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RESEARCH PAPER

Unity and Closure: A Performatist Reading of *Poet X* by Elizabeth Acevedo

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ABSTRACT

The current research paper attempts at exploring and analyzing Performatism with its various features in a contemporary American novel *Poet X* by Elizabeth Acevedo. The study is developed in the background of the recent propositions in literary theory which have tried to emphasize and argue that postmodernism is dead or in the process of dying and is being replaced by new theoretical and methodological concepts like metamodernism, remodernism, digimodernism, hypermodernism, performatism, post-postmodernism etc. However, there is so far no consensus as to which literary theory is the most suitable one to define the current cultural moment. Performatism is also considered to be one of the leading and most systematic theories that tries to chart cultural changes in the contemporary art and literature breaking away from the split concepts of sign to the unified one aiming for specific closure of the work. Monism, double framing, opaque subjectivity and theism are its salient features which need to be explored and analysed in the work to ascertain if performatism really be the answer to the dilemma of defining literary moment after postmodernism. Textual analysis of Poet X suggests that there is substantial evidence of performatist features in the novel yet there are also certain postmodern features present in the background.

Introduction

In the wake of brandishing multiple literary and cultural theories by various contemporary theorists since the turn of the millennium, the readers, scholars and aspiring students of literary and cultural studies have to study extensively in order to decide as to which proposition is univocal and befitting to define and "chart the cultural changes" (Hucheon, 2002, p. 181) that are happening around the world. Although many replacements of postmodernism like Metamodernism (Vermeulen & van den Akker, 2010), Cosmodernism (Moraru, 2011), Hypermodernism (Lipovetsky, 2005), Remodernism (Childish & Thomson, 2015), Performatism (Eshelman, 2008), Altermodernism (Bourriaud, 2015), Digimodernism (Kirby, 2009), Automodernism (Samuels, 2009), Renewalism (Brooks & Toth, 2019a) and Post-postmodernism (Nealon, 2012) have been proposed but so far there is no consensus on a single

proposition to be the most suitable representative of the condition of the contemporary literary theory (Quintero, 2022). So much so that one of the leading literary theorists of postmodernism, Ihab Hassan (2003) even makes comment questioning the confusion and inability for a unified understanding of postmodernism "what was postmodernism in the first place? I am not at all certain, for I know less about it today than I did some thirty years ago" (p. 200). Yet, to move on to a new phase of cultural changes occurring in the world, it is pertinent to define and somewhat sum up postmodernism. The problem of coherent definition of postmodernism also lies in its having multiplicity of ideas and "incoherent sensibilities" (Vermeulen & van den Akker 2010, n.p.). Certain leading ideas like "depthlessness", "weakening of historicity" and "a new type of emotional ground tone" (Jameson, 1991, p. 6) involving pluralism, fragmentation, questioning the objective realities, end of metanarratives, denial of objective truths, deconstruction and development of sub-cultures (Hassan, 2003) could be summed up as the leading ones while trying to make sense of what postmodernism is/was.

Literature Review

With the substantial evidence presented by the contemporary theorists and scholars particularly those emphasizing the end of postmodernism and proposing the replacements, the debate now has moved forward in three major dimensions: existence of postmodernism and its traits in contemporary art versus replacement with few postmodern traits, complete rejection of postmodernism versus its complete existence, and coming of a new epoch or moment in literary theory versus reverting to older concepts of modernity, sincerity and objectivity. Scholars like Manolache (2014) seem to assert that postmodernism is very much here and with all its traits in the works of the contemporary artists, while Hassan (2003) and Huber (2014) seem to argue that some postmodern traits are still working in the backdrop but are going to be replaced completely by something new which they, respectively call as new forms of realism, romanticism, truth, modernism or any other. However, Quintero (2022) argues that the realist project of modernism leading to hyper neo-liberalism, which was interfered by postmodernism and was left incomplete is being revived and that "a kind of (oxymoronic) distorted recovery of truth" (p. 23-24) has set in.

