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## The Quandary of Human Minds in Post-Modern Perspectives

Amzi Azmi, M.A. English Literature

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### Abstract

This article will feature the presentation of the idea of uncertainty and self-alienation as the dominant themes of postmodern literature with the references to Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1953), Harold Pinter's *The Dumb Waiter* (1960) and Edward Albee's *The Zoo Story* (1960). These three post-modern works are marked for its quintessential representations of post-modernity both from the stylistic sides such as recalcitrant stage directions and from the thematic aspects such as uncertainty and self-alienation.

The term *postmodernism* will be elaborated as a diverse and controversial topic of debates of literary intellectuals. Jameson's definition of post-modernism will be reviewed in order to clarify it as the reaction to modernist attempts. The explanation of the social degradation of human society will be discussed which is the

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pivotal aspect of postmodern society. Also, the question that how the writers have marked those features and associated them with their literary characters will be answered based on the above mentioned three texts. Comparative discussions will be shown to make the arguments more logical and the concept of postmodernism in literature will also be explained to be defined as an encapsulated form of revolting against traditionalism and modernist concepts in all sectors.

**Keywords:** post-modernism, waiting, expectation, uncertainty, self-alienation, depression, mistrust, pessimism, optimism.

### **Analysis**

Post-modernism is an argued term considered as an unconventional sensation, which emerged as a feedback in contradiction of the modernist conception. It has a deep impression in differentiated fields and recent literary progresses are also saturated with the traits and trials. Post-modernism is highly marked in architectural dimension:

Postmodernism in architecture was reactionary (like Waught) in rejecting the modernist project; it proposed to revive pre-modernist manners such as eclecticism, the playful collaging of diverse styles within one building or development, a return to the use of Graeco-Roman pillars and capitals, and the entire ornamental vocabulary of classicism.( Wheale, 1995, p.41)



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Since the 1980s the critical discussion of science fiction, particularly of authors like Philip K. Dick, J. G. Ballard, and William Gibson, has increasingly made

reference to the concept of postmodernism. Since this term can mean quite different things according to the context, some clarification is necessary:

It might be said that the term postmodernism is deployed in at least three different ways. The first is the construction of an aesthetic, or a poetics, which is produced inductively from an empirical analysis of a number of texts. *Postmodernism* is an aesthetic which comes definitively *after* modernism, and is elaborated through a process of difference from the form and ideology of the Modern movement, usually in terms of binary oppositions. The second sense is a considerably vaster claim, which moves beyond a purely internal art history and attempts to place the shift from modernism to postmodernism within a fundamental historical transformation. Postmodernism thus becomes a concept which relates to a new economic, political and cultural totality... These three senses, thus delineated, could be ascribed to distinct disciplines, with “postmodernism” belonging to art history, “postmodernity” belonging to more sociologically inflected analyses, and “postmodern thought” belonging to philosophy. Things, however, are not this simple . . . [because] A central definitional element of postmodernism is the transgression of boundaries . . . Postmodernism is less a bewildering and diversely deployed term which can yet be reduced to a singular root; rather it conceals lines of thought which appear to be flatly opposed.’ (Roger Luckhurst, ‘Varieties of Postmodernism’, Hull Occasional Papers in Philosophy (1992).

### **Human Existence in Postmodernism**

In postmodern literature, human existence is showcased in a dramatic and metaphoric way with categorical traces of catastrophe, trauma, anguish and socio-psychological degeneration. In case of literature, Silverman marks:

Postmodernism has a double dimension : (1) desperate clinging to obsolete modes of hyper-individualistic yet conventionalized or institutionalized criticality (e.g., in the pseudo-rebel/hero of the rock world); and(2) recognition that the locus *vivendi* of activist criticality and sophisticated integrity is at once cognitive and empathic acceptance of intersubjectivity, with all its problems. (Silverman, 1990, p.61)

Thus, writers depict the social and psychological changes in human lives in an artistic way. Moreover, he says:

The site of the theater seems to be a prison in which actors are trapped within the confines of a proscenium space and the audience is walled off within the illusion of its speculative security beyond the footlights. Inside this prison the drama of the attrition of representation is played out. (Silverman, 1990, p.141)

### **Questions Against the Values, Signs, and Practices of Modernist Societies**

Postmodern literature criticizes the modern projects and evokes thoughtful questions against the values, signs, and practices of modernist societies around the world. The success and achievements of modernism are questioned at the outset of postmodernism:

