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Studying Samuel Beckett'S Waiting For Godot Through The Lens Of Postmodernism

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ABSTRACT

The present study is the postmodernist analysis of Samuel Beckett's play, Waiting for Godot. The postmodernism features including fragmentation, minimalism, maximalism, truth versus reality and temporal distortion are emphasized. Through the textual analysis the present research examines the experiences of Vladimir and Estrogon. The study reveals that the play reflects major characteristics of postmodern theory through its non-linear narration, minimal setting, the inadequate development of plot and the repetitive routine of characters. The ambiguity of the mysterious Godot, the meaningless activities and instable language of the characters further demonstrate the crisis of human identity, and the absence of absolute truth. The present study concludes that Beckett's play is one of the significant postmodern texts that continues to influence the contemporary literature.

Key words: Postmodernism, features of postmodernism, Absurdity .

Introduction

The early period of twentieth century witnessed two great wars. World War I and World War II. The two wars profoundly affected the literature of that particular age. Consequently, the writers of the post-World Wars era refused to tell the readers straight forward stories. The writers believed that since there is hopelessness, meaninglessness and uncertainty in the lives of the people then why to be straightforward in depicting the society. They came up with fragmentations and a complete breakage from the traditional methods of depicting life in literature. As a result, the 20th century, there is modernism and postmodernism theories. Lyotard (1984) asserts that the modernism and postmodernism are the epochs postulated in a relatively shared, viewpoint of history. According to the famous version of history, the modernism starts from the 18th century which is also called as the age of Enlightenment to the middle of 20th century

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and after that the era of postmodernism began. Although the postmodernism succeeded the modernism which was an international movement during 19th century, it still remains a subject of debate. Modernism had two great wars, WWI and WWII under it shelter. These two wars had profound effect on the thoughts of human beings.

The two wars also questioned the reliability of rationalism in general and modernism in particular. Postmodernism on the other hand is a complete deviation of thought line of men. It is a reawakening or renaissance towards breaching the rigidified chains of the traditional norms and notions of society and which have converted into economic, political and social institutes. These rigid principles and unaltered beliefs are the cards for megalomaniac figures. These power-maniac figures exploit the so so-called prescribed rules to justify and rationalize their callousness. The postmodernism phenomenon cannot be articulated chronologically only. Postmodernism assumes that one must work without directions and rules to make up the rules of what would have been done. This is the thing we find in Samuel Beckett's work usually. Beckett's each work invent its own rules as it moves forward. Like postmodernism Beckett believed that we live in the world where things do not happen logically rather happen haphazardly. The writers of 21st century lost the belief on the universal truth and an ordered and balanced universe. One lives and dies by chance, they suffer bad conditions by chance or randomly. Nothing is well planned or crafted. Everything is without scheme and in most part of the world, there is no order or justice.

Similarly, the postmodernism phenomenon could not find certainty in any part of the universe therefore, it questioned everything that operated in the universe. Furthermore, it rejects the presence of an absolute truth and is profoundly doubtful about the concept of human advancement. The postmodernism is inclined towards explanation, diversity, beautification and comprehensiveness. In actual fact, the postmodernism is a different and innovative period whose activities are undistinguished, blurred and unclear. It is an era whose implications, connotations and inferences are yet to be understood. Therefore, uncertainty, doubt, distrust and disbelief are the central qualities of postmodernism. As per Hooti (2011) the postmodernism is an ample concept that has been debated and challenged in many grounds like science, literature, philosophical and cultural. Some critics are of the view that it has originated from architecture. It cannot be given a definite and fixed definition as it is based on natural aspects and attributes.

The play, *Waiting for Godot*, was written in French language in 1949 by Samuel Beckett. It was translated into English language in the year 1954. The play open with the appearance of two men Vladimir and Estrogon who are waiting for a mysterious Godot. It shows the uncertainty and meaninglessness of human existence. There are two tramps, Vladimir and Estrogon who are waiting for a mysterious Godot. During their wait, to pass the time they engage in conversations which are both philosophical and fragmented. The Godot never comes, they kept waiting anxiously and suffer endlessly. The play ends without a resolution which shows the hollowness of human existence.

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Research Question

How far does *Waiting for Godot* reflects the characteristics of postmodernism?

