

Fragmented Realities, Challenged Meanings: A Reading of Jon Fosse's *Dream of Autumn* as a Postdramatic Play

Parçalanmış Gerçeklikler, Sorgulanan Anlamlar: Jon Fosse'nin *Dream of Autumn* Adlı Eserinin Postdramatik Bir Oyun Olarak Okuması

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ABSTRACT

The approach to theatre-making observed an aesthetic and philosophical shift in the late 20th century. Hans-Thies Lehmann, in his book *Postdramatic Theatre* (1999), states that unlike the drama of modern times, the postdramatic theatre centres on a human being for whom drama arising from conflicts is not a real possibility. Postdramatic theatre, hence, is freed from the traditional rules of drama, as it breaks away from creating an illusion and instead focuses on providing a direct, real-time experience for the audience. Nobel Prize-winning Norwegian author, poet, and playwright Jon Fosse is one of the most renowned postdramatic playwrights. His plays are characterised by a rejection of conventional narrative methods, a disruption of linear storytelling, and a prioritisation of fragmented dialogue and paralinguistic language. These elements together create a meditative space in which language and action become secondary, giving centre stage to emotional and existential questions on life, death, and all that may or may not lie in between. This paper attempts to present a reading of Jon Fosse's play *Dream of Autumn* as a postdramatic play. The play's postdramatic treatment of language, characterisation, time, and life shall be studied to further the understanding of what truly qualifies as a postdramatic play.

Keywords: Postdramatic Theatre, Jon Fosse, *Dream of Autumn*, Fragmentation

ÖZ

Tiyatro üretimine yaklaşımda, 20. yüzyılın sonlarında estetik ve felsefi bir değişim gözlemlenmiştir. Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Postdramatik Tiyatro* (1999) adlı kitabında, modern zamanların dramasının aksine, postdramatik tiyatrodaki merkeze alınan insan için çatışmalardan doğan drama gerçek bir olasılık değildir diye belirtir. Dolayısıyla postdramatik tiyatro, bir illüzyon yaratmaktan uzaklaştığı ve bunun yerine izleyici için doğrudan, gerçek zamanlı bir deneyim sağlamaya odaklandığı için, dramının geleneksel kurallarının dışına çıkmıştır. Nobel ödüllü Norveçli yazar, şair ve oyun yazarı Jon Fosse, en tanınmış postdramatik oyun yazarlarından biridir. Oyunları, geleneksel anlatı yöntemlerinin reddi, doğrusal hikâye anlatımının sekteye uğratılması ve parçalı diyaloglar ile paralinguistik (dilötesi) dile öncelik verilmesi ile karakterize edilir. Bu unsurlar bir araya gelerek, içinde dilin ve eylemin ikincil hale geldiği meditatif (meditasyona yönelik) bir alan yaratır ve sahnenin merkezini yaşam, ölüm ve bu ikisi arasında yer alabilecek ya da alamayacak olan her şey için duygusal ve varoluşsal sorulara bırakır. Bu makale, Jon Fosse'un *Dream of Autumn* adlı oyununun postdramatik bir oyun olarak bir okumasını sunmayı amaçlamaktadır. Bir oyunu neyin gerçekten postdramatik olarak nitelendirdiğine dair anlayışı derinleştirmek amacıyla, oyunun dili, karakter inşasını, zamanı ve yaşamı postdramatik bağlamda nasıl ele aldığı incelenecektir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Postdramatik Tiyatro, Jon Fosse, *Dream of Autumn*, Parçalanma

