

PLAYFUL IN PRAYER AND SERIOUS IN SEX: MODERNIST AND POSTMODERNIST TENDENCIES IN JOB'S *HALLELUJAH*

Gankhanani Moffat Moyo

Department Of Literature And Languages, University Of Zambia

Abstract

This paper follows the poetry of Zambian singer JOB. It explores the modernist and postmodernist elements in the work. The work opens with an examination of the statement “Forgive me father for I have sinned” and how JOB has used it in his poem. The work further studies modernist and postmodernist literary elements before considering how they have been used in JOB’s ‘Hallelujah’. It is learnt that the elements in JOB’s poem include deception, failed technology, and pastiche. The paper finally concludes that the poets presentation of his work in this manner is in relation with his desire to be different from the other singers of his age.

Keywords: Song, Poetry, Modernism and Postmodernism

Introduction

“Forgive me father for I have sinned.” This is common in confession rooms. It is a special confession session which is usually opened by the priests when he makes the sign of the cross. The confessor will also make the sign of the cross and say the above words, (http://www.saintaquinas.com/howto_confess.html). Here, it is possible to say that this is a very important session as it brings man closer to God since it is through priests that the communication between man and God takes place. It is important to remember the seriousness of this session and the words used within the ritual. The seriousness of prayer, especially for Christians can be seen from Paul’s command to the Thessalonians in his letter (I Thessalonians 5:17) when he urges them to ‘pray without ceasing’. Some have pointed out that the seriousness of prayer can be drawn from the fact that some people even go on fasting, a period of not eating, for spiritual purposes (<http://www.jesuschristismygod.com/in-fortydays.html>). From the above knowledge, it is understood that the phrase that opens this paper, ‘Forgive me father for I have sinned’ is taken very seriously as it shows man’s getting closer to God.

When one listens to Zambian ragamuffin, Job’s ‘Halleluja’, what comes to mind on the first instance is the seriousness of the song. This is because the song opens with a clip from a sermon and the confession words explored above. The song goes into exposing what members of the church do ‘in the dark’. The artist uses modernist and postmodernist elements in the song to express the thematic concerns as can be observed from his serious attack on religion and use of other modernist and postmodernist elements.

This paper aims at studying the modernist and postmodernist tendencies in the song ‘Hallelujah’ by Job, a young Zambian song poet. The work, before discussing modernism and postmodernism, gives a brief background of the artist and later proceeds to explore the modernist and postmodernist elements in the song having discussed modernism and postmodernism as literary elements.

Modernism and postmodernism

Modernism and modernism as well is not purely a literary concept. It is derived from developments in culture which could well be said to be from life, in this case. Abrams (1999; 167) says that:

the specific features signified by “modernism” (or by the adjective modernist) vary with the user, but many critics agree that it involves a deliberate and radical break with some of the traditional bases not only of western art, but of Western culture in general.

The tenets of modernist literature are almost the same as those of modernism in general though they focus chiefly on literature. Lorcher (2012) says that the tenets of modernism include “a strong and intentional break with tradition usually through a strong reaction against established religious, political, and social views, belief that the world is created in the act of perceiving it; that is, the world is what we say it is, a belief that there is no such thing as absolute truth as all things are relative, the lack of connection with history or institutions.’ Abrams (1999; 167) says that the major feature of modernism is the phenomenon called the avant-garde, a military metaphor meaning ‘advance guard. This is a small, self-conscious group of artists and authors that have deliberately detached themselves from tradition in trying to make a new creation. This implies their deliberately violating the general literary conventions. In line with this, what is most outstanding is their intention and ability to shock the conventional reader and challenge the norms of the bourgeois culture.

Postmodernism, on the other hand has, at some point been referred to as another version of modernism, (Davis and Schleifer, 1989; 15). This is because it comes in shortly after the high modernism which is chiefly in the 1920s. It is said to be a culture of fragmentary sensations, eclectic nostalgia, disposable simulacra, and promiscuous superficiality, in which the traditionally valued qualities of depth, coherence, meaning, originality, and authenticity are evacuated or dissolved amid the random swirl of empty signals, (Baldick, 2009). As modernism seems to be a reaction against the portrayal of a socially ordered society, postmodernism may be ‘seen as a continuation of modernism’s alienated mood and disorienting techniques and at the same time as an abandonment of its determined quest for artistic coherence in a fragmented world: in very crude terms, where a modernist artist or writer would try to wrest a meaning from the world through myth, symbol, or formal complexity. The postmodernist greets the absurd or meaningless confusion of contemporary existence with a certain numbed or flippant indifference, favouring self-consciously ‘depthless’ works of fabulation, pastiche, bricolage, or aleatory disconnection.’ It is these features that differentiate modernism from postmodernism.

Modernist and postmodernist literary elements in J.O.B.’S *Halleluja*

From the title of the poem, one is made to believe that this is a Christian spiritual poem meant either to uplift (praise) God or to worship Him. Of course not very surprising indeed, the poem explores the church though, unexpectedly, related to sexual experiences. The poet tries to show illicit sexual relations both within and outside the church.

