

Postmodern Landscape: Postmodernist Discourse in Mark Ravenhill's Shopping and Fucking

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Abstract: Among contemporary dramatists of the 1990s, Mark Ravenhill has a unique place. As an enthusiastic supporter of the society and an iconoclast of modern drama he is the most original and enigmatic writer of the post-Thatcher generation. Ravenhill's dramatic voice is indisputably the strongest of the postmodern era. He creates a postmodern landscape where the influence of consumerism can be felt everywhere in society. In his most masterly work *Shopping and Fucking* he created a dark vision of postmodern atmosphere. This article aims at revealing a critical appraisal of postmodernist discourse reflected in Ravenhill's *Shopping and Fucking*.

Keywords: Contemporary British theatre, Mark Ravenhill, postmodern theatre, *Shopping and Fucking*.

Postmodern Manzara: Mark Ravenhill'in Shopping and Fucking Adlı Oyununda Postmodernist Söylem

Öz: 1990 sonrası çağdaş İngiliz oyun yazarları arasında Mark Ravenhill'in özel bir yeri vardır. Toplumun coşkulu bir destekçisi ve çağdaş tiyatronun bir tür putkranı olan yazar, Thatcher sonrası tiyatronun en gizemli kalemidir. Hiç kuşkusuz onun dramatik söylemi postmodern dönemin en keskin olanıdır. Mark Ravenhill oyunlarında, tüketim olgusunun toplumun her kesimini etkilediği postmodern bir manzara oluşturur. Uсталık dolu oyunu *Shopping and Fucking*'de de karamsar bir postmodern atmosfer yaratmıştır. Bu makalenin amacı, Ravenhill'in *Shopping and Fucking* oyunundaki postmodernist söylemi açığa çıkarmaktır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Çağdaş İngiliz Tiyatrosu, Mark Ravenhill, postmodern tiyatro, *Shopping and Fucking*.

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“There is no such thing as a de-politicized world”

(John McGrath 2002: x)

Introduction

Like the dramatic revival of the late fifties British theatre in the late 1990s has seen a rise of a group of new and unknown playwrights whose works have been categorized under the label of ‘Cool Britannia’. In 1995, with the debut of Sarah Kane’s controversial *Blasted* British theatre witnessed a sudden change. In Ken Urban’s (2008:38) words “on 18 January 1995, the British theatre world got what it least expected: a kick in the arse, a jab in the eyeball and a punch in the gut”. These new writers refer to a new renaissance in the course of British theatre. They all aimed at placing the theatre in the forefront of struggle for social change by using dirty language in their texts. They all use taboo subjects, provocative themes and bring blatant language, cruel images, and shock tactics on stage.

According to most accounts, “Britain today has many more living writers than Periclean Athens, Shakespeare’s England or the first postwar new wave. That’s why people speak of a renaissance of new writing in the past twenty years” (Sierz 2011: 16). Mark Ravenhill is one of the most controversial, provocative, shocking, and adventurous playwrights of this new golden age. He “took the London scene by storm with his controversial *Shopping and Fucking* (1996), staged only one year after Sarah Kane’s seminal *Blasted* (1995) and following in its wake” (Monforte, 2007: 91).

Mark Ravenhill has come to be seen as one of the major voices of what critics like to label ‘Cool Britannia’ or ‘in-yer-face theatre’. As is now widely acknowledged Ravenhill is the most influential living dramatist of contemporary British political theatre. He is an enigma. In the span of his playwriting career from 1996 to present day he has written twenty plays which have garnered popular success. His plays have been staged both in Britain and abroad. Since the debut of speculatively titled *Shopping and Fucking* (1996) which changed the perception of reality on the British stage, it is clear that Ravenhill uses theatre as a vehicle for political commentary but his characters do not stand for any political issue. Instead they are representatives of psychological images.

