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Searching for postmodernism in Martin Crimp’s
Attempts on her life

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Abstract

Martin Crimp is regarded as one of the significant playwright in Britain in the last decade of twenty first century. He has written on the changing structures of family, the issue of woman, consumerism and similar topics. Although he wrote most of his initial plays in absurd tradition, he then began to write about the social issues of his time with the beginnings of nineteen nineties. It is certain that this brought a certain change in his topics and style. However, he wrote his masterpieces following his decision on writing postmodern issues. Attempts on Her Life is one of his late plays debuted in 1997 and regarded as his masterpiece. The play subjects a woman who meets the audience in different roles such as mother, lover, killer and child throughout the play. Crimp tries to evoke the audience to feel the temporariness and some other features of postmodernism in this play. For this reason, this study will investigate the traces of postmodernism in Crimp’s Attempts on Her Life.

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1. Introduction

Martin Crimp begins to appear in the British stage at the end of nineteen seventies with his absurdist plays as he has been influenced by Beckett and Ionesco during his readings in his university education (Sierz, 2010). He continues writing such plays and some novels till the beginnings of nineteen-nineties determining his flourish as a striking playwright. It is likely that he estimated the approaching way of writing style called as social reality, thus

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he began to write such plays. Besides, the beginning of nineteen nineties was significant in influencing the works of playwrights because the Communism had been collapsed, Thatcher left the seat of prime minister of England and the most striking was the brutality in the society (Buchler, 2008) Although Crimp was not regarded as the typical playwright profile of that time, many of the important playwrights were in their twenties and had rage against Thatcher, Crimp would have produced one of the most crucial play of that decade. Mark Ravenhill, Sarah Kane and Anthony Neilson were the leading figures of 1990s and dominant theatrical movement in-yr-face. Therefore, they were likely expected to produce such an influential play. However, Martin Crimp, older than these three and did not call himself as a figure of in-yr-face, wrote the long-expected play of the decade. His “Attempts on Her Life” was premiered in 1997 and brought an unexpected fame to Crimp. Sierz remarks the importance of this play with the following sentences:

In the dying days of John Major’s Tory government, a sorry tale of sleaze and continuous xenophobic clamour, Attempts on Her Life appeared as both a brilliantly original and a distinctly European play, both a comment on the late twentieth century and a vision of what the theatre of the future might be (Sierz, 2010, p. 49).

In this manner, Crimp also brings the European values to British stage by overcoming the insularity of many British playwrights. For this reason, while he has been known in many European capitals as his plays have been performed there, British audiences would know him later and thus he would catch the fame in his country later than other European countries. What is more, Michael Billington draws attention to the play with his article published in The Guardian emphasizing on the postmodern features of the play (Billington, 2007). Colin Thomas also desires a special interest to Attempts on Her Life and its postmodern context and style:

It’s true. In this 15-year-old script, Crimp assigns no characters; he simply indicates a change of speakers by inserting a dash. (The script has been performed by as few as three actors. Here, there are 15.) The central character, Anne, never appears, nor does a stable depiction of her identity emerge. In the 17 largely unrelated scenes, Anne is everything from an artist who documents her suicide attempts to a new car: the Anny. Characters share their narratives about Anne, but, in doing so, they are creating their own realities (Thomas, 2012, p. 1).

Given the above mentioned statements, this study will discuss the postmodern values incorporated into Attempts on Her Life and try to bring a new perspective to this play. The claims will be supported by means of the artistic features of Crimp.

2. Postmodernism and “Attempts on Her Life”

The play consists of seventeen scenes, some of which may be interrelated to each other in a direct way. Although there is not a main character, it is then inferred the presence of a woman as the protagonist (Devine, 2006). This woman is pictured as mother, survivalist, terrorist, activist and a make of car in different scenes. In addition, the lines do not involve any name concerning the characters, and the reader is forced to imagine and establish the events. Attempts on Her Life begins with the scene of “All Messages Deleted” which consists of eleven phone messages. In this part, Anne is sometimes missed by her husband, sometimes her dad shouts at her on phone, and sometimes she is abused. This short prelude gives us some clues about the strangeness of the play because Anne, who is a postmodern character, is loved, threatened, praised, humiliated, but she can put an end to all these events by touching a button to delete messages in her phone. There are seventeen scenarios in this play and each of these parts mention about different characters and, in fact, all these characters represent the different ages of Anne, or who knows the humanity. In addition, Crimp becomes a bridge between absurd tradition and in-yr-face movement, so he combines these two theatrical movements in his Attempts on Her Life, since he has written his earlier plays in absurd tradition and he has changed his style with the beginnings of nineteen nineties. Additionally, Crimp states that Attempts on Her Life is his best play because he has felt himself fine without sticking to write his play in well-made plot and form naturalistic characters (Sierz, 2010). His this statement gives clue about the postmodern traits of the play because postmodern texts do not concern well-made plots and characters. They are more likely loosened texts indicating different points of unconnected events.
I have two ways of writing, playwright Crimp said. I do still write what you would call conventional plays. But ever since I discovered this alternative way of writing with *Attempts on Her Life*, it has continued to fascinate me (Crimp, 2007, p. 1).

Besides, Crimp also states that he decided to write *Attempts on Her Life* when he was bored of conventional plays and turned to write postmodern plays. This treatment likely reveals the creativity of Crimp contrary to his background surrounded by cliché concepts.