Research Objective

To evaluate the characteristics of postmodernism in the play, *Waiting for Godot.*

Literature Review

Noorbakhsh (2013) states that the literature of the 20th century describes the mood and tone of the age. Therefore, the writers produced literature which is fragmentary, no plot and no characterization, absurdity and pointless activities of characters, no order or sequential arrangement and rising and falling actions etc. Samuel Becket, who is one the most promising writers of 20th century introduced the notion of absurdity, hollowness, fragmentation and nothingness of life in his play, *Waiting for Godot* which was first performed in 1953 in Paris. The play *Waiting for Godot* presents the qualities of both modernism and postmodernism movements. Therefore, the current study focuses on studying Beckett's drama *Waiting for Godot* through the lens of Postmodernism.

The drama, *Waiting for Godot* has received attention from scholars due to its unconventional structure. Noorbakhsh (2011) concludes that the mysterious road, the puzzling tree, the characters of the drama, all exist indifferently from each other. Hence, lacking coherence and meaningfulness. Likewise, Das (2025) evaluated the play *Waiting for Godot,* from both modernist and postmodern perspectives. The findings of her study reveals that the play reflects the ideas and elements that are at the edge of both modernism and postmodernism theories. However, Shams (2013) centered his analysis on humanistic aspect and found numerous contradictions in the play. According to him the sufferings, the pain and the struggle that Vladimir and Estrogon go through separate them from their true selves. The basic human nature is to live independently and without any boundary. However, in the play Beckett shows that human nature is dependent. Vladimir and Estrogon do not want to wait but they have no choice. Further, there is no relief in pain and suffering of both characters. Both the characters want to commit suicide, but even that is beyond their reach.

Postmodernism and Its Features

Preda (2001) maintains the view that in the era of 1930s and 1940s the term "postmodernism" was in used in the literary debates of literary criticism of Anglo-American and Latin American literary debates. Postmodernism got attention and force in 1970s. Sheeba (2017), Mahitosh (n.d), Rameen and Preeti 2011, Aslam (2019) provided some examples of stylistic techniques that are often used in post- modern literature.

Pastiche: Pastiche is pasting together various ideas together to create a new writing style. For example the amalgamation scientific fiction and fairy Tales.

Intertextuality: Intertextuality is to give credit and to acknowledge the earlier literary works with another literary work.

Metafiction: Metafiction is to remind readers that they are reading a fictional and imaginative work.

Temporal Distortion: it is the use of time in narrative that does not develop smoothly from one phase to another phase in a logical manner

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Minimalism: In minimalism the writer uses the events and characters which are common and unremarkable.
Maximalism: Maximalism is the detailed writing which is disorganized and incoherent.
Magical Realism: Magical realism is to introduce impossible and unrealistic events without defining explicitly what is fact and what is fiction.
Moreover, postmodern writers celebrated the fragmentation and did not lament over it. Postmodern writers did not follow any established rules and principles of writing. According to postmodern writers truth is always relative and there is no absolute truth. They believed that fashions, manners, trends and traditions do not exist forever. Therefore, all these issues are prone to change. Postmodern writers do not search for universal truth. Consequently, postmodernist denied the classical literary rules. There is no hero or heroine in the postmodern literary works. There is no logical beginning, climax and end. There is no unity of time, unity of place and unity of action. The characters in postmodern works are ordinary men and women who belong to middle, or lower strata of the society. Furthermore, in classical literary tradition there is a moral lesson in the end with a close ended conclusion. In postmodernism the end of the literary work is open for discussion and can be interpreted at various levels.

The information presented above it will be at ease to analyze the *Waiting for Godot* as postmodern work. With the above information, now it will be a bit easier to analyze our text *Waiting For Godot.* There are various similarities between the play and the postmodernism because it was performed and published in the second half of the 20th Century just before the movement postmodernism began. Therefore, many similarities can be found in it. The present study use textual analysis as research method to evaluate the selected play. The textual analysis involves the close reading of the text (Mc Kee, 2003).By reading the text line by line the researchers identify the keywords, phrases, imagery and symbolism. After analyzing the meaning, the evidences are selected to support the arguments. These steps help in the explanation and interpretation of the text.
For the present study the researchers use the following features of postmodernism to evaluate the selected text.

Analysis

Uncertainty and Meaninglessness

Samuel Becket introduces the mysterious, strange, and weird world of *Waiting for Godot* through these melancholic, depressing and painful word.

"let's go"_"we can't"_ "why not"_
"we are waiting for Godot"_"ah"... (Becket, 1956 p. 16).