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Introduction

Hans-Thies Lehmann, a well-known German theatre scholar, argued that the aim of postdramatic theatre is not to reflect, but rather to be self-reflexive, as it “consciously questions its own status as an object of contemplation and becomes an element in different kinds of practice” (Lehmann, 2014, p. 42). Such an approach towards theatre observed a significant shift in the aesthetic and philosophical approach to theatre-making that emerged in the late 20th century, contemporary with other avant-garde movements including Dadaism and Surrealism. Lehmann (2006), discussing the emergence of postdramatic theatre contends that the “while the drama of modern times was based on a human being that constituted itself through interpersonal rapport, the postdramatic theatre assumes a human being for whom even the most conflictuous situations will no longer appear as drama” (p. 182). This shift, hence, aimed to move away from the traditional, text-based drama that prioritized coherent narratives and character development, venturing towards a theatrical experience that prioritizes visual, auditory, and performative elements over narrative structure. Thus, some prominent characteristics of postdramatic theatre include less reliance on the play-text, fragmentation of thought and dialogues, subversion of fixed meaning, and considering performance as a third term between drama and theatre. In response to the ‘modern’ world, wherein the relationship between humans and the world constantly evolves, postdramatic theatre becomes an essential form of expression. Freed from the traditional rules of drama, i.e. the Dramatic theatre, it breaks away from creating an illusion and instead focuses on providing a direct, real-time experience for the audience. Often considered as ‘anti-dramatic’, postdramatic should rather “be considered as an extension of the dramatic” (Sharma & Bhattacharya, 2024, p. 18). This is because anti-dramatic theatre (or antitheatricality) rejects the artifice of theatrical illusion and ‘scripted’ representation completely, often rooted in the moral and ideological critique of theatre, and standing firmly against it. Postdramatic theatre, however, moves “beyond drama... at a time ‘after’ the authority of the dramatic paradigm” and favours presence over representation, thus process over product. It dissolves linear plot and prioritizes a more spatial, and sensory experience, reframing theater as live event rather than narrative artifact.

Dream of Autumn is a significant play in the postdramatic tradition, written by Jon Fosse. It premiered at the National Theatre, on 8 September 1999, in Oslo. Interestingly, the title of the play, i.e., *Dream of Autumn*, when considered together with the play’s plot, resonates with ‘dream allegory’, a form popular during the medieval period and used by writers such as Geoffrey Chaucer

and John Gower. The ‘dream’ in *Dream of Autumn* can be understood as being symbolic of the endless state of limbo felt by the characters in the play, as they neither embrace the many challenges of life nor confront the certainty of death. ‘Dreaming’ of ‘autumn’, thus, implies a yearning for maturation or ‘ripening’. ‘Autumn’, usually associated with ‘decay’ in literary discourse, becomes an essential phase in the cycle of reformation, implying that only through such decay can the possibility of regeneration emerge. While Fosse’s work appears non-traditional, aligning with the postdramatic tendency to disrupt traditional dramatic conventions, the play’s title, i.e., *Dream of Autumn*, paradoxically demonstrates Fosse’s unique approach to the dream allegory, therefore highlighting how contemporary works often reinterpret and repurpose established forms, instead of rejecting them completely. Such a practice favours ‘micro’ narratives and “reflects the postmodern scepticism toward fixed meanings and grand narratives, presenting a sense of crisis in the human condition” (Sharma & Bhattacharya, 2024, p. 2). On stage, these performances “move between presence and absence” (Bouko, 2021, p. 33), as indicated by the rejection of traditional elements such as acts, scenes, and clearly defined characters. In an interview with *The Guardian*, Fosse reflects on the liberation playwriting provides him because it allows him to employ silence in a way he could not in prose. He further states– “I could use the word ‘pause’ a lot, and ‘he or she breaks off’, and somehow make the silence speak and establish a second silent language behind the spoken language” (Power, 2023, para. 7). In his stories, Fosse fuses “domestic realism – making food, getting ready for bed, looking after a dog – and the mystical” (Power, 2023, para. 16). In postdramatic theatre, meaning emerges not from a conventional configuration of narrative, but through its dynamic interplay with performance, stage design, and props, leaving interpretation to the audience’s engagement with these elements, including the pauses and silences.

***Dream of Autumn*: Decoding the Postdramatic Quintessentials**

Postdramatic theatre is “invariably non-mimetic and almost always draws in significant measure upon the actual life stories and experiences of the performers rather than upon any external pre-existing text” (Carlson, 2015, p. 591). Hence, it often critiques fixed characterization and avoids the traditional concept of a protagonist. In Fosse’s *Dream of Autumn*, none of the characters hold a central role; they are all equally significant and simultaneously peripheral to the play’s plot. The most recurring characters are labeled ‘Man’ and ‘Woman,’ and share an underdeveloped yet dependent relationship. The absence of names encourages the spectators to empathise with the characters. Further, it also “destabilizes the spectator’s construction of identity by which a new

understanding of the other and for the self is constructed” (Pimenta, 2017, p. 13). Other characters such as the ‘Mother’ and ‘Father,’ follow this same archetypal pattern. The few characters given names - Dorthe von Obstfelder (the deceased whose funeral all characters have come to attend), and Gaute (the Man’s son) remain absent from the stage. Gaute’s absence invites a comparison to Godot from Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*. The comparison is reinforced by the parallels between Fosse’s and Beckett’s theatrical idioms. Like Godot, Gaute never appears, yet his presence is crucial in shaping the relationship between the characters, particularly as the son who temporarily held the estranged family together.