Most early protagonists of postmodernism defined themselves in contrast to a narrowly selective or retired image of modernism, they had one aim in common. All were attacking the idea that the work of art existed in and for itself, in a state of autotelicity, above the flux and discords of mass culture and the ruptures of a modernity that was itself on the threshold of a major reconfiguration. (Sheppard, 2000, p.124)



Courtesy: [michaelnewberry.com](http://michaelnewberry.com)

### **Gradual Degradation**

Literary depictions of the postmodern era display a gradual degradation of human psyche and a struggling figure of human existence trying to find its own identity in a diverse environment. Postmodern literature also portrays a pluralist world where meaning is fragmented, identity is broken and subjectivity is questioned with

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very rigor of criticality. The obvious price of the post-modern phenomenon is the sacrifice of meaning, certainty, objectivity and homogeneity of patterns of life and essence. Instead, a world emerges where every human effort has lost the centrality as well as the value of dialectic contradictions of right and wrong.

This deconstruction, which is often derogatorily marked as destruction of modernist concept, results in a decentered, deconstructed value system echoing the nihilistic hollowness, alienations and uncertainties. Thus human existence is also turned into an isolated and decentered system of values (or lack of values). This makes them self-alienated from family bonds and society and also makes them fear an uncertain future. Marking such subjective furor, Wheale says: ‘For the multitude of causes unknown to former times are now acting with a combined force to blunt the discriminating powers of the mind, and unfitting it for all voluntary exertion to reduce it to a state of almost savage torpor’ (1995, p.33). Moreover, Jameson says;

### **Inverted Millenarianism**

The last few years have been marked by an inverted millenarianism in which premonitions of the future, catastrophic or redemptive, have been replaced by senses of the end of this or that (the end of ideology, art or social class; the “crisis” of Leninism, social democracy, or the welfare state, etc., etc.) taken together, all of these perhaps constitute what is increasingly called postmodernism. (Jameson, 1991)

In order to define Jameson’s definition, it can be said that the changes and challenges of the previous conventions in diverse disciplines as well as the effects of modernism are responsible for the birth of postmodernism and Fredric Jameson’s definition highlights these facts. It is a critical term that has multiple definitions made by several critics from miscellaneous fields. Therefore, his definition does not mark the quintessential features of postmodernism, but provides a wide-ranging view of the term. He says not only the disasters but also the restorations are associated with it and revising his assertion is the main purpose of few of the upcoming paragraphs.

## **Modernism and Post-modernism Architecture**

The term modernism itself is a controversial issue and post modernism is considered as the aftermath of modern tactics in practice. Critic Charles Jencks says that it is ‘the combination of modern technique with something else’ (1996, p. 29) and this ‘something else’ indicates several transformations and challenges. Jameson marks it as the end of ideology, art, social democracy and welfare but I say that it is not the end but the injection of new dimensions or ideas in all those fields. For example, in architecture, when modern designs fail to connect with its various spectators, post-modern architects used strategies to overcome it.

James Stirling’s Staatsgalerie is such architecture where blue and red handrails are used to suit the taste of youth along with classical decors (Ibid, p. 34). This tactic is called pluralism, the amalgamation of old and new to get multiple perceptions, which is an essential feature of post-modernism.

## **Changes in Literary Devices**

Regarding the changes of literary devices, critic M. Sarup highlights Jameson’s remarks in *Post-Structuralism and Post-Modernism* (1993, pp. 146-147) in case of the use of old literary norms in ironic ways in literature. In his book, he explains Jameson’s views that pastiche and schizophrenia are the two significant features of postmodern literature. The former is used in ‘nostalgia films’ with the themes that the unique and theatrical characters are subjective and are incapable of dealing the devastation of societies. The latter supports Lacan’s ideas of language associated with isolation and discontinuity. He further says: ‘experiences of temporal discontinuity, similar to those described above, are evoked in postmodernist works such as the compositions of John Cage and the texts of Samuel Beckett’ (Ibid). I agree with Jameson as I have also identified the issue of incoherence between Vladimir’s and Estragon’s dialogues in *Waiting for Godot* (1953) and in Cage’s *Fontana Mix* (1958).

