A POSTMODERN LOOK AT FIVE OF HUZIR SULAIMAN’S PLAYS

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ABSTRACT

A POSTMODERN LOOK AT FIVE OF HUZIR SULAIMAN'S PLAYS

Mohd Azril Bin Adnan

The study was designed to examine five of Huzir Sulaiman’s plays from the perspective of the postmodern theory by looking at the issues of reality and representations of reality found in his works. The objectives is first, to examine whether Huzir Sulaiman’s plays fit into the postmodern framework based on selected elements of Postmodernism namely fragmentation, experimentation, rejection of meta-narratives, pastiche and streams of consciousness. The second objective is to analyze specific characteristics from the five plays in comparison to Baudrillard’s four stages of simulacra and simulations. Data was collected by selecting Huzir Sulaiman’s plays by using two criteria, first was that the plays chosen have characteristics of a postmodern literature, specifically elements of postmodernism. Second, the plays deal with postmodern issues, such as loss of reality, hyperreality and representations which can be categorized in Baudrillard’s four stages of simulacra and simulations. The plays were then read and analyzed based on the mentioned categories by using data analysis with the use of the postmodern theory as the framework. The findings showed that his plays can be termed as postmodern products as all five plays contains at least two of the postmodern elements and one of Baudrillard’s stages of simulacra and simulations. The results also showed that Sulaiman’s plays reflected the issues of the postmodern society such as issues of determining authenticity of reality and representations of reality in the society.
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

1.0 Chapter Overview

This chapter aims to provide an overview on the background of the study discussing the relationship between society and postmodernism. It will then move on to the problem statement which will further discuss how this relationship is tied to literature. This will lead to the aim of the study and the objectives of the study. The purpose of the study, significance, operational definition of terms and finally the scope of the study will provide further details concerned with this study.

1.1 Background of the Study

A society in any part of the world is a complex structure, prone to changes and evolution through the progression of time. One way a society would be prone to change and evolution is by change of thought, values and even by the advancements of technologies, evident by a suggestion from Habermas (103), "[T]he project of modernity formulated in the eighteenth century by the philosophers of the Enlightenment consisted in their efforts to develop objective science, universal morality and law, and autonomous art according to their inner logic". In the same page Habermas further elaborated, "the twentieth century has shattered this optimism. The differentiation of science, morality and art has come to mean the autonomy of the segments treated by the specialist and their separation from the hermeneutics of everyday communication".
The Enlightenment movement in France, was the result of new and radical thoughts during that time which emphasized on certain thoughts and principals, which were brought forth by the improvement of printing technology that made it possible. And as argued by Habermas, as time progresses so does the society, it showed how the society thoughts, culture and values has changed over time and sometimes these changes were influenced by the introduction of new technologies. These changes in society can be explained by using theories, and one of those theories would be the postmodern theory.

There are several prominent theorists who worked on postmodernism such as Derida and Lyotard, but this study emphasizes on another major postmodern theorist, Jean Baudrillard. His work especially from the mid 1970s and onward, developed an essential postmodern form of social theory and in which in the year 1983 he worked on a paper titled Simulations. Simulacra and simulations is a concept written as a part of the critical discourse of postmodernism. According to Barry (87), “within postmodernism the concept is that the distinction between what is real and what is simulated collapses: everything is a model or an image, all is surface without depths: this is the hyperreal”. Thus postmodernism, based on Baudrillard’s work, suggests that in the postmodern society simulations structure and control social affairs where models and codes precede reality and are reproduced unceasingly in a society where the contrast between the real and the unreal.

This illustrates a general description on what a postmodern society is, it is also known as the ‘post-industrial’ society (Jameson, extracted from Docherty, p. 63). It is where the society is a result of technological development, confronted in a world of fast communications, media, electronic and along with it, inflicting the society with issues that can best describe the characterization of postmodern society. These issues such as hyperreality, simulations, the loss of reality and representations are dominant in a postmodern society.
Representation is the most critical word in Baudrillard’s simulacra and simulations. The word ‘representation’ is the reference to signs that depicts or attempt to demonstrate of something another. Signs as defined by Macey (350), ‘is a reflection upon how meaning is constituted by the relationship between what is signified and what signifies it are probably as old as human thinking about language, and the notion of sign can be traced back to Classical Antiquity’’. What this means is that the representation of the signs is not a direct model and of course it is not the original, but it is a system, method or ways in an attempt to depict or copy the condition of that original or the imaginary.