Mark Ravenhill’s theatre is characterized by its vision of contemporary postmodern society as a place of social and moral decay. What fascinating about Ravenhill’s theatre is its postmodern aspect. He is one of those contemporary dramatists who is unique making insistent statements about globalisation and the postmodern condition. Thus his preoccupation with postmodernism constitutes one of the main figures of his plays. In this sense it is remarkable to quote his ideas on the issue which reflect his vision:

*Marxism and postmodernism had sent so many words to the naughty step.
When I first started writing plays in the middle of the 1990s narrative*

itself seemed to be the only really trustworthy concept. 'Story' offered a concrete set of skills to learn but also allowed you to place your work in a wider context, the narrative tradition. Alongside many others, I took thoughts about narrative from sources as diverse as the Jungian Bruno Bettelheim, the playwright David Mamet, the screenwriting teacher Robert Mckee and the philosopher Jean-François Lyotard and started writing plays for British stages (Ravenhill 2009: xi-xii).

Mark Ravenhill's playwriting career reached a climax when *Shopping and Fucking* was staged at Out of Joint: Royal Court Theatre in 1996. It is an experimental play that is characterized by a vision of postmodernist thought. The play has an individual voice that speaks to young people. It is divided into fourteen scenes. The play "does not have a complex or ambiguous narrative; the language is clear and accessible; the setting is contemporary and familiar" (Rebellato 1996: xiii). *Shopping and Fucking* explores the lives and interactions of a group of young characters- Robbie, Mark, Gary, and Lulu. As the title provocatively suggests, everything in the play is based on shopping and fucking, buying and selling. The world of the play, under its challenging title, draws a chaotic and darkest picture of contemporary British society.

Postmodernist Discourse in Mark Ravenhill's *Shopping and Fucking*

In *Shopping and Fucking* the critique of consumerism is explicit. In the text the consumer society, consumerism, capitalism and its discontents are mercilessly criticized. Ravenhill presents the postmodern condition in *Shopping and Fucking* by means of a Lyotardian perspective. Lyotard (1984: xxiv) observes that "incredulity toward metanarratives, that malady common to our so called postmodern condition". Closely read Robbie's speech in scene thirteen of *Shopping and Fucking* displays postmodernist discourse as Lyotard confirms:

I think... I think we all need stories, we make up stories so that we can get by. And I think a long time ago there were big stories. Stories so big you could live your whole life in them. The Powerful Hands of the Gods and Fate. The Journey to Enlightenment. The March of Socialism. But they all died or the world grew up or grew senile or forgot them, so now we're all making up our own stories. Little stories. It comes out in different ways. But we've each got one (Ravenhill 2001: 66).

Lyotard's postmodernist discourse of the end of meta-narratives is clear in Robbie's speech. In his reading of contemporary life Lyotard (1984:37) argues clearly that "the grand narrative has lost its credibility". So they are big enough to define the whole life. For this reason they are always problematic and offer only partial perspectives. Additionally, postmodernist writers depend on the idea that "reality cannot be truly represented.

Neither words nor images nor theatre can show us the real. You can only represent your version of reality, and every version is of equal value” (Sierz 2006: 166). Viewed from this perspective it is clear that in creating his dramatic universe Mark Ravenhill discredits grand narratives and focuses on little, individual stories. These micronarratives dominate the dramatic atmosphere of the new millennium.

Ravenhill is a true representative of contemporary world, a world of conspicuous consumption, postmodern globalised community, and the chaotic state of humanity. He “shows us our society, the state of our communal bonds, ripped and tattered by transcontinental economic forces” (Rebellato 2001: x). *Shopping and Fucking* addresses the ontological questions about globalisation. This assumption is supported by Ravenhill himself. He says: “I want to write about globalisation... To write about the virtual markets of images and information spinning around us and threatening to drag us into perpetual postmodern giddiness” (Ravenhill 2003). It is clear that Ravenhill writes about postmodernist landscape and postmodern giddiness with a political consciousness. Dan Rebellato (1998: xix) also points out this postmodern stance with the following observation. In *The Postmodern Condition*:

Liotard claims that the ‘grand narratives’ of modernity have been ‘deligitimated’: after Auschwitz, great overarching stories like progress are revealed in all their implausibility. In postmodernity we inhabit only ‘micronarratives’, which are smaller in scale, more sensitive to the particularity and individuality.