## **End of Ideology**

When Jameson says ‘end of ideology’, it highlights the dominant role of technology and science shifting the place of importance in human lives. J. Birringer strongly marks this saying: ‘Jameson apparently wants us to think of his examples of

“technological alienation” in a dialectical way that could unite the catastrophic and progressive aspects of postmodernism’ (1993, p. 8). He intends to say that technological advancement is making humans materialistic thus alienating them from family commitments. It is similar to Jean Baudrillard’s concept of ‘completed catastrophe’ (Ibid, p. 20) but the word ‘dialectic’ suggests the progressive revisionist perception too. The phrase ‘inverted millennialism’ suggests overall changes deriving from shifting of ideas with deconstructive reviews. For instance, the idea of power shifts from the acquisition of knowledge to the amount of money and technological expertise one has. Therefore, money and technology get the utmost importance and the values of human relationships as well as the ideas of transcendental dogmas, faith and belief structures decay. Similarly, Françoise Lyotard advocates that the advancement of science promotes capitalism widening the gap between developed and developing countries (1993, p. 134). Thus, postmodern capitalism is not only benefitting but also ruining the national economies.

### **Multiple Changes**

The phrase ‘this and that’ refers to multiple changes in different disciplines. For instance, in medical science, the AIDS epidemic is spotted as a catastrophic premonition of the future. Therefore, post-prevention risk control and celibacy campaigns are redemptive measures taken to face the challenge. In philosophy and social criticism, more pragmatic, contextual and heterogeneous ideas are proposed with an undertone of denigrating the classical philosophical propositions as age-old, obsolete clichés. It also rejects ‘formalist autonomy’ and ‘Utopian compensation’ (1995, p. 26).

In photography and painting, new discourses are introduced considering it as ‘high art representation’ (Ibid, p. 43). It aims to practice direct access to reality through graphics as ‘a means of appropriating reality and a means of making it obsolete’ (Ibid, p. 122). It sets the idea that everything is decentered and people are incapable of seeing the binary sides of truth and falsehood, accommodating nihilistic perceptions of life.

Moreover, in politics, the term shifts Lenin’s concept with the ideas of neo-colonialism and multinational industrial strategies, setting a hope to establish a new

society but also giving the threat of a third world war. In short, all these replacements of ideas are responsible for the formation of postmodernism and this is openly hinted in Jameson's definition.

### **An Aesthetic Term**

Therefore, different postmodernists define the term from their own perspectives; therefore, its definition cannot be concretized. According to Jameson's definition, postmodernism is an aesthetic term that derives from the fundamental transformation of modernist attempts. It suggests a pragmatic shift from the practicing roots of diverse sectors to more critical and dynamic ones, which carry both positive and negative aspects. Postmodernism allows all its doors open for criticisms and suggests that it is a debated concept, an ongoing, unfinished project. Using the first bracket in the definition and the word 'etc.' twice, he encourages readers to think of the issues related to the term. The best attribute of Jameson's definition is that it does not provide a number of constructing features but used the phrase, 'this or that' which allows postmodernists to analyze and discover more. The definition gives ample opportunities to explore postmodernism by diving deep to the cause and effect of the ideas associated with it.



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### **The Sense of Self-Doubt and Repugnance**

Uncertainty is related with the concern of the future, which postmodern theories explain as the sense of self-doubt and repugnance. It is extremely imbedded in the unpredictability that arises from losing confidence in an omniscient existence

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and in human associations. Moreover, infidelity in ideologies and relationships, as well as estrangement of men from the sense of contentment in achievements, is represented in both modern and postmodern literature. As ideologies have been decentered in postmodern project, the traditional modernist values have been deeply shaken and postmodern writers have showcased the discontent, dissatisfaction and sense of hollowness echoing out of lack of value and deconstruction of the traditional value-generative elements of humanist efforts. Such a subjective disorder of the ideas make human beings alienated from general happiness and contentment of social lives. Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* is a masterpiece focusing the decentered human world and catastrophe of deconstruction of value systems. The work belongs to the beginning category of postmodern literature for highlighting crucial dilemmas of postmodern anxiety of human existence. Therefore, it is a controversial issue to mark Beckett as the last modernist or the first postmodern writer.



Courtesy: [backstage.blogs.com](http://backstage.blogs.com)

### **Eternal Waiting**

In *Waiting for Godot*, Vladimir and Estragon, the protagonists of the play, eternally wait for an imaginary character named Godot who never appears in the scene. Being hopeful to the fact that Godot will end their sorrows, their eternal waiting never ends and frustration follows with a signature tune of repetitive elements of more waiting to follow. The topsy-turvy, the ups and downs, the deep confusion out of the play point towards the deconstructive assessment of human existence, the lack of certainty, the confusion, the self-alienated tendency and the mistrust to the modernist projects.

The waiting thus signifies a question to the traditional values and poses a deep mistrust towards the value systems like Godot, the imaginary savior. In short, Beckett shows through them 'an increasing dehumanization of life' (Hutcheon, 1989, p.28)

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evoking in postmodern society. Estragon is shown dependent on Vladimir, and Vladimir, comparatively smart, is planning suicide. This indicates the impatience and depression of human beings suffering from the fear of disappointments. Vladimir randomly gives up his plan of suicide, evokes feelings of hope but again makes plan of suicide feeling pessimistic; this behavior marks him as unpredictable.

