

A REVIEW OF A POSTMODERN NOVEL THE ROMANTIC EGOIST

BİR POSTMODERN ROMAN İNCELEMESİ ROMANTİK EGOİST

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ABSTRACT

The main purpose of this study is to examine the French writer Frédéric Beigbeder's Romantic Egoist in the context of postmodern literature. The postmodern concept represents the end of modernization, as can be understood from the prefix "post". There are different interpretations of this concept, first introduced in America, whether it is opposed to modernism or successive of it. Ultimately, while the postmodern concept is being debated, it cannot be considered independently of modernism. Postmodern writers support an understanding that practises on all the legacy of literature, makes references to different works, texts and writers. Irony and pastiche are characteristics of this movement. Contrary to modern writers, throughout the work postmodern writers make the reader feel that the story is fictional. In this study, after giving a brief summary of this work, which is an example of a postmodern novel, the answer to the question of who is postmodern writer is sought. The fact that the author sometimes presents himself as a novel character in the work shows that he wrote his work using the metafiction technique of postmodern literature. After examining the examples of this technique in the work, the features like epigraph, collage, quotation and reference of the concept of intertextuality, which is one of the areas used by the postmodern literary movement, are discussed.

Key Words: Postmodernism, Romantic Egoist, Metafiction, Intertextuality

ÖZET

Bu çalışmanın temel amacı Fransız yazar Frédéric Beigbeder'in Romantik Egoist adlı eserini postmodern edebiyat bağlamında incelemektir. Postmodern kavramı "post" ön ekinden de anlaşılacağı üzere modernizmin sonrasını temsil eder. İlk olarak Amerika'da ortaya atılan bu kavram hakkında modernizme karşı mı yoksa modernizmin ardılı mı gibi farklı yorumlar mevcuttur. Nihayetinde postmodern kavramı tartışılırken modernizmden bağımsız düşünülemez. Postmodern yazarlar edebiyatın bütün mirasından yararlanan, farklı eserlere, metinlere ve yazarlara göndermeler yapan bir anlayışı savunurlar. İroni ve pastiş bu akımın özelliklerindedir. Modern yazarların aksine postmodern yazarlar eser boyunca anlatının bir kurmaca olduğunu okuyucuya hissettirirler. Bu çalışmada bir postmodern roman örneği olan bu eserin kısa bir özeti verildikten sonra postmodern yazar kimdir sorusuna cevap aranmıştır. Yazarın eserde kendisini yer yer bir roman karakteri olarak okuyucuya sunması eserini postmodern edebiyatın üstkurmaca tekniğini kullanarak yazdığını göstermektedir. Eserdeki bu tekniğin örnekleri incelendikten sonra postmodern edebiyat akımının faydalandığı alanlardan biri olan metinlerarasılık kavramının tanımlık, kolaj, alıntı ve gönderge özelliklerine değinilmiştir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Postmodernizm, Romantik Egoist, Üstkurmaca, Metinlerarasılık

1. INTRODUCTION

Born in France in 1965, Frédéric Beigbeder is known as a writer, literary critic and TV presenter. While serving as a TV presenter for a certain period of his life, he met very different names from every community and included these names in his novel, which was written in a daily style called *Romantic Egoist*. The writing style in the writer's works has both humorous and ironic features. The *Romantic Egoist*, which was published in 2005, is also in this direction.

In this novel, which is written in a daily style, the writer presents the reader with both his experiences from his life and with his imaginative inferences. From time to time, his real name is

Frédéric Beigbeder in the novel, and sometimes “Oscar Dufresne”, the name he gives the protagonist of the book. In other words, there is a "duality", and that duality sometimes causes complexity. Civelek and Tilbe draw attention to this situation in their articles as follows: “Considering at the word levels, it remains unclear whether the subject speaking in most places is Beigbeder or the narrator Oscar Dufresne” (Civelek, K. Tilbe, A. 2016, p. 37).

The reason why the author chooses the name Oscar Dufresne, who is a historical personality, is that the author believes that Oscar Dufresne is a worse man than him.

