

OTHERNESS OF LITERATURE: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF HAROLD PINTER'S *THE DUMBWAITER* AND SAMUEL BECKETT'S *WAITING FOR GODOT*

Abstract

This paper critically examines the question of language in literature. Language in the common understanding is a means of expression. But in the literary studies, language as a means of communication does not touch on the essence of language. The study aligns with Heidegger's idea that 'that language itself is poetry in essential sense' (1971: 74). This constitutes the Otherness of literature, that is, language is the house of Being. The fact that anything can be articulated in literature is first articulated as language. This articulation of being is what Heidegger calls unconcealment of being. In revealing the disclosedness of the being, its truth is set forth. It is this truth of being we shall explore using the works of Harold Pinter and Samuel Beckett. Theoretical emphasis will be placed on the works of Aristotle, Michel Foucault, Roland Barthes and Martin Heidegger.

Introduction

The critical issue in this work centers on three questions: what is literature? What are the distinctive features of literature and the question of representation in literary art? Simple as these questions may appear, it has generated a lot of critical debates and discussions. These questions are central to the question of literature. As a result, it has given rise to several definitions of literature. One of the commonest definitions of literature is anything that is written. This includes Medical reports, law reports, and newspaper reports. Most historical document is included in this understanding of literature as anything that is written. As Edwin Greenlaw argues,

Nothing related to the history of civilization is beyond our province; we are not limited to belles-lettres or even to printed or manuscript records in our effort to understand a period or civilization, and we must see our work in the light of its possible contribution to the history of culture (cited in Rene Wellek and Austin Warren, 1956:20).

According to Greenlaw, literature is not closely related to the history of civilization; it is identical with it. The simple reason is that it is something that is written. But inclusion of everything written as literature does not answer the question, what is literature. Instead it has grouped literature with some other cultural activities. At times literature is seen as a reflection of a people's life. This forms the main thrust of Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's definition of literature, that 'it reflects the life of a people as it is now, as it will be, and it is supposed to be, so literature contains people's image of themselves in history and of their place in the universe' (cited in Okoh, 2008:130).

Following the argument of Greenlaw and Ngugi, what is literature has not been answered. Rather literature is associated with some other things. By contrast, literature is where one encounters language, which takes place as art. The idea of literature as language constitutes the otherness of literature.

Otherness And Literature

Otherness as a concept has been aptly described from various perspectives. According to Gadamer, Otherness confronts us with what he calls 'the impenetrability of the Otherness of the other' (1988:55), for Michel Foucault it marks 'the limitation of our thought' (1970:15), for Lyotard, 'as the search for the limitations of representation' (Bill, 1991:37), for Jacques Derrida, otherness names the self-differentiating play of signifiers which he calls 'Difference' (1978:50), Jacques Lacan, 'Symbolic Order' (Waugh, 2001:181), Sigmund Freud, 'the unconscious' (MacIntyre 2004:395), for Nietzsche, 'Will to Power' (Lechte 2005:285), Emmanuel Levinas 'Alterity' (1961:41), Maurice Merleau-Ponty 'Invisible' (1968:178), Akwanya 'integrity' (2005:129) and Walter Benjamin, 'Aura' (Costello, 2005: 145).

Otherness captures all the properties that describe literature as a distinctive form of art. It announces the reality of literature as a verbal structure which is self-sufficient, autonomous and subsists in its language alone; Otherness marks 'the impossibility of literature' (Jameson, 1972: 174) to communicate in any form as a means of communication, a reflection of the social milieu, or private mythology of the writer. All these can be a provocative in a literary work, but the text can take place in spite of all these. As Frye has shown,

Literature may have life, reality, experience, nature, imaginative truth, social conditions, or what you will for its content; but literature itself is not made out of these things. Poetry can only be made out of other poems; novels out of other novels. Literature shapes itself, and is not shaped externally: the forms of literature can no more exist outside literature than the forms of sonata and fugue and rondo can exist outside music (2000:97).