I wrote the play at a time when I felt a real nausea about conventional plays. The really interesting thing about writing in this way is that you can travel, you can cover time and space in a way that you can’t in traditional plays. So is it about going back in a way to the traditions of storytelling (Crimp, 2007, p. 2).

As to the play, Anne is the protagonist of Crimp and she is called as Annie, Anya, Annushka and Others in different scenes. In addition, she welcomes the audience sometimes as a child or a young girl or an old woman who is waiting and crying for her child. Moreover, she appears in different characters as following:

The recipient of a variety of telephone messages, the heroine of a film, a victim of civil war, a typical consumer, a megastar, a tourist guide, a make of car, a physicist, an international terrorist, an American survivalist, an artist, a refugee’s dead child, a victim of aliens, the girl next door, the object of a police investigation, a porn star, and the subject of a conversation among friends (Sierz, 2010, p. 49).

Postmodern theory urges the ambiguity in literary texts. This may refer to characters, title, plot and etc. Crimp establishes this feature of postmodernism firstly with title: *Attempts on Her Life*. Such a title evokes certain movements aiming to interfere any action or situation. However, the reader remains confused concerning the play and the rest of the plot. Following parts of the play increase the ambiguity because the play is divided into seventeen different scenes. Each scene brings a different type of character called as Anny, Annie and Annushka and etc. However, the reader is devoid of forming any well-made character from these parts because the scenes reflect different types of individuals and thus prevent the reader in constructing any well-structured character (Harvey, 2010). In addition, the play also lacks any constructed plot and story as a feature of postmodern texts. As reader is in difficulty of creating a character, the same situation is present for a well-made plot. Therefore, the reader finds himself in many events disconnected from each other. Anne is sometimes witnessed as a member of consumer society, she is then presented as a porn star criticising the society in which she lives.

Besides, Crimp tries to appeal all the people from different ages, jobs, classes and he achieves this aim by characterizing Anne in different social levels. Therefore, he aims to reach the simplicity and effacement of class distinction that postmodernism aims (Featherstone, 2005). For example, while the first scene subjects Anne as a rich woman living with a rich man, the following scene portrays her as an individual likely lost some relatives in war and now struggling for peace. In addition, while Anne is seen as a small child living with her parents in an unhappy environment contrary to expected, she is also witnessed as a mother who has been left by her only son. However, her son then comes with his wife and two children in tenth scene titled as Kinda Funny.

In addition, two scenes of the play are played in foreign languages with translation because Crimp wants to emphasize the localization of his work. Besides, it is significant that the players, who staged the play, were from different nationalities such as Bosnia, Nigeria and England. (Sierz, 2010)

What is more, Crimp refers to seminal books of literature and religions as a trait of postmodern theory called as intertextuality and by doing so the writer tries to shape his text through the association of the mentioned works in the mind of readers (Karaburgu, 2007). In the sixteenth scene, he addresses the holy book of Muslims, Koran and Bible of Christians.

She has hung on a cross to die… (translation)
Risen on the third day from the dead… (translation)
Grown a beard… (translation)
Moreover, According to Baudrillard, theorized his principles in his book titled as “Simulacra and Simulations”, postmodern society is dominated by media and it is full of showings, thus hyper reality and image consumption are in the first place of postmodern consumers’ life (Binay, 2010). Postmodern subject is destructed and the society is full of images, thus, postmodern people can form their identities by transferring among the images. In addition, these images gain new forms in minds and bodies of each different person. Baudrillard also stresses that new forms of technology and information became central to the shift from a productive to a reproductive social order in which simulations and models increasingly constitute the world so that the distinction between the real and appearance becomes erased (Featherstone, 2007). This feature of postmodern society is portrayed extensively in Crimp’s related work yet some parts will be taken to exemplify the situation.

The camera loves you – The camera loves you – The camera loves you
We need to sympathise – We need to empathise – We need to advertise
We need to realize – we are the good guys – we are the good guys
We need to feel – what we’re seeing is real
It is not just acting – it is far more exacting – than acting – we are talking reality… (Crimp, 2005, p. 223).

This scene is really short and it covers only two pages, but it refers to many things related to consumerism. As it has been mentioned before, mass media and television are regarded as the most important elements of postmodern consumerism. In addition, if the postmodern consumerism is in question it should not be only referred to buying or selling something. The consumption of images is also important especially for Baudrillard and as it is stated above the scene begins with “The Camera Loves You” and this is repeated for three times. The postmodern theory asserts that the contemporary media does not represent the reality but it fictionalises (Featherstone, 2005). In this manner, the media does manipulate the reality in the accordance of its own wishes to gain profit, and this event cannot be regarded strange in the postmodern society.

3. Conclusion

This study has tried to analyse Crimp’s Attempts on Her Life through postmodern literary features. It has been emphasized that Crimp experienced a great change from being an absurdist playwright to a postmodernist one. It is also certain that the changing conditions of society have forced him to write such plays. However, he reached the fame by means of these postmodern plays and Attempts on Her Life, the most significant example of these plays. I want to end this study with a quotation from Jean Baudrillard taking place in the beginning page of Attempts on Her Life:

No one will have directly experienced the actual cause of such happenings, but everyone will have received an image of them (Crimp, 2005, p. 198).

References