

Language, Character and History in Postmodern Drama: Towards Formulating a Poetics

Mufti Mudasir

The present paper is an attempt towards formulating a poetics of postmodern drama, based on the theoretical insights of some of the foremost postmodern critics and dramatists. It seeks to underline the importance of a poetics of postmodern drama keeping in view that unlike other genres of literature, especially the novel, postmodern drama has received little critical attention. Drawing upon the works of Linda Hutcheon, Jeanette Malkin and Deborah Geis, the paper tries to examine the bearing of their insights on our appreciation of postmodern dramatic practice. It argues, contrary to some contemporary voices which regard all forms of postmodern art as hermetically sealed and hence devoid of referential value, that postmodern drama foregrounds the notion of 'self-reflexive referentiality' by challenging the conventional notions of language, character and history.

Although the term postmodern drama has been in use for quite some time now, there are still those who dismiss it as an empty signifier. One of the main reasons often cited for this is that postmodernism implies a rejection of mimetic status of the drama and thus strikes at the roots of representation through it. An example of this attitude is Stephen Watt's *Postmodern/Drama: Reading the Contemporary Stage* (1998) in which the author uses a slash in the title between postmodern and drama to indicate that the relation between the two is at best oxymoronic. Watt announces the "failure of the term postmodern drama," (Watt 25) and is of the opinion that it is largely "an empty intellectual marker," (39) This, he believes, is due to the fact that postmodernism challenges the privileging of the play and the playwright and undermines the essential difference of drama from other forms of literature and art. Despite this he, ironically perhaps, laments the lack of consideration for contemporary drama by postmodern theorists.

Watt's somewhat dismissive attitude toward postmodern drama as a valid term is, however, not shared by certain other writers who have taken up the study of contemporary drama with a recognition that an identifiable shift has taken place in the foundational dramatic categories of character, language and representation since modernism. Some of these works include Deborah Geis's *Postmodern Theatric[k]s: Monologue in Contemporary American Drama* (1993), Jeanette Malkin's *Memory Theatre and Postmodern Drama* (1999), and Nick Kaye's *Postmodernism and Performance* (1994), to name a few very important critical examinations of postmodern drama. The present paper aims to combine some of the insights provided by these critics with the theoretical framework of postmodernism presented by Linda Hutcheon to examine the possibility of a poetics of postmodern drama. The purpose is to see how recent changes in the contemporary drama can be examined in the light of postmodern theory and hence, an attempt is made to identify the specific areas of conflation between postmodern theory and drama.

In the 1980s, 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" (Bigsby, "Politics of Anxiety" 393). In a somewhat similar vein, Ruby Cohn noted that since the 1950s, a departure from "the mimetic representation of contemporary middle class reality" (Cohn 1) is to be witnessed in the British theatre. The two elements she finds most noticeable are "theatre in the theatre and split character" (18). Although both Bigsby and Cohn acknowledge that a shift has occurred in the contemporary drama, neither relates it to the critical category of postmodernism. As we shall see below, these changes are more rigorous and fundamental than

some critics have assumed, and as such require a thorough reformulation of the theoretical paradigm for examining the salient concerns of the contemporary dramatic practice.

Of the several theorists of postmodernism, Linda Hutcheon's highly persuasive work that appeared in 1988 under the title *A Poetics of Postmodernism*:

History, Theory, Fiction, merits the most serious critical attention. The strength of Hutcheon's theoretical model can be attributed to her appropriation of the seminal ideas of the leading French poststructuralists including Derrida, Foucault, Barthes and Lyotard, in her discussion of postmodern literary theory and practice. But what is very striking about Hutcheon is her firm stance, cogently defended, that postmodernism is neither ahistorical nor apolitical, instead it retains a critical edge towards reality, an idea further explicated by Hutcheon in her *The Politics of Postmodernism* (1989). A remarkable feature of Hutcheon's formulation of a postmodern poetics is her recognition that such a project should derive from an analytic study of the postmodern works, that is, the literary practice itself. She thus arrives at a poetics of postmodernism from the study of postmodern artifacts themselves, and yet very perceptively, relates the postmodern literary practice to a theoretical basis provided by the poststructuralist thought.

