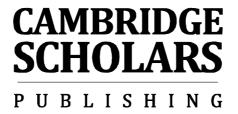# Towards a Poetics of Postmodern Drama

Towards a Poetics of Postmodern Drama: A Study of Harold Pinter and Tom Stoppard

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P U B L I S H I N G

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

INTRODUCTION

Harold Pinter and Tom Stoppard undoubtedly figure among the leading British dramatists of the last sixty years or so and both have been acknowledged among the most prominent playwrights of the contemporary theatre. John Fleming aptly remarks:

> Indeed, in virtually any list of premier British playwrights of the second half of the twentieth century, two names consistently appear: Tom Stoppard and Harold Pinter. Their standing as the preeminent British playwrights of the last half century seems relatively secure.[1]

Pinter has intrigued critics for decades and a remarkable variety of critical responses to his plays testify to the richness of his dramatic output and his stature as a great playwright. Characterized by complexity, his plays defy easy explication and according to W J Free, "puzzle audiences and critics", and, "in spite of a growing body of criticism, there are perhaps more unanswered questions about Pinter than about any other major contemporary playwright."[2] Surveying Pinter criticism, G C Behera identifies three broad approaches taken by Pinter scholars:

> the socio-psychological approach with its emphasis on the problem of failure in communication, the symbolic- allegorical approach with the emphasis on the ideas that are inherent in the plays, and the theatrical approach with its concern with stage effects.[3]

Despite these major attempts to classify and categorize his works, a realization among critics persists that traditional critical tools are inadequate for understanding Pinter; conventional approaches fail to offer satisfactory explanations of many essential features of his plays. Austin Quigley was the first critic to draw attention to the fact that Pinter's plays demand a different approach. Rejecting the traditionally accepted socio-

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[1] John Fleming. *Stoppard's Theatre: Finding Order among Chaos.* Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001, p. 251.

[2] W J Free. "Treatment of Characters in Harold Pinter's *The Homecoming.*" *South Atlantic Bulletin*, xxxiv, November 1969, p. 1.

[3] Guru Charan Behera. *Reality and Illusion in the Plays of Harold Pinter.* New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers, 1998, pp. 11-2.

psychological and symbolic-allegorical approaches, Quigley, in *The Pinter Problem* (1975), invokes the language philosophy of the later Wittgenstein to analyze Pinter's plays. He exposes the limitations inherent in such approaches which assume that the primary function of language is referential. Positing an interrelational function of language, Quigley argues that Pinter's characters use language primarily to negotiate relationships with each other. He persuades us to:

> look at Pinter's language from exactly the same point of view that we should adopt in approaching all language use; we must begin with Wittgenstein's suggestion that we: 'Look at the sentence as an instrument, and its sense as its employment.'[4]

His in-depth study and analysis of such plays as *The Room* (1957), *The Caretaker* (1959), *The Homecoming* (1965) and *The Landscape* (1968) centers on the use of language as a tool not of communication but of manipulation where characters are in full control of the linguistic resources at their disposal.

Continuing with the line of inquiry that posits language at the center, Marc Silverstein in *Harold Pinter and the Language of Cultural Power* (1993) asserts that Quigley's entire focus is confined to "what Saussure calls parole, the individual speech-act, without sufficient attention to langue (language as a codified system) and its relation to parole."[5] According to Silverstein, Quigley fails to consider how the system of language forecloses all possibilities of situating the human subject outside the linguistic codes. He sees language as the prime agent through which power functions to constitute and situate the human subjects. His focus is on the process by which human subjectivity is created through an inexorable law of inscription by cultural codes.

Varun Begley in his *Harold Pinter and the Twilight of Modernism* (2005) challenges Andreas Huyssen's idea of the "Great Divide" between modernism and postmodernism and argues that Pinter "blurs the adversarial simplicity of the "Great Divide" and complicates clear-cut distinctions between the modern and postmodern".[6] Begley's main interest lies in reading Pinter from Adorno's perspective on the problem of artistic autonomy and commitment. For him, it is with the memory plays that

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[4] Austin Quigley. *The Pinter Problem*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975, p. 46.
[5] Mark Silverstein. *Harold Pinter and the Language of Cultural Power*. London and Toronto: Associated University Press, 1993, p. 18.
[6] Varun Begley. *Harold Pinter and the Twilight of Modernism*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005, p. 5.

Pinter enters a postmodern terrain, a journey which culminates in his later political plays. Although Begley's work has many insights to offer, he shows little interest in relating what he terms as Pinter's postmodern turn, to theories of deconstruction, decentered subjectivity and Lyotardian dissensus, ideas which the present work has drawn on to approach Pinter.

More significantly, the present work draws on the invaluable insights of Silverstein but also marks a departure from his basic thesis in some important respects. It argues that Silverstein's thesis of the monolithic unassailability of power does not duly consider the deconstructive strategies by means of which Pinter thoroughly demystifies these cultural codes. It makes an attempt to show that, in a characteristically postmodern manner, Pinter's plays both inscribe and contest these codes and ideologies, a strategy which makes them double-coded. It is true that Pinter does not posit any vantage point of critique or resistance outside of these ideologies, but what is equally important is to see how he contests them from within by exposing their constructed nature. It is this postmodern method of inscription and subversion from within that enables Pinter to expose the nexus between power and representation, and subjectivity and subjection. Furthermore, it has been demonstrated that from a postmodern perspective, the memory plays of Pinter, so conspicuously absent from Silverstein's exposition, are of immense importance because of their potential to serve as a powerful commentary on the idea of decentered subjectivity.