Who am I? Some say my name is Oscar Dufresne; others think that my real name is Frédéric Beigbeder. Sometimes I have trouble picking out who I am. In fact, I think Frédéric Beigbeder would eagerly like to be Oscar Dufresne, but he has no courage to do so Oscar Dufresne is worse than him, otherwise, why would he create him? (Beigbeder, 2006: 26).

Throughout the novel, the protagonist Oscar travels different countries and cities and presents the events he witnessed in these journeys to the reader in a daily style. The concepts such as hypocrisy, love and sexuality, popular culture, rapid consumption syndrome, and superficial thought which he witnesses during these journeys are explained in a humorous way throughout the work. He uses postmodern novel techniques while writing this narrative and making these subtle touches to the bleeding wounds of the popular culture.

2. WHO IS POSTMODERN AUTHOR?

The concept of postmodernism has taken its place in many disciplines since its beginning; however, it has been one of the most discussed concepts. “Postmodernism thus involved a highly critical epistemology, hostile to any overarching philosophical or political doctrine, and strongly opposed to those ‘dominant ideologies’ that help to maintain the status quo” (Butler, 2002: 29).

In this context, the views of the critic Linda Hutcheon are remarkable: “I would like to begin by arguing that, for me, postmodernism is a contradictory phenomenon, one that uses and abuses, installs and then subverts, the very concepts it challenges—be it in architecture, literature, painting, sculpture, film, video, dance, TV, music, philosophy, aesthetic theory, psychoanalysis, linguistics, or historiography” (Hutcheon, 1988: 3). As can be understood from the quote, the concept of postmodern, which has a place for itself in many different disciplines, has become a technique used by writers in the field of literature. So who is postmodern writer?

In the postmodern work, the author adds multidimensional features to his work by quoting other works and referring to different works. Instead of giving a mere meaning, he/she disrupts the whole work and opens different windows to the reader. “The typical postmodernist work of art is arbitrary, eclectic, hybrid, decentred, fluid, discontinuous, pastiche-like” (Eagleton, 1996: 201). In other words, fragmentation is at the forefront instead of integrity in the work. In postmodern works that are not based on plot technique, the main purpose is the event itself.

The events experienced by the characters are more important than the subject cohesion. This situation confirms the thesis that the works can contain different comments each time they are read. While presenting the work to the reader, the author does not accept the idea that the reader should only extract a message from it. In other words, the reader is also a part of the work and can make the desired conclusion. The postmodern writer can rewrite previously written works, but while doing so, brings a new breath to the work. In this particular examination, he aims to examine the work and tries to find an answer to this problem. A postmodern author, while writing, deals with the technique of fiction rather than realist features and takes refuge in his own truth and fiction by opposing universal values.

2.1. The Romantic Egoist

The fact that Beigbeder wrote this work in daily style and in sections among which there is no relation despite the local coherence which appears throughout the book, that he consciously makes use of the intertextuality technique by, occasionally, making explicit and implicit references to historical personalities, writers, artists, singers, literary texts and works shows us that the author used postmodern novel techniques while writing this work. "Since postmodernism represents a decentralized understanding of the universe where individual works are not isolated works, most criticisms in postmodern literature review focus on intertextuality: the relationship between a text (e.g a novel) and another text, or a text intertwined with the texture of literary history." (Sharma, R. Chaudhary, P. 2011, p. 194).

A section from Beigbeder's own work, *The Romantic Egoist*, about the concept of intertextuality, which is one of the characteristics of postmodern literature, will give us a hint as to what the author thinks about this subject.

And me, who thinks "his camera, which is called memory storage" is indeed an original invention! A century ago, Proust said the same thing (slightly better): "There are tasteful things like photographs. It is nothing more than a negative stereotype that man learns while he is together with his loved one; it will dawn on you later, upon coming home, when you find that inner, dark room ready to use, the room where you keep the entrance closed, no sooner than seeing someone."(In the Shadow of the Blooming Young Girls). Damn, when La Bruyere said, "It's all said," I'm sure someone else said the same thing before him (253).