Through this non-traditional technique of ‘nomenclature’, *Dream of Autumn* encourages the audience to understand these characters through their interpretations, making the ‘act of watching’ an active, participatory experience. Although the audience is ‘defamiliarized’ by the postdramatic play’s unrealistic reality, their participation becomes integral. The subjectivity of interpretation, dependent on spectators, suggests that the play’s meaning is never fixed. Ultimately, the postdramatic play belongs more to the spectator than the playwright or its actors.

In postdramatic theatre, the performance becomes an event rather than a mere representation of the play text (Sharma & Bhattacharya, 2024, p. 17). This flexibility in interpretation aligns with postdramatic theatre’s disapproval of metanarratives, which advocate for ‘absolute’ meanings. The postdramatic rejects this, aiming more at reflecting the complications of the world, particularly post 20th century, where certainty and universality are constantly interrogated and contested. The idea of fragmentation invades nearly every aspect of the play’s narrative - the characters’ identity, their relationships with one another, their muted emotional response to traumatic events, and the open-ended conclusion. The absence of warmth and hope in their lives is briefly attributed to the transition from childhood to adulthood. Resonating with the theme explored by the British poet William Wordsworth in his famous ode, *Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood*, Fosse delves on the idea that the loss of childhood wonder is the beginning of adult disillusionment, which is also reminiscent of William Blake’s *Songs of Innocence and Experience*. In the play, the character of Woman, while talking to the Man, recounts a child’s remark:

well there was a child who said
up in the plane
when we were high up in the sky
‘We can’t see the birds’
A strange way of putting it don’t you think. (Fosse, 2004, p. 97)

This moment underlines the play's emphasis on the absence of hope, where even a child, who should naturally possess innocent optimism, is denied the sense of hope they rightly deserve. In a world where adults often seek a sense of 'stagnancy,' children, by contrast, are constantly searching for 'dynamism'. This makes them keenly sensitive to the 'absence' of things, as can be seen in the child's observation. Flying high in the sky, where a child's mind should be filled with wonder, the child notices the 'absence' of birds instead. The 'birds', symbolic of hope, freedom, and liveliness are conspicuously absent to the child's eye.

While children still express and communicate their perception of loss and absence, adults tend to endure this deprivation in silence, suppressing their emotions until the weight of it erodes both their sense of self and their relationships with others. The relationship between the Man and the Woman in the play symbolizes the perfunctory relationship that people share in the 'modern' world, experiencing physical and sexual gratification, but remaining emotionally passive, resulting in hyper individualism and monotony. This emotional detachment can be observed in the following lines spoken by the Man to the Woman:

It doesn't mean anything
That's just the way it is
It's nothing to worry about
He gets up, moves towards her
And I'll tell you
I cannot
Aggressively
stand
these feelings
Feelings
Feelings
Bloody feelings
I hate feelings. (Fosse, 2004, p. 113)

The unexpressed emotions lead to fragmentation, this fragmentation remains further unaddressed, eventually creating a perpetual sense of emptiness in almost all kinds of relationships. In *Dream of Autumn*, this 'emotional emptiness' is demonstrated through the conversations, which mostly seem hollow, as observed in the above excerpt. While the characters often have long discussions, their words lack any apparent meaning, symbolizing the urge to use elaborate language to fill gaps in conversations. The Man and the Woman in the play remain unaware of each other's personal lives, despite sharing a long, intimate history. This is made clear when she tells him:

But we've never said

to each other
 that we care for each other
 we've never said that. (Fosse, 2004, p. 123)

The dialogue in postdramatic theatre, thus, portrays an unrealistic reality, where the characters seem 'logical', yet the "principle of a somewhat Brechtian conscious exposition of an often highly artificial language" (Lehmann, 2014, p. 38) renders the meaning of their dialogue confusing. It is also because the postdramatic dialogue is not shaped by dramatic conventions of character and plot development, but is projected as "an audience-addressed polylogue by verbal performers in an ongoing discourse flow" (James, 2020, p. 113). The play's emphasis on broken conversations is quite intentional and recurring. The characters never agree with one another, their discussions never come to a meaningful conclusion, and the idea of 'individual opinion' permeates each conversation, as suggested by the following dialogue:

MAN

But then it is God within us
 to put it that way
 that saves the dead

WOMAN

Perhaps it's like that
 Wondering a short while
 Or are the dead
 saved by
 the birth of children

MAN

We're just talking of course
 It's only rubbish
 what we're saying
 It's only rubbish
 It is (Fosse, 2004, p. 116)

The failure to reach mutual agreements in conversations leads to repetition of dialogues and thoughts throughout the play. Characters say the same things, almost as if trying to make their words more meaningful through repetition. The constant line breaks in the dialogues suggest the same. In a dialogue between the Man and his Mother about their deceased grandmother, they keep repeating that she was "very old", rather than discussing her life or death in a manner that would suggest that they loved and cared for her. These breaks challenge traditional theatrical expectations, as theatre usually values eloquence, something absent in postdramatic plays.