Tom Stoppard too has been seen by most of the critics as a playwright obsessed with writing in a light, playful manner, often borrowing from previous dramatic texts to produce rather farcical plays.[7] Although his plays conspicuously lack Pinter's mysterious or enigmatic quality, yet these need to be analyzed from a postmodern perspective in order to demonstrate Stoppard's stature as one of the leading contemporary dramatists. The present study, therefore, examines Stoppard's concerns with history, ethics, and opinions on art and epistemology, to argue that his dominant modes of parody and other self-reflexive devices qualify him as a preeminent postmodern playwright.

Although Stoppard's overt use of these devices makes it easy to identify his postmodern concerns, it is noteworthy that critics have mostly interpreted his plays as examples of lightweight comic entertainments which deal with serious ideas in a more or less Wildean fashion. This is the reason that some critics have tended to use the term pastiche for his

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[7] Some of the critical studies which argue on these lines are Jim Hunter's *Tom Stoppard's Plays* (1982), Thomas Whitaker's *Tom Stoppard* (1983) and Tim Brassel's *Tom Stoppard: An Assessment* (1985).

plays. Ira B Nadel and Michael Vanden Heuvel both prefer the term pastiche to describe Stoppard's plays. Nadel, for example, remarks:

> Pastiche, for Stoppard, is the playful loose imitation of or borrowing from another text to formulate a new one. Whether he draws from or imitates *Macbeth* in *Cahoot's Macbeth*, or Agatha Christie in *The Real Inspector Hound*, or borrows lines and themes from Strindberg's *Miss Julie* and John Ford's '*Tis Pity She's a Whore*' in *The Real Thing*, the pastiche is a breezy strategy for creating the Stoppard style.[8]

Even Heuvel applies the Jamesonian model of pastiche to *Travesties* (1974), asserting that "the formal structure of *Travesties* is that of postmodern pastiche as it is defined by Jameson."[9] The argument presented in this book is that it is parody rather than pastiche that defines Stoppard's work more satisfactorily.[10] The focus, therefore, is to see Stoppard as a parodist who exploits the critical potential of parody to move beyond mere playfulness. Stoppard's plays are, it is argued, fraught with political and ideological implications due to which they cannot be taken merely as light entertainments.[11]

The first chapter "Engaging with Reality: A Poetics of Postmodern Drama", encapsulates the theoretical framework of the study and attempts to highlight the value of the theoretical model presented by Linda Hutcheon in her work on postmodernism to demonstrate its relevance for the study of postmodern drama. It is argued that Hutcheon's model that she prefers to call "a poetics of postmodernism", by articulating a significant parallel between the poststructuralist thought and postmodern artistic practice, provides a basis for formulating a poetics of postmodern drama. Her basic assertion that postmodernism is essentially double-coded, an idea she borrows from Charles Jencks, has a very important advantage of seeing postmodern art and literature as capable of retaining a

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[8] Ira B Nadel. "Writing Tom Stoppard" in *Journal of Modern Literature*. 2004, Vol. 27, no.3, p. 23.

[9] Michael Vanden Heuvel. "'Is postmodernism?' Stoppard among/against the postmoderns" in Katherine E. Kelly (ed). *The Cambridge Companion to Tom Stoppard*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001, p. 220.

[10] The difference between the two terms will be discussed in detail in the first chapter.

[11] John Fleming is inclined to regard Stoppard as a modernist rather than a postmodernist, although he too admits that in one important sense, namely, Stoppard's embracing of uncertainties instead of mourning the loss of meaning makes him more a postmodernist than modernist. See *Stoppard's Theatre: Finding Order among Chaos.* Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001, p. 256.

critical stance towards contemporary reality in spite of its self-conscious complicity with it.

It is argued that the main characteristics of postmodernism can be identified in the works of some of the well-known contemporary European and American dramatists and on the basis of these it is possible to formulate a poetics of postmodern drama. The theoretical model provided by Hutcheon, according to which postmodernism both inscribes and subverts the representational categories in art, is applied to drama to argue that postmodern drama employs the conventional dramatic categories of language, character and plot, only to subvert them from within. This argument is substantiated by an examination of some seminal critical works on postmodern drama in recent times by Jeanette Malkin, Deborah Geis, Nick Kaye and Philip Auslander. For exploring the characteristic features of postmodern drama, Brecht and Beckett, along with some later dramatists such as Sam Shepard, David Mamet, Robert Wilson, Richard Foreman, Heiner Muller and Thomas Bernhard, have been discussed with reference to their treatment of language, human subject and reality.

The second chapter "Harold Pinter and Postmodernism: Power, Memory and Politics", examines Pinter's plays using the concepts elucidated in the first chapter. Following Keith Peacock, these plays are divided into three categories which roughly, though not strictly, correspond to the three phases of Pinter's dramatic career. In the first category, Pinter's earlier plays are discussed with a special focus on the exposition of the ideological creation of subjectivity. The object is the study of power that operates through the dominant ideological codes to construct the human subject. The plays of the second category called memory plays are examined to reveal the idea of decentering of the subject and fluidity of the past, while in the third category the later plays, which treat issues like political subjugation and power abuse, are discussed in the light of the Lyotardian concepts of mini-narratives and dissensus.

The third chapter "Stoppard and Postmodernism: Parody, History and Ethics", analyzes the plays of Tom Stoppard, dividing them into three broad categories based on certain predominant structural and thematic concerns. In the first category, plays which employ overt self-reflexive devices such as parody and play-within-the-play are discussed. In the second category, plays based on history, a perennial postmodern concern, are analyzed to argue that Stoppard's treatment of history offers striking parallels with "historiographic metafiction". The third category, in which only two plays are analyzed, highlights Stoppard's typical postmodern stance towards ethics.