Representation can take many forms, such as paintings, pictures, sculptures or scenes in a play. Historically, Plato, a Greek philosopher spoke of two kinds of image-making; the first is a faithful reproduction, attempted to copy precisely the original and second is an intentional distortion to make the copy appear more correctly (A. Bennet & N. Royle, p. 235). The concept of representation can also be traced to Saussure, who was a structuralism theorist, where he wrote on the systems of the sign, the signifier and the signified. In essence, Saussure’s implication to linguistic and the media is that the language structures the world since language is a system of signs that mediates between the human mind and external reality. In Saussure’s theory, the signifier is the sound and the signified is the thought (Saussure, extracted from Newton, p.16). It would be illogical to have one without the other; to have a signifier without the signified or to have a signified without the signifier. The concept is that an object is related to its own specific sign. When there is an absence to the sign, the object would not exist. Meaning that, ultimately a person’s knowledge of the existence of an object is governed by the vocabulary knowledge possessed on that specific object. An object must have a name, without a name the object would not exist and vice versa. And in postmodernism, the representation of the sign may have altered the signified (the thought or concept of the sign). The signifier may remain unchanged, but as the signified has been compromised by the representations,
it may lead to society in having a different perception, or views on what the sign is supposed to be.

These concepts are similar to Jean Baudrillard’s work in Simulacra and simulations but it has been expanded into the postmodern society. The postmodern society is where the media, advertizing and a lot more are eroding the lines between the truth and imaginary and to an extent the imaginary becomes the reality. The expansion covers that area, where the truth and the imaginary are mixed or confused. According to Wain (367), ‘’The postmodernist critics process an image, which is the representation, syntagmatically along a chain of meaning which continually recede, never concluding on an ultimate truth’’. Thus, signs in which its origin was not part of reality and never existed before, but since it has been given a name (signifier) will in turn becomes a reality (signified). This emphasized the system of signs as not being exclusive only to reality but expands to the limits of the imaginary, providing a sign to the un-existing. And the same phenomenon can be identified to happen in postmodern literatures, for instance novels, short stories and plays.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

The contemporary society is facing a dilemma, because the world’s rapid progress has fed to the development and growth in terms of globalization, industrialization, mass communication and mechanization. It affects the world as a whole, posing a different kind of challenges to the society compared to the past. In those challenges, it involves a new territory of issues concerned with the society, especially the products of the society.

As mentioned by Wain, “postmodern pastiche destablishes the genres from which it borrows its composite parts. It disseminates texts so that no central or original point of reference can be located and scatters the fragments randomly to form
an eclectic work", (p. 361). An eclectic work refers to a work that shares concepts from many forms, specifically a work that does not belong to a single concept. The work may include references from others, for instance a writer may use the references of other writers to be included in his or her work. This in turns reflects a condition of the postmodern society, the eclectic society. It is where the people’s identity is no longer singular, but has evolved to incorporate the values and cultures of others, allowing themselves to be fragmented in their identity.

According to Inglehart (220), "The world is shifting into a new era where the beliefs and values of people, those of advanced industrial societies, has changed, in relation to the diminishing likelihood of people in that society to die prematurely of starvation or disease". What this means is that with the advancement of technological progress, societies are becoming less concerned with the basic needs, such as food or shelter, but exploring new and alternative ways in enriching their lives, making life more comfortable with the use of technologies. For instance, technologies are used to fill their time with activities such as video games, the television and other forms of technological entertainments. These wants for technological entertainments is feeding the growth of the technological development, to a point the growth becomes uncontrollable. To further explain this uncontrollable growth, lets look at Lyotard’s argument, (78), "It is no longer possible to call development progress. It seems to proceed of its own accord, with a force, an autonomous motoricity that is independent of us". These technological developments, is viewed by postmodernism as something that is progressing like a wildfire; uncontrollable and unstoppable by men, and this progression is viewed as no longer something that is positive but negative in its effects towards the society. These cases can be found happening throughout society, countless cases of anorexic women afflicted by the disorder, trying to look like models in magazines. a teenager in the United States quitting school just to play video games (Ehlers, p.1) and news broadcasts are debated over its authenticity. All these cases are examples of the negative effects of technological developments that
are reflecting the problems inflicting the postmodern society, where the truths and the representations of truths are becoming an issue in the society's way of life.

