

## **AN EXPERIMENTAL DIALOGUE WITH POSTMODERNISM: (RE) READINGSAMUEL BECKETT'S KRAPP'S LAST TAPE**

**Reenu S John**

MA English, Maharaja's College Ernakulam, Kerala, India

### **Abstract**

The proposed study is placed on the interstices of the postmodern literary condition and Gender studies. This interstice is crucial in the current scenario where on the one side we witness more global mobility and visibility of women and yet there prevails certain 'spirals of silence' that jettison women. The attempted close analysis of literary work may be seen as take-off point as to how representation in the broad social sense feeds into this scenario. The attempted work is rather a dialogue between two works with different subject positions. The paper attempts to try and possibly problematize the interface that is usually discussed within postmodernist representations and the concerns of Gender Studies. This is vital because, in a big way discussions of the same tend to conflate gender, and in doing so bypass the women's question, not just in literary texts but generally in 'social narratives' The objective here is to create a space, especially in the social reality that is India, where the issue of the Woman's voice can be recovered for reasoned debate and reflection.

**Keywords:** Postmodernism, Subject Position, Gender Studies, Postmodernist

Representation, Social narratives

The article attempts to study how postmodern elements are employed in the play Krapp's Last Tape. The different aspects of postmodernism such as self-reflexivity, doubling of memories, fragmentation, minimalism, the issue of time and voice, hypermetasensibility, subjectivity, plurality of identity, openendedness are all skillfully explored in the play.

Postmodern theory and theories of postmodernism differ depending on what they understand the postmodern to be. For Jean-Francois Lyotard and Gianni Vattimo, postmodernism is a way of thinking (Fortier 118). In *The Postmodern Condition*, Lyotard argues that postmodernism entails the failure of all master narratives, which might allow for a total and unified understanding the world. In place of masternarratives, Lyotard posits micronarratives and language games, performability over truth, pluricity over unity, exchange over legitimation (50). For Linda Hutcheon, the Postmodern is much more an artistic style<sup>2</sup>, recognizable by its self reflexivity and irony especially in its relations to the practices and objects of the surrounding culture and the cultural past (Fortier 119). In short the very many definitions attributed to postmodernism can be seen as set with slightly differing versions.

Arguably, Samuel Beckett shares with Borges the distinction of inaugurating in literature what has come to be called postmodernism. The term is still the subject of heated debate. On one hand it clearly refers to that which succeeds modernism, itself as an international movement that broke with nineteenth century forms of realism. The play *Krapp's Last Tape* often recognized, as a minor dramatic masterpiece possesses several postmodern traits. Of this self-reflexivity demandspecial, mention

Largely the play *Krapp's Last Tape* is self-reflexive in nature from its very outset. The hypermetasensibility of postmodernism in the wake of the demise of nineteenth century high realism make the text a play that exhibits obvious selfreflexivity. Krapp identifies himself as a third person even while he is retrospection his own life experience with the aid of a tape which can infact be called as a sound based autobiographical library. (Harris 12). The text reflects the authors consciousness as well. Twice in the play we hear about Krapp's opus magnum and the seventeen copies sold. Much like Beckett himself who had the experience of writing for almost twenty years without any recognition krapp talks of a bitter disillusionment. "Flagging pursuit of happiness, unattainable laxation" (krapp: 58).

Yet this sense of despair is not limited to his aspirations as a writer. He sneers at what he calls youth and thanks to god its over "On his birthday thirty years ago he talks of "separating the grain from the husk" (57), if there is any husk to be separated and this perhaps makes him doubtful whether to be or not to be. Memory and imagination blur in the tapes, which thus annually record not a life, not even the 'grain' of a life,

but the imagination of a grain. He derides his own aspiration of “drinking less” and his plan for less. Engrossing sexual life” (Krapp: 58). In this disillusionment thirty years ago we hear:

Hard to believe I was ever that young whelp. The voice!

Jesus! In addition, the aspirations! [Brief laugh in which Krapp joins]. And the resolutions! [Brief laugh in which Krapp joins]. To drink less in particular. [Brief laugh in which

Krapp joins]. (Krapp: 58)

We find Krapp as the regulator of his own past, yet a “very fallible [one] in an obviously dualistic situation” (99) as Lawley (1994) believes. Selecting and editing, “Krapp is no passive listener, but his own ‘programmer’ rearranging his minimal autobiography” (Kennedy, 1991: 69). But he cannot be successful for through the continuous process of manipulation, he himself is manipulated by the memory of his recorded past while manipulating the machine to receive the desirable output. Paul Lawley (1994) writes: However, the dense mediation of the tape recorder ensures that the play is shadowed by a sense that the power to shape is itself a fiction. It can never be grounded because what is being shaped by the process of editing is itself always already shaped, edited. Krapp cannot shape his experience definitively because he has no unmediated access to the past”. (94).