### **No Assumption of Identity**

Moreover, both these characters have no surnames, no religion and no responsibility all of which highlight the fact of their alienation from the general human society. If they had blood ties or friends, they must have mentioned them. We do not find them talking about their parents, siblings or marriage, so we can assume that they have no one and they are unsocial as well that turns them so much dependent on Godot. Their dialogues are fragmented marking their anger and displeasure towards the society they are living. Even the stage setting, a barren land and a half-dead tree with a few green leaves, suggests, as Jean Baudrillard says, 'completed catastrophe' (In Birringer, 1991, p. 20). The stage is metaphorically a representation of the present condition of the society as well as of the characters in the play, that is, barren of moral ethics and laws, where any value can be built, any value can be questioned, any character can pose the mimic of Godot and trick the human memory as a gimmick of 'the-person-who-saves-the-world'.

### **Metaphors**

The green leaves, metaphorically, represent hope for a better future followed by uncertainty and indicates the dialectic contradictions of hope and despair to the post war era. The stage setting in the play metaphorically represents the human mind, which is barren and empty because of the effects of world wars and postmodernity. It shows a mind that is 'the abundance of questions, and the lack of certain answers' (Croall, 2005, p. 130). Such a mind evokes the feeling of self-alienation and despair. Similarly, Gablik (1984: 17) says 'To the postmodernist mind, everything is empty at the center. Our vision is not integrated and it lacks form and definition' (In Hutcheon, 1989, p. 38) and such facts are shown in both the characters.

Furthermore, silence and pause are associated with the concept of uncertainty, alienation and delay and Beckett uses a lot of silences in dialogues to highlight these issues lengthening the time of the play to give the audience and readers the taste of

waiting. The characters' constant waiting is a curse to them. It makes them abstain from general activity because they fear that if Godot comes and fails to find them, they will never ever see Godot again. Therefore, they hesitate and neither move location nor return back to the place from where they came. Many critics suggest Vladimir and Estragon as nihilists because of their self-alienating attitudes and sense of uncertainty. Alternatively, the act of waiting also suggests hope, a positive space of human psyche where any value can be built in optimistic sense. They are not committing suicide though they attempted several times to do so. They are even uncertain as to whether they can kill themselves successfully or not. It is not certain whether Godot will come or not but they are waiting in the hope of his arrival.

So, having the theme of uncertainty and alienation, the characters cannot be marked as the concrete archetypes of it. They represent essential features of human characteristics, which are the mixture of uncertainty and hope, alienation and togetherness. Similarly, G. Anders says 'What Beckett presents is not nihilism, but the inability of man to be a nihilist even in a situation of utter hopelessness' (In Esslin, 1965, p. 144). Thus, the play emerges as a successful key literature to postmodern traits, where hope and despair live with different capacities, questioning as well as complementing the centrality of human existence. As a consequence of this, the play helps readers to question the conventional roots of the system of values deconstructing.

### **Uncertainty Rules Over**

Moreover, the idea of uncertainty is highly associated with time. People start to feel uncertain when any result or feedback does not come in its expected schedule. Regal says that '*Waiting for Godot* treats time as minutely incremental and unendurably long. Failing to find any reasonably alternative to waiting, Gogo and Didi must continue to suffer, denied even the possibility of taking pride in their punctuality' (1995, p. 130) and I also agree with this statement. As they are not convinced of Godot's arrival, the waiting turns into a torture and they suffer from insecurity and ambiguity repetitively saying 'We are waiting for Godot' (Beckett, 1953, *Waiting for Godot*, Act 1). Beckett highlights this as a postmodern issue suggesting that everyone waits for a golden opportunity to change their life but hardly

gets it and the waiting or longing for such an opportunity is the reason for frustration. In this regard, David Bradby says:

Beckett is the first dramatist to focus exclusively on the act of waiting and to make this into his dominant metaphor for existence. At the same time he obliges his audience to share the experience, in real time, of what it is to wait. To wait is to experience time passing slowly or coming to a standstill. (2001, chapter-2, p. 25)

I agree with Bradby because the silences make the audience wait for a while to comprehend what is happening or to guess what will happen next. On the other hand, the way Vladimir and Estragon pass their time is humorous but it also highlights the killing of time, as they do nothing productive. They could have joined any social activity to pass their time but they did nothing that can serve the society or even themselves that marks their intention of being self-alienated from the social interactions. What they did is some exercise and unusable talks, which bring them fatigue realizing the pessimistic impulses: ‘Nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes, it’s awful!’ (Ibid). It seems that such pessimistic notions discourages them being social and friendly. Therefore, their dialogues echo their tension and impatience. This is one of the post modern dilemmas that people do not know what they should do to pass their time, neither, do they know whether their leisure activities can bring some benefit to them or not.