Her critical project, therefore, has the value of recognizing and incorporating the poststructuralist insights while maintaining that postmodern literary works retain a referential and critical edge, and hence cannot be dismissed as irrelevant, to the contemporary social and political reality. Hutcheon stresses the point that postmodernism is doubly-coded, one that is 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" (*Poetics* 3). Hutcheon's thesis takes seriously the tendency to regard postmodern art as entirely self-reflexive, thereby divesting it 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 affirming that postmodernism can never be equated with aesthetic formalism. The following observation made by Bertens on Hutcheon's model is worth quoting in full:

Hutcheon's attractive (and immensely successful) model has the great advantage that it, in her own words, gives equal value to the self-reflexive 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.
(Bertens 78)

For Hutcheon, '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. (*Poetics* 23)

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” (*Politics* 51). 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 quite 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 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 (*Parody* 11). 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, underscoring that the scope of parody is 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 intertextuality—is usually considered central to postmodernism, both by its detractors and its defenders,” (*Politics* 93) she departs from the prevailing interpretation that postmodern parody is ultimately value-free and devoid of any critical potential.

It has been argued that Linda Hutcheon’s thesis of postmodern poetics focuses exclusively on a specific literary genre ‘historiographic metafiction’ to the exclusion of other postmodern literary forms. Stephen Baker in his *The Fiction of Postmodernity* largely agrees with Hutcheon’s thesis but is uneasy with what he calls “Hutcheon’s identification of postmodern fiction as ‘historiographic metafiction’ ” (Baker 5). A closer look at Hutcheon’s arguments reveals, however, that her examination of the ideas like language, human subjectivity, power, intertextuality and discourse, which she uses to characterize ‘historiographic metafiction’ as typically postmodern, can prove equally illuminating for the study of drama. In fact, Hutcheon herself alludes to this 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” (*Poetics* 220). Both ‘historiographic metafiction’ and Brecht’s Epic theatre “place the receiver in a paradoxical position, both inside and outside, participatory and critical” (*Poetics* 220). Both challenge the concepts of linear development and causality, and foreground the process of subject’s construction by the cultural and social structures. And ultimately both are subversive in their critique of representation as complicitous with the power structures.

Postmodern drama can be best approached from the Hutcheonian perspective of a simultaneous inscription and subversion of the basic dramatic categories of character, language and reality. The notable aspect is the essential double-coded nature of postmodern drama whereby it relies on these categories, but questions the assumptions on which they are 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 ideology. It is this aspect of postmodern drama that makes it comparable to parody and ‘historiographic metafiction’.

To examine these features in the contemporary American and European drama, one has to turn to some of the most influential playwrights of the recent past which include Sam Shepard, David Mamet, Robert Wilson, Richard Foreman, Heiner Muller, Thomas Bernhard and Tom Stoppard, to name only a few whose works can offer illuminating instances of postmodernism in drama. All of them have, in somewhat similar ways, challenged the traditional dramatic conventions. Their innovations in exploiting the theatrical apparatus serve to highlight the areas of conflation between the contemporary theatre and postmodern theory. It is, however, essential to trace these

developments to the two foremost European dramatists, Brecht and Beckett. It is highly interesting to note that Roland Barthes was the first critic to see a connection between poststructuralist ideas and Brecht's theatre. In the 1955 article '*La Revolution Brechtienne*', originally an editorial in *Theatre Populaire*, Barthes summarizes the assumptions that Brecht's Epic theatre challenged. These assumptions, Barthes believed, were rooted in the Western tradition and create a myth of naturalness in the place of constructedness. Barthes seems to have been highly impressed by Brecht's critique of the notions of essentialism, especially the notion of character. His critical analysis of how signification is naturalized owes its strength to his early recognition of Brecht's strategies of disrupting the ideology of the theatre. Barthes's theory of semiotics, with the explicit aim to deconstruct dominant ideologies by demonstrating the meaning-constructing activity of signs, came only after he observed how Brecht carried out a similar task in the theatre.