Although each theoretical position taken up by the contemporary literary theorists (enlisted above) seems to be based on substantial evidence and rationale, yet some of these stand out to be the leading ones. One such example is that of metamodernism by Vermeulen & van den Akker (2010) which is based on the idea of contemporary art and literature being in oscillation between the modernism and postmodernism. Metamodernism has been critically debated and agreed upon by scholars like Bunnell & College (2015), Rudrum & Stavris (2015) and Ciorogar (2019). There is another theoretical proposisition i.e. performatism by Eshelman (2008) which is considered as "one of the most trenchant representatives of postpostmodern theory" (Xue 2018, p. 325). Performatism has also been applied and analysed in various researchers belonging to different fields of arts and humanities (Badra, 2021; Dorfman, 2020; Seah, 2012). Yet still, there are comments, criticism and reservations on the unanimous acceptance of performatism by scholars (Brooks & Toth, 2019b; Connor, 2015; Hayles & Gannon, 2007; Huber, 2014; Manolache, 2014) which needs more explorations and research works. As a newly formed and systematic

proposition, so far, the significance of performatism and its various features cannot be completely rejected. The more there are researches on performatism, the better it is to ascertain the actual value and position of the theory. In the backdrop of this argument, the current study aims to add to the existing body of knowledge available on performatism with a view to ascertain the positionality of performatism as could be seen after its implementation on the contemporary literature as the previous studies on performatism have significant dearth in the analytical studies (Maoz, 2017). Hence the overarching research question of this study is to explore how performatism manifests itself in the latest novels particulary *Poet X* by Elizabeth Acevedo (2019). The rationale for the selection of this novel is that it was recognized at national level in the US as being the most important novel in the year 2019. So being among the most recent and well recognized piece of literature, Poet X is the suitable choice to be evaluated from the perspective of one of the most recent and systematic theories specifically when there is the vehement pronouncement of the death of postmodernism and a shift in the culture of arts and literature in the new millennium. The most recent works are assumed to be carrying the latest developments and changes if there are any.

From the turn of the new century, Raoul Eshelman (2002) had started presenting and developing his theoretical proposition i.e. performatism, as a replacement of postmodernism. Starting with research papers and blog on performatism, Eshelman was able to publish a systematic and step by step manual in the form of a book in 2008 with the title *Performatism, or the End of Postmodernism* in which he had discussed the theoretical propositions with all its major key features in first chapter followed by its application on the various art forms including literary works, paintings, architecture and films. Eshelman calls his work "a kind of do-it-yourself manual for budding metaphysical monists" (p. xii) with the proclamation that it is a moment that "describe(s) the epochal changes now taking place in world culture" (p. xii). To put simply, Eshelman claims that his performatism is "an epoch" (p. 01) in which the split concepts of signs, as was the case in postmodernism, have been displaced with the unified concepts of signs, a representation of monistic aesthetics in the recent art works. In order to justify how that is happening, Eshelman comes up with analysis of various recent art works that are being produced in the new millennium. New works, according to Eshelman, do not seem to fall into the pitfall of the "endless regress" (p. 01) without a central focal point. Performatist monism provides that center to the work and the work is unified into a whole although with specifically mediated aesthetic devices.

Performatist Reading of *Poet X*

There are four basic features of performatism as outlined by Eshelman (2008) which needs to be explored in the work of art in order to ascertain if the work could be ascribed as performatist. These features are: monistic semiotic mode, aesthetic devices of double framing, opacity or density of subjects, and spatial and temporal coordination in theistic mode. The concept of ostensive sign, although Eshelman borrowed it from Gans (1993, 2003), is a wonderful answer to the dualist concept of sign of postmodernism (Eshelman, 2008). *The Poet X* by Elizabeth Acevedo (2018) is a narrative in poetic form that focuses around the journey of Xiomara, the young Dominican living with her family in the US, from childhood to a mature independent