2.2. Metafiction

In the metafiction technique, one of the postmodern literary techniques, the writer intervenes, from time to time, in the story he/she tells. While doing this, he/she sometimes keeps the reader fit so that they understand that the work is a fiction, and sometimes includes himself/herself as a character of the novel. In his *Romantic Egoist*, Beigbeder makes good use of this technique of postmodern literature. Stating "Some say that my name is Oscar Dufresne; others think that the real name is Frédéric Beigbeder"(26). He adds himself to the story along with expressing the life of the character named Oscar Dufresne. In the light of such information, the reader realizes that what they read is fiction while reading the work. The protagonist may be the author of the novel in the work dealt with through the metafiction technique. In such cases, the writer may sometimes turn this into an autobiographical style. Oscar Dufresne, the protagonist of Beigbeder, is also depicted as a writer in the work.

The technique collage, which is often mentioned in the concept of intertextuality, also has the features of metafiction. The author, while using this technique in his/her work, he/she takes sections from any movie or song and sticks them to the work. These quotations are given in quotation marks so as to make the reader aware of this fictional technique. We see that Beigbeder quotes from different films, songs, and television programs throughout the work. "I murmur the hit single of the ice-cold night "You Are My High"(64). The author, who is content with just giving the name of the song here, uses the technique metafiction by expressing the riff of Eminem's song in the following pages. "I love the riff of Eminem's new song": "Now this looks like a job for me / So everybody, just follow me / Cause we need a little controversy / Cause it feels so empty without me"(263).

The author's explanation about his work named the *Romantic Egoist* can also be regarded as a metafictional feature.

Francis Scott Fitzgerald's first novel, which was rejected twice by the magazine *Scribner's* in August and October 1918 and published two years later under the title *This Side of Paradise*, was titled *The Romantic Egoist*. And of course, it was telling about me. But I am also an emotional pervert, a loving skunk. An absoluteness-obsessed

bumpkin, an affectionate vulgar, a lonely macho. A Catholic pleasure hunter. Thanks Francis, for the title of this book (183).

The fact that the author gives information about where he got the name of his novel and referring to another writer while doing so, demolishes the perception of reality in the reader. Readers will remember that they are in a fictional event in such a situation. In addition, the fact that Beigbeder refers to different works and authors within the work, in other words, utilizing the method of intertextuality is also among the characteristics of metafiction.

2.3. Epigraph

This concept, which is known as "Epigraph" in English and is one of the features of intertextuality, has also been translated into Turkish as a "headword". However, it can be said that it is generally accepted as an "epigraph". As Kubilay Aktulum, one of the critics who have a voice in the field of intertextuality also states, an epigraph is "the most reduced type of foreword", "a summary of the foreword", "the essence of the quote", and "an icon put into a privileged form of speech" (Aktulum, 2011: 475). The reader gets clues about the work under favor of the definition he sees at the beginning of any work. They have preliminary knowledge of how a kind of work or plot will develop. In other words, it "represents the book" by standing alone at the top of a page, reducing and summarizing the book and its meaning" (Aktulum, 2011: 475).

Beigbeder, in his *Romantic Egoist*, uses this feature of intertextuality at the beginning of each chapter. The book consists of eight chapters in total and each chapter starts with a season name. Summer, Autumn, Winter, and Spring. These seasons are repeated after Spring. In other words, every season is mentioned twice. The descriptions used by the author at the beginning of this season episodes are quoted from different authors and individuals, and the epigraph at the beginning of each episode gives clues about that episode.

In this chapter, the author quotes Sergey Dovlatov, "God bestows upon the writer not a talent for poetry, but an ability to live a bad life", referring to the poor life he leads. In the second part, he emphasizes the naughty and mischievous child living in the writer, through this quotation from Martin Amis: "The author is a person who never manages to be an adult".