Speaking of the self in relationship to an object sustains an image of the self both as a perceiving object and as a speaker. When Beckett’s creatures tell their stories they act as both speaker and principal listeners (Lyons 93). The physical device of the tape recorder allows Beckett to return to the image of the solitary figure. The separate voice of the younger Krapp combined with the presence of the older figure who listens completes the paradigm. The text spoken by the recorded voice also becomes the principal physical object the hero possesses, the tangible relic of the past as a part of the collection of tapes. The tapes are both text and object. They have an immediacy and authenticity that Beckett’s other relics of the past do not have, but their physical separation from Krapp and his enigmatic response to them demonstrates the gap between past and present. The gap is both spatial and psychological. The words voiced by this tape are the manifestation of Krapp’s present consciousness. Krapp’s mind as the principal image of the play is no closer to the consciousness of the younger Krapp. Krapp performs actions, which are identical to those reported by the younger voice, the play represents the gap between the two voices more than the identification of one with the other. The multiple selves are thus depicted with the apparent tension that exists between the two voices. Again, this sense of ‘gap’ is also postmodern in nature.

The way which in the issue of time in the play Krapp’s Last Tape is tackled can also be explained based on postmodern theory. In Krapp’s Last Tape Beckett uses images of space and character to examine problems in the perception of time. Beckett’s dramatic economy reduces the literal time of his plays to a brief segment of his protagonist’s experience. He contrives, however, to represent a single moment and, simultaneously, to create a sense of extended time. In this play Beckett establishes the time as a precise moment: the hero’s sixty ninth birthday. He develops an image of an extensive past in the form of the boxes of recording tape that ostensibly house years of memory. His ledger suggests a compulsive record-keeping and functions as an image of collected moments in time. Krapp reads entries from this ledger which, as we recognize later from quotations from the tape he has chosen to play.

As Krapp plays the tape we recognize that the antithesis of light and dark informs each of the three segments. In the scene that marks the death of his mother the voice of the younger Krapp notes the black and white costume of the nursemaid in the park, her dark beauty and the funeral ‘black hooded perambulator’. The critical image of seeing the lowered blind in the window of his mother’s room, signifying her death, also suggests a tension between light and darkness. Beckett schedules Krapp’s movement in and out of the darkness purposely. In the darkness he drinks; in the light he confronts the presence of an earlier Krapp as the tape has recorded him. Using this circle of light he also attempts to complete this year’s retrospective ‘Memorable..... Equinox’ refers to the moment in March when he stands at the end of the jetty confronting the storm. At the point of the Equinox the day and the night are of equal length, and darkness and light in perfect balance. The taped voice speaks of a moment of clear recognition:

What I suddenly saw then was this, that the belief I had been going on all my life, namely— (Krapp switches off impatiently, winds tape forward, switches on again)— great granite rocks the foam flying up in the light of the light house and the wind gauge spinning like a propeller, clear to me at last that the dark I have always struggled to keep under is in reality my most— (Krapp curses, switches off,,)

In the storm he confronts the presence of darkness within his own being that he had ‘struggled to keep under’. In Beckett, lighted space, marking off the surrounding darkness, always as an imagined object within its own perception. In the performance of the play Krapp balances his time between illuminated circle in which his table sits and the darkness into which he periodically disappears. He forces himself back into the light in order to confront the memories and the images of himself. The light illuminates the self as an object within its own

perception. During the course of the performance, Krapp retreats into the darkness forcing himself to move back into the light to confront memories and the images of the self<sup>6</sup> that are contained in the tapes.

In the third principal memory -the scene in the boat-Krapp also focusses on the tension between light and the dark. Here the scene is filled with brilliant sunlight. He describes the woman in the punt. Seeing himself reflected in the her eyes confirms his identity. Although the memory recounts the dissolution their relationship, his desire to be seen by her demonstrates his ambivalence.

Fragmentation is yet another technique used in postmodernism that is explored by Beckett in this monodrama of two voices. Beckett invests the three incidents that the recording discusses with a detail which is rare for the playwright, he fragments the ostensibly complete tape, omitting portions of the message and presenting recollection of the year's experience without continuity or context. Consequently what remains constitutes a series of graphic details that do not form a conventional narrative because the relationship among the events remains unclarified. The play puts forward the room for several questions such as: Did Krapp's reaction to his mother's death in the autumn lead him to an analysis of his own life that, in turn, produced the vision he experienced on the jetty during the storm in the following spring? Did that self knowledge, then, motivate him to dissolve his relationship to the woman in the boat sometime in summer? These questions which the play may provoke in the spectator's imagination would be external to Beckett's play except that the absence of the of their answers forms gaps in the image of Krapp's consciousness. Krapp himself revolves these specific segments of the year without assimilating them or synthesising them into a coherent narrative

Yet the tapes themselves are not simply an analogy for memory. The incongruity of life is seen in the contrast between the technologically perfect record afforded by the tapes and the living Krapp. Krapp's Last Tape thus contributes something new to the technique of drama—an actor not present who is still able to speak. The immediate dramatic impact of younger Krapp is in the difference of sound, a strong, pompous voice brimming with assurance and wisdom, with which older Krapp, thanks to the tape machine, can play. Beckett can play, too, with Krapp's attitude of listening. As Krapp begins listening to the tape, he settles himself more comfortably and, in the process, knocks a box full of tapes to the floor. He switches off the tape, loses his temper, and throws the boxes and index ledger to the floor before rewinding the tape and starting over. Thus, the drama of listening is portrayed as never before, as an activity of editing, censoring, and rehearing that true listening never can be

