

Self-reflexivity in Postmodern Theatre: A reading of Arthur Kopit's *Oh Dad, Poor Dad, Mamma's Hung You in the Closet and I'm Feelin' So Sad*

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Abstract: Self-reflexivity is a postmodern phenomenon in which the genre calls attention to its self-conscious nature. Self-reflexive theatre is also known as metatheatre, a term given by Lionel Abel in his book *Metatheatre* (1963). It also stands for anti-representative play with techniques such as play-within-the-play (which can be both explicit or implicit), self-conscious role-playing by the characters, intertextuality with other literary texts, dramatic sequences which seem like improvisation, abrupt song and dance sequences, anti-closure or anti-totalisation. Metatheatrical plays such as Luigi Pirandello's *Six Characters in search of an Author* (1922) affect the audience with a sort of Brechtian alienation effect or *Verfremdungseffekt*. The purpose of the present paper is to analyze Arthur Kopit's *Oh Dad, Poor Dad, Mamma's Hung You in the Closet and I'm Feelin' So Sad* (1959) and find out whether the postulates of metatheatre can be applied to the play. This play, with its absurd and incredible happenings lead to estrangement and defamiliarization. The paper will deal with various themes such as intertextuality, paranormal devices, play-within-the-play, theme of imprisonment, anti-closure and parody of genres and attempt to testify whether these helps in breaching the fourth wall between the stage and the audience.

Keywords: Self-reflexivity, metatheatre, play-within-the-play, parody, intertextuality.

The American dramatist Arthur Kopit's (born 10 May, 1937) play *Oh Dad, Poor Dad, Mamma's Hung You in the Closet and I'm Feelin' So Sad* (1959) has been basically read as a play in the absurd tradition due to its incomprehensive happenings. Reviewers like John Gassner have dealt with its psycho-sexual dimension such as fear of sexuality, psychological violence and associated trauma. This paper, however, will look into the performative aspect in terms of its self-reflexive nature. Self-reflexivity is considered to be a major aspect of postmodernism. The period from the 1960s and 1970s have seen numerous subjects being prefixed with 'meta-' such as Jean-Francois Lyotard's 'metanarrative' (1979), Hayden White's 'metahistory' (1973), Roman Jakobson's 'metalanguage' and Lionel Abel's 'metatheatre' (1963). Among them, Lionel Abel's (1910-2001) term metatheatre stands for a kind of theatre which self-consciously reveals its own status as performance. The salient postulates of metatheatre claim that the characters are self-conscious of their role as

character and actor, their dramatic life is already theatricalized, there is scope for improvisation, the action has the quality of a dream, closure is undermined and authority subverted, the audience is forced to actively respond and not just passively receive as in the reader-response theory and the scheme of the play-within-the-play is used for self-referentiality. The technique of play-within-the-play can be both explicit as well as implicit and often in the presence of an on-stage audience. For instance, in Luigi Pirandello's play *Six Characters in Search of an Author* (1922), the six characters stage an improvised play "Mixing It Up" within the original play. Richard Hornby in his book *Drama, Metadrama and Perception* (1986), has given the varieties of overt metatheatre, as play-within-a-play, ceremony-within-the-play, role playing within the role, literary and real-life reference and self-reference. Intertextuality and parody are other inherent aspects of postmodernism which also make the audience feel that they are watching a performance and not merely a slice of life dramatized on stage as it happens in realistic plays.

I

In order to find out the self-referential strategies in this play, the following themes will be analyzed I) realm of texts; II) paranormal devices; III) implicit play-within-a-play in a scene-by-scene analysis; IV) theme of imprisonment; V) anti-closure; and VI) parody of genres. A very striking fact of the play is that the names of all the major characters such as Madame Rosepettle, Rosalie, Commodore Roseabove, Rosalinda (a minor character who is Dad's Secretary) and Rosalinda (the piranha fish) begins with the word 'Rose'. These names refer to the names of characters in Tennessee Williams's play *The Rose Tattoo* (1951). There are also obvious similarities in the dramatic action. In the *The Rose Tattoo*, for example, the widow Serafina delle Rose celebrates her love for her dead husband Rosario by centering her whole life around the urn containing his ashes just as Madame Rosepettle is obsessed with the coffin containing her dead husband. Like Madame Rosepettle who is a threat to her only son Jonathan, Serafina in her self-destructive mourning threatens to destroy the life of her only child, Rosa. This invocation of intertextual kinship of characters suggest that literary characters exist in relation to one another. In addition, the play shows that its dramatic action should be seen in relation to another play, not real life. Moreover, the case of a text referring back to texts and authors in real life underlines the textual life of the play. Madame Rosepettle's son Jonathan in a moment of ephemeral euphoria, for example, utters the names of his favourite "old friends":