Otherness presupposes that literature is a verbal art; and language accounts for its being. At the center of otherness is the sign system, which is no longer, used to refer but 'systematically forms the objects of which they speak' (Foucault 1970:49). Furthermore, otherness implies that 'literature is not a subject of study, but an object of study' (Frye, Anatomy 11, see also Blanchot 293).

The idea of literature as language is something that goes back in literary history. In *The poetics*, Aristotle discusses the various medium of representation in painting, music and poetry. In painting, the images are perceived for themselves; music consists of sounds whose value lies in themselves, and poetry (literature) consists of non-instrumental use of language. In the same context Aristotle makes further distinction between poetry and history. As he puts it,

It is not the function of the poet to relate what has happened, but what may happen, - what is possible according to the law of probability or necessity. The poet and the historian differ not by writing in verse or in prose. The work of Herodotus might be put into verse, and it would still be a species of history, with meter no less than without it. The true difference is that one relates what has happened, the other what may happen. Poetry, therefore, is a more philosophical and a higher thing than history: for poetry tends to express the universal, history the particular. By the universal, I mean how a person of a

certain type will on occasion speak or act, according to the law of probability or necessity; and it is this universality at which poetry aims in the name she attaches to the personages (2000:14).

Here, Aristotle makes a fundamental distinction between literature and history. History relates to punctual events; while literature deals with probable events. That is, things that may happen. Of great interest is the use of the modal auxiliary 'may happen' (Poetics 14). In other words, the truth of literature is hypothetical. It is not a tenable truth. Besides, Aristotle underscores the fact that 'All art is equally conventionalized' (Frye 96). In a literary work, it is expected that in a discursive convention for example tragedy, a tragic figure goes in accordance with the norms of literary tradition. To see a work of tragedy is to see it as 'the representation of the will of man in conflict' (Butcher Liv).

If this is the case, the question of communication is ruled out in literary studies. The language of literature does not communicate. As Derrida puts it 'there is nothing outside the text' (Of Grammatology 158). For Martin Heidegger the question of literature is far more than the question of communication or representation of objective reality. As Heidegger argues, 'the reflection upon what art is is entirely and decisively determined only by the question about Being' (89). He argues further,

In the current view, language is held to be a kind of communication. It serves for verbal exchange and agreement, and in general for communicating. But language is not only and not primarily an audible and written expression of what is to be communicated. It not only puts forth in words and statements what is overtly or covertly intended to be communicated; language alone brings being as beings into the open for the first time. Where there is no language; as in the Being of Stone, plant, and animal, there is also no openness of beings, and consequently no openness of nonbeing and of the empty. Language, by naming beings for the first time, first brings beings to word and appearance (Basic Writings 1993:198).

This account of Heidegger stands in opposition to the various schools of literary criticism, such as Marxism, Feminism and Humanism. In these schools of literary criticism the work of art is personally directed by the author to teach a moral lesson, or to portray a particular world-view. In most cases the work of literary studies is seen as a committed literature whereby the text is used to engage the ruling class. From the standpoint of Heidegger, none of these views can be held as the cause of the poetic art. It is language as the inaugural naming of Being that opens the question of literature as language. According to Heidegger, "language is the house of Being" (Eric Lemay 1996:93). The fact that anything can be articulated in literature is first articulated as language.

This articulation of being is what Heidegger calls the disclosedness of being. In revealing the disclosedness of being, its truth is revealed. In the work of art, the truth of beings has set itself to work. As Heidegger puts it,

What happens here? What is at work in the work? Van Gogh's painting is the disclosure of what the equipment, the pair of peasant's shoes, is in truth. This entity

emerges into the unconcealedness of its being. The Greeks called the unconcealedness of beings 'aletheia' (Miller 1992:81).

In disclosing the truth of being, language grounds our normal understanding of this phenomenon. The being that is disclosed is inaugural in every sense of the word.