Brecht's challenge to the realist dramatic narrative based on linearity and to the human subject has had an enormous influence on the subsequent dramatists who perceived that he had marked an irreversible break with the realist tradition. Deborah Geis comments on the significance of Brecht for postmodern drama in these terms:

Brecht's theory often serves as a paradigm for the challenging or displacing these conventional strategies of representation. In Brecht's "A-effect", the ongoing refusal to permit audience empathy---or the concomitant distinctions between actor/character and story/history---allows for a constructive disengagement (or, more accurately, a historicized "reading") of the speaking body and its signifiers.

(Geis, "Wordscapes" 292)

Postmodern drama presents the condition of the human subject as essentially decentered, an idea central to the poststructuralist theories. This decentering is suggested mainly in two ways: by revealing human subjectivity as an ideological construct being constantly reproduced by cultural and linguistic codes, or by showing it as fundamentally fragmented, without a core, a self or a past. Brecht is probably the first European playwright who wrote with a strong conviction against the notion of essentialism of the human subject. His Epic theatre situates the subject against a particular social and historical background to suggest how subjectivity is shaped by forces operating on it from outside.

The most important dramatist to influence the concept of human subjectivity in postmodern drama, however, is Beckett. It is noteworthy that while Brecht contested essentialism of the subject by always historicizing and contextualizing his characters, Beckett achieved the same purpose by reversing Brecht's method. His characters, stripped of all remnants of the past are thoroughly decontextualized, as the plays themselves tend to take place in some spatial and temporal void. J. Malkin makes an important remark in this regard:

...postmodern drama has no psychologically endowed characters who can act as the locus of recall. For postmodernism, individual recall is no longer the relevant paradigm, since the rooted, autonomous self, the subject-as-consciousness, is no longer available. When, as in Beckett's late plays, recall appears to arise from a specific subject, that subject is him/herself fractured, "falling to bits", and placed at a remove from the "remembering" voice(s). The link between an experiencing subject and articulated recall is severed, as is the faith in memory to capture truth, find origins, or heal.

(Malkin 7)

According to her, Beckett represents most forcefully the concept of fragmentation of the self:

Hollowed out, lacking an ego or a core of human essence, these are not characters who develop in time and inspire audience identification..... The fragmentation of experience and the dissolution of the unified self---basic topoi of postmodern thought--- banish memory from the security of individual control, rendering it sourceless.

(Malkin 7)

Malkin's basic thesis which she derives from her perception that postmodernism marks a foundational shift in the way memory operates, provides an important insight into how postmodern drama treats the concept of the subject's relation with its past :

Where once memory called up coherent, progressing narratives of experienced life, or at least unlocked the significance of hidden memory for the progressions of the present, this kind of enlightenment organization has broken down in postmodernism and given way to the nonnarrative reproduction of conflated, disrupted, repetitive, and moreover collectively retained and articulated fragments. This shift in the workings of memory is reflected in plays shaped through fragmentation, recurrence, and imagistic tumult.

(Malkin 4)

A somewhat similar thesis underlies Deborah Geis's argument which focuses on the representation of monologue in postmodern drama to suggest decentering and multivocality. She remarks, "perhaps the ultimate manifestation of the decentered subject is the increasing precedence that monologue takes over dialogue in postmodern drama"(Geis 35). For her, monologue in postmodern drama does not emerge from a unified subject, "monologue does not necessarily emerge from one coherent 'voice' or 'self'; the monologic texts, rather, are similarly fragmented and given multiple voices" (Geis 35). In fact, monologue can be seen as a medium through which the decentered subject dramatizes the fragmented condition of its memory. Installing fragmentation at a site where the subject usually assumes the sense of a unified self is a powerful method of suggesting its dispersal.