poet facing her fears and working towards "the perfection of the self" (Eshelman, 2008, p. 13). Eshelman's performatism, "a kind of do-it-yourself manual for budding metaphysical monists" (p. xii) is an attempt to replace the "split concept of sign and the strategies of boundary transgression" (p. 01) and move towards unified concept of sign and strategies of closure. At least some part of the work offers such monism which prompts the readers to believe in some way as truths. This could be for longer or shorter periods of time. Specific devices are strategies applied by the writers to develop that monistic belief and give the narrative a bounded closure. These are named as double framing, monistic semiotics comprising ostensive signs, opaque or dense subjectivity, and theistic mode through coordination of time and space emphasizing authoriality. With the use of these devices and strategies, the aim is to create an attitude of belief among the readers in unified manner giving the work of art a formal closure. The following paragraphs try to analyse one of the most recent and popular American novel *The Poet X* by Elizabeth Acevedo (2019) from performatist perspective.

In the novel *Poet X*, the central character Xiomara or Poet X comes across a number of conflicts that help her to make a strong performance and become a typical performatist subject to transcend the given conditions of her frame. These signs could be enlisted as silence, poetry writing, music, and love. These signs not only hold back the mimetic conflict but also keep the work unified and monistic. Silence as a monistic ostensive sign is used at quite a number of places throughout the novel *Poet X*. Xiomara was a girl bursting with so many piercing thoughts and feelings that she wanted to share these and get rid of the religious, psychological and social conflicts that were suffocating her all the time. She says that "I want to break myself open, like an egg smacked hard against an edge" (p. 21). But she could not do it. So silence was the best option to avoid the conflict that was taking root in her since childhood when she was forced by her mother to observe Christianity in a staunch manner. Choosing silence as a refuge, Xiomara says,

> I try to think of the ways
> I can sneak out unnoticed.
> I have nothing to say
> To Ms galiano, or anyone else.   (Acevedo, 2018, p. 182)

Silence, as a sign is also a safe passage for Xiomara in the world. "It seems safe, our silence" (p. 47). It holds her back from the conflicts that were surrounding her existence since childhood. She is filled with "all the echoing doubts" (p. 16) towards religion but in order to avoid the conflict with her mother she prefers to lean back and stay silent, for she knows that "the only person in this house, who isn't heard is me" (p. 3). So she intends to "close my eyes, against the rocking, and try my best to dream" (p. 6). It is through these signs that the inner frame of the novel is formed and developed.

When silence is not enough, Xiomara thinks that she would explode, she takes refuge in another act i.e. writing poetry. This is also used as a sign in the novel. Her relationship with writing poetry is the most precious that gives her the feeling that she is safe and on her own. It is the little bit of freedom that she enjoys with the pen and paper. She is aware that "writing is the only way I keep from hurting" (p. 25).

This act of writing also defers her conflict with the religion and her mother. It is the poetry that becomes her sole passion so that she could express herself in the given conditions of her originary frame. Throughout the novel she has been snared in this conflict but has kept on writing poetry. It is also the transcendence from these given conditions that make her performance successful. Poetry is perhaps the most important sign used in this story that keeps the characters and the events unified in one way or the other. Had Xiomara been trapped in the conflict for a longer period of time without expressing through poetry what could have been her condition? There was a possibility that she could have grown violent. The traits of violence were in part of her personality in the beginning of the novel. Even the meanings of her name Xiomara are "one who is ready for war" (p. 04). There have been many instances in the beginning when she came home with bruises on her knuckles which showed that she had been into a fight again in the school. Her father used to utter a sentence, "you sure ain't an easy one" (p. 05). Even during her birth she came out fighting. Poetry turned out to be a sign through which the violence was deferred and the conflict was managed somehow. This violence deferring characteristic of the sign is what makes it ostensive. However, Xiomara faces retaliation against her passion for poetry because her religious mother thinks that it was a devilish act. Even when her poetry book was being burnt by her mother, she screams and rushes out of the home. The adoption of a violent course of action does not become a choice for her. As the story progresses, the readers can feel it that her interest in the poetry club and participation in the poetry events develop her attitude and mood towards life. Her anger is subsided. She knew that too. She knew that poetry is the refuge where she could take shelter and relax. It heals her. "It almost feels like, the more I bruise the page, the quicker something inside me heals" (p. 206). Even when her relationship with Aman, the boy she loved, is strained and she cannot give him more than few kisses and poems, the events are again interconnected monistically through poetry. Xiomara says that "but at least there's tomorrow. At least there's poetry" (p. 184). Poetry, as a sign, also serves as the reason to let Xiomara rise above her given conditions. It helps her in transcending what was troubling and conflicting in her life. It connects the inner frame with the denouement of the story in order to give it a complete closure.