In the text understudy, that is, *The Dumbwaiter* and *Waiting for Godot*, language discloses the being of waiting as a pattern of structuration. In *The Dumbwaiter*, Gus and Ben, two hired killers are enclosed in a basement room waiting to perform a task yet to be communicated to them by their employer. In *Waiting for Godot*, Vladimir and Estragon, two tramps are waiting on a country road for a man called Godot, whom they believe will give meaning and direction to their life.

While waiting the characters in *The Dumbwaiter* and *Waiting for Godot* engage themselves in conversation that exposes 'a movement in the consciousness of the characters' (Nwahunanya, 1998:51). In *The Dumbwaiter*, Ben relates a newspaper publication which reports of an elderly man, who tried to cross a busy road by crawling under a truck, which ran over him. Ben relates to Gus also of an article about a child killing a cat. Sometimes the discussion centers on a picture on the wall of cricket players entitled "The First Eleven". At other time, the conversation is a reflection on the nature of their job. Ben laments that his life revolves around entering dark rooms, which he has never seen before, sleeping all day, doing their job and leaving at night. Apart from all these, Ben and Gus engage in linguistic quarrel over the correct usage of 'light the kettle' and 'light the gas; the issue is brought out as follows:

Gus: I can light the kettle now.

Ben: Yes, you're always cadging matches. How many have you got there?

Gus: About a dozen.

Ben: Well, don't lose them. Red too. You don't even need a box.

(Gus probes his ear with a match)

(slapping his hand). Don't waste them!

Go on, go and light it.

Gus: Eh!

Ben: Go and light it

Gus: Light what?

Ben: The kettle.

Gus: You mean the gas.

Ben: who does

Gus: You do.

Ben: (his eyes narrowing): what do you mean,
I mean the gas?

Gus: Well, that's what you mean, don't you?

The Gas.

Ben (powerfully): If I say go and light the kettle. I mean go and light the kettle.

Gus: How can you light a kettle?

Ben: It's a figure of speech! Light the kettle.

It's a figure of speech!

Gus: I've never heard it (1008).

In this instance of discourse between Ben and Gus, the issue that draws their gaze is the correct usage of 'light the kettle' and 'light the gas. Even though the two gangsters persist on their various grounds that what they say is the correct thing, it is more than issue of correct usage. The problem centers on leadership and loyalty. Ben feels that Gus is no more loyal to him and the organization, which they work for. To enforce discipline and loyalty, Ben, the senior partner has to insist that he is right even though what Gus say may be correct.

On the other hand, in *Waiting for Godot*, the two tramps, Vladimir and Estragon, wait for Godot by engaging in various modes of conversation such as discussion on the nature of mankind, what they did yesterday and discussion on their present state. One interesting aspect of their discussion centers on the Calvary scene where two thieves were crucified with Christ. For Vladimir it is strange that only one evangelist reported the matter. We read thus,

Vladimir: It'll pass the time (Pause). Two thieves, crucified at the same time as our Saviour. One

Estragon: Our what?

Vladimir: Our Saviour. Two thieves. One is supposed to have been saved and the other ... (he searches for the contrary of saved) .. damned.

Estragon: Saved from what?

Vladimir: Hell

Estragon: I'm going

He does not move.

Vladimir: And yet ... (Pause) ... how is it- this is not boring you! Hope-how is it that of the four evangelists only one speaks of a thief being saved. The four of them were there or there about-and only one speaks of a thief being saved (pause). Come on, Gogo, return the ball, cant you, once in a way? (9).

For Vladimir the centrality of Calvary event demands accurate description. It baffles him that only one evangelist reported the matter. The omission by other evangelist raises doubt on the veracity of calvary event. To him, he doubts whether the other evangelists were present on calvary.