Courtesy: [chicagocritic.com](http://chicagocritic.com)

In the subplot of Pozzo and Lucky, some interesting new facts are noted. Pozzo subjugates Lucky in order to practice authority over him. Lucky carries a load on his back of which he cannot get easily rid. This makes Vladimir and Estragon worried and they frequently ask ‘Why he doesn’t put down his bags’ (Ibid). This load is metaphorical and can be marked as the burden of imperialism and postmodernism. Both these characters have no family surnames and they never mention anyone related to them. This marks their alienation from family ties. Moreover, Lucky fears that if he places the load on the ground, Pozzo may whip him and thus, he restricts himself from doing so. Lucky intentionally avoids putting the load down as he is uncertain of his freedom after such a mutinous act. Such a doubt creates psychological dilemma in him and he finds no other way but to serve Pozzo. Pozzo treats Lucky as if he is a machine continuously bound to serve him and it becomes clear to readers that Lucky himself starts to believe as though ‘we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism; in short we are all cyborgs’ (Eaglestone, 2004, p.317). Even Pozzo gives orders to Lucky as if Lucky is a programmed machine: ‘Stop! (*Lucky stops*) Back! (*Lucky moves back*) Stop! (*Lucky stops*) Turn! (*Lucky turns towards auditorium*) Think!’ (Ibid)

Thus, it is apparent in the play that Lucky is deprived of his rights as a human and he himself is not aware of it. He unconsciously alienates himself from the rest of the characters by not unloading the burden and acknowledging himself as a servant to Pozzo. If Lucky was confident to the fact that defending himself could provide him freedom, he may have done so. However, he is unsure, thus he avoids trying anything, which goes against Pozzo’s orders in the fear that it may cause him increased difficulties. This is also another dilemma in postmodern society; that people want to change their situation but suffer from anxiety at the idea of facing an unknown outcome, which could be destructive instead of progressive, resulting from their potential actions.

### ***The Zoo Story***

Similar views are declared in Edward Albee’s *The Zoo Story* highlighting the theme of uncertainty and self-alienation more elaborately. The idea of self-alienation is first introduced when Jerry says ‘it isn’t a law, for God’s sake’ (Albee, E., 1960,

*The Zoo Story*) regarding marriage and criticizes Peter's conjugal life. As Jerry himself has no wife, and children, it is natural that he will feel jealous of someone having all of these. Then he admits that he has nobody to talk to, so grabs Peter, a stranger in the park road, as his company of sharing ideas. This marks that Jerry has no social life and has no friends with whom he can share his feelings. It also indicates the loneliness and solidarity of postmodern life. When Peter asks Jerry the reason behind this, both the themes become clearer to readers.

Jerry starts relating his neighbours to whom he is not responsive and socially attached. He does not even know their names nor can identify the face of his next-door neighbours. This results his alienation from social interactions. Then he describes his property highlighting two empty photo frames. He says they are empty because he has no one special to be remembered. He comes from a broken family. He never saw his mother and father having a happy conjugal life and he lived with his relatives that failed to provide a healthy family environment for him. Nobody loved him and he also never fell in love. Gradually, he has started spending nights with prostitutes, thus he neither has a family in the past nor expects to have one in the future. Such a frustrated life makes him aloof and alienated from the normal day-to-day life of human civilization. He has no future plans that can motivate him to change his current devastating position. He thinks of himself as a victim of fate who is destined to suffer and therefore arrives at an absurd idea involving Peter. He claims the right to sit on Peter's bench and in a dispute, makes Peter stab him with the intention that the news will be broadcast on television next day.