JONATHAN. (Emotionally) Tra-Tra-Trallope- Ha-Haggard-Daudet- Ga-Ga-Gautier-ma- mmmmy old -fffriends. La—lllok at them all. Sh-sh-Sholokhov- Alain- Fournier Alighieri-Turturturgenev. My—old friends. (11)

These people are mostly French, Russian and Italian authors. Among them, the mention of Theophile Gautier (1811-1872) is significant because he was a French theatre columnist who suggested that the nature of theatrical effect should be in favour of creating fantasy rather

than portraying reality, as he felt that realistic theatre was undesirable. Furthermore, there is the instance of Jonathan tying a chair about his neck. Curiously, this suggests an implicit reference to the play *The Chairs* (1954), by Eugene Ionesco. Just as Jonathan lives a sort of imprisoned life with minimal outside contact, the nonagenarian couple in that play dwells in a place surrounded by water on all sides and holds conversation with guests, who are invisible. This play suspends belief right from the inception of its performance. It assumes to effectively pierce into the credulity of the audience. A bit similar to the circumstances of corpses in Eugene Ionesco's *Rhinoceros* (1960), the fact that Madame Rosepettle is the most unconventional tourist who carries the corpse of her deceased husband stuffed in a coffin is undoubtedly abnormal. At this point, the question that comes to mind is, does it simply exist to terrify the audience or does it indulge in any sort of role-playing. Just as the boulder which Sisyphus carries up the hill and which consistently rolls down due to the force of gravity in Albert Camus's *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942), the coffin is the burden Madame Rosepettle carries to her numerous tourist spots. Unlike the boulder, the corpse does not tumble down (as it is generally kept hooked in the closet) except thrice. After the frightened bellboys once let it fall, in the later cases, the mummy of Dad automatically “tumbles forward stiffly” twice onto the bed in which Rosalie was planning to seduce Jonathan. After Jonathan strangles Rosalie, the stage direction says,

But as he staggers past the corpse of his father, his father's lifeless ARMS somehow come to life for an instant and, reaching out, grab JONATHAN by the feet. JONATHAN falls to the floor. (58)

Other than the fact that it is a repetition of falling on the floor, it can also be interpreted as a blatant 'parody' of Oedipus complex. Since Rosalie usurps the place of the mother in her “master bedroom”, the father tumbles forward interrupting the planned sexual encounter. It has already been mentioned that people have read the text in terms of Oedipus Complex but the issue of it reading as a parody takes it a step forward since parody is one of the potent devices of metatheatre. Kopit does not limit the abnormal specimens to the coffin. Her entourage (being an important person as Madame Rosepettle claims herself to be) consists of a speaking piranha fish which consume only tender Siamese Kittens and not skeletons of Alley cats. As Madame Rosepettle scolds the bellboy,

MADAME ROSEPETTLE. WHAT!? A common alley cat? Just who do you think I am? What kind of fish do you think I have? Alley Cat? Alley cat? Indeed. In Buenos Aires, I'll have you know, Rosalinda was fed nothing but Siamese kittens, which are even more tender than Siamese cats. That's what I call consideration! (12-13)

Other than the cat-eating fish Rosalinda (a character in the play), there are also two gruesome flesh-eating Venus flytraps (in reality they are insectivorous plants) which growl and grow oversize to capture and consume Jonathan until he destroys them. As it is felt while observing the play that intrusion of these unrealistic flora and fauna on stage tend to

transform it into a macabre one for the audience. So, this play strive to be an anti-illusionist by being nightmarish in quality.