The author justifies the flirtatiousness of Oscar, the protagonist, by quoting the following statements from Beaumarchais:

"Sensitive souls, faithful souls,
You who condemn mild love,
End these cruel complaints:
Is it that much a crime to change?
Should love has wings,
For what else is it, if it is not merely to haw and gee?
For what else is it, if it is not merely to haw and gee?"

For what else is it, if it is not merely to haw and gee?"(68). Because the protagonist has a very turbulent sex life. As it can be understood from the "Epigraph", the author argues that it is not right to live solely dependent on a woman and looks with favour on being around to haw and gee, by repeating the statement "For what else is it, if it is not merely to haw and gee?" three times.

The other epigraphs used by the author in other chapters and which are also related to the chapters in question are as follows: "The possessed tears sparkle the eyes of the memories." O. V. de L. Milosz (103). "Life prevents the expression of life itself." "If I had a great love, I would never be able to tell." Fernando Pessoa. "Tom Ford: - Are you happy? Karl Lagerfeld: -Darling, I'm not that ambitious." (From the interview published on *Numero*, in December 2004.) "The first step to

changing the world is to understand it." Karl Marx. "One of the greatest rules of art is to not fall behind." Andre Gide (233).

2.4. Collage

This technique, which was first used in fine arts in the 20th century, later "finds a wide range of applications from painting to cinema, literature, photography, advertising, posters" (Aktulum, 2011: 45). Detailed explanations of Aktulum on what the collage technique is will be useful.

Intertextual collage, whether written or not, refers to newspaper headlines, articles, advertisements, official documents, posters, prospectuses, brochures, pieces in other texts; and sometimes to previously edited different elements such as trendy songs, opera pieces, radio announcements, etc., inserted into a new whole. We can add words, clichés, stereotypes, proverbs, in short, all kinds of other non-text elements to this list. All of this is "pasted" into a new text (Aktulum, 2011: 451).

Since the author includes a lot of collage technique in his work, we also partially included collages in this section. The brands mentioned in the works can also be considered as a collage. Because the author uses a bonding technique by choosing the real brands that exist instead of making up an imaginary brand. "New worn-out brands like Zara or H&M made stone-cold foxes a thousand times sexier than moneyed bitches." Here, almost bringing an ironic criticism to the rich, the author repeats this idea by criticizing luxury cars further down the page. While doing this, he does not hesitate to give car brands by using collage technique. "The thing I disgust the most in the world? The smell of leather inside luxury British cars. What could be more sickening than a Rolls, Bentley, or Jaguar?"(14).

As mentioned before, movie titles can also be considered as collages. In this context, the writer can make positive or negative criticisms to the film, which is referred to as a collage, depending on the situation. Naming the movie, the protagonist watches in his hotel room is an intertextual feature. "I end the night in my hotel room watching Inspector Derrick dubbed in Italian. Or am I a true Christian who has lost his way?" (22).

In another chapter, he uses collage technique criticizing the film by stating: "O racist gangs; do you think the Turks are short, busy-moustached types like those in the Midnight Express? This would be to forget the glory of Byzantium, which was first Constantinople and then Istanbul"(190).

As is known, song titles are also considered collage. It is seen that Beigbeder gave dozens of song titles throughout the novel. Sometimes the author contented himself by naming the songs, and sometimes he offers these songs to the reader by quoting them. "We weep together, listening to Etienne Daho's latest album accompanied by a beautiful melody of Carly Simon, during which Etienne Daho keeps repeating tirelessly: now we have to learn to live alone"(35). In another chapter, the author does not hide his admiration for Michael Jackson. "I play Michael and Jackson one after the other: 'Don't Stop Til You Get Enough', 'Black or White', 'Billy Jean', 'The Way You Make Me Feel', 'Bad', 'Wanna Be Startin' 'Something', 'Beat it' (...)"(192).