The opening of the poem, just like the title, is also deceiving as it is an extract from a sermon. Even though the poet refused to disclose in an interview with the author of this paper, other sources have speculated that this is from sermon by renowned Zambian Bishop Joe Imakando. Others are suspecting that it could be a Seventh Day Adventist pastor during a church service in a sermon where he was criticising sexual immorality in the church. Whether these speculation are accurate or not (of course, not both can be accurate), the idea is that the use of pastiche, which will be discussed later under when analysing postmodernist elements independently, has added to one’s interpretation, on the first encounter with the text, that this is a Christian spiritual poem. The deception is a very important element of discussion in this

instance because the general expectation is that the poem will continue as a spiritual one as it has opened.

The deception is further exasperated by the earlier discussed confession words. It is always expected that people will say ‘forgive me father for I have sinned’. The poet, cleverly, through the same element of pastiche has included ‘again’. Intelligently, the again comes in after about two seconds which is not typically of normal speech. Of course, it shows the element of a rundown society as the confession. The poet prepares his audience, with the use of again, for a rotten social exposure. The social degradation is what contributed to the modernist movement around the late 19th century and early 20th century. The rotten elements of the society in the case of Job’s poem is born from sexual immorality. The opening sermon extract has already indicated that the church itself is full of devil worshipers. This is a place where one generally expects utmost spiritual purity. If the church is the abode of the devil, as it has been shown, it follows that the rest of society is worse. Here, it can be concluded that the poet is in utter despair as he watches his society crumbling down.

One also notices that the poet has for once tried to focus on pointing out the promiscuity emanating from men. While the society focuses on bringing down women and presenting them as a lower ranked sex and hence inferior to men, taking the blame for almost everything that men do, as can be seen in Shakespeare’s case in *Hamlet*, Job talks about a brother in the church who is in the habit of sleeping with married women. He goes further to condemn a choirmaster who tucks in a t-shirt and leading the choir. He is later shown while still leading the choir staring at beautiful girls in the church. The choir master is further said to have eaten groundnuts that have pushed his sexual desire further and he is now pressurising the children in society asking for sexual relations.

The above should not be taken to mean that women are left without ridicule. Job has said girls are making noise in church as though they have been beaten. He further says that a woman, a Sister Jane, whose name has changed to ‘Jane never just sleeps’ implying that she cannot go to sleep without at least a sexual act. He challenges her to say where she was, arguing that some people make money while they are lying down being soldered. Soldering has been used by the poet to refer to the soldering iron used to solder metals. The poet is metaphorically looking at the shape of the soldering iron in relation to the penis. He therefore implies that Jane is a prostitute despite the fact that she is a serious church member.

Job is also frustrated with modern technology. He seems unhappy with the technology that he believes Africans have misused. A character in the poem is seen using a cell phone at a funeral. During funerals in Africa, and Zambia in particular, people are expected to be humble. The technology referred to here is also seen at the coming onto the scene of modernism. With modernism, the focus shifts from the human being to the tool for capital accumulation. The human being is either replaced by machines or will operate as one.

The outstanding element of postmodernism in use is that of pastiche. This one is evident in the sermon opening, the immediate next text of confession, the refrain from a New Apostolic church hymn, and the closing which sounds like the continuation of the sermon that opens the poem. Even though it is difficult to point out the sources of the material used for pastiche, the poet has managed to use the material in such a way that it marries well with the rest of the thematic concerns of the text. The irony of a seemingly spiritual poem that uncovers the rot of society is typical of modernist literature that aims at exploring the reality of society from all angles.

Finally, the poet’s claim that he wants to be different from others cannot be questioned since it has already been shown that he has used the very elements of the proponents of making it new. This contributes to making people believe that this is a modernist and postmodernist work.

These are among the other elements in the poem that contribute to making it a modernist work.

Conclusion

The poem that has been discussed above has elements that the poets themselves may not see as modernist. Yet, the poet's desire to address serious issues in life makes the work employ these elements. While the work is expected to focus on prayer, a very serious element, this is challenged by the poet's mocking prayer by shifting the focus to sex. The seriousness which with the audience approaches the work on believing that it is spiritual is shifted to sexual revelations while prayer itself is mocked into mere pretence. The work qualifies in challenging the status quo as it delves into an area that people would want to regard with spiritual fear and respect.

References:

Job. (2011). *Halleluja*.

Abrama, M. H. (1999). *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. Massachusetts, Heinle and Heinle

Baldick, C. 2009. *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*. Oxford; Oxford University Press

Davis, C. R. and R. Schleifer. (1989). *Contemporary Literary Criticism: Literary and Cultural Studies*. New York; Longman

Lorcher, T. (2012). *Modernism in Literature: Quick Overview*. Bright Hub Education. Retrieved on 29 March 2012 from <http://www.brighthubeducation.com/high-school-english-lessons/29453-modernism-in-literature/>

How to Make a Good Confession. Retrieved on 29 March 2012 from http://www.saintaquinas.com/howto_confess.html

Forty Days of Prayer and Fasting. Retrieved on 29 March 2012 from <http://www.jesuschristismygod.com/in-fortydays.html>