The conclusion, while largely summing up the important findings of the present work, reiterates the distinctive existence of postmodern drama despite its many overlappings with the modern avant-garde and absurdist traditions. It not only points out how both Pinter and Stoppard, despite their largely different styles and dramatic modes, are postmodernist, but also suggests their importance for any reformulation of a poetics of postmodern drama.

CHAPTER ONE

ENGAGING WITH REALITY:
A POETICS OF POSTMODERN DRAMA

Many critics have rightly complained of a lack of critical studies on postmodern drama and scant theoretical attention it has received as compared to other literary genres. For some the phrase "postmodern drama" is little more than an empty signifier. Stephen Watt's *Postmodern/Drama: Reading the Contemporary Stage* (1998) illustrates this attitude by using a slash in the title between postmodern and drama to indicate that the relation between the two is at best oxymoronic. One of the main reasons for this is the notion that postmodernism implies a rejection of the mimetic status of drama and thus strikes at the very roots of representation through it. Watt announces the "failure of the term postmodern drama,"[1] and is of the opinion that it is largely "an empty intellectual marker."[2] This, he believes, is due to the fact that "drama has been relegated to the role of the unwanted or unwashed, a bastard stepchild born in and supportive of a less enlightened social formation".[3] Given the problematic nature of the term "postmodern" itself, postmodern drama becomes for Watt "doubly problematic". In addition to this, the fact that the phrase "postmodern drama" is usually used as "a weak term of periodization fraught with difficulties as a historical marker", explains why there is a definite lack of interest in theorizing drama from a postmodern perspective.[4] Moreover postmodernism, by challenging the ideas of a determinate dramatic text and theatrical space, challenges any attempt to conceive of "postmodern drama" itself.

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[1] Stephen Watt. *Postmodern/Drama: Reading the Contemporary Stage*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998, p. 25.

[2] *ibid*, p. 39. As Watt states "… when preceded by such adjectives as *postmodern* or *post-modernist*, drama is emptied of most of the features by which it has traditionally been recognized – dialogue, a discernible narrative, character, agon – thus potentially rendering the text so described as something of an "empty" or self-nullifying "marker"(17).

[3] *ibid*, p. 6.

[4] *ibid,* p. 19.

In 1981, C W E Bigsby had remarked that the English theatrical scene of the late 1950s presented an anxiety that found expression in ontological and epistemological questions and reflected a condition where "the social order, character and language are shown in a state of disrepair."[5] Ten years later, in a somewhat similar vein, Ruby Cohn noted that since the 1950s, a departure from "the mimetic representation of contemporary middle class reality" is to be witnessed in the British theatre.[6] The two elements she found most noticeable were "theatre in the theatre and split character."[7] Although both Bigsby and Cohn acknowledged that a shift had occurred in the contemporary drama, neither used the term postmodernism for explaining this shift. What follows here is an attempt to delineate a poetics of postmodern drama by examining the theory of postmodernism offered by Linda Hutcheon, one of the most outstanding theoreticians of postmodernism, and drawing on the insights of some perceptive critics such as Jeanette Malkin, Kerstin Schmidt and Deborah Geis. The focus will be to see how these changes in the contemporary drama can be examined in the light of Hutcheon's model. The discussion should, however, start with an elucidation of her model and its justification for studying postmodern drama. A brief overview of some initial attempts at theorizing postmodern literature is, therefore, not out of place here.

The much-debated problem whether postmodernism should be seen as a radical break from modernism or its continuation need not engage us here. According to Hutcheon, postmodern should be seen as both a continuation of and departure from modernism manifest in the shift in the foundational categories on which Western literature is premised, like the human subject, language and history. This shift has found a sustained expression in the literary practice of the past for many decades now. In 1987, John Johnston argued that postmodernism revolved round three broad categories: "literary/aesthetic post-modernism, historical (or cultural) postmodernism and theoretical postmodernism."[8] Out of these the most familiar version, according to Johnston, was the literary or aesthetic one "advanced by people like Patricia Waugh and Brian McHale in England, and Jerome Klinowitz and Ihab Hassan in the United States."[9]

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[5] C W E Bigsby. "The Politics of Anxiety: Contemporary Socialist Theatre in England". *Modern Drama* 24, 1981, p. 393.
[6] Ruby Cohn. *Retreats from Realism in Recent English Drama*. London: Penguin Publications, 1991, p. 1.
[7] *ibid,* p. 18.
[8] John Johnston. "Postmodern Theory/ Postmodern Fiction". *CLIO* 16:2. 1987 (Winter), p. 140.
[9] *ibid.*

Ihab Hassan, perhaps, was the first critic to recognize a need for a new term to classify the works that had appeared on the American literary scene in the 1950s. In his early writings, especially the essays of the 1960s like "The Dismemberment of Orpheus" (1963) and "The Literature of Silence" (1967), Hassan used the term modernism as a broad concept accommodating newer literary expressions under the category. He, however, soon felt the inadequacy of the term modern and was led to use the term postmodern for writers like de Sade, Hemingway, Kafka, Genet and Beckett. In his later writings, Hassan became increasingly interested in the significant shift in the contemporary European literature which called for a new critical terminology. At this point, in the late 1970s and 1980s, Hassan became aware of the importance of the French poststructuralist influence on postmodern thought and practice. Poststructuralism, Hassan realized, could no longer be kept out of the debate on postmodernism. Other writers too recognized this important factor and Allen Thiher's *Words in Reflection: Modern Language Theory and Postmodern Fiction* (1984) offered chapters on Wittgenstein, Heidegger, de Saussure and Derrida, thus demonstrating the increasing acceptability of the poststructuralist relation with the fiction of postmodernism. In the following year Hilary Lawson wrote *Reflexivity: The Postmodern Predicament* (1985) focusing on Derrida's significance for post-modernism.