2.5. Quotation

The quotation technique that enables intertextual exchange can be seen most clearly in any text. Because the author refers to the person he quotes and states the sentence he quoted in quotation marks. In other words: "The author clearly states that the discourse or the utterance that he brings to the agenda in brackets does not belong to him"(Aktulum 2014: 77). Beigbeder's work in question is quite rich in terms of quotations. He appears to be quoting many authors and critics. He quotes Schopenhauer in the message that his beloved Claire wrote to him that one of the reasons for the existence of human beings is in the search for a life partner: "Why so much fuss? Why are these efforts, these angers, these worries, this misery? However, there is something very simple: every Jeannot finds his own Jeannette" (49).

The author also makes references to the condition of the people of the age. He defines the people of the age as individuals escaping from their responsibility by making negative criticisms to the worldview brought by modernism and gradually uniformizing people. In doing this, he likens the modern man to the Roman governor Pontius Pilate, who is a historical figure. Pontius Pilate has left the decision to crucify Jesus to the Jewish people and the clergy. He is known to be a person who has avoided taking responsibility by neither approving nor disapproving the execution. Pilate's escape from this responsibility is actually interpreted as the approval of Jesus' death. With this analogy, Beigbeder expresses modern man's evasion of his responsibilities as follows: "We are all Pontius Pilate, obedient to his destiny, bored with the idea of this world that overwhelms us, and this incomprehensible things that we no longer pretend to be the coordinator of which." He supports this argument citing Barthes. Roland Barthes said, "Pontius Pilate is not a gentleman who says neither yes nor no, he is a gentleman who says yes"(59). In the last sentence of the relevant paragraph, Beigbeder supports his assertion by saying "we think we are muttering, but we are actually obeying in silence".

2.6. Reference

According to Aktulum, reference is simply to mention the title of a work or the name of an author. In other words, unlike a quote, the reference forwards the reader directly to another text without quoting from a text (Aktulum 2011: 435). Beigbeder makes use of references in this work in which he wrote the life of an author. The author makes references to many authors, works, historical personalities, critics and poets throughout the work.

The protagonist Oscar and his girlfriend Penelope are in Cannes. Here, a conversation develops between them and they suggest books to each other. "He tells me that I should read *Bridget Jones*, and I tell him it would be good to read Kierkegaard's *Diary of the Seducer*". The author's reference to Kierkegaard's work is actually an emphasis on the protagonist's flirtatiousness. In another chapter, while criticizing the sms application imposed by popular culture, he refers to Choderlos de Laclos, the author of *Dangerous Relationships*, the novel written in letter form. "Okay, admit it, this is not Choderlos de Laclos, but we are slowly making his way. The speed and brevity of these messages push people to exaggerate their feelings and desires" (62). Beigbeder draws a similarity between this post and *Dangerous Relationships*.

The existential questions of Oscar, the protagonist, throughout the novel are aimed at eliminating the question marks about this character's life and his environment. While citing memories of his past, he comments on identity confusion and refers to many names.

In the beginning, I wanted to be either Chateaubriand or nothing, like Victor Hugo did. Then, as I got older, I revised my claim. I said to myself: "Either be Antoine Blondin, or nothing." The following year, it was "Either Frederic Dard, or nothing." Then, "Either Charles Bukowski or nothing.", then, "Either Philippe Djian or nothing." and now, "Either Oscar Dufresne, or nothing." Be anything, rather than nothing (221).

In a conversation with his publisher, Oscar says he wants to kill himself out of boredom. On top of that, the publisher said, "This would be great for the sales of your books. Your manuscripts would become cult objects like those of Brautigan or Sylvia Plath "(236) says and gives him an ironic advice in order that the author's work be immortal. Referring to these two American authors who are known to have committed suicide, Beigbeder expresses his admiration for their work. The author also makes references to great writers such as Jules Verne, Kafka, Orwell, Huxley and Flaubert throughout the work.

3. CONCLUSION

Postmodern writers may confront the reader as novel characters in their works. They inform the reader about fiction by participating in the stories they write. When examined on the basis of the reader, the reader sheds off the merely reading act assigned to him; in other words, he/she is no

longer passive reading and takes an active role throughout the work. The authors create almost mosaics using all the heritage of literature. In this context, benefiting from different authors and works and establishing intertextual relations with these works are among the most important features of postmodern writing.

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