Acevedo (2018) develops a specific semiotic mechanism in the novel *Poet X* by pitching certain signs against the other. One of the shocking contrasts is between the poetry and religion. Once in the bathroom, Xiomara was trying to memorise the verses of poetry which she wanted to read in the poetry club, her mother asked what she was doing, she replied that she was reciting the verses from the Bible. This contrast is put forcefully when her poetry is burnt by the mother on the grounds that "These thoughts that you have, that you would write them, for the people to read . . . without feeling guilt. Shame. What kind of daughter of mine are you?" (p. 217). Xiomara's condition becomes too painful and pitiable. She feels the complete thrust of cage suffocating her. She is desperate to save herself which she had expressed through poetry. She wants to say that "it is the only thing holding me up, holding me back" (p. 219). Poetry was a cure for her as it kept her normal. It healed her pains. The juxtaposition of poetry and religion are aesthetically manifested again during the act of burning the poetry book. On the one hand, while burning the collection, the mother was reciting the scriptures while on the other hand Xiomara was reciting her poetry.

Double framing is one of the core strategies employed by the contemporary writers to give the text a "specific aesthetic closure" (Eshelman, 2008, p. x). By double framing it is meant that there are two types of frames used by the author in the text i.e. inner and outer frame. The inner frame or originary scene comprises of various ostensive signs that give the text a monistic appeal. It is the actual frame or frames on which the story rests. In the case of *Poet X* (2018), the originary frame is Xiomara's given conditions which are prompting her to give various reactions. It includes her Dominican background, physique, parents, social settings, friends, school, church and the neighbourhood. In this frame, Xiomara is passing through various experiences which are completely ripping her apart and leaving her lonely, suffocated and desolate. She wants to get out of these given circumstances. Her impulsive reactions of trying to cope with these frames are through certain signs that she omits i.e. silence, poetry writing, listening to music and finding refuge in Aman. But still the pressures of the originary frame are so binding that she cannot come out of these. It is like her existence is squeezed to a systematic mechanics from where there was no escape possible. Had she gone on with these conditions, the fragmentations and the fall of the character was inevitable. But she does not do so. The author does not let us see the fragmented conditions of Xiomara for a long period of time.

One of the significant aspects of double framing is that the outer frame is also introduced in the inner frame. These interventions by the author keep the novel unified and the readers back on the actual track of the text. One such example is the time when she is spotted by her mother while kissing Aman on the train. In her relationship with Aman, a refuge for her, she was drifting along and the story could have taken a new turn, perhaps in life with Aman and facing other issues of love and living together or some other. But the core issue for Acevedo was the idea she wanted her readers to believe in. It was the freedom, power of words, poetry and the choices that a person must make in her life in order to enjoy peace within herself. Instead of letting the characters and the plot digress from this core issue, she lets the characters and the readers back into the original tension of the novel. The mother sees the spectacle of their kissing and the words that are enforced from her mouth drive the readers back into the actual conflicts of the novel. "Had her tongue down his throat. Some little, dirty boy. I have to get off the train a stop early" (Acevedo, 2008, p. 136). After this abhorrence by the mother, the characters are driven back into the actual major conflict of the novel. The mother admonishes Xiomara severely and she is banned from different things like "no cell phone. No lunch money. No afternoons off from church. No boys. No texting. No hanging out after school. No freedom. No time to myself. No getting out of confession with Father Sean this Sunday" (p. 152). So many no's are thwarted upon her. The tension between the imposition of religious life and exercise of freedom is heightened. The readers are enforced back into the actual issue of the novel. The originary frame of the novel was floating in its natural logic while the outer frame of Mami's looking at the kissing scene and her reaction afterwards is introduced and the readers are driven back in the actual tension.