The above lines show the collapse of rational action they are not performing any significant action. They seem to be miserable characters who have nothing to do. They are waiting for the Godot under a tree in the middle of an uncertain place. They are doing certain meaningless actions to pass their time. At one point they contemplate of suicide as well. As they want to get rid of the wait and the dreadful silence. The deferral actions of Vladimir and Estrogon reflect the postmodernist feature. At one point they decide to leave which shows the clear direction and purpose but the immediate

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negation, *we can't*, shows the vague authority of Godot. Their wait is interrupted by Pozzo, his slave, Lucky and an unnamed boy. That unnamed boy appears to be messenger of Godot. Nothing really happens in the drama and the play seems to be the absurd one. The play, *Waiting for Godot* had a serious influence on the literary writers and people of that era. As Samuel Beckett violated the convention of traditional drama and with this defiance he started the trend of 'Theater of Absurd'. The place of *Waiting for Godot* after the Second World War was among one of the most brilliant plays written after WWII. Esslin (1980) rightly calls it as one of the intensely written, successful drama of the post-war literature. Most importantly, the play does not have a proper ending. The mystery that is associated with the Godot is not resolved. The play starts with the waiting and it ends with the waiting of the mysterious Godot who never arrives.

Fragmentation in Waiting for Godot

The characters, themes, story and characters reveals the disintegration in every dimension. The fragmentation baffles the readers and they are unable to understand that who are the two characters Vladimir and Estrogon and who is the mysterious Godot they are waiting for. Unlike, traditional drama the plot is not well organized and compact. Furthermore, the Wasteland of T.S Eliot is to a fragmentary poem but Eliot laments the glorious past. *Waiting for Godot* on the other hand never laments for the past and celebrates the fragmentation. Vladimir says, *what did we do yesterday.* (Beckett, p.10). The sentence is repeated by Estrogen, *what did we do yesterday?* It shows that the time is vague for the characters and their actions are so identical that they are unable to distinguish between past and present. In addition, the traditional plays have a beginning, middle or climax and resolution. In the play, *Waiting for Godot,* there is no proper plot, no beginning and resolution. The wait of the characters never ended; the Godot never arrived. Only the repetitive actions remained.

Truth and its Denial

In most of Samuel Beckett's works like *Waiting for Godot* (1954), Not I (1974) and Endgame (1958), he involves himself in such a language system in which he reorganize and restructure the phenomenon of reality in his personal way. In his literary works one may find the irony. Because on one hand he says that one must show his/her existence through speech/talk and on the other hand he says that words or sentences are meaningless and do not carry any intrinsic meaning. In the works of Beckett the truth is blocked off form the readers. It can further be elaborated through the Deconstruction theory. The term was firstly used by Jacques Derrida (1930-2004), the French philosopher. This concept can be applied to Beckett's works as well because it questions the rationality of the veiled structure on which the "truth" is based. White (2009) commented that Beckett is writer who opposes the truth of existence through a system of language that Beckett thinks is going to be ineffective. White (2009) comments further Beckett creates a world which is in the constant state of decline and this decline and destruction distresses his characters mentally, emotionally and physically.

Vladimir: *"our savior. Two thieves. One is supposed to have been saved and the other...damned"* (Beckett, p.5). The character of Vladimir making the point through

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this dialogue that everything in world is subject to doubt and is vague. In the world of *Waiting for Godot* there is no rationality in beliefs. Samuel Beckett's attitude towards postmodern world can be seen as desolate and depressing. His outlook towards life is ironic and miserable where language does not carry any certain meaning. The play *Waiting for Godot* the characters demonstrates their desire to make sense and to prove their existence in hopeless world they are living. Vladimir and Estrogon are communicating with each other to illustrate their existence but the language system they are using is not sufficient to help them in attaining the abstract truth. And centrally, the words the characters are using is not the truth itself but the mere symbolic presentation of the truth. It is therefore, suggested that the rejection of the truth shows that there is no absolute truth exist in this world.

The Ordinary men as characters

The two characters of *Waiting for Godot* (Vladimir and Estrogon) are the characters from ordinary world. They are neither kings nor the people from high society. The drama revolves around the problem of their identity which is an inner problem. There is no action at all. Nothing really happens in the play. No rising and falling action is there. The postmodern literature deals with common people/characters with order less plot. This is the common feature one can find in the *Waiting for Godot* and postmodernism.