In this regard, Bottoms says;

The protagonist of *The Zoo Story* (1959) had done his best to provoke the placid Peter from his isolated bench, to force him to acknowledge his plight, to acknowledge that he is alive. As Edmee remarks in *Finding the Sun*, "We have so much to be thankful for, being alive. *Being Alive!* (2005, p.149)

Peter did not realize that talking to a stranger and consoling an unknown could cause him such a trouble. He even was not certain that he could stab a person in anger. He was unaware that his habit of reading books on park benches in the evenings may cause him to be at risk from unpredictable dangers and accidents. So,

the idea arrives that everything is uncertain and anything shocking can happen anytime without a single expectation. On the other hand, Jerry provokes Peter to stab him, and ultimately achieves his goal, only because he wants himself to be discussed and known to the world. He knows that his murder case will be investigated, written about in the daily newspapers and telecasted on news channels; therefore, it is assumed that he makes an absurd decision to destroy himself in order to become socially popular and uses Peter in the name of formal friendship. It is a matter of question that a person like Peter who tries to alienate himself from the society suddenly wants the rest of the world to know him and makes an absurd plan to make his death public news.

At first Jerry lives a life of isolation and then he engineers his death with the aim of it becoming social news. His only motivation is that he wants people to remember him and his death. This marks the mental condition of postmodern individuals. He could have done positive acts to achieve popularity but he did not. It seems that he wants himself to be remembered, no matter whether it is for peculiar reasons, and this mindset alienates him from the rest of the people of the society. Even if his death is forgotten after a few days publication of the incident, Peter will never forget Jerry and in Jerry's mind this will still be his own achievement. This is the only reason of Jerry planning his own death and Peter falling a victim to him. The idea of alienation is also seen in case of the sobbing lady who lives close to the apartment of Jerry. She is his everyday encounter: 'Whenever I go out or come back in, whenever I pass her door, I always hear her crying, muffled' (Ibid). He says that he always finds her crying with determination all alone in her room and her door always remains open but Jerry never enters nor knows the reason for her sorrow. It may be that she is waiting for someone who will never come and this reality makes her suffer.



Courtesy: [yo-poeta.blogspot.com](http://yo-poeta.blogspot.com)

Moreover, Jerry feels pity for her but he never asks the reason behind her sorrow as if it is not his business. His words show that he is sympathetic toward her but restricts himself being too close to her as if he dislikes getting involved with others' private matters. There would have been no harm if Jerry had gone to her and tried to console her, which could mark him as a socially active person, but he did not. It raises the question as to the reason behind such remoteness and Jerry himself gives the answer claiming that he feels himself to be a homosexual: 'I was a h-o-m-o-s-e-x-u-a-l' (Ibid). Then he refers to his anti-feminist impulses and that he goes to prostitutes only for sex. Therefore, his gender identity crisis can be a reason for his alienation from common interaction in society. Jerry could plan for his future falling in love with a lady, marrying her and having children but he wishes to be with prostitutes just to satisfy his lust. It shows that Jerry intentionally avoids social life and matrimonial alliances thus alienate him from human happiness.

### **Avoiding Relationship Commitments**

In postmodern societies, people are afraid of relationship commitments, as they believe that commitments are often broken. They are ready to believe machines but not human beings; they even disbelieve their blood ties. The concept of trust is completely a matter of doubts for postmodern individuals.

Moreover, their belief in a transcendental identity is also decayed. As a result, human beings became frustrated and Albee highlights these facts in case of depicting the psychological traumas and social obligations of Jerry. If Jerry is compared to Vladimir, it is evident that both of them suffer from the same psychological dilemmas. Both of them plan their death, but Jerry succeeds whereas Vladimir rejects his suicide plan at the end. Both the characters feel that no one will remember them after their death and this feeling of lonesomeness makes them frustrated.



Many critics think that *The Zoo Story* is inspired by *Waiting for Godot* but Albee, in an interview, admits that he is least inspired by Beckett: ‘A homage to Beckett? Not necessarily.’(In Bottoms, 2005, p. 242). On the other hand, Harold Pinter was greatly inspired by Beckett and his one act play *The Dumb Waiter* is a good example, which has many similar features. The two characters, the setting and even the dialogue presentations are also similar.



Courtesy: [artsculture.newsandmediarepublic.org](http://artsculture.newsandmediarepublic.org)

### ***The Dumb Waiter***

*The Dumb Waiter* also depicts the theme of uncertainty and self-alienation. Both the characters, Ben and Gus, are postmodern individuals and they have no surname in their identity. The readers do not know anything about their family or friends. If they had wife and children, they must have mentioned them in their conversations but they did nothing like that. Between both the characters, Gus seems to be dependent on Ben and therefore, asks frequent questions that marks his anxiety or insecurity. Their words are fragmented and their topics of discussion suggest that they have nothing to do but to waste time and to wait for the orders of their boss. The story is very simple as Pinter himself says: ‘The whole action of *The Dumb Waiter* is about the personal interaction of two characters who are contracted to kill the next person coming in through the door’ (In Raby, 2009, p. 15).