In the new millennium, “postmodernism became a buzzword, it generally referred to the philisophical criticism of absolute truths or unchanging identities or grand narratives” (Sierz 2006: 10). There is no doubt about the fact that postmodernist discourse such as the loss of grand narratives, capitalism and money forms the textual setting of Mark Ravenhill’s cannon. If viewed from this perspective it is clear that Ravenhill’s works present the grim realities of the postmodern world and post-consumerist society. Michelene Wandor (2001: 228) discusses that “consumerism absorbs both shopping and fucking. No one is really able to look after themselves. The former involves theft and ownership, the latter, continuous physical, homosexual violation. At the center are semi-homeless, parentless, unloved young people.” In the play Ravenhill identifies the role of consumerism on human life. For him obeying the rules of capitalism is more important than human life. In this context it can be readily stated that another important postmodernist discourse in *Shopping and Fucking* is the question of ‘money’. The play discusses consumerism and its impact on social relationships. A good example of this issue in the play is Robbie’s keynote speech when he attacks the values of consumerism:

I was looking down on this planet. Spaceman over this earth. And I see this kid in Rwanda, crying, but he doesn’t know why. And this granny in

Kiev, selling everything she's ever owned. And this president in Bogota or... South America. And I see the suffering. And the wars. And the grab, grab, grab.

And I think: Fuck Money. Fuck it. This selling. This buying. This system. Fuck the bitching world and let's be... beautiful. Beautiful. And happy. You see? You see? (39)

According to Ravenhill, *Shopping and Fucking* is “satirically swiping at a kind of moral and spiritual emptiness, where everything is defined in terms of consumption” (Cavendish 1996). One of the monsters in society is money. In consumerist societies everything is for sale. Even human values are for sale. Ravenhill’s focus on money in the play has a basic goal: to remind the society of the dehumanizing effects of money in all human interactions. One of the most significant attacks on consumerism and money which heightens the postmodernist discourse is evident in a speech which is voices by Brian:

Tell me, son, says my dad, what are the first few words in the Bible? I don't know, Dad, I say, what are the first few words in the Bible? And he looks me, he looks me in the eye and he says: Son, the first few words in the Bible are... get money first. Get. The money. First... It's not perfect, I don't deny it. We haven't reached perfection. But it's closest we've come to meaning, Civilisation is money. Money is civilisation. And civilisation- how did we get here? By war, by struggle, kill or be killed. And money- it's the same thing, you understand? The getting is cruel, is hard, but the having is civilisation. Then we are civilised. Say it. Say it with me. Money is... (87)

Shopping and Fucking clearly shows how consumerism, which is the key word to define the postmodern condition, consumes human. Ravenhill spoofs postmodern society, where money is everything. In such a world, as Billingham (2007: 137) notes, all the characters know “the price of everything but the value of nothing”. In the play, Brian’s philosophy of ‘money is civilisation and civilisation is money’, a statement which has been read as a manifestation of consumer society is one of the key features of the postmodern condition. This speech is the clear critique of Mark Ravenhill’s vision of corrupting power of money in a postmodern world, a world focused on money and consumption. It is also the concrete example of Ravenhill’s skepticism towards capitalism. “Globalisation is driven by a hypothetical imperative: to make money” (Rebellato 2009: 70). Ravenhill tries to find a language to express the new monetary realities of this global world. *Shopping and Fucking* presents a world of consumption onstage. In the play Ravenhill reads globalisation as something of global economy, international market place, global capitalism and global free

market. Such a reading helps us to explore his criticism of capitalism in its dehumanizing global forms. Mark Ravenhill's emphasis on money as a shaping and materialising factor of human life is a reference to Baudrillardian critic of consumerism. In the play we see the world in which money is the center. This is Baudrillardian postmodernism. Baudrillard (1989: 32-33) believes that "money has become a pure artefact, an artefact of a celestial movement, of a momentary exchangeability. Money has finally found its proper place, one far more unusual than in the stock exchange: the earth orbit, in which it rises and falls like an artificial sun".