Thus the problem is narrowed down to issues concerned with reality, where the distinction that separates the real and the imagined is no longer absolute and where the line that separates between the two is confused. This is because the society is a product of a postmodern era, where people are bombarded with signs and representations that are either real or something that has been created but were made so real, to a point where the postmodern society accepts them as part of reality. Postmodernism accepts these phenomenon and attempts to explain them through its components. As the society progresses and newer technology develops, for a postmodern society, the issue of identifying the real and the imaginary has become pertinent in making sense of what is happening all around the world. When there is no longer any absolute truth and what is left are only small truths which have been fragmented, then the need to find the distinction between truth and fiction has become greater and finding the distinction between the two can be termed as a difficult process: since any notions of truths or at least the representation of truth has been perverted since the early civilizations.

In literature, signs are seldom what they seem to be. Plays have been used as a medium to reflect the issues in society and many of those issues have been exaggerated or undermined to make the play to be more effective towards the recipients. When this happens, the issues brought forth by the plays may have been altered in its truthfulness and mixed up with the imaginary of the writer(s) and may to a point where the issues are no longer real but merely conjured up the writer(s) figment of imagination. This is the problem associated with plays, and in this case, Huzir Sulaiman's plays. It is when truths are no longer easily identified in the representations taking place in it. This is out of the reason that the plays are mirror reflections of the society itself since it is a product of that society. This may cause
further confusion or perhaps create an illusion that created realities that originated from the imaginary among the readers and to the society.

The issues portrayed or presented in the plays are issues that can be identified happening to the society, as the postmodern theory suggest, there are no meta-narratives, meaning there is no absolute truth. There will always be truth which has been scattered or fragmented, and in many cases altered, changed or even lost in the process. Baudrillard tackled these issues in his work. It provides a guideline in discerning and tagging the difference between what is real and what is not, and for this study, in the scenes depicted in plays.

One author, known for his plays characterized as a postmodern product, is Huzir Sulaiman and considered to be one of the prominent playwrights in Malaysia. Born in the Malaysian capital, Kuala Lumpur, educated at Princeton University and later started what now considered as an established company called The Straits Times Theater Company based in Kuala Lumpur (Klappert, p. 1). He enjoyed critical acclaimed success with his plays such as Lazy Hazy Crazy, Atomic Jaya and others. In the plays written by Huzir Sulaiman, some of the scenes portrayed may be an attempt to represent the reality or the imagined of the societal environments. His plays has been considered as a postmodern product, and thus containing elements of the post modernistic culture: ideas are fragmented and scenes that exploits the streams of consciousness, hyperreality and others. In his plays, the representations of reality in certain scenes can be argued on whether it is a part of the basic truth, simulations or even a pure simulacrum.

1.3 Purpose of the Study

The postmodern society has been bombarded with representations that have influenced the perception towards reality. The representations of images can be
identified all around, from the news, politics, arts, and even in literary works. This study focuses in looking at plays written by Huzir Sulaiman through the postmodern theory. Thus, the objectives of this study are to:

1. Examine whether Huzir Sulaiman’s plays fit into the postmodern framework based on selected elements of Postmodernism namely fragmentation, hyperreality, pastiche and streams of consciousness.

2. Analyze specific characteristics from the five plays by Huzir Sulaiman in comparison to Baudrillard’s four stages of Simulacra and simulations.

These objectives of the study are the main guidelines when conducting this study. The affects that are taking place in the society may be proven through the analysis of the plays, where the findings resulted in the plays as a postmodern product and reflecting the postmodern culture and society.

This study attempts to analyze the societal aspects of postmodernism and how the society is influenced and affected by the postmodern era. The researcher needs to analyze the possible relationship connecting between the postmodern theory, the components of postmodernism to the plays written by Huzir Sulaiman. It aims to identify whether the plays written may have any indications that it has been influenced by the postmodern culture or it is a product as a result of such culture. As this issue has become a big part of our daily lives, it induced questions in how the plays may reflect the product of the society to be postmodern:

1. Can the elements of postmodernism which are pastiche, streams of consciousness, fragmentations and rejection of grand-narratives be identified in Huzir Sulaiman’s plays?