One of the striking features of performatism is opacity or density of the subjects (Eshelman, 2008). This opacity is not on an individual level rather it is with reference to the milieu around them. Opacity is developed in such a way that the character is not pulled apart and "misled by signs surrounding context" (p. 8) as is the

case with postmodern subjects. The performtist characters are dense. Although they may have ambivalent feelings but they achieve a closed unity. Xiomara appears to be a dense subject. She is ambivalent as she seems to have opposing feelings and ideas towards things around her which also create conflict. She loves her mother but at the same times hates her when she is forced to do certain things against her will. Besides this ambivalence, she develops herself and comes up with positive aesthetic experience. It could be owing to the choices that she makes and the interventions of the outer frames. Opaque and dense subjects are singular and inscrutable. Mami always thinks that her daughter is a difficult case and stubborn who needs to be controlled through force. Other people around her like Papi, Caridad and Father Sean are unable to comprehend her completely. They cannot fathom the fact that the girl is different and a free wild bird who needs space of her own so that she could develop herself. So they try to use coercive means in order to control her. However, owing to her singularity and inscrutability, she invites the enmity of her milieu. But the milieu in which she was living does not become violent and the readers do not have the sacrificial note. Rather it is of reconciliatory nature in which the characters reconcile and transcend by perfecting their selves. This happens with Xiomara. When father says that "you sure ain't an easy one" (p. 5), he implies that the subject is dense and inscrutable. Even when she was being beaten and forced to make confession in the church, Xiomara stays singular. She keeps on thinking that "I am no ant" (p. 142) and that she will not bear the weights like ants. It is also because of Xiomara's singularity that she invites the enmity of her mother. She is called a "Cuero" (whore) when found kissing Aman. Yet she does not move away from her stance. Same happens in the case of her poetry writing and reading. She does not seem to budge. But from inside she knows that it is her mother and that she could not keep up the fight with her. She keeps on looking for reconciliatory solutions instead of turning violent. Even when her book was being burnt by mother she could not turn violent and she realizes that. There was no way that she could use force.

> My anger wants to become a creature
> With teeth and nails but I keep it collared
> Because this is my mother. And I am sorry.   (Acevedo, 2018, p. 219)

She wants to be violent but does not opt for it because she has this consciousness of the respect of the relationship. This act of violence is deferred through ostensive signs. Mother recites the verses from the Bible while the daughter reads her own verses. In this way the violence is evaded. The density of Xiomara's character could be observed from the following lines that she writes about herself,

> I'm like a haiku,
> With different sides,
> Except no clean tie.   (Acevedo, 2018, p. 194)

She has different sides which implies that she cannot be expressed in simple plain words. And even those sides are not tied suggests that there is much to know about her. Like a dense object, it is not easy to enter into her or there would be a little light emanating from inside her. The milieu is going to know very less about her. And as the character persists in her own preoccupations and interests, there are chances that the milieu would turn against her. This is exactly what happens with Xiomara

and Mami. Mami turns against Xiomara's choice for she is unable to understand what was going on inside her. However, through perfection of the self, Xiomara is able to transcend the given frames.