The plays of the 1990s are generally political. But playwrights of this era put personal politics over global politics. Because they grew up in a social atmosphere where individualist policy, free market economy, consumer capitalism, privatization and liberalization gain importance under the reign of Margaret Thatcher. In the course of Ravenhill's youth, Britain was transformed and corrupted in many ways. In 1979 Margaret Thatcher was elected as the first female prime minister of England. Some of her policies were deregulation of the financial sector, restructuring of the economy, education and social services based on market economy. Mark Ravenhill expresses these changes as follows:

*There were massive changes happening in Britain all the way during my education at university, with the country moving from being a society with a mixed economy and an anachronistic consensus about politics- a consensus about a form of state capitalism- to a free market economy. I was the first country in Europe to do that so aggressively and to do it very quickly. The whole fabric of the country was transformed, and that had a huge effect on everybody. Those kids in Shopping and F****ing are at the very tail end of what that wild free market, that western capitalism does" (Ravenhill in Monforte 2007: 95).*

Aleks Sierz (2000:237) supports Ravenhill by stating in his book *In-Yer-Face Theatre British Drama Today* that:

One way of understanding the point of view of a young writer is to do a thought experiment. Imagine being born in 1970. You're nine years old when Margaret Thatcher comes to power; for the next eighteen years -just as you're growing up intellectually and emotionally- the only people you see in power in Britain are Tories. Nothing changes; politics stagnate. Then, some time in the late eighties, you discover Ecstasy and dance culture. Sexually, you're less hung up about differences between gays and straights than your older brothers and sisters. You also realize that if you want to protest, or make music, shoot a film or put on an exhibition, you have to do it yourself. In 1989, the Berlin Wall falls and

the old ideological certainties disappear into the dustbin of history. And you're still not even twenty. In the nineties, media images of Iraq, Bosnia and Rwanda haunt your mind. Political idealism- you remember Tiananmen Square and know people who are roads protesters- is mixed with cynicism- your friends don't vote and you think all politicians are corrupt. This is the world you write about.

Shopping and Fucking is written as a response to Thatcherite politics, mainly against to her famous quotation 'there is no such thing as society. There are only individuals'. The play criticizes the corrupted nature of human values, consumer society, capitalism, and culture of consumption. "Thatcherite policies affected the theatre, not just in the gradual erosion of subsidization and implementation of the market-driven economy, but also in the subject matter and use of dramatic form. Whilst it was initially suggested that many of the playwrights of the 1990s- especially the in-her-face dramatists- were essentially apolitical" (D'monte 2008: 79). The play has no political agenda to change the ills of consumer society. So characters in the play have no political goals. They speak as one. They don't state openly their beliefs, feelings, thoughts and they don't claim that any ideology is true or correct. In this respect *Shopping and Fucking* does not stand for any clear ideology and it does not offer any solutions to the situation because it does not tell any visions of utopia. Instead Ravenhill deals with the effects of capitalism on individuals and shows different ideas on stage through his characters. Because he strictly believes that "there were no ready-made Utopias and no grand narrative schemes" (Billington 2007: 361). In the play, "young characters are in a world that's without politics, without religion, without family, without any kind of history, without structures or narratives, and as a consequence they have to built up their own structures" (Ravenhill in Monforte 2007: 93). In this context it is clear that *Shopping and Fucking* is a problem play rather than an answer play.