However, this recognition of the significance of poststructuralist theories for postmodern art, especially deconstruction, raised the important question of referentiality which led to the notion that postmodern art discredits all critical engagement with reality. Interpreting the self-reflexive tendencies in postmodern art as the negation of the world or reality was, however, largely because of a widespread misunderstanding of some of the central concepts of the poststructuralist thought. Perceptive critics, however, were quick to point out that the feature of self-reflexivity in postmodern art could not be interpreted as the negation of referentiality. In the early 1980s, John Barth labeled his self-reflexive short stories collected in his own *Lost in the Funhouse* as mainly late modernist, while they had been considered postmodernist by many critics. For Barth, a true postmodern writer like Italo Calvino, "keeps one foot always in the narrative past…and one foot in the structuralist present."[10] This recognition of the danger of relegating postmodern literature to the prison-house of language with no referential value was shared by some of the foremost theorists of postmodern literature who also undertook the

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[10] John Barth. "The Literature of Replenishment: Postmodernist Fiction". *Atlantic Monthly*. 1980, 245:1, p. 70.

difficult task of delineating a poetics of postmodernism. Brian McHale's *Postmodernist Fiction* (1987) made an attempt to formulate a distinctive poetics that could explain adequately the concerns of postmodern novels. The central tenet of McHale's formulation of postmodernism is the identification of a shift from the epistemological questions characteristic of the modern period to the ontological questions. He writes:

> The dominant of modernist fiction is *epistemological*. That is, modernist fiction deploys strategies which engage and foreground questions such as those mentioned by Dick Higgins in my epigraph: "How can I interpret this world of which I am a part? And what am I in it?" Other typical modernist question might be added: "what is there to be known? Who knows it? How do they know it, and with what degree of certainty?"[11]

On this formulation, McHale includes novels as Ford Madox Ford's *The Good Soldier* which is featured by an unreliable narrator and Kafka's *The Trial* which depicts an individual's prosecution but significantly declines to offer any motive for the court's actions. As against the modernist fiction, the dominant of postmodernist fiction is ontological:

> Postmodernist fiction deploys strategies which engage and foreground questions like the ones Dick Higgins calls '*Post cognition'*: 'which world is this? What is to be done in it? Which of my selves is to do it?" Other typical postmodernist questions bear either on the ontology of the literary text itself or on the ontology of the world it projects, for instance: "what is a world?: what kinds of world are there, how are they constituted, and how do they differ?"[12]

McHale offers examples of Thomas Pynchon's novels that foreground the idea of uncertainty in postmodernist fiction. The simultaneous existence of more than one worlds points to their constructed nature. The reader finds herself constantly beset with a situation where she has to ask herself whether the world she is reading about is anything except her own construction. McHale's version of postmodernism offers to see it in terms of pluriform, polyphonic being and contests the extreme self-reflexivity of these works. Hans Bertens writes about McHale's analysis in these terms:

> For McHale, postmodernist fiction negotiates the tension between self-reflexivity and representation by abandoning the modernist emphasis on epistemology – which leads inevitably towards reflexivity for an emphasis on ontology. Knowing loses its privileged position to pluriform,

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[11] Brian McHale. *Postmodernist Fiction*. London: Methuen, 1987, p. 9.

[12] *ibid,* p. 10.

polyphonic being. The one world which the modernist sought to know is replaced by a plurality of autonomous worlds that can be described and the relations between which we can explore, but that can never be the objects of true knowledge.[13]

It is, however, Linda Hutcheon's cogently argued work that appeared under the title *A Poetics of Postmodernism*: *History, Theory, Fiction* in 1988 which is of immense value for our purposes. The merit of Hutcheon's theoretical model lies in her appropriation of the seminal ideas of the leading French poststructuralists such as Derrida, Foucault, Barthes and Lyotard on the one hand, and her demonstration of the fallacy inherent in the oft-repeated claim that postmodern self-reflexivity is a sign of its downright complicity with the dominant contemporary culture on the other. She exemplifies how postmodern literature retains a critical edge towards contemporary reality, a feature that makes her paradigm appealing even today. A remarkable feature of Hutcheon's formulation of a postmodern poetics is her recognition that such a project has to be inductive in that it has to arrive at a poetics through the study of postmodern works, that is, the literary practice itself.

Her critical project, therefore, has the value of recognizing and incorporating poststructuralist insights while maintaining that postmodern literary works retain a critical edge towards the contemporary social and political reality and hence cannot be dismissed as merely acquiescing in the dominant ideologies of the contemporary times. Hutcheon stresses the point that postmodernism is doubly-coded, one that is simultaneously self-reflexive and referential. She remarks that "postmodernism is a contradictory phenomenon, one that uses and abuses, installs and then subverts the very concepts it challenges."[14] She also takes issue with those writers who regard postmodern art as entirely self-reflexive and hence bereft of any representational value. For its detractors, liberal humanists and Marxists alike, postmodernism ends up as a dishonest refuge from reality, content with social and political quietism. Hutcheon tries to reveal the flaw in this argument by arguing that postmodernism can never be equated with aesthetic formalism. The following observation made by Bertens on Hutcheon's model highlights the core value of her thesis:

> Hutcheon's attractive (and immensely successful) model has the great advantage that it, in her own words, gives equal value to the self-reflexive

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[13] Hans Bertens. *The Idea of the Postmodern: A History*. New York: Routledge, 1995, p. 77.
[14] Linda Hutcheon. *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction.* London: Routledge, 1988, p. 3.

and historically grounded and can thus retain a political dimension (even if
it simultaneously calls political commitments into question). Because of its
refusal to surrender to sheer textuality, it can, with a certain amount of
credibility, investigate the determining role of representations, discourses,
and signifying practices. It can, in other words, address the matter of
power.[15]