However, these verbal gaps are compensated for by using paralinguistic features in the play. As Lehmann notes in his book, *Postdramatic Theatre* (1999), the postdramatic body is "a body of

gesture,” (p. 164) wherein gestures hold potential meaning without fully exhausting themselves in action. Paralinguistic elements in postdramatic theatre include voice modulations by characters, such as breathlessness, breathiness, whispering, extreme laughter or absurdist manners of crying for shock value become central to the plot. In *Dream of Autumn*, several of these cues are utilized to have more meaning to the play, instead of dialogues. The repetitive ‘pauses’ in the play, in between conversations, function as a motif, symbolizing the fragmented state of the ‘modern’ world. The absence of full stops after dialogues represents the ‘lack’ of resolution in conversations. Physical responses, such as laughing, smiling, sitting quietly, and glancing, further underline the characters’ emotions and relationships. Considering that the play revolves around the exchanges between an ex-couple; silences, pauses, and glances become necessary to represent their unsaid emotions, unresolved feelings, and lingering longings. These gestures are not placed in brackets, as is common in traditional theatre, probably because they are integral to the dialogue, not separate from it.

The characters in the play experience reality in a fragmented state. They are either planning to leave or preparing to leave to go somewhere. Even if they manage to finally leave, they are never truly able to. This stagnation in life is caused due to the fragmentation of life, where characters anticipate movement but are unable to actualize it. This is further substantiated by the unclear time jumps in-between dialogues, blurring the linear progression of time. In the play as well as postdramatic theatre overall, time is treated as an abstract entity rather than an absolute one. The following exchange between the Man and his ex-wife, Gry substantiates it, where they discuss the death of their son, Gaute:

MAN

to Gry

It’s a long time since Gaute died

GRY

Nothing is long ago

MAN

despairing

It’s a long time ago

ages and ages

since

GRY

Nothing is long ago. (Fosse, 2004, p. 213)

Here, time is portrayed as a thoroughly intangible and subjectively perceived entity. Postdramatic theatre, in its revision, more than a complete rejection of traditional structures, instead challenges the conventional perception of time. Time, being invisible and elusive, can be questioned as an impractical idea, something that does not truly exist. It continues to move forward, indifferent to human events, and never pauses or stops, even during moments of great calamity. This unrelenting passage of time makes the characters live in a constant rush. However, their attempts to 'hurry' are futile, as they remain exactly where they are, i.e. on the gravel path. They cannot leave before their time has truly come.

The postdramatic theatre, therefore, parodies the classical unities of place and time. Discussing Lehmann's concept of time for the postdramatic, professor and critic Jonathan Kalb explains that the (postdramatic) play searches "for three different 'lost times', which may or may not have existed, [and] produces the impression of a 'breakdown of time'. [...] Time doesn't march on but rather becomes buried in itself, circles and folds in on itself as remembered time" (p. 81). The time, furthermore, is 'shared' by the performers and the audience "as a processuality that is on principle open and has structurally neither beginning, nor middle, nor end" (Lehmann, 2006, p. 61).

The audience or reader only learns of the play's setting, i.e., a churchyard, halfway through the narrative. This 'delay' suggests that no one can escape their time or fate before it is fulfilled. The churchyard thus becomes a symbolic world, representing a place where time and life are inextricably linked. Introducing the setting of the play in the opening scene, hence, becomes unnecessary, as the churchyard represents the world itself, where people are bound by an unchangeable passage of time, emphasizing the universality of human existence and experience, which ultimately remain marked by the stagnation of life and the inevitability of death.