Shopping and Fucking is also the model of postmodern heroism. In *The Postmodern Condition* Lyotard claims that like the grand narratives, in the postmodern age, grand hero has no proper place and credibility. He (1984: xxix) emphasizes that "the narrative function is losing its functors, its great hero, its great dangers, its great voyages, its great goal". This is certainly the case in *Shopping and Fucking*. Like Jimmy Porter's, the protagonist of John Osborne's landmark play *Look Back in Anger*, much quoted line which can be read as the end of grand narratives or grand hero, "there aren't any good, brave causes left" (Osborne 1957: 84).

Postmodern theory rejects the notion of identity that stands for political action. In the postmodern world, individual identity becomes obscure and impossible. Ravenhill's theatre demonstrates such a tendency. He doesn't give much knowledge about his characters. In *Shopping and Fucking* characters are named as Lulu, Robbie, Mark,

Gary and Brian. They have no real personality even surnames and we don't know their lifestyles. Characters of *Shopping and Fucking* "spend a great deal of the play shopping and fucking...They also seem to lack any sense of history, barely mentioning anything that isn't a feature of contemporary popular culture" (Rebellato 1998: xix). They are in an effort to communicate but they fail to establish a meaningful communication. The characters of the play cannot control life, anything, even their minds. For this reason they are in need of guidance and support to establish an identity. Ravenhill just gives us a conception of postmodern identity which is globalised. Characters of the play are in search of meaning and value. They are "desperately trying to find a different set of values, but they can't" (Cavendish 1996). In postmodern culture, individuals seek to understand who they are today. This becomes impossible and problematic. It soon becomes clear that their efforts for creating an identity come to nothing. As a postmodern playwright Ravenhill is revealing the impossibility of identity in the postmodern period. In this sense Brian's final speech with Robbie contributes strongly to the case:

You know, life is hard. On this planet. Intractable. I can tell you this because I feel it. Yes, like you I have felt this. We work, we struggle. And we find ourselves asking: what is this for? Is there meaning? I know you've... I can see this question in your eyes. You ask yourself these questions. Right now-yes? We need something. A guide. A talisman. A set of rules. A compass to steer us through this everlasting night. Our youth is spent searching for this guide until we... some give up. Some say there is nothing. There is chaos. We are born into chaos. But this is... no. This is too painful. This is too awful to contemplate. This we deny. Am I right? (86).

Ravenhill's *Shopping and Fucking* is remarked upon for staging what should not be staged and forgotten: horrors of contemporary life, vomit, crime, abuse, prostitution, despair, psychic helplessness and sexual violence. Lyotard's observation in *The Postmodern Condition* (1984: 81) exactly fits the situation within the context of Ravenhill's play:

The postmodern would be that in which, in the modern, puts forward the unrepresentable in presentation itself; that which denies itself the solace of good forms, the consensus of taste... that which searches for new presentations, not in order to enjoy them but in order to impart a stronger sense of the unrepresentable.

In Ravenhill's case *Shopping and Fucking* attempts to present Lyotard's postmodern 'forgotten and unrepresentable'. With these points in mind it is clear that Ravenhill's theatre typically uses these issues to convey the postmodern condition of the 21st century.

Conclusion

In conclusion, among contemporary dramatists of the 1990s, Mark Ravenhill has a unique place. As an enthusiastic supporter of the society and an iconoclast of modern drama he is the most original and enigmatic writer of the post-Thatcher generation. Ravenhill's dramatic voice is indisputably the strongest of the postmodern era. Facing the turn of the new millennium *Shopping and Fucking* marked a milestone in contemporary British theatre. With the play Mark Ravenhill contextualizes the corrupted values of consumer culture and symbolizes the corrupting power of money in such a world. The play deals with the negative effects of capitalism on human beings. It is a critique and reading of contemporary consumerist habits in the light of postmodern tradition. The play operates with the postmodern principles as Lyotard suggest: end of the ideology, grand narratives; rise of a money centered world and globalisation.

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