Sam Shepard offers a prime example of this idea in a number of his plays such as *Chicago* (1965), *Tooth of Crime* (1972), *Action* (1976), *Buried Child* (1978) and *Fool for Love* (1982). For both Malkin and Geis, Shepard's obsession with the theme of disintegration of the human subject is a feature of postmodernism. Malkin comments thus on Shepard's concerns:

His characters constantly transform, perform, speak in "voices." Parallel actions and generic shiftings undermine any possibility of stability, even within a theatrical code. This postmodern rejection of essence and foundation of "metaconcepts," or what Jean-Francois Lyotard calls "master narratives," supplies the frame of Shepard's imagistic plays.

(Malkin 117)

David Mamet's drama shares some essential features with Shepard's, and in the plays as *American Buffalo* (1976), *A Life in the Theatre* (1977) and *Water Engine* (1977), surface realism is constantly subverted by undermining its assumptions about character and linear progress. Bigsby remarks that Mamet's realism is, "fully informed by absurdist assumptions about the pressures which offer to dissolve character, aware of the displacement of the subject, the deceptions of language and the cogency of entropy as image and fact" (Bigsby 266). In Mamet's plays there are unmistakable signs of pressures under which the characters seem to be losing their sense of a concrete self. Bigsby sums up the state of Mamet's characters: "unable to act, to commit themselves to the casualities of a moral existence, the characters allow their impulses to be deflected into language which must then carry the weight of their blunted aspirations" (Bigsby 266).

The use of language in postmodern drama calls for a special critical attention because postmodern thought foregrounds the role of language in constructing both the epistemological discourses and the human subject. Language can never be a neutral medium for representation, but is rather always already inflected with power relations. In the words of Paul de Man, "no such thing as an unrhetorical, natural language exists that could be used as a point of reference; language is itself the result of purely rhetorical tricks and devices" (de Man 35). Postmodern drama inscribes language but subverts its neutral status by revealing its complicity with discursive practices of various types. Language, therefore, is shown to be a medium that can manipulate and hide the truth as much as it can express and reveal it. Moreover, postmodern drama demonstrates the condition of the human subjectivity as a function of linguistic codes, an

idea expounded by theoreticians such as Benveniste. Language as such is shown not to be merely reflective, but constitutive of what is termed as reality. The linguistic codes, thoroughly social in their character, cannot be used merely as tools for expression. They are, instead, inflected with prior meanings and traces from usages in different contexts, and thus shape the subject's perception of itself and reality. The use of dialogue borrowed from other texts, yet another feature of postmodern drama, simultaneously challenges the notions of the autonomy of the dramatic world inhabited by characters and their consciousness as the origin of language. The characters, held within an unbounded signifying system, are often at the mercy of various codes which manipulate them after they have been internalized by them.

Another characteristic feature of postmodern drama relating to language is its exploitation of the linguistic indeterminacies and semantic pluralities to the effect of destabilizing the link between the sign and the referent, the signifier and the signified. Here too, Beckett can be seen as a powerful representative of the idea. Andrew Kennedy has rightly observed in this context:

Beckett, who used to read Mauthner's *Critique of Language* aloud to Joyce, has woven a far reaching epistemological skepticism about all language into all his texts; and his dialogue is shot through with the pathos of man's insuperable need to go on talking without end.

(Kennedy 4)

Postmodern drama follows Beckett in dramatizing the Derridean notion of the infinite play of signifiers through a refusal of narrative closure, an idea which often finds expression in its tendency to embrace contradictions instead of resolving them. In some cases, this idea gets manifested through open-ended debates on epistemology, arts and ethics, all of which are shown to be inextricably bound with the problem of linguistic signification.

The theatres of Richard Foreman and Robert Wilson offer apt illustrations of this kind of drama that uses language to disrupt the assumptions of linguistic signification. Foreman's Ontological—Hysteric Theatre which he himself describes as

a form of concrete theatre in which the moment-to-moment resistance and impenetrability of the materials worked on stage are framed and reframed so that the spectator's attention is redistributed and exhilaration slowly invades his consciousness as a result of the continuous presentation and re-presentation of the atomic units of each experienced moment,

(qtd. in Davy xviii)

can be seen as an attempt to make the theatre viable in an age where communication of meaning has become increasingly difficult. Foreman's manifestoes which he used to corroborate his theatrical practice offer useful insights into the manner language operates in his theatre. Some of the important manifestoes read as follows:

