a girl claims to be Jesus and her family tortures the girl just like Jesus had been tortured, eventually crucifying her. There has been murders resembling to Katurian's stories. Moreover, the toes from a boy is found at Katurian's house, yet Katurian pleads innocent. Katurian's brother Michal is also held in another cell and they find a chance to talk to each other. Michal is mentally disabled and it is revealed by flashbacks that Michal is mentally disabled as a result of heinous experience his parents had done on him; their parents showered Katurian with love and kindness while tortured his brother next door for the sake of Katurian's art. Katurian who initially wrote about beautiful things started to write dark and twisted stories as he listened to the tortured voice next door. When Katurian finds out that his brother is held captive next door and tortured by his parents, he strangulates his parents by a

pillow to save his brother. Out of mercy, Katurian kills his brother Michal to save him from police's hands. Later, Katurian admits committing all the murders in exchange for preservation of his stories but his confession collapses because he is unable to remember the details of the murders. Yet, Katurian is executed by the police at the end of the play and for no apparent reason, policeman Ariel decides to preserve his stories.

There are many layers to the story, the use of allegories and ironies are so intense that it requires rethinking from many different perspectives. The layers of the story unfold in reversals and flashbacks at times. Katurian serves as a storyteller and the stories are reanimated from his perspective. Despite the tense atmosphere and brutality of the setting, McDonagh successfully combines humorous moments with tense moments of violence. To illustrate:

“Tupolski: Make him swallow them

Ariel tries to force the toes into Katurian's mouth.

Tupolski: Don't make him swallow them, Ariel. What are you doing?

Ariel: You *said* make him swallow them.

Tupolski: Only to scare him! They're evidence! Have *some* sense!” (p. 21).

These are some postmodern elements knitting the story. The stories which are told from Katurian's perspective also demonstrates unreliable narrator. Throughout the play, the audience does not know whom to trust, whether the characters are good or evil or even whether the story line is real. The lack of reliability in the text, both for Katurian, as a storyteller and Martin McDonagh, as the writer of the play is a postmodern characteristic.

Unlike McDonagh's other plays, *The Pillowman* does not have a specific time and place. It is only slightly implied that it is an Eastern totalitarian police state. This context-free mode enables McDonagh to focus on the universal problems such as democracy, violence, child abuse and mental illnesses. The context-free mode itself is a criticism to police cruelty and political power.

Postmodernism has been criticized for lacking authenticity. Martin McDonagh is bold in using clichés. In the play, there are two policemen, Tupolski who is more experienced 'the good police' and Ariel who younger policeman with a temper 'the good police'. Even in the play, Ariel admits the situation as “Oh, I almost forgot to mention . . . I'm the good cop, he's the bad cop” (McDonagh, 2003, p. 12). McDonagh utilizes the clichés into his play, in a self-reflexive, humorous way. The essence of postmodernism is about that: Clichés make up something new together.

Intertextuality is another device often used by McDonagh. In the play, the story named “The Little Jesus” references the Bible itself because the girl in the story claims to be Jesus and eventually gets crucified. In another story named “The Tale of the Town on The River”, a poor boy shares his food with a dark hooded stranger in a cart passing the town and in return, the dark hooded stranger chops off the boy's toes and tells him that one day the boy would thank him for that. At the end of the story it is revealed that the name of the town is Hamelin. Katurian references the fairy tale of “The Pied Piper of Hamelin” in which a piper helps a town, Hamelin to get rid of the rats, which are plague bearers. When town refuses to pay for the piper's service, the piper takes away all the children. There was only one child who was not taken away by the piper because he was crippled. That was supposed to be the poor boy in in Katurian's story who had lost his toes. Katurian's story has unity and integrity by itself, however, it also references other works creating a hyperlink. There is also the mention of Katurian's stories “Shakespeare Room” in which Shakespeare stabs a lady in a box every time he wants to write a play.

In flashbacks, it is revealed to the audience that Katurian had been showered with love while his brother Michal had been tortured by their parents as a part of a cruel experiment. In order to support Katurian's artistry, his parents had been torturing his brother. When Katurian finds out about this, he suffocates both of his parents with a pillow to save his brother. Ironically, when Katurian finds out his brother is the sole responsible for the murders parallel to his short stories, he kills his brother too, out of mercy. As Katurian kills his parents and his brother with a pillow, he becomes 'the pillowman' himself, which is yet another irony. "The Pillowman" is one of the bitter stories Katurian had written in which there is a pillowman whose job is to convince small children to commit suicide rather than pursuing an unhappy life. Pillowman may seem cruel for killing small children but the audience understands that he does what he does out of mercy because Pillowman finds his job so painful and one day a Pillowboy appears to convince him to kill himself. By killing himself, Pillowman ends his own suffering but causes many small children grow up to have miserable lives. The story which gave the play its name has a coherent, circular lining. Ironically, Katurian himself is a 'Pillowman' both by paralleling to his own story and for killing his parents and brother with a pillow. "The Pillowman" is also an allegorical story for the same reasons it is ironic. Worthen & Worthen (2006) suggest there are two elements of allegory: sublimation of the concrete particulars and into abstract realm of ideas" (p.158). Katurian's stories can be read as the abstractions of the real life.