II

In this play, the segregation between the interior world composed of the master bedroom and the space specified for Jonathan's leading a prison-like existence and the exterior world represented by the music of the carnival is strictly maintained because Jonathan is never allowed to visit outside as his possessive mother thinks he is "susceptible". As Madame Rosepettle answers Rosalie on what basis he is never allowed to move out,

MADAME ROSEPETTLE. I don't let him out because he is my son. I don't let him out because his skin is as white as fresh snow and he would burn if the sun struck him. I don't let him out because outside there are trees with birds sitting on their branches waiting for him to walk beneath. I don't let him out because you're there, waiting behind the bushes with your skirt up. I don't let him out because he is susceptible. That's why. Because he is susceptible. Susceptible to trees and to sluts and to sunstroke. (26)

No doubt these words "I don't let him out" five times enhances the pathetic absurdity of Jonathan's circumstances, on second thoughts, it needs to be asked, whether the dissociation between the interior and exterior merely on the surface level. In other words, it needs to be seen how far it is real or superficial for Jonathan. Just as in any carnival there are dances, theatre performances, entertainment shows of varied sorts, in a similar way, inside the compartment of Jonathan too, a 'pseudo-carnival' remains in operation. Peopled with heavily caricatured characters specially Madame Rosepettle, their histrionic acting in front of an internal audience (as will be analyzed in the following paragraphs) gives it the dimension of the play-within-a-play, though in an extremely implicit manner. Going by scenes, Scene One has Madame Rosepettle behaving like an acclimatized actress in front of the on-stage audience which comprises of the hotel bellboys. The passage which refers to itself as a pseudo-opening of the first scene of any play when the curtains are raised and profound dialogues are spoken, is this,

(They open the bedroom doors. Madame Rosepettle lowers her eyes as the blinding rays of sunlight stream from the room).

MADAME ROSEPETTLE. People have no respect for coffins nowadays. They think nothing of the dead. (Short pause) I wonder what the dead think of them? (Short pause.) Agh! The world is growing dismal.

(She now proceeds to storm heroically about the room sweeping over all the furniture in her path. New articles are immediately brought in to replace the broken articles, which are removed.) (6)

In this passage, her "heroically"... "sweeping over all the furniture" can refer to creating new sets for a new play. Moreover, in a way, she performs the role of a stage manager, instructing the bellboys (who will now be transformed into stage decorators) as to where to place the props of the stage. Still going further, she instructs Jonathan to take notes (in the process giving him the role of a stage prompter) that she plans to sack the

bellboys the next morning. In Scene One itself, there is another passage which is also highly theatricalised. For instance, while giving Jonathan his “Surprise for the day”, the bellboys are asked to turn their backs, creating the scenario for asides spoken in plays,

MADAME ROSEPETTLE. Turn your backs, bellboys... You may turn around now. (The sound of a HAMMER is heard offstage). If you must bang like that, my boy, then please bang with some sort of rhythm. Oh, the Lieutenant in Buenos Aires, remember him, Robinson? How he shook when he drilled. I fairly danced that day. (She begins to dance, the other BELLBOYS clapping in rhythm.) That's enough. That's enough. (She stops.) (10-11)

Her dance with the rhythmical music given by the bellboys creates an ambience for a mini-carnival and she is self-conscious of the fact since she quickly becomes normal as she is in mourning. In Scene Two, if we consider Rosalie and Jonathan as acting out their parts (Rosalie deliberately acting to gain his love and Jonathan speaking out his feelings may be for the first time in his life), on the other side, Madame Rosepettle is the audience as she keeps listening to them from the keyhole of her master bedroom. In Scene Three, this pseudo-stage acting can be divided into two parts for the purpose of better comprehension. In the first part, the waltz dancing party of Madame Rosepettle and Commodore Roseabove, in which she is self-consciously acting pretending to love the Commodore, Jonathan is the on-stage audience in the background who then is shocked to know his family's past, just as the real audience will be shocked at the cruelty of Madame Rosepettle who narrated her “fairy tale” of how she met and later killed her husband. In this scene, several incomprehensible things happen, as the stage direction says,