Hutcheon's argument that postmodernism is both self-reflexive and
historical was, however, anticipated by John Barth in "The Literature of
Replenishment: Postmodern Fiction" (1980), where he argued that
postmodern writing should attempt to achieve a kind of synthesis between
modernism and realism by avoiding both extreme self-reflexivity of the
former and naïve illusionism of the latter. For Hutcheon, too, extreme self-
reflexivity is a feature of the late modernist literature rather than of
postmodernism: "Postmodern forms want to work toward a public
discourse that would overtly eschew modernist aestheticism and
hermeticism and its attendant political self-marginalization."[16] For her,
"historiographic metafiction" is the representative postmodern art form,
one that offers the model of self-reflexive representation. "Historiographic
metafiction" both installs and subverts what it installs only to problematize
our notions about history and its truth-value:

> In challenging the seamless quality of the history/fiction (or world/art) join
> implied by realist narrative, postmodern fiction does not disconnect itself
> from history or the world. It foregrounds and thus contests the
> conventionality and unacknowledged ideology of that assumption of
> seamlessness and asks its readers to question the process by which we
> represent ourselves and our world to ourselves and to become aware of the
> means by which we *make* sense of and *construct* order out of experience in
> our particular culture. We cannot avoid representation. We *can* try to avoid
> fixing our notion of it and assuming it to be transhistorical and
> transcultural. We can also study how representation legitimizes and
> privileges certain kinds of knowledge including certain kinds of historical
> knowledge.[17]

She also sums up the postmodern view of history in these terms:

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[15] Hans Bertens. *The Idea of the Postmodern: A History.* New York: Routledge,
1995, p.78.
[16] John Barth. "The Literature of Replenishment: Postmodernist Fiction" in *The
Atlantic,* 1980, 245:1, p. 65.
[17] Linda Hutcheon. *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction.*
London: Routledge, 1988, p. 23.

> What the postmodern writing of both history and literature has taught us is that both history and fiction are discourses, that both constitute systems of signification by which we make sense of the past ("exertions of the shaping, ordering imagination"). In other words, the meaning and shape are not in the events, but in the systems which make those past 'events' into present historical 'facts'. This is not a 'dishonest refuge from truth' but an acknowledgement of the meaning-making function of human constructs.[18]

Hutcheon emphasizes the double-codedness of postmodernism and its self-consciously contradictory nature to distinguish it from modernism. Postmodernism, she insists, "takes the form of self-conscious, self-contradictory, self-undermining statement."[19] And one of the most successful strategies to create a contradictory stance on any statement is the use of parody. The use of parody in literature is old but the term has all long been taken to mean a ridiculing imitation of a previous work of art. Already, in her *Theory of Parody* (1985), Hutcheon had argued that the concept of parody needs to be freed from the constraint of the traditional definition. Parody, according to her, is a much more profound literary concept than is ordinarily understood. She states, "the kind of parody I wish to focus is an integrated structural modeling process of revisiting, replaying, inventing and trans-contextualizing previous work of art."[20]

She regards parody as an apt postmodern form because of its potential to critique the traditional humanist ideas about art and its relation to reality. For her, the parodied text is not a target but a weapon, an idea that underscores the scope of parody as much broader than merely ridiculing some other work. It is a form of auto-referentiality fraught with ideological implications. While Hutcheon states that, "parody, often called ironic quotation, pastiche, appropriation, or inter-textuality, is usually considered central to postmodernism, both by its detractors and its defenders,"[21] she departs from the prevailing interpretation that postmodern parody is ultimately value-free and devoid of any critical potential. It is noteworthy that Frederic Jameson takes this view of postmodern parody, rejecting its critical stance towards reality and regarding it as a mere pastiche. Jameson identifies pastiche as a defining formal feature of postmodern aesthetics.

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[18] *ibid,* p. 89.

[19] Linda Hutcheon. *The Politics of Postmodernism*. London: Routledge, 1989, p. 51.

[20] Linda Hutcheon. *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth Century Art Forms.* London: Methuen, 1985, p. 11.

[21] Linda Hutcheon. *The Politics of Postmodernism.* London: Routledge, 1989, p. 93.

He sees two factors as crucial in the emergence of the "universal practice" in the contemporary literary practice whereby texts speak in the "dead" language and forms of the past. For him it is the notion of the "decentering" of the formerly sovereign or autonomous subject that necessitates the "imitation of dead styles". Secondly, he links the emergence of pastiche to the absence of a linguistic norm. He grants parody a critical potential but finds it to have been displaced by pastiche in postmodern art:

> Parody finds itself without a vocation; it has lived, and that strange new thing pastiche slowly comes to take its place. Pastiche is, like parody, the imitation of a peculiar mask, speech in a dead language: but it is a neutral practice of such mimicry, without any of parody's ulterior motives, amputated of the satiric impulse, devoid of laughter and of any conviction that alongside the abnormal tongue you have momentarily borrowed, some healthy linguistic normality still exists. Pastiche is thus blind parody, a statue with blind eyes.[22]

Jameson's remarks reflect the well-known stance of Marxist critics who regard all forms of postmodern art as de-historicized, wallowing in the mire of self-referentiality; in brief, an art incapable of any meaningful intervention in reality. Responding to Jameson's distinction between parody and pastiche, Terry Eagleton argues that although parody of a sort is not alien to postmodernism, it is deplorable that:

> what is parodied by postmodernist culture, with its dissolution of art into the prevailing forms of commodity production, is nothing less the revolutionary art of the twentieth century avant-garde. It is though postmodernism is among other things a sick joke at the expense of such revolutionary avant-gardism, one of whose major impulses, as Peter Burger has convincingly argued in his *Theory of the Avant-Garde,* was to dismantle the institutional autonomy of art, erase the frontiers between culture and political society and return aesthetic production to its humble, unprivileged place within social practices as a whole. In the commodified artifacts of postmodernism, the avant-gardist dream of an integration of art and society returns in monstrously caricatured form … Postmodernism, from this perspective, mimes the formal resolution of art and social life attempted by the avant-garde while remorselessly emptying it of its political content.[23]

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[22] Frederic Jameson. *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. London and New York: Verso, 1991, pp. 17-8.
[23] Terry Eagleton. "Capitalism, modernism and postmodernism" in *New Left Review*, 1985, 152, p. 60.