Xiomara can be seen struggling with the coercive force of time and space in the novel. The mode in which these struggles happen is not deistic. Reasoning has not much to do with these rather there is the involvement of passions. There is Mami's passion towards religion juxtaposed against Xiomara's passion towards poetry. The clash of these passions is purely theistic. It moves on to a level of beliefs. Both of the characters cannot be just reasoned out. They try to talk and shout on each other so that one of the protohuman could subside and let the other act but it does not happen. Both of them need to transcend from their given frames. If it could not have happened through reconciliation conducted through playing god by Father Sean, the sacrifice of Xiomara was inevitable. When reconciliation has happened through the coordination of time and space, the characters feel themselves developed, relieved and even stronger.

> For the next couple of weeks,
> my mother and I work to break down
> some of the things that have built up between us.
> We meet with Father Sean once a week
> and talk. Sometimes about each other.   (Acevedo, 2018, p. 248)

Thus, subjects develop themselves and arrive at the conclusion that "words give people permission to be their fullest self" (p. 249). A space is created for the characters as well as the readers where they can "vicariously" experience "transcendence, goodness, and beauty" (Eshelman, 2008, p. 91).

As to the aim of a performatist work to lead the readers from the condition of disbelief to belief, it needs to be assessed as to what belief Acevedo wanted to convey to her readers. This belief could be seen as being emphasized at different places in the novel especially after the involvement of the outer frames. It is the belief in the power of the words that could heal the conflicts and pains of the human soul. It is also the kind of belief that divinity resides inside man and it is not just following the scriptures that one gets to the divine among human beings and that the words do not enslave man rather these make man free. This is what happened with Xiomara. The readers are convinced, not cognitively, but through the willful deception that words have the power and self-expression can lead to enlightenment also which is a freeing experience. From the coordination of monistic semiotic signs, double frames, opacity or density of subjects, and theistic mode of spatial and temporal relationships in the novel, Xiomara is seen happy, stronger and freer. After the poetry slam, there is freedom, love, smiles, care, and celebration.

> After the slam,
> Mami and Papi
> invite my friends over
> and Ms. Galiano and Father Sean, too.   (Acevedo, 2018, p. 256)

It is kind of an all-inclusive belief. There is a gay couple, a normal unmarried couple, a married, the priest, and the literary philosopher, all sitting together on a single table and enjoying dances and meals. It happens through the power of love when all allow each other the right to self-expression and living. There are heated debates in these kind of situations, as it happens between Father Sean and Ms Giliano at that time of celebration as Xiomara writes, "Ms. Galiano and Father Sean begin a heated convo about Floyd Mayweather" (p. 256), yet there is peace, love and merriment because the characters have learnt to avoid the conflicts through ostensive signs by giving space to each other.

Conclusion

Acevedo did not try to present the dualities and split concepts of signs that would be falling into the unending chain of meanings and meaninglessness eventually. There are clear messages and meanings working at hand in the novel *Poet X*. She applies different performatist strategies to make the readers believe, maybe for a short period of time, in the universal love and tolerance even while have extremely conflicting ideas and the power of words in self-expression. The belief is conveyed. The irony is held at check. The readers tend to believe in the possibility of such a co-existence in the world, though it could be for a short period of time for the staunch believers. Characters transcend and make successful performances. These are the very features performatism has seen or attempts to pursue in the contemporary works of art at the same time suggesting that disintegration, fragmentation, intertextuality, metafiction, playfulness and randomness is not the aim of writers anymore. There is hope and sincerity replacing hopelessness and melancholy in the contemporary narratives although through artificial use of techniques and deceptive strategies which seem to have postmodernism still lurking in the background of contemporary writers, theorists and researchers. Connor (2015) insists that performatism is a method of analyzing and reading a literary work just as postmodernism was and that there could also be postmodern reading of the same work. This analysis needs a comparative reading of the same work from performatist as well as postmodernist perspective which, at the moment, is beyond the scope of this paper.

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