2. Can the characteristics of Huzir Sulaiman’s plays be classified in Baudrillard’s four stages of Simulacra and Simulations?
1.4 Significance of the Study

By using the postmodern framework in the analysis, this study obtained findings on the influences of postmodernism that took place in a Malaysian author’s work. Through the elements of postmodernism that were identified throughout the plays, it established a relationship to the works, as a product of a postmodern society. Subsequently, this study also provided findings that shed some light on the Malaysian literature as a whole, as in how postmodernism has evolved and adapted in Malaysian literatures. Where Malaysian literature are now presenting or dealing with contemporary issues. The issues presented in the plays may be dealing with what the society is currently facing and those issues may reflect postmodern issues.

Thus, the result of this study may be used by other researchers as a further reference in studying the components of the postmodern framework, and also, the concept of and simulacra and simulations in Malaysian literature. By using the results of this analysis, other researchers may also use this study as a reference to be used with other forms of narratives such as novels or short stories, providing more insights on what are happening in Malaysian literatures.

This study may also be used by other professions such as teachers, students or lecturers as a mean to deepen their understanding and appreciation of a locally written play. It may be achieved by analyzing the plays and the representations of the scenes with the society itself, in that it may provide an explanation to the distinction between truth and fiction, in which the current society views them as issues or a source of confusion that may impact the cultures and norms of the society.
1.5 Operational Definitions and Terms

1.5.1 Simulacra:
As defined by Baurillard (382) “[S]ubstituting signs of the real for the real itself; that is, an operation to deter every real process by its operational double, a metastable, programmatic, perfect descriptive machine which provides all the signs of the real and short circuits all its vicissitudes. Never again will the real have to be reproduced”.

1.5.2 Simulations:
According to Baudrillard (382-383), “to dissimulate is to feign not to have what one has. To simulate is to feign to have what one hasn't. One implies a presence, the other an absence. But the matter is more complicated, since to simulate is not simply to feign: "Someone who feigns an illness can simply go to bed and pretend he is ill. Someone who simulates an illness produces in himself some of the symptoms" (Littre). Thus, feigning or dissimulating leaves the reality principle intact: the difference is always clear. it is only masked: whereas simulation threatens the difference between "true" and "false", between "real" and "imaginary””.

1.5.3 Scenes of plays:
As defined by J.Peck and M.Coyle (88). “[a] play is divided into acts and scenes. One of the most productive ways of discussing a play is to focus on individual scenes, for any scene will tell us a lot about the plays as a whole. Individual scenes will reveal the specific problems the dramatist is dealing with and also reveal how he or she makes his or her themes come to life”.
1.5.4 Hyperreality:
According to Baudrillard (381-382) ‘‘a hyperreal is the product of an irradiating synthesis of combinatory models in a hyperspace without atmosphere. Thus it is the inability to distinguish between what is real and what is not, an enhancement of reality’’.

1.5.5 Pastiche:
According to Callincos (22), ‘‘[p]astiche is the neutral practice of mimicry, without any of parody’s ulterior motives, amputated of the satiric impulse, devoid of laughter and of any conviction that alongside the abnormal tongue you have momentarily borrowed, some healthy linguistic normally still exist’’.

1.5.6 Streams of consciousness:
According to Lombardi ‘‘The plot line may weave in and out of time and place, carrying the reader through the life span of a character or further along a timeline to incorporate the lives (and thoughts) of characters from other time periods.’’(p.1).

1.5.7 Fragmentations:
According to A.Bennet and N.Royle (233 – 234), “fragmentation in postmodernism does no depend on the possibility of an original ‘unity’ which has been lost. Another way of thinking about postmodern fragmentation is in term of dissemination. Dissemination involves a sense of scattering (as in a scattering of seeds or ‘semes’), a scattering of origins and ends, of identity, centre and presence”.