Hutcheon deals with these arguments of the two leading Marxist critics by arguing that postmodern parody is thoroughly political, primarily because it serves to underline the political and ideological nature of all representations. She is critical of Eagleton who, according to her, fails to appreciate the critical edge of postmodernism while approving of the same in the modernist revolutionary avant-garde. In fact, postmodernism's relation with modernism can be understood better by keeping in view that avant-garde is nearer to postmodernism than to modernism. What postmodernism challenges is modernism's view of the autonomy of art and the individual human subject. Modernism sought in art an order which it failed to find in life and the great modernists attempted to flee from the chaos of history and discontinuities of the modern world into the formal world of art. T S Eliot believed that all disparate experiences are always forming new wholes in the mind of the poet. This inward turn, so characteristic of all great modernists, highlights their preoccupation with the inner world of human consciousness. The modernist assumption of aesthetic autonomy postulates a perspective from outside, an Archimedean viewpoint from where to respond to the modern world. This assumption stands radically challenged by postmodernism. Another feature that postmodern radically departs from is modernism's uncritical acceptance of language as a neutral medium of communication.

The historical avant-garde too aims to deconstruct the very ideology of art by relating it to social reality and cultural institutions. Unlike modernism, it is highly conscious of the political nature of all representations and seeks to interrogate the operations of the dominant cultural discourses. This explains the apparent tendency of disruption of all that is fixed by the avant-garde. These concerns of the avant-garde are obsessions with postmodernism. The subversive tendencies of postmodern art forms are indicative of the postmodern concern with challenging the conventional configurations of experience and perceptions. Postmodern art works to challenge the dominant cultural discourse while being quite aware that the challenge itself is contained within some discourse. This self-consciousness of postmodernism sets it apart from the avant-garde.

Postmodernism is not avant-garde because of its provisional and self-consciously contradictory character. While as the avant-garde is overtly oppositional to the tradition and places faith in the ability of art to change social reality rather directly, postmodernism neither desires any break with the past nor regards art as capable of effecting a social change, though, as Hutcheon maintains, questioning and problematizing may set up the conditions for possible change. Hutcheon's argument on this point is based on the accepted stance of postmodernism, one which is derived from the

works of Lyotard, Derrida, Foucault and the rest. Postmodernism opposes all attempts to regard representations as natural. By virtue of its relentless critique of the natural and neutral, it resists all efforts to naturalize what it regards to be ideological.

Roland Barthes called this process which enables us to see the oft-concealed ideology of our notions of reality as *dedoxification*. The term *doxa* itself means something that is accepted as natural and *dedoxification* is the recognition of this supposed "natural" as ideological. Barthes' main thrust as a critic was to denaturalize our assumptions of the human self and the "objective" world outside us. Hutcheon sees a similar potential in the postmodern parody as it helps us see the political and ideological nature of all human discourses. But while all the earlier forms and strategies of criticism posited a vantage point from which to approach the object, postmodern parody denies the possibility of any such view from outside. On the contrary, it foregrounds its complicity with the object of its critique and underscores the implicated nature of all viewpoints. Postmodernism, thus, is a complicitous critique of all social and political phenomena. Hutcheon suggests that postmodern parody is complicitous with the values it subverts. This subversion, nevertheless, takes the form of denaturalization:

> It seems reasonable to say that the postmodernism's initial concern is to denaturalize some of the dominant features of our way of life, to point out that those entities we unthinkingly experience as 'natural' they might even include capitalism, patriarchy, liberal humanism are in fact 'cultural', made by us, not given to us.[24]

To see how postmodernism should be seen as simultaneously inscribing and contesting the concept of representation, let us turn to some of the implications of Derrida's critical strategies for our understanding of history. In Derrida's whole oeuvre, it is his ideas on textuality that have problematized the traditional notions about history and its truth-value. For Derrida, history is a text and a text itself is a configuration in which meaning is always produced by a process of signification that never reaches what he calls the "transcendental signified". Nicholas Royle has rightly noted that "the implications of Derrida's work for historiography are quite massive."[25] Derrida himself clarifies his position in these terms:

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[24] Linda Hutcheon. *The Politics of Postmodernism*. London: Routledge, 1989, p. 2.
[25] Nicholas Royle. *After Derrida.* Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995, p. 18.