(She smiles seductively. The room darkens till only a SINGLE SPOT of light falls upon the table set in the middle of the room. The WALTZ plays on. MADAME ROSEPETTLE nods to the COMMODORE and he goes to sit. But before he can pull his chair out, it slides out under its own power. He places himself and the chair slides back in, as if some invisible waiter had been holding it in his invisible hands. MADAME ROSEPETTLE smiles sweetly, and pulling out her chair herself, sits. (33)

After the action of the “invisible hands” of the “invisible waiter”, the glasses break on their own while raising a toast, as the stage direction says,

(They raise their glasses. They gaze wistfully into each other's eyes. The MUSIC builds to brilliance. The COMMODORE clicks his glass against MADAME ROSEPETTLE's glass. The glasses break. (34)

These sort of action inevitably produce a jarring effect in the audience. The second part takes place in the master bedroom. Just as Rosalie enters it,

(ROSALIE walks into the room and pulls the drapes from off the windows. Weird COLORED LIGHTS stream in and illuminate the bedroom in wild, distorted, nightmarish shadows and lights. They

blink on and off, on and off. It's all like some strange, macabre fun house in an amusement park.) (52-53)

These action of Rosalie pulling the drapes refer to the symbolic curtain raising in a theatre and the light effect proclaim that a show is coming. Here Rosalie does her self-conscious seductive acting and the on-stage audience is the dead father inside the closet who all of a sudden participates by interrupting the planned love scene between his son and Rosalie. So, it shows that the device of the play-within-a-play makes this play a metatheatrical one. The enormously long and unusual title of the play poignantly reflects the anguish of Jonathan in the situation that he is. Being the hugely protected son, paradoxically, his life is co-incident with absurd heroes or anti-heroes. William I. Oliver in his essay "Between Absurdity and the Playwright" says,

The absurdist playwrights believe that our existence is absurd because we are born without asking to be born, we die without seeking death, we live between birth and death trapped within our body and our reason, unable to conceive of a time in which we were like the concept of infinity: something we perceive only in so far as we cannot experience it. (*Modern Drama* 4)

In this play, the circumstances of Jonathan's birth is quite abnormal. His "poor Dad" pretended that he did not know of his birth and his mother also kept him hidden, as will be clear from Madame Rosepettle's monologic "fairy tale", "favourite" story,

MADAME ROSEPETTLE. ... Oh, no, let him think I'm simply getting fat, I said. And that's the way I did it too. I, nonchalantly putting on weight; Albert nonchalantly watching my belly grow. If he knew what was happening to me, he never let me know it. He was as silent as before. (Pause) Twelve months later my son was born. He was so overdue, when he came out he was already teething. He bit the index finger off the poor doctor's hand and snapped at the nurse till she fainted. I took him home and put him in a cage in the darkest corner of my room. But still I — (43)

Born after the anomalous twelve months of gestation as a "teething" child, he was not given a fixed identity by his mother who called him with the various sub-names of his Dad and pretends not to recognize when Rosalie questions about him,

ROSALIE. Why don't you let Jonathan out of his room?

MADAME ROSEPETTLE. Who?

ROSALIE. Jonathan.

MADAME ROSEPETTLE. Who?

ROSALIE. Your son.

MADAME ROSEPETTLE. You mean Albert?

Is that who you mean? Albert? (26)

Thus, undefined and entrapped in his mother's whims and fancies, his motivation to correspond with the distant world of people is also rendered unproductive. Although he builds a telescope to view the passengers inside an airplane whose situation is similar to him,

JONATHAN. ... And I thought to myself, if I could just see - if I could just see what they looked like, the people, sitting at their

windows, looking out — and flying. If I could see — just once- if I could just once what they looked like — then I might — know what I — what I ... (Slight pause.) (20)

slightly later, confronting the truth of the futility of his creation,
JONATHAN. (Sadly) I know. That's the trouble. You take the time to build a telescope that can see for miles, then there's nothing out there to see. Ma-Mother says it's a Lesson in life. (Pause.) (20)

Other than the telescope, another technique with which he hoped to build relationship with people is by sending them letters whose names are in the phone book, by then he had covered all the "A's" and "B's" up to Barrera but this hope is also nullified for him,