Temporal distortion

As mentioned earlier, the play *Waiting for Godot* is more concerned with the identity problem which is an inner problem in characters. The reader is not knowing anything about the major characters. The job, status, age of Vladimir and Estrogen is not known to the readers. There is sudden appearance of the other two characters Pozzo and Lucky. Furthermore, Vladimir and Estrogen forgot their names Estrogen calls Vladimir as Didi and Vladimir calls Estrogen as Gogo. The characters do not remember the past and they are not certain about their present state. They do not remember since how long they are waiting for the mysterious Godot. They are even not sure whether the Godot would come today or tomorrow. The Vladimir and Estrogen are not knowing the clear reason of their waiting for the mysterious Godot. Furthermore, Pozzo appears as blind in Act II and he cannot recall that he met Estrogen and Vladimir yesterday. In Holding up for Godot, our sense of direct or dynamic time is persistently disturbed. In spite of the fact that the play encompasses a particular chronological structure with occasions happening successively, the representations of time inside the story break this coherence. Act Two begins 'Next day. Same time. Same place,' however the most characters, Vladimir and Estragon, cannot be certain that typically the case. Their disappointments of memory start to call into address the authority of the playwright's declarations, and confuse our sense of time. They cannot decipher between the present and past time.

We have time to grow old. The air is full of our cries. (Beckett, pg.44)

Was I sleeping, while the others suffered? That with Estragon my friend, at this place, until the fall of night, I waited for Godot? (Beckett, pg.44)

The very existence of two characters is meaningless to an extent that they believe it's better to die then to live alive into this useless and uncertain world. It shows that

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suffering is the inseparable part of human existence. There are screams of pain and cries all around them but they cannot do anything to improve their conditions. At one point they think of committing suicide but it is also out of their power to die peacefully. They are consistently waiting for the mysterious Godot , they are uncertain about their wait. They are not sure that since how many days they have been waiting and how long they have to wait. They cannot distinguish between the times of their wait. This offend them completely and they did some meaningless activities to kill the time but they are living in such a mysterious world in which they have to face suffering and torture only. There is hardly any moment of peace and relief.

The play *Waiting for Godot* is a play within the Theater of Absurd, which is an impressive result of postmodernism. Through the characters of Vladimir and Estrogen, Samuel Beckett depicts the nothingness of human existence. All the characters in the play faces the absurdity of their existence as life seems meaningless to them. This constant discontent is presented through the repetitive dialogues like *"Nothing can be done"* by Estragon. All the individuals who survived the two great wars involved in the same sentiments. Life demonstrates the absurdity of human existence which is full of purposeless and nothingness.

Minimalism & Maximalism

Minimalism is the economical use of words and characters in the literature. It is one of the promising qualities of postmodernism that it uses very few words and few characters. The characters speaks very few words. The characters in the *Waiting for Godot* speak with pithiness and precisely. Let us consider the following example from the text:

Estragon: *Nothing to be done.* (Beckett, p.65)

That's how it is on this bitch of an earth. (Beckett, p.50)

The dialogues are delivered with minimal use of words and phrases. The words are simple and dialogues are very brief and minimum use of vocabulary. Though the few words are used in each dialogue but even though they leave a permanent impression on the minds of the reader. The readers of *Waiting for Godot* can easily find the disturbance, turmoil and meaninglessness of human existence after the world war one and the world war two. In addition, maxixmalism is also revealed in the play. It exhibits infinite interpretations and symbols. Vladimir and Estrogon talk constantly and share such memories which are untrue most probably. There is excessiveness of sameness. The characters repetitively talk, wait, leave, come back and forget. It shows their endless despair and anxiety.

Conclusion

It can be concluded here that postmodernism is an unorthodox philosophy. It is a radical deviation of thought process of human beings. It is a step of reawakening to break the rigid chains of orthodox norms, rules and regulations of society which have transformed into political, social institutions to exploit the common people of society. And also the megalomaniac people exploit such so-called rules to justify their injustice and insensitivity. The Postmodernist writers belief that one should work without the directions of already prescribed rules. This is the thing which can be found in the literary works of Samuel Beckett. Each work of Beckett discover and creates its own rules as it proceeds. Like postmodernism Beckett believed that we live in the world

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where things do not happen logically rather happen haphazardly .In this way, we will say that the play *Waiting for Godot,* is curiously a play to consider from postmodernist viewpoints. The character, setting, dialect, and the fashion of the play go with the afterward 20th century scholarly development called postmodernism. Samuel Beckett's play, *Waiting for Godot* is considered as an example of a work spanning two movements: modernism and postmodernism. The play was written in 1955, it was an era when novelty, creativity, experimentation, fragmentation, magic realism, minimalism etc were at their peak. The current study found number of postmodernism features in the play under study. Therefore, the play *Waiting for Godot* can be considered as an example for the postmodernist literary work. Hence, the play is one the significant postmodernist texts and it still influences the contemporary literature.

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