1.5.8 Rejection of meta-narratives
According to A. Bennet and N. Royle (234), “Grand narratives such as Christianity, Marxism, the Enlightenment attempt to provide a framework for everything. Little narratives present local explanations of individual events or phenomena but do not claim to explain everything. Little narratives are fragmentary, non-totalizing and non-theological.”

1.5.9 Experimentation
According to Huysen postmodernist experiments is “in visual perspective, narrative structure and temporal logic, which all attacked the dogma of mimetic referentiality.” (p. 170).

1.6 Scope of the Study

This study focused in analyzing five plays written by Huzir Sulaiman by using the components that makes up the postmodern theoretical framework. This study used Baudrillard’s Simulacra and simulations, as the guidelines in analyzing the plays of the order of reality and how it reflects the culture of a postmodern society. The five plays are:

a) Atomic Jaya
b) The smell of language
c) Hip-Hopera
d) Notes on Life and Love and Painting
e) Whatever that is

This study is focused on the elements of the postmodern framework, which are pastiche, fragmentations, rejection of met-narratives, streams of consciousness
and hyperreality. This study also emphasized on a component of postmodernism which is Baudrillard’s four stages of Simulacra and Simulations. The four stages are:

1. The sign represents the basic reality
2. The sign distorts or perverts a basic reality
3. It masks the absence of reality
4. It bears no relation to any reality whatever: it is its own pure simulacrum.

1.7 Chapter Review

This chapter discussed the theory as a medium to explain the changes happening to a society from a broad perspective to a more specific issue of which the contemporary society is facing. It explained the significance and relevance of this study on the influence of postmodernism on the society and literature. In the following chapter, the researcher will review the studies done in relation to postmodernism and literary works.
CHAPTER TWO
REVIEW OF LITERATURE

2.0 Preview

This chapter reviews some of the studies done in relation with the use of the postmodern theory and Baudrillard's works. The aspects reviewed in this study will show the workings of the postmodern theory and how scholars of this theory has made findings in which can be used to explain the representations found in modern plays and especially in regards to Huzir Sulaiman’s works.

2.10 Postmodern Theory

According to Lyotard (379), “The postmodern would be that which in the modern invokes the unpresentable in presentation itself, that which refuses the consolation of correct forms, refuses the consensus of taste permitting a common experience of nostalgia for the impossible, and inquires into a new presentations – not to take pleasure in them, but to better produce the feeling that there is something unpresentable”. What this means is that postmodernism stresses on fluidity, individuality, adaptability and formlessness. Unlike other theories that attempt to describe or explain the condition of a given population as a whole.

Postmodernism views this as repressive, stating that every individual is unique and have fragmented issues concerned with the society. Postmodern refuses
the ‘consolation of correct forms’, where there is a notion of a correct structure, correct morality, ethics and so on. Postmodernism rejects this strict notion of unity through its rejection of such grand-narratives. Maintaining a stand where there are no absolute truths and what remains are fragmented truths - only mini-narratives. Thus, as postmodernism refuses the concept of absolution, by providing a definition to the theory in itself, would be a paradox. It would be a contradiction to state or provide something so definite to a theory that rejects the idea in the first place.

Another scholar, Alex Callinicos did not attempt to give a definition to theory, but he gave a description in how the theory may be explained (2), “postmodernism represented the convergence of three distinct cultural trends. The first involved certain changes in the arts over the previous couple of decades”. Here Callinicos describe the identification of postmodernism through the movement of arts, not only in terms of paintings and sculptures but covers to a wider range, encompassing architecture, music, literature to drama. In postmodernism, this movement of arts is the movement from a particular style to another. For instance, styles such as Romanticism, Modernism and Surrealism are replaced by a newer style which incorporates the postmodern elements, focused on the past and on mass culture (pastiche) (2).

Callinicos explained the second trend (2), “secondly, however, a certain current in philosophy was thought to be giving conceptual expression to the themes explored by contemporary artists”. Callinicos argued that a group of French theorists who came in 1970’s who shared the label of poststructuralism contributed to the workings in postmodern issues, specifically on the issues of reality. With this he relates it to the third cultural trend, which is on the understanding of the poststructuralist concept (2-3), “art and philosophy seemed to reflect (somewhat at odds with poststructuralism’s anti-realism) changes in the social world.” Here, Callinicos explained that during the 1970’s, a few theorists produced works that
contributed to the development of postmodernism, thus giving a better insight on the theory. The implication is that, even though postmodernism has been argued as a continuation, rejection or an evolution of modernism, but it shares some of its roots with the poststructuralist concept. This means that postmodernism can be argued for its development, as it was not seen to have developed on its own. It was an evolution of a theory and at the same time, sharing similarities with other philosophical concepts which have existed before it.