The play also critiques the pervasive presence of death in life and vice versa. While the characters are physically alive, they are emotionally disconnected, almost as if dead inside. Like the formidable Frankenstein's monster, whose identity remains in an eternal conflict, mainly due to its existence being a result of the uneven fusion of the fragments of different dead bodies; the characters in the play seem aloof to their existence, being in a perpetual state of disorientation towards their existence. Repeated phrases like "We must go," "We have to go, we can't stay here," and "I can't stay here" (Fosse, 2004, p. 187) reflect their desperate desire to escape. However,

escape is not possible by choice, and the nihilist acceptance of being stuck is observed in the following conversation between the Man and the Woman:

MAN

We have to go home

WOMAN

We have no home (Fosse, 2004, p. 196)

The characters in the play always seem to be fighting for survival, not against outside forces but within themselves, all while walking along a never-ending gravel path. The gravel path acts as a key symbol, representing both life and death. Rather than being opposites, life and death coexist, constantly intersecting. The churchyard, as noted before, symbolizes the world itself, blending the physical and spiritual realms. It is not just a graveyard but a churchyard, a place that signifies the connection between life, death, and the unseen divine. As the characters struggle to complete their walk on the gravel path, the churchyard becomes their next journey—seen with Gaute, the Father, and the Man, who do not survive by the play’s end. The gravel path stays the same; only the people walking on it change.

The play presents death as an inevitable event rather than a tragic one. If there is life, death will eventually occur. Additionally, death acts as a bridge among the characters, closing the emotional gaps that often keep them apart. In their otherwise superficial conversations, the topic of death brings them closer together. The Man, who has been emotionally distant from the Woman, reveals that he “thought of you (the Woman)” (Fosse, 2004, p. 108) after seeing von Obstfelder’s gravestone. Similarly, a conversation between the Mother and the Father shows how death—specifically, the memory of the deceased grandmother—temporarily fosters intimacy between them.

FATHER

Just calm down

MOTHER

Yes I’ll try

Pause. Seemingly to herself.

Well perhaps it was

for the best

FATHER

That grandmother died

yes

MOTHER

Yes

The Mother takes the wreath, lays it on her lap, the Father looks down and far away the Man and the Woman enter walking hand in hand wearing their everyday clothes

FATHER

to the mother

She had a long life

MOTHER

Yes

FATHER

And we've also

had a long life together (Fosse, 2004, p. 140)

As the play moves towards its conclusion, all the male characters—the Man, the Father, Gaute, are dead, while the female characters, Gry, the Woman, and the Mother survive. In postdramatic theatre, where there is no ‘fixed’ or ‘intended’ meaning by the playwright, this gendered dichotomy between life and death might be interpreted as the unpredictability of death or the uncertainty of life. Perhaps it means nothing, reiterating the postdramatic’s emphasis on open-ended conclusions. The following lines are the final lines of the play, spoken by the Mother, addressing the other two surviving women, Gry and the Woman:

MOTHER

to them

We'd better go then

it's time

The mother slowly walks down the gravel path. Gry gets up and takes the Mother by the arm. They turn, stand looking at the Woman and the Mother offers her hand. The Woman gets up, crosses to the Mother and takes hold of the Mother's arm, and arm in arm the three women slowly exit (Fosse, 2004, p. 165)

The three women who survive in the end, who are shown to be at crossroads throughout the events of the play, are now connected through the ‘death’ of the three men in their lives, offering a critique on the working of grief and how it can unite characters, whose union seems impossible otherwise. The newly formed ‘sisterhood’ among the three women might also symbolise liberation, as their lives no longer carry the ‘masculine’ oppression. Although the play concludes with the traditional ‘exit’ of the remaining characters, the playwright does not use a full stop after the last dialogue, probably to restate the message: journey on the gravel path continues, and the three women are also following the same discourse of life and death, in interchangeable patterns. The open-ended

conclusion, moreover, foregrounds the philosophy of the postdramatic theatre, where a story-of any being-never reaches a clean end, rather remains fluid, changing but never ceasing.

Conclusion

Postdramatic theatre moves away from traditional storytelling, character development, and structure, encouraging audiences to rethink what theatre can be. It eliminates conventional plot progression and blurs the line between reality and onstage performance, inviting the audience to actively interpret the play's meaning and performance. Jon Fosse's *Dream of Autumn* effectively captures the essence of postdramatic theatre, using fragmented scenes, hollow conversations, and nonverbal cues to highlight the fragmentation and lack of genuine connections experienced by people living in a rapidly changing world. Fosse's use of ambiguous time, unaddressed emotions, and repetitive gestures depicts a world where the meaning of life and death is unclear, and the characters behave in ways that make them both universal and individual. At the same time, the absence of traditional main characters and contested identities reflects postdramatic theatre's rejection of 'absolute' meanings, encouraging audiences to reflect, with each person's experience shaped by their personal interpretation.

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