What I call 'text' implies all the structures called 'real', 'economic', 'historical', 'socio-institutional', in short all possible referents. Another way of recalling once again that 'there is nothing outside the text'. That does not mean that all referents are suspended, denied or enclosed in a book, as people have claimed, or have been naïve enough to believe and to have accused me of believing. But it does mean that every referent and all reality has the structure of a differential trace and that one cannot refer to this 'real' except in an interpretative experience. The latter neither yields meaning nor assumes it except in a movement of differential referring. That's all.[26]

Royle explains the implications of deconstruction for historiography in these terms:

To say that history is radically determined by writing, then, is to say that it is constituted by a general or unbounded logic of traces and remainders-general and unbounded because these traces and remains, this work of remainders and remnants are themselves neither presences nor original: rather they too are constituted by traces and remains in turn.[27]

Hence, for Derrida textuality is the condition of history and textuality itself carries with it the condition of its own critique. Derrida argues that there can be no meaning inherent in the text without a context and context itself is unbounded. It is this state of being "unbounded" that generates a perpetual difference of meaning. Applying this idea to history, we see that history can never escape the condition of textuality whose production involves a process of constructing meaning in language. Rather than capturing something "given", the very exercise of writing implies a process of selection, distribution, contextualization, combination and reconstruction, connecting and disconnecting and ultimately endowing the "seamless past" with certain meanings and not others. History, therefore, cannot lay claim to objective and neutral knowledge of the past, since everything that a historian relies on for her work of historiography, including herself, is a text. Historians, howsoever objective they might try to be, can never escape their condition of situatedness in the web of signification. There exists no Archimedean point from which to carry out a truly objective study of the past. There are only some events that find a place in the historical records and become "facts". History itself is

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[26] Quoted in Simon Critchley. *The Ethics of Deconstruction*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1922, p. 39.
[27] Nicholas Royle. *After Derrida*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995, p. 20.

permeated by the institutional forces that work to promote certain favored versions to the exclusion of some others.

In the past few decades, these ideas have received a new impetus in the works of the writers such as Hayden White, Richard Evans, Frank Ankersmit and Dominick LaCapra. Their studies, despite a stiff resistance offered by the traditional historians, have now found a firm foothold in academic circles and can no longer be dismissed as mere intellectual vandalism. The postmodernist position on history, therefore, contests all thought-systems which claim to derive their strength from history, Marxism being the central one. This calls for addressing the main charges brought against postmodernism by its detractors, mainly the Marxists and the liberal humanists. As mentioned above, it is argued by many that postmodernism upholds the negation of history and referentiality and is ultimately complicitous with the contemporary consumerism. These critics accuse postmodernism of a culpable escape into textuality at the cost of engagement with reality. It is argued that postmodernism is informed by the ideology of linguistic determinism that reduces all reality to linguistic codes.

It is of utmost importance to understand that postmodernism's contestation of the epistemological status of history does not imply a rejection of the past. Simon Critchley has shown that Derrida's purpose is not to reduce the world of real objects, things and events into discourses, into mere texts, which means rejecting their existence altogether. Explaining Derrida's concept of the text, he says that this idea does not:

> wish to turn the world into some vast library, nor does it wish to cut off reference to some '*extra textual realm'*. Deconstruction is not bibliophilia. Text *qua* text is glossed by Derrida as the entire 'real-history-of-the-world' and this is said in order to emphasize the fact that the word 'text' does not suspend reference 'to history, to the world, to reality, to being and especially not to the other'. All the latter appear in an experience which is not an immediate experience of presence – the text or context is not present, but rather the experience of a network of differentially signifying traces which are constitutive of meaning. Experience or thought traces a ceaseless movement of interpretation within a limitless context.[28]

And Hutcheon very perceptively explains Derrida's view on the subject of reference as follows:

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[28] Simon Critchley. *The Ethics of Deconstruction.* Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1922, p. 39.

Derrida's denial of the transcendental signified is not a denial of reference or a denial of any access to extra-textual reality. However, it is meant to suggest that meaning can be derived only from within texts through deferral, through *differance*. This kind of poststructuralist thinking has obvious implications for historiography and historiographic metafiction. It radically questions the nature of the archive, the document, evidence. It separates the (meaning-granted) facts of history-writing from the brute events of past.[29]

The implications of the ideas discussed above are of central importance for the formulation of a poetics of postmodernism. Postmodern literary works foreground the ideological and political nature of all representations and radically question our assumptions of objectivity and neutrality. It is at this point that the issue of power and its role in representation becomes seminal to a poetics of postmodernism. We can see here how Foucault enters the picture of Hutcheon's thesis. Foucault's ideas on discourse and its overwhelmingly determining character of both the subjective self and objective knowledge should undoubtedly find a significant place in any attempt to delineate a poetics of postmodernism. Hutcheon very aptly states that "the relation of power to knowledge and to historical, social and ideological contexts is an obsession of postmodernism."[30]

Language itself is inextricably bound with the ideological contexts and it is not possible to purge language of these contextual traces. Our prevalent cultural signification generates a field of power which is all-pervading. In the words of Terry Eagleton:

Discourses, sign-system and signifying practices of all kinds, from film and television to fiction and the languages of natural science, produce effects, shape forms of consciousness and unconsciousness, which are closely related to the maintenance or transformation of our existing systems of power.[31]

Power is a ubiquitous phenomenon, a process rather than a product that permeates cultural signification to its core. Postmodernism, especially deconstruction, has tried to unravel the hidden power relationships in the general tendency of binary opposition. Every binary, the argument goes, conceals a power relation that divides it into a hierarchy of the privileged and the under-privileged. Thus the seemingly innocuous binaries of

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[29] Linda Hutcheon. *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Fiction, Theory*. London: Routledge, 1988, p. 149.

[30] *ibid,* p. 86.

[31] Terry Eagleton. *Literary Theory: An Introduction*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1983, p. 210.

male/female, white/black, western/eastern, are tied up with power relations. Postmodernism thus strikes at the very basis of this hierarchical division.