This opens the gate to understanding postmodernism and subsequently giving a better understanding on what a postmodern text is. As mentioned by Lane (85), "A postmodern text, building, performance, and so on, is usually a mixture of styles, drawing upon different historical movements and features to produce a hybrid form". The postmodern text, argued by lane is a 'hybrid', a combination of different features from different styles or different concepts of previous works that constitutes the text as postmodern. This 'hybrid' also means an eclectic work, as mentioned by Wain, "postmodern pastiche destablishes the genres from which it borrows its composite parts. It disseminates texts so that no central or original point of reference can be located and scatters the fragments randomly to form an eclectic work", (p. 361). An eclectic work refers to a work that shares concepts from many forms, specifically a work that does not belong to a single concept. The work may include references from others, for instance a writer may use the references of other writers to be included in his or her work.

As suggested by Khalidi (9), "elements from other theories first elaborated elsewhere were also incorporated into the postmodern realm". Thus it is considered as a normal phenomenon when certain features in a postmodern text can be related with other theories that have existed before it, such as modernism and post-structuralism. These features can best be termed as elements that incorporate the theory, and in which these elements can also be traced to these other theories. What is
important in this study is not so much as in what the theories have in similarities with one another, rather, the emphasis is on how the theories views the elements that they have similarities with. Postmodernism have a distinct perception in the elements that are incorporated by it. One instance would be, unlike modernism, the difference is that postmodernism no longer laments over these elements that they have in common, but rejoiced it, specifically, viewing these elements as a positive phenomenon and accepts them to be a part of the society.

2.1.1 Elements of Postmodern Texts.

As for the elements, it is important to be reminded that, even though the postmodern term is hard to be conclusively defined, but it can still be described by the elements themselves. The elements give a better understanding of what postmodernism is and the mechanism that contributes to the explanation in how the theory functions. Here, the researcher has listed the major elements of the postmodern theory:

- **Hyperreality:**
  According to Baudrillard (381-382) "a hyperreal is the product of an irradiating synthesis of combinatory models in a hyperspace without atmosphere. Thus it is the inability to distinguish between what is real and what is not, an enhancement of reality".

- **Simulacra:**
  As defined by Baurillard (382) "[S]ubstituting signs of the real for the real itself; that is, an operation to deter every real process by its operational double, a metastable, programmatic, perfect descriptive machine which provides all the signs of the real and short circuits all its vicissitudes. Never again will the real have to be reproduced".


• **Simulations:**

According to Baudrilard (382-383), "to dissimulate is to feign not to have what one has. To simulate is to feign to have what one hasn't. One implies a presence, the other an absence. But the matter is more complicated, since to simulate is not simply to feign: "Someone who feigns an illness can simply go to bed and pretend he is ill. Someone who simulates an illness produces in himself some of the symptoms" (Littre). Thus, feigning or dissimulating leaves the reality principle intact: the difference is always clear, it is only masked; whereas simulation threatens the difference between "true" and "false", between "real" and "imaginary"."

• **Rejection of meta(grand)-narratives:**

According to A. Bennet and N. Royle (234), "Grand narratives such as Christianity, Marxism, the Enlightenment attempt to provide a framework for everything. Little narratives present local explanations of individual events or phenomena but do not claim to explain everything. Little narratives are fragmentary, non-totalizing and non-teological". In literary texts it is the style of writing of the authors to rejects the concept of absolution. It is as an attempt by the author to reject the notion of absolute truths and replaces it with the acceptance of mini-narratives.

• **Pastiche:**

According to a quote from Jameson (extracted from Felluga, p. 1), "Pastiche is, like parody, the imitation of a peculiar or unique, idiosyncratic style, the wearing of a linguistic mask, speech in a dead language. But it is a neutral practice of such mimicry, without any of parody's ulterior motives, amputated of the satiric impulse, devoid of laughter".