Both modernism and postmodernism examine the psyches of people. Postmodernism deals with the darker parts of the psyche. Katurian has very dark stories but the audience realizes that these dark stories only echo Katurian's childhood experiences. If it had not been for his parents' experiment on the effects of torture sounds next door to Katurian, he could have been turned out to be a great, happy writer. Or could he? Could he be the product of what parents had designed for him to be? Each character has dark past in the play. Apart from Katurian and Michal, Ariel is a policeman who had been sexually abused by his father and there is a brief mention of Tupolski's alcoholic, abusive father as well. Near the end of the play, it is also revealed that Tupolski had lost his child because of a drowning while fishing. These characters, therefore, are dark and twisted. The underlying reason for each character's behavioral disorder is their past traumas. Because of these deep traumas, violence turns mediocrity but also new violence arises as the play progresses (Çakırtaş, 2018). Michal is mentally disabled as a result of his parents' torture and cannot be held responsible for the murders he had committed because of his brain damage but he also shows some signs of smartness. When he states that it was easier to be at the opposite of tortured side, the audience understands that he knew what had been going on, at some level.

Both modern and postmodern literature deal with internal conflicts, however, modern novel tries to find a solution to the inner conflicts while postmodern novel takes chaos and conflict as insurmountable and plays with it. McDonagh introduces characters who have challenging pasts but no redemption is offered at all. Rather, the act of playfulness through black humor in a chaotic setting is offered to the audience with no apparent solution.

"Maximalism is not necessarily about overcrowding a space but simply choosing to be bold by showcasing your own unique style in a creative way" (luxurylondon.co.uk.) Maximalism gives writer to experiment in both style and themes. In *the Pillowman*, the maximization of violence comes as a style for McDonagh and other in-yer-face theatre writers use. Through the use of violence, in all forms, the message to be conveyed is bold and direct. The aim of in-yer-face theatre is to "grab the by the scruff of the neck shake it until it gets the message" (Sierz, 2001) and maximization of violence in *the Pillowman* provokes, shakes, disturbs and compels to think.

The structure of the play is not linear due to Katurian's embedded stories. Katurian's stories can be referred as metafictional because presenting Katurian as a writer, McDonagh has a chance to communicate the audience about the nature of the fiction. Katurian's embedded stories also create fragmentation as the sequencing of the story is divided and the audience is challenged to combine the pieces of the incidents together to make sense of it.

Thorson (2009) suggests that McDonagh's plays lack depth and they are criticized about their literary value (p.2); even, his plays are claimed to be thoughtless recreations of old-fashioned plots (p.3). Postmodernism, however, does not seek for authenticity in texts. The use of pastiche is to integrate elements from the theatre of cruelty to detective fiction, comedy, political criticism and absurdity. Mainly, considered as a part of 'in-yer-face' movement, McDonagh's *Pillowman* offers more than 'in-yer-face' theatre. A detective story with black humor and theatre of violence combined together demonstrates a skillfully crafted pastiche. It must also be noted that Katurian's stories are like fairy-tales (looking as if appealing to young children and including words like 'once upon a time') however, they are too violent to be fairy tales.

CONCLUSION

Because it is not an organized movement, postmodernism in literature does not have definite definitions, timeline or central figures. The examples of postmodern literature can be traced back to as early as the novels like Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, yet, not every literary work in these postmodern times can be considered as postmodern. The theatre of the absurd, beat generation, in-yer-face theatre and magical realism have similarities and sometimes they are collectively called postmodern literature. Mainly considered as a part of in-yer-face theatre, which focuses on the violence; murder, torture, child abuse *Pillowman* adds more layers to in-yer-face theatre by its intertextuality, irony, playfulness, allegory, maximalism, parody, pastiche and dark humor. Postmodern literature has been criticized for lacking authenticity and originality however, *The Pillowman* demonstrates how clichés can come together to create something unique. The intermingling stories of Katurian show intertextuality, metafictional state, irony and allegory. Postmodern condition of the life Martin McDonagh also adds to the postmodern nature of the play *The Pillowman*".

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