From a perspective of a postmodern poetics, language and all forms of representation are politically inflected because there can be no escape from "situatedness" within some discourse. A postmodern artifact raises the question of ideology by revealing that every kind of representation in art is somebody's representation. No author, artist or critic can avoid her imbrication in some ideologically-inflected narrative and can hence lay no claim to an apolitical representation. Reality does not exist except when represented through a text, spoken, visual or written, and all texts are discursive practices. Rather than positing the origin of a text in the personality of the author, postmodernism declares that the text originates within a field of enunciation. An aesthetic product, no matter how aesthetically pure and uncontaminated it is alleged to be, always exists within some field of enunciation, that is, a social, political, religious and cultural milieu, and is, therefore, inextricably bound to power relations. Hutcheon comments upon this idea in the following manner:

> Both postmodern art and theory work to reveal the complicity of discourse and power by re-emphasizing the enunciation: the act of saying is an inherently political act, at least when it is not seen as only a formal entity.[32]

The Foucauldian insights into the nature and operations of discourse are already visible here. Discourse, according to Foucault, operates by means of various procedures involving controls, constrains, permissibility, acceptability and rejection. It is over-arching in its character and enables the production, dissemination and reception of all forms of knowledge. As language comes to be seen as "a social practice", an instrument as much for manipulation and control as for humanist self-expression, it also becomes clear that the linguistic is not separable from the extra-linguistic. No linguistic speech, written document or visual representation can exist without power somehow permeating its very core. Language is quite often an instrument of cultural power, a means of repression, of hiding rather than stating the truth and an instrument for manipulation.

The term "political" occupies an important place in postmodernism as it comes to signify the discursive nature of all representations. As already illustrated, Foucault's examination of power and its operations in the constitution of human subjectivity and discourse of knowledge are of

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[32] Linda Hutcheon. *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*. London: Routledge, 1988, p. 185.

central concern to postmodernism. This calls for a revision of the term political and its usage. In postmodern art, politics becomes an inherent feature of all representation which it seeks to explore and reveal. Postmodern art problematizes the concept of neutral representation, the very basis of the realist tradition in art, by engaging with the political nature of representation. Art, postmodern works suggest, can never avoid implication with the discursive practices which are themselves built into politically inflected relationships. "All language," as Hayden White has said, "is politically contaminated,"[33] and postmodern art works to reveal the political status of all representations claiming neutrality. This concern of postmodern art finds expression in the tendency to depart from the mimetic tradition in arts. The assumptions of the realistic tradition, which are thoroughly challenged by postmodernism, give way to the increasing awareness of inescapable imbrications with the ideologies inherent in artistic representation. Language in postmodern literary artifacts is no longer used only referentially or emotively, but as a means to explore how it can be used for purposes different from its commonly accepted usage. In fact, postmodern theories illustrate the primacy of linguistic signs in constituting the human subject in the first place. Postmodern literature reflects this concern in its focus on the characters' construction in and through linguistic discourse. This idea manifests itself through what is termed as the "decentered subject", in which the human subject is presented as more or less a point of intersection of various discourses.

Postmodern art draws attention to these ideas by foregrounding the question of power. For Hutcheon, power is one of the central themes of "historiographic metafiction's" investigations of the relation of art to ideology. The novels that Hutcheon cites like William Kennedy's *Legs*, Toni Morrison's *Tar Baby* and Rushdie's *Shame*, deal with the theme of ideological power inherent in cultural discourse. In the final analysis, postmodern literature serves to denaturalize the paradigm of power distribution in cultural and social institutions. Notions of authority, authenticity, sacredness, filiations, duty, punishment and others are derived from a web of complex power distribution. Ideas about legitimacy and illegitimacy rest upon it and postmodern works lay bare the structures embedded in power. While doing so, postmodern art inscribes and challenges power. A simultaneous inscription and contestation of power means revealing its permeation of all "natural" categories, thereby contesting it from within and, reinscribing it suggests its inescapable determining mode.

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[33] *ibid*, p. 193.

It has been argued that Linda Hutcheon's thesis of postmodern poetics focuses almost exclusively on a specific literary genre "historiographic metafiction" to the exclusion of other postmodern literary forms. Stephen Baker in his *The Fiction of Postmodernity* agrees with Hutcheon's insights but is uneasy with what he calls "Hutcheon's identification of postmodern fiction as "historiographic metafiction".[34] Such objections can be dealt with if we take into consideration the vital fact that for Hutcheon "historiographic metafiction" is the most apt postmodern form of art because it exemplifies the concerns of postmodernism and foregrounds its characteristic features. The same is true of parody. It is clear, however, that Hutcheon does not intend to reduce postmodernism to parody or "historiographic metafiction". In fact, Hutcheon herself hints at other possible postmodern forms in her discussion of the avant-garde and Brecht's theatre, both of which share many significant features with postmodernism. Hutcheon suggests a similarity between parody and Brecht's aesthetic distance, both of which "involve both artist and audience in a participatory hermeneutic activity."[35] Both "historiographic meta-fiction" and Brecht's Epic theatre "place the receiver in a paradoxical position, both inside and outside, participatory and critical."[36] Both challenge the concept of linearity, development and causality, and foreground the process of the human subject's construction by the dominant cultural and social structures. And, ultimately, both are subversive in their critique of representation as complicitous with power structures.

Having elucidated Hutcheon's thesis and its merits, it will be worthwhile to consider its applicability to the study of drama. Postmodern drama can be best understood in the Hutcheonian terms as a simultaneous inscription and subversion of the basic dramatic categories of character, language and representation. What needs to be underlined is the double-coded nature of postmodern drama whereby it rests on these categories, but questions the assumptions on which they have been traditionally based. Although postmodern drama attempts to lay bare and thus demystify the ideologies in which the whole dramatic apparatus including the playwright, character, language and the audience are situated, it suggests that the awareness of these ideologies itself constitutes an

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[34] Stephen Baker. *The Fiction of Postmodernity*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000, p. 5.
[35] Linda Hutcheon. *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*. London: Routledge, 1988, p. 220.
[36] *ibid,* p. 220.