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## TRACES OF POSTMODERNISM IN CARYL CHURCHILL'S EARLY PLAYS

Zahra Khozaei Ravari<sup>1</sup>, Sivabala Naidu<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of Foreign Languages, Faculty of Literature and Humanities, Shahd Bahonar University of Karman (IRAN)

<sup>2</sup>School of Education, Faculty of Arts and Social Science, University of Nottingham (MALAYSIA)

Emails: zahra.khozaei@uk.ac.ir; zahra.khozaei@gmail.com, Sivabala.Naidu@nottingham.edu.my

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### ABSTRACT

This study is devoted to the various concepts of postmodernism in Caryl Churchill's plays from 1976 to 2000 when she established herself as a pioneer in feminist drama in England. Although, her plays have been vastly studied from numerous perspectives, there have been only a few concerted attempts to investigate the postmodern concepts that are present in her works. Accordingly, this study aims to investigate traces of postmodernism in *Vinegar Tom* (1976), *Cloud Nine* (1979), *Top Girls* (1982), *The Skriker* (1994) and *Far Away* (2000). These plays were written during the Second Wave of Feminism and her worldview on the social construction of gender in the plays catalysed the Third Wave of Feminism. However, this study is aimed at unearthing postmodernist concepts such as pastiche, meta-fiction, temporal distortion, irony, transformation, fragmentation and magic realism which are under-explored in previous studies. In doing so, the study hopes to showcase that Churchill was not only a feminist writer but a postmodernist playwright as well. The study via a close reading of the selected texts is set to provide a greater understanding of Churchill's plays and establish that she was also a pioneer in postmodernist writings.

**Key words:** pastiche, meta-fiction, temporal distortion, irony, transformation, fragmentation, magic realism

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Caryl Churchill who began her illustrious career as a playwright in 1958 with *Downstairs* is considered as the pioneer of English feminist theatre (Keyssar 1984). However, Churchill was also a postmodernist and as such, postmodernist concepts were also prevalent in many of her plays. Postmodernist theatre is characterized by "disjunctive, displaced, or indeterminate forms, a discourse of fragments, an ideology of fracture, a will to unmaking, an invocation of silence - (it) veers toward all these and yet implies their very opposites, their antithetical realities" (Hassan, cited in Schmidt, 16). The use of ambiguous and unstable potential of signs and performance makes it possible for playwrights to challenge assumptions. Hence, postmodernism can expose and delocate the assumptions that govern conventions so that traditional ways of reading are dislodged. In other words, conventions can only be effectively challenged if the form also changes radically.

This investigation is necessitated by the fact that dominant features and techniques of postmodern concepts in theatre have often been disregarded by scholars; for instance, Bigsby maintains that "theatre has commanded very little interest from the major theorists or those who have taken up their theories" (Schmidt 9). Hence, only a selected few playwrights such as Beckett, Ionesco, Pinter, Shepard and Wilson are considered as postmodern dramatists in literary circles worldwide.

Basically, this study is based on the premise that limited attention has been given to the exploration of postmodernism in theatre compared to other literary genres and most scholars tend to scrutinize narrative fiction to establish interpretations of postmodern techniques and concepts such as collision, hesitation, banality, displaced fantastic, hyperreality and hesitation as it is often more appropriate to fiction than drama (see, Jernigan 2008, Mudasi 2014). This study, hence, is a bold attempt to locate the application of postmodern techniques in theatre via the analysis of five of Churchill's works although the range of postmodern concepts/techniques which are appropriate to this genre of literary work is expected to be much lesser than in other genres.

Essentially, elements of postmodernism are often compared in contrast to what was the norm in modernism. For instance, unlike modernism, postmodernism does not concern itself with rationality and logical thinking and hence, it does not attempt to provide a clear meaning. In other words, postmodernism challenge the conventional notions of modernist writings. As clarified earlier, postmodernism techniques and concepts dismantle the traditional style of playwrighting by adopting unconventional forms in language and performance. In his classification of postmodernism, This study will utilize Mason's proposal (2007) who suggests that postmodern writings tend to be characterized by 1) a poststructuralist critical approach and 2) a set of aesthetic and textual devices" (xxx) which this study hopes to uncover in the analysis of the selected plays.

### 2. POSTMODERNIST STUDIES

One of the dominant postmodernist studies that informs this study is Nankovias' *Chaos of Postmodern Changes* which investigated expressions of transformation in Slavic literature after 1989 when over 300 million Slavs were locked in a cultural paradigm that was diametrically opposite to communism. This comparative study of Slavic literatures was analysed from the perspective of both postmodern culture and the philosophical ideas of thinkers such as Lyotard, Bauman, Rorty, Pignone, Foucault, and Derrida among others, to legitimize the theory of pluralism i.e. in the understanding of the multi-faceted nature of truth, the polyphony of cultures, and the significance of all minorities in the spiritual development of humankind" (9).

Utilizing selected examples from the literatures of the West, East and South Slavic countries, the author attempts to identify the crucial elements of transformation in social and literary self-awareness of different generations in the post-communist Slavic countries over fifteen years. She scrutinised the writings of J. Topol, V. Palevin, T. Royewicz, D. Ugresh, T. Zubutko, and D. Bemkowski to understand how the quest for a better and braver world of pluralism and democracy was



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