The fact of uncertainty is that they are not aware of the true identity of their boss and neither of them knows who will be their next target to kill. Whenever something is given to them by post or by telephonic messages, they suffer from uncertainty as to whether it is from their boss or someone else. Even they live in an old kitchen, detached from society, with an aim of providing a secure location for

themselves. It is a matter of euphemism that those who live their life by killing people are utterly afraid of their own death.

If we compare this play with *Waiting for Godot*, we will find that not only the themes are similar but also Gus and Ben are like Estragon and Vladimir. As Estragon and Vladimir wait for Godot, Ben and Gus wait for the next assignment to kill. The stage settings are similar in spite of some props but the endings are different. Contrastingly, J. Croall says :‘Pinter’s early plays are in the end very different from Beckett’s, being generally more social and specific, rooted in a recognizable reality, and concerned with individual psychology, while Beckett’s are more obviously metaphorical and universal’ (2005, p.129). I agree with this statement as I have noticed the end of *The Dumb Waiter* providing suspense, an uncertainty of what will happen next. A number of questions arise in the mind of readers; whether Ben will kill Gus or whether he will let Gus go in the name of friendship and companionship.

If Ben kills Gus, it will highlight the materialistic outlook of postmodern society where emotions and relationships become fragile in front of ambition and selfishness. If Ben let Gus go, it will highlight humanity and friendship but in that case, Ben will face trouble from his boss. The play ends abruptly leaving readers in a fix. We are not sure what will actually happen and this dilemma is one of the postmodern traits of confusion, anxiety and uncertainty. Nothing is absolute or certain and everything is questionably deconstructive, dynamic as well as transmittable. This common problem of uncertainty is represented in Pinter’s play, depicting people being alienated from the society by their usual fears. In the case of Pinter’s characters, Regal states: ‘Pinter focuses on the local and the familiar. His characters, for the most part, bear ordinary names, wear ordinary clothes, and go about their business in definable naturalistic settings’ (1995, pp.130-131). I agree with this statement and I also think that depicting ordinary people’s unusual dilemmas, like Ben’s over-consciousness and Gus’s insecurity, Pinter effectively points out the concept of fear, uncertainty, alienation, shock, and annoyance.

Moreover, A. Hinchliffe gives a detail explanation of Pinter’s work:

‘Harold Pinter’s people are generally at cross-purpose with each other and sometimes tangled in a world of disconcerting objectivity. Mental discontinuities balance objective absurdities to arouse suspense and a

sense of threat, bordering on insanity, as when in *The Dumb Waiter* mysterious orders for elaborate meals come down the lift from what had once been a restaurant to the basement kitchen where the two ambiguous ruffians are at their simultaneously flaccid and ominous talk; wherein a lucid symbolism may be felt flowering from a superficial absurdity' (1964, p. 164)

### **Unpredictable Nature**

Under Hinchliffe's ideas, it is clear that both the characters in *The Dumb Waiter* are unpredictable and imbalanced in decision-making, which creates suspense and threat of danger for them. The arrival of meal orders creates tension for Gus and Ben as they are not sure of the sender. They always live with insecurity and a simple sound makes them tremble with fear. They engage themselves in absurd conversation in order to pass time waiting for the order to kill someone. The job, which they have been doing for a long time, is illegal and unsocial. Contract killing is a heinous job and those who do it as a profession are alienated from society. They always keep hiding themselves from the rest of the world and never trust anyone, as they fear their own premature death.

Even if they want to return to normal life, they cannot because they have ruined their conscience by killing people for money and Ben and Gus are perfect examples of these facts. Pinter tries to showcase an absurd mix of these diverse feelings and emotions, affirmations and confusions, wills and lack of determinate destiny in the characters as his own life observation served him:

The battle for dominance and the condemnation of society's "fundamental hypocrisy"- that contributed to the "world" of Pinter...terror and menace are most essential elements of Harold Pinter's vision of life: the horror of existence presented in truly threatening and frightening terms (Scholl, 1971, p.86)

### **Portraying People from the Margins**

The postmodern writers, like Pinter, have often picked the portrayals of alienated people, people who are from margins and from alienated experiences of life. In *The Dumb Waiter*, the protagonists also belong to that type of portrayal where

stark, contrastive figures are represented in relation to the normative, civil figures of society. Ben and Gus are archetypal portrayals of people who do not follow civil laws and earn their livelihood performing uncivilized acts. These mark them as self-alienated individuals or, in short, criminals who are therefore segregated from normal society. However, the dialectic part of those characters is the emotive faculty, the human mind, the enigmatic anxiety of anguish and the pain of the existence of a human soul into an alienated individual. These people are responsible for their self-isolated lifestyles and thus suffer from various psychological torments and personality disorders. A writer must often pray to be saved from his critics and, not least, from those who admire him. Regarding this, Hinchliffe says: ‘When Dukore sums up the plays of Harold Pinter by saying that they have an “unreal reality” or a “realistic unreality”, he seems to be assuming the right to paradox that is properly the artist’s.’ (1967, p.163)