Theatre in the past has used language to build: What follows/ We use language not to destroy, but to undercut pinnings of *there*. (qtd. in Davy xviii)

And:

Dissonances, dissociation, discontinuity, dehuman-ization/ and GAPS remind one of what is true; that man is always shipwrecked/ That he will never WIN/(Which is different from saying that he cannot/ PLAY magnificently and joyously—in which/ case not-winning is hardly a case for sadness). (qtd. in Davy 147)

Foreman argues that language should not be used primarily for its referential purposes because referentiality itself stands deeply problematized. His plays such as *Hotel China* (1972), *Pandering to the Masses: A Misrepresentation* (1975) and *Penguin Touquet* (1981) are attempts to explore the possibilities of a theatre that is based on the recognition of an inherent semantic dissonance of language.

A somewhat similar idea about language is presented in Robert Wilson's theatre of images that refuses to engage with either the psychological concerns or the plot development. Instead, what is

highlighted is the severance of language from its supposed origin, the human consciousness. His plays such as *A Letter for Queen Victoria* (1974-5) and *Einstein on the Beach* (1976) subvert language by, “hollowing it out, establishing a series of disjunctions between word and act, word and context, word and gesture” (Bigsby 181). Language as a part of the medium of the theatrical representation is used to pinpoint its problematical nature. Bigsby comments on Wilson’s use of language in these terms:

The language is deployed in part as a kind of jazz scat or a form of mantra. He uses language against itself. On the one hand he relies on a certain associative power. He wishes to press his model of simultaneous experience into the realm of language while at the same time wanting to dis-assemble it. (Bigsby 178)

It is however to be noted that the aim of both Foreman and Wilson is to break free from language, an idea premised upon the faith in the human ability to capture a pre-linguistic essence. This idea, however, is radically contested by postmodernism. Nevertheless, both these playwrights have marked a significant point of intersection between theatre and the recent poststructuralist theories.

The question of language is thus central to postmodern drama even if certain practitioners are motivated by a desire to escape its determining influences. Postmodern drama does not abjure reference to reality in spite of its disruption of linguistic categories. This can be seen in the way in which the past is both inscribed and subverted. Like ‘historiographic metafiction’, postmodern drama revisits the past ironically. History assumes importance not because it reveals the past as it was, but because it enables to perceive that our retrieval of it can never escape the conditions of textuality. The challenge of inscribing the past on the stage is met by postmodern drama by either projecting characters reminiscing about a collective or individual past, or by presenting different time-frames simultaneously or alternately on the stage. This calls for redefining the narrative in non-linear terms that alters the manner of conceptualizing time. In the words of Elizabeth Deeds Ermath:

The best definition of postmodern narrative might be precisely that it resolutely does not operate according to any form of historical time, that is, representational time, and in many cases directly parodies or disputes that time and the generalizations it allows to form. (Ermath 43)

By rejecting the notion of linearity of history, postmodern drama also rejects the related notion of progress. J. Malkin’s remarks in this regard are worth quoting:

Ideologically, postmodernism differs from the modern in terms of the foundational concept of “progress”. Progress implies linear and causal increase through time, development, improvement, teleological faith. The virtues of progress and goal-oriented history – compromised beyond repair by this century’s ideological excesses – are rejected in postmodernism and replaced by concept stressing synchronicity, the simultaneous, repetitive, plural, and interactive. (Malkin 10)

Malkin’s assertion that postmodernism stresses synchronicity should not be construed to suggest that it abjures the past. On the contrary, postmodern drama revisits the past precisely to disrupt the notion of linear progress underlying the assumptions of the Enlightenment Rationality. A very remarkable instance of this is Tom Stoppard’s plays such as *Travesties* (1974), *Arcadia* (1993), *The Invention of Love* (1997) and *The Coast of Utopia* (2002) all of which are situated in the past and feature historical figures and events. They offer a striking parallel, in the dramatic mode, to Linda Hutcheon’s conceptualization of ‘historiographic metafiction’ as a mode of writing that problematizes the referential status of history. One of the most prominent characteristics that these plays share with ‘historiographic metafiction’ is that they freely mix historical and fictional elements, often situating historical figures in purely imaginative situations. The device calls attention to the inherent functionality of history as a narrative. They also share with ‘historiographic metafiction’ the idea of the human subject as a point of intersection of multiple

and even conflicting discourses and its ultimate situatedness in the ideological matrix, thereby undermining the notion of a vantage perspective on history and the past.