In the two works, waiting gives rise to a certain sense of expectation and hope. In *The Dumbwaiter*, Ben and Gus wait for an order to carryout their operation, that is, to assassinate their next victim. But like, Vladimir and Estragon, in *Waiting for Godot*, Godot may never come for them. In *The Dumbwaiter*, the object for which Ben and Gus wait do arrive and that complicates their problem of waiting.

However, if language is the house of Being, it has an obvious implication in terms of representation. Representation involves the impossible project of making the absent present. Seen in this context, the relationship between representation as a form and what is represented can only be one of alterity. As Roland Barthes has shown that criticism of literature does not aim to recover the object of representation. Thus he asserts, to rediscover the essence of the work, for this essence is the subject itself, that is to say an absence: every metaphor is a sign without a substance, and it is this far-

off quality of the signified that the symbolic process, in its profusion, designates: the critic can only continue the metaphors of the work not reduce them. ... It is sterile to bring the work down to pure explicitness, since then immediately there is nothing more to say about it ... but it is hardly less vain to seek in the work what it might be saying without actually saying it and to suppose that it has a final secret, to which, once discovered, these would equally be nothing to add: whatever one says about the work, there always remains in it something of language (87).

This something of language opens up the problem of representation. The something of language Michel Foucault has characterized as statement, discontinuity, discursive break, threshold, and limits. (*Archaeology* 14-15). In a discursive structure, Foucault explains that discontinuity is characteristics of every discursive statement. Furthermore, Foucault explains that systems of dispersion are the underlying reality of all discursive statements. The unity of any discourse is actually a dispersion of elements, which involves discontinuity. Hence the task of any discursive analysis is to discover the rules according to which this disunity of objects, forms, concepts, and theoretical option is present.

In the works of Harold Pinter and Samuel Beckett, the texts are very suggestive of meaning. For example in *The Dumbwaiter*, the structural metaphor of dumbwaiter grinds the meaning of the text, while in *Waiting for Godot* the identity of Godot suspends the argumentative structure of the work.

In *The Dumbwaiter*, Gus and Ben are two gangsters who wait in a basement room for their victim. In the basement room, they are the dumbwaiters. Their presence constitutes an act of waiting.

Also in the basement room, the elevator all of a sudden starts giving order for an exotic dish. Ben and Gus have to carryout the order of the elevator. In this sense they are dumbwaiters waiting for their order from the elevator.

But more striking is the fact that Gus is also a dumbwaiter too. While Ben and Gus are in the basement room waiting for their order, ironically, Gus becomes the dumbwaiter, that is, the victim they are waiting for.

Finally, Ben who is the boss of Gus is the dumbwaiter himself. He obeys order without any question. To a great extent he is also a dumbwaiter.

In *Waiting for Godot* the identity of Godot is fragmented and distended as a series of selves. The questions of what or who Godot might be is only one of the perplexities in the play, which withholds meaning and denies explanation. As the identity of Godot is in question so also that of Estragon and Vladimir. As we read in the text,

Estragon: we came here yesterday.
 Vladimir: Ah no, there you're mistaken.
 Estragon: what did we do yesterday?
 Vladimir: what did we do yesterday?
 Estragon: Yes.
 Vladimir: why ... (Angrily) nothing is certain
 When you're about (14).

These two characters cannot remember anything for certain. Their desperate unreliability of memory is reinforced in Act 11, as Estragon and Vladimir try to figure out whether they were there the day before or not. From this instance of their failing memory, one may ask, when did the two, that is, Estragon and Vladimir make the appointment to see Godot. Or is Godot just a mere figment of their unreliable memory. In certain instances of the discourse, Estragon says 'we hardly know him' (16) while Vladimir claims 'he is a kind of acquaintance' (16).

If the text is unable to affirm the identity of Godot and also to determine the problematic of the dumbwaiter, it then implies that meaning is always deferred. In literary discourse, one can say that meaning is a process and not a product. As Derrida has shown, ... This movement of play, permitted by the lack or absence of a center of origin, is the movement of supplementarity ... The movement of signification adds something, which results from the fact that there is always more, but this addition is a floating one because it comes to perform a vicarious function, to supplement a task on the part of the signified (Seyhan, 1992:112).