One of the major ingredients of postmodernism is subjectivity. In the very play Krapp's Last Tape logic, morality and sexuality appear relative and personal. Krapp walks laboriously and is in the habit of fumbling in his pockets. He also has an absurd addiction to bananas, alcohol and sex. Through the very beginning of the play "A late evening in future" (Krapp 1), Beckett is forestalling the reviewers quibble that, as the magnetic tape recorder is a relatively recent invention, it was not possible in 1958 for an old man to listen to tapes recorded in his youth. Thus the anachronism is justified in Beckett's own way.

In the play there is also a blurring of distinction between genres which is yet another trait of postmodernism. Though it is a monodrama we could feel more than one voice<sup>7</sup>. One is that of the wearish old man and the other is that of the tape which is often looked upon with great curiosity. The two voices attempt to bring forward the tension between the past and the present.

Doubling of memories which is one of the important marks of postmodernism is also used masterfully in the play. His memories of a life time are recollected through the tape. The memory is imaged as a large two spooled tape recorder. The choice of a mechanical material box presupposes and shapes the way we view memory functions. It is not one voice that speaks. Beckett marks this division scenically with the physical separation of the character and stories he tells. The consciousness of the old Krapp encompasses and assimilates these memories not with much great comprehension. Something, of course, draws Krapp to the story of the women in the boat, and he plays that section of the tape three times. However we do not know if he is responding to the memory itself or to his memory of earlier playing of the tape. The old Krapp is puzzled by the word 'equinox'; he cannot remember the meaning of the word 'viduity', and searches dictionary to discover the significance of the word used by the younger.

The character Krapp exhibits disillusionment which is yet another feature of postmodernism. The anniversary messages note his movement between this private world and a public world external to this space, and he clearly sees his den as a refuge. Krapp's excursion into the public world, however also mark his isolation. The three incidents on the earlier tape deal either with the termination of relationships or with moments of solitude. Even the reference to the Winehouse and the park include the notation: 'Not a soul'. Beckett establishes a conflict between antithetical desires.

The ending of the play is also strikingly notable for it exhibits traits of openness which is often considered as another postmodern technique. The tape that runs on silence can be subjected to a number of

interpretations. Krapp sits in his 'den', the microcosm of the wearish post-modern man still tackling with his old habits and old memories, performing a ritualistic recording and editing. "The 'last tape' of the title also clearly implies that death is lurking somewhere close at hand, a feeling that is echoed... by Krapp's croaking efforts to sing Sabine Baring Gould's evening hymn 'Now the day is over.' (James Knowlson 1976). The ending suggests the old man's familiarity with the words of this tape that allows him to accompany it with subvocalised speech so that he speaks as well as hears the speech. The words of the past provides substance for his present consciousness. The close of the early tape becomes the ending of the play itself. At the final moment therefore the spectators perceive the image of the earlier Krapp experiencing the earlier ending, once again, as the ending to the present movement. The collection of tapes themselves provide a compound image of endings, since these anniversary messages take the form of retrospective summaries that look back to the preceding year rather than ahead to the new year. Despite the fact that the character's death seems imminent, the text appears to rehearse the impossibility of ending, clarifying both the potential of a series of endings and the narrators acute desire for an absolute end.

Alvarez, A. Beckett: London: Faber and Faber, 1973. Print.

Barry, Peter. *Beginning Theory: An Introduction To Literary And Cultural Theory*. 2002 ed. Manchester: Manchester University press, 1995. Print.

Beckett, Samuel. *The Complete Dramatic works*. London: Faber and Faber, 1986. Print.

Beryl S, and John Fletcher. *An Introduction To The Plays Of Samuel Beckett*. 1985 ed. London: Faber and Faber, 1978. Print.

Erikson, E. H. *Identity: Youth and crisis*. New York: Norton. (1968). Print.

Fortier, Mark. *Theory / Theatre an introduction*. London & New York: Routledge, 1997. Print.

Handke, Peter. *Till Day Do You Part Or A Question Of Light*. Ed. Mike Mitchell: Frankfurt, 2010. Print.

Harris, V C, and Aju Narayanan. *Beckettum Krappum Kuruppum*. Kottayam: Sahithya Pravarthaka Co-operative society, 2014. Print.

Hutcheon, Linda. *The Politics Of Postmodernism*. London & New York: Routledge, 1989. Print.

James Knowlson, *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett*. London: Bloomsbury, 1996. Print.

Lyons, Charles R. *Samuel Beckett*. London: The Macmillan Press, 1983. Print.

Lyotard, Jean-François. *The Postmodern Condition*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984. Print.

McDonald, Ronan. *The Cambridge introduction to Samuel Beckett*. Cambridge: Cambridge university press, 2006. Print.