Malkin takes up Heiner Muller and Thomas Bernhard, the two German dramatists, to substantiate the argument that postmodern drama revisits history with irony in order to question its epistemological status. Muller's *Germania: Death in Berlin* (1971) and *The Battle* (1974), and Bernhard's *Eve of Retirement* (1979) are examples where history is presented in the form of a collage and mixed freely with purely imaginative elements. In a scene of *Germania*, for example, a rather grotesque version of the battle of Stalingard is presented, where the real historical figures as Napoleon, Caesar, and the Nibelungs engage in farcical acts. In yet another scene Frederick II appears as a vampire. This device of fiddling with history is a potent way to engage with it ironically. Bernhard's *Eve of Retirement* too treats history with complicitous irony, conflating the realms of the past and the present, while simultaneously presenting a proliferation of perspectives, fragmentation and radical indeterminacies. Malkin sums up the manner in which postmodern dramatists engage with history in these terms:

Postmodernism involves an explicit (and always "loaded") utilization and reflection of the past, confounded by memory, by a destabilized perspective, or by other deconstructive tactics. Bernhard, like other postmodern dramatists--- Heiner Muller, Sam Shepard--- depends on the audiences' knowledge of the past, of how the past is usually imaged, in order to shock and draw irony through multiple, or conflated perspectives. These are often provocations which challenge the usual representation of that past, or of the present in its light.

(Malkin, "Pulling the Pants" 106)

Moreover, postmodern drama inscribes a relation with the present as much as with the past. All representations, whether belonging to the past or the present, are shown by it to be constitutive of reality. This means blurring the traditional distinctions between reality and its representation and hence fact and fiction, an idea which is presented through the use of self-conscious theatrical devices such as the play-within-the-play. Postmodern drama, like other postmodern art forms, engages critically with reality. This is, however, done by simultaneously throwing its own representational status into question, confirming Hutcheon's thesis that postmodernism is a paradoxical and self-contradictory enterprise. Nick Kaye substantiates this point in his analysis of postmodern performance:

The postmodern [drama] indicates a calling into question of the languages, styles and figures through which it is seen..... It follows that the postmodern in art is subversive and transgressive, that is occurs as a critical and skeptical stepping beyond bounds, a disruption that purposefully upsets the terms by which the "work of art" would constitute itself.

(Kaye 19)

Postmodern drama, to use Barthes's terminology, *dedoxifies* our modes of thought and perception which provokes a rethinking of these modes. A recognition of this fact enables us to dispel the notion that postmodernism implies an infinite regress into textuality with no referential value. Hutcheon's thesis can be seen to be endorsed by Kaye who sees postmodern performance as an art form with a deconstructive potential. Kaye remarks that, "performance may be thought of as a primary postmodern mode," (12) because it has the potential of "making visible [of] contingencies and instabilities,.... A disruption of the move toward containment and stability" (23).

A similar view is expressed by Philip Auslander in his *Presence and Resistance: Postmodernism and Cultural Politics in Contemporary American Performance* (1992) where he sees postmodern performances as fraught with political implications for the contemporary postmodern commodification. Mark Forties describes Auslander's position thus : "Auslander argues that although, all cultural production is politically compromised; postmodern performance restores critical distance which strategically allows us to reconsider the world we

live in, thereby, performing a resistant political function” (Forties 123). It is this deconstructive impulse of postmodern drama that vindicates its value as a mode of critical engagement with the contemporary culture and politics and establishes it as a significant artistic category capable of both reflecting and commenting on the contemporary reality.

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