Moreover, Pinter highlights that those who become contract killers are bound to live a life like Ben and Gus of *The Dumb Waiter* and their unlawful acts will result into a prison life, further separating them as individuals from society and family. The play highlights the question of the importance of money compared to the importance of human life and emotions. The general overview is that money cannot supersede people’s needs but, in contradiction to this, the postmodern era displays the sense that money is the answer to all questions. Under the effects of industrialization, money is thought to save lives, bring respect and provide support in danger, whereas, relationships do not exist if financial solvency is not offered. It seems that money has deconstructed the definition and the position of fate and omniscient presence in postmodern periods.

### **Changes of Life Styles**

Regarding the changes of lifestyles after the First World War, N. K. Gish notes:

Old values and beliefs were no longer secured. Women cut their hair and shortened their skirts. Manners and morals were lost. Young people danced all night to jazz and ragtime music. Life seemed uprooted and uncertain, and a mood of deep disillusion set in along with a rejection of old certainties and

constraints. Whether good or bad, the world was different, and art changed with it. (1988, p. 3)

Such a stern set of beliefs has spread all over the world and we can mark Gus and Ben as the representations of the victims of its effect. In the case of Vladimir and Estragon, it is found that waiting itself is a task, which is both tormenting and hopeful. The fact of uncertainty makes them optimistic that Godot may come someday and on that day, if they are absent, the golden chance of survival will be diminished. Therefore, the result is that the concept of uncertainty is both a profanity and a virtue. In one sense, it keeps people believing in hope for a better future; on the other it makes them fear the unpredictability of events and gradually alienates them from the normal life-styles.

Being uncertain of the future results, people turns frustrated that disturbs their normal thinking abilities. For example, Jerry in *The Zoo Story* points out the theme of self-alienation for his unsocial activities and Sunday evening of Peter in the story has been a shock for him highlighting the concept of uncertainty. Peter never knew that something hideous could ever happen to him. He came to the park with the regular expectation of reading a book but meeting Jerry and accidentally stabbing him were events for which he was unprepared. Moreover, Ben and Gus in the *The Dumb Waiter* are self-alienated individuals for being contract killers. At the end of the story Ben aims his gun at Gus and this is a matter of shock and uncertainty, not only for Gus, but also for readers. In this regard, we can say:

If we disregard the bizarre detail of the initial assumption behind the occupation Gus and Ben pursue, we can see without any great difficulty what it is that the supernatural trappings of the play describe: no more and no less than the process of alienation to which men are subjected in a highly organized industrial society, which denies to the individual, particularly the individual of low intelligence and insight in the lower ranks, any real understanding of its working; and the frustration this engenders, the violence into which this frustration is bound to erupt. (Esslin, 2000, p.63)

## To Conclude

In conclusion, postmodern literature emphasizes on the social conditions and highlights the foremost problems of mankind, among which the sense of uncertainty and self-alienation are the noticeable ones. The loss of trust in destiny and God deliver a life full of qualms and psychological vulnerabilities. These critical subjective difficulties become the vibrant notions of debates for literary figures, thus they have implemented such themes in their works.

Many writers of the postmodern age have portrayed the subjective tumult of human beings in their literary works. Beckett, Pinter and Albee accentuate these concepts in their works with the skill of their poetic brilliance, which has been revealed in this article. All these works stress the problems, but none of them offer solutions. It seems that the main purpose of the writers is to make readers alert of these socio-psychological circumstances only. Even their literary style of demonstrations is different following the postmodern notion of deconstruction. Besides the literary traits of postmodernism, some major thematic issues like seclusion, unpredictability, decentralism, deconstruction of values and mistrust on transcendental realm are ornately described in the cited three texts and all contribute to the signature tune of uncertainty and self-alienation.

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Azmi Azam, M.A. English Literature  
 Arts, Law and Social Science Faculty  
 Department of English, Communication, Film and Media  
 Anglia Ruskin University  
 Cambridge, England  
[azmiazam13@yahoo.com](mailto:azmiazam13@yahoo.com)

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Amzi Azmi, M.A. English Literature

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