JONATHAN. Mostly I just ask them what they look like. (Pause. Suddenly he starts to sob in a curious combination of laughter and tears.) But I don't think she ever mails them. She reads them, then takes them out to mail. But I don't think she ever does. I'll bet she just throws them away. Well, if she's not going to mail them, why does she say she will? I-I could save the stamps. (49)

In this way, his hopes are shattered both by the nothingness in the horizon and his mother's cruel endeavour. Moreover, when Rosalie gives Jonathan a lifetime chance to escape from the bizarre dungeon by running away, it is seen that Jonathan renounces the offer of freedom and ecstasy. Absurdity plays with the idea of the reliability of human memory. Incapability to remember is not so apparent in this play except that Madame Rosepettle gives the central position of the room to her "dictaphone" which stores memories. Entering into its mouthpiece,

MADAME ROSEPETTLE. My Memoires. Port Royale- Part One — The Arrival. (Pause, While she thinks what to say). Sorry to say, once again, nothing unusual to report. (15)

Whereas the audience knows that contrary to "nothing unusual to report:" for her, this phantasmagorical tragi-comedy depicted outrageous limits of abnormal behaviour.

III

The closure of the play is ambivalent in that it is a non-closure asking the profound question of the feeling of the absurd,

MADAME ROSEPETTLE. ... I ask you, Robinson. As a mother to a son I ask you. What is the meaning of this? (60)

After the havoc that Jonathan did destroying all the assets and accessories of Madame Rosepettle, the non-closure once again suggests that this play is a metatheatrical. This play, when initially published had a sub-title which was later removed from subsequent publications. It was "A pseudo — classical tragicomedy in a bastard French tradition". The opinion of critics vary on this position. William I. Oliver in his essay "Between Absurdity and the Playwright" has this opinion that it is not a parody of the French tradition of the Absurd, as he mentions,

If I'm not mistaken, Mr. Kopit meant *Oh Dad, Poor Dad, Mamma's Hung You in the Closet and I'm Feelin' So Sad* to be something of a parody of absurdist drama. Upon close inspection I find this play

every bit as sound as many seriously recognized pieces in the absurdist field. Like jazz, or any other extreme artistic expression, absurdist drama will not bear parody, for the parodies often appear as good as the work parodied. (*Modern Drama* 10)

And Martin Esslin in his book *The Theatre of the Absurd* has said about this aspect that, This play takes the oblique approach of parody. (315) Here, it can be suggested that, although it has several moments of confrontation with the absurd, the style of language can be considered parodistic against the language used in French Absurd plays. For instance, while Jonathan basically stammers only in the first scene in the presence of his mother, in the second scene, he overcomes his disadvantage while speaking to Rosalie with few lapses in between including calling her “Sir”. In the third scene, his stammering is done with totally as he speaks quite normally. Themes such as inability of human language to communicate is remedied in this play. Moreover, Madame Rosepettle seems to comprehend the sounds spoken by Rosalinda the fish also. Another aspect of parody can be the fact that unlike the characters of the French tradition such as Vladimir and Estragon who usually fail to achieve their desire and purpose in life, Jonathan here could accomplish his impulsive revenge by killing Rosalinda, the fish, the cruel venus fly traps and destroying the dictaphone to avenge the inhumanity of his mother towards his “Poor Dad” and himself.

It should be noted that in this play, Kopit also works on three different traditions of drama writing. There is the tradition of revenge-tragedy where the killer is pursued and punished by a character or by God. In this play, this tradition of drama-writing is parodied and the sense of pride which defines revenge is repeatedly followed out. The play also responds to the tradition of crime and suspense drama where the criminal runs away from justice and is finally caught. This play parodies and rejects popular representation of guilt and crime like Agatha Christie's *The Mousetrap* (1952). There is also the tradition of puritan absurd drama which critiques the limits of realism in plays like *Rhinoceros*, *The Chairs*. Linda Hutcheon considers parody as “the perfect postmodern form” (*Poetics* 11) and Kopit's play uses the technique of parody for self-reflexivity in the postmodern tradition.

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