Conclusion

Otherness entails that the possibilities of meaning can never be exhausted in a work of art. Each reading of the text will unfold a new pattern of meaning and discussion. As Northern Frye puts,

Literature ... is, far as we know, an inexhaustible source of new critical discoveries, and would be even if new works of literature ceased to be written (Anatomy 17).

Within this context, to approach literature is to know it as a verbal structure, where language is encountered as a thought-made-object. Language in this sense is not a form of expression, or as a form of representation. Rather language as poetry is a thinking where poetry alone brings what is into view, into unconcealedness. Poetry discloses what is.

References

- Akwanya, A.N. *Language and Habits Thought*. Enugu: New Generation Books, 2005.
- Aristotle. *The Poetics*, trans S.H. Butcher. Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University, 2000.
- Blanchot, Maurice. *The Book to Come*, trans. Charlotte Mandell. Stanford; University Press, 2003.
- Butcher S.H. *Aristotle's Theory of Poetry and Fine Art*. New York: Dover Publications, Inc, 1951.
- Bill, Readings. *Introducing Lyotard: Art and Politics*. London and New York: Routledge, 1991.
- Barthes, Roland. *Criticism and Truth*. Trans. Katrine Pilcher Keuneman. Mineapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1978.
- Beckett, Samuel. *Waiting for Godot*. New York: Grove Press, 1982.
- Costello, Diarmuid. 'Aura, face, photograph' *Walter Benjamin and Art*. London: Continuum Books, 2005.

- Derrida, Jacques. *Writing and Difference*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978.
 ——— *Of Grammatology*, trans Gayatri chakravorty Spivak. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978.
- Foucault, Michel. *The Order of Things*. London: Tavistock, 1970
 ——— *The Archaeology of knowledge*. Trans, A.M. Sheridan Smith. London: Tavistock , 1978.
- Frye, Northrop. *Anatomy of Criticism*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press 2000
- Gadamer, Hans-Georg. 'Text and Interpretation' *Dialogue and Decostruction :The Gadamer-Derrida Encounter*, Ed.
- Diane P. Michelfelder and Richard. E. Palmer. Buffalo: State University Press of New York, 1989.
- Heidegger, Martin. *Basic Writings*, Ed.
 David Farrel Krell: New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1993.
- Jameson, Fredric. *The Prison-House of Language*.
 New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1972.
- Lechte, John. *Fifty key Contemporary Thinkers*. London: Routledge, 2008.
- Levinas, Emmanuel. *Totality and Infinity*, trans. A. Lingis, Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1961.
- Lemay, Eric and Jennifer A. Pitts. *Heidegger for Beginners*.
 Danbury, USA: Writers and Readers, Inc, 1996.
- MacIntyre, Alasdair. *The unconscious: A Conceptual Analysis*, Rev. edition. New York: Routledge, 2004.
- Miller, Hillis. *Illustration*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992.
- Nwahunanya, Chinyere. *Issues in Literary Theory, History and Criticism*. Owerri: Corporate Impressions, 1998.
- Okoh, Nkem. *Preface to Oral Literature*. Onitsha: Africana First Publishers Limited, 2008.
- Otto, Reinert and Peter Arnott. ED. *The DumbWaiter. Twenty-three plays: An Introductory Anthology*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1978.
- Ponty, Maurice Merleau. *The Visible and the Invisible*, ed. Claude Lefort, trans. Alphonso Lingis, Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1968.
- Rice, Philip and Patricia Waugh, Ed. *Modern Literary Theory*. New York: Oxford University Press, Inc. 2001.
- Seyhan, Azade, *Representation and its Discontents* Oxford: University of California Press, 1992.
- Wellek, Rene, and Austin Warren. *Theory of Literature*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc, 1956.