

Agony of Postmodern Love: A Study of Patrick Marber's *Closer*

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Abstract

As one of the most significant British plays of the 1990s, *Closer* depicts a postmodern consumerist society where young adults suffer from the agony of love. In light of the inadequacy of current interdisciplinary studies on the play, this study is aimed at extrapolating the reasons for the characters' failure to attain closeness in *Closer* based on Byung-Chul Han's philosophy of postmodern Eros. As is manifested in the play, these young men and women are isolated and dissociated due to their egocentric tendency to appropriate and use the Other for their own ends; their substitution of uniqueness in the Other with self-imaged Homogeneity; the commodification of love to pornography in society which induces their fuzziness of true identify and incapability of differentiating between the real and the fake; and their complex play of power relations between two competitive sexes. Hopefully, this study can not only enlighten the contemporary humanity who still wish for a healthy and long-lasting relationship but provide some reference for subsequent scholars to conduct more diversified cross-field studies of Marber.

Key words: *Closer*; Patrick Marber; Postmodern; Love

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1. INTRODUCTION

Patrick Marber's *Closer* is a popular success with both West End and Broadway audiences and has been recognized as one of the most important British plays of the 1990s. At its first production at London's Royal National Theatre in 1997, *Closer* wins that year the Olivier Award for Best New Play and the Evening Standard Theatre Award for Best Comedy; and after its premiere on Broadway it picks up a Tony Award.

Closer not only enjoys considerable favor from theater audiences, but also quickly merits academic attention with significant entries within major surveys of twentieth-century British playwriting. These include Christopher Innes's revised volume, *Modern British Drama* in 2002 and David Rabey's *English Drama since 1940* in 2003.

Much of *Closer*'s success comes from its notably intense scrutiny and aggressively explicit depiction of human emotional and sexual relations, as it follows four characters over the course of a four-and-a-half-year period as they come together, break apart, swap partners and eventually separate irrevocably within twelve scenes. Kate Kellaway points out that it is a play about mental deficiency, greedy bodies and undernourished hearts (1998, p.51); while Zoglin notes that *Closer* is a bruising dissection of modern relationships (1999, p.65). Apart from that, Aleks Sierz makes Marber a central figure in his book *In-Yer-Face Theatre: British Drama Today* (2001), and believes that *Closer* is arguably "the decade's key play about relationships, and certainly one of the most successful" which treats the theme of lust frankly and unsparingly (2001, p.187); and Blansfield further suggests that "the overt irony of the play is that, despite the characters' longing for intimacy, no one is ever willing to risk it, so none of them grow closer" (2003, p.2).

Granted, previous studies of *Closer* have excavated the opulent undercurrents of it, laying the foundation for subsequent interpretations, but overall there is deficiency in interdisciplinary research with quite patently a limited

number of papers on *Closer*—only some theatre reviews and chapters of monographs have investigated certain aspects of the play, including sex, lies and cyberspace, and the existing explorations largely fail to thoroughly reveal the reasons for the doomed agony of Love in *Closer*, especially the impact of the wave of consumerism on human nature and relationship.

Under these circumstances, this study attempts to address why the characters in *Closer* fail to attain intimacy or love based on Byung-Chul Han's philosophy of postmodern Eros, so as to dig deeper into the socio-humanistic value of the play and to shed some light on the contemporary crisis of heterosexual relation.

2. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

2.1 Boosting Desires of the Self

Primarily, love is threatened or gravely ill in *Closer* because “egocentrism boosted by the consumerist society” renders people more inclined to appropriate and exploit “the Other” for the constant gratification of their egoistic desires rather than to engage in fully-committed spiritual communion with the Other (Han, 2003, p.3). A telling instance comes from Dan, who works in Siberia of journalism writing obituary. In scene one, he tells Alice, a young attractive stripper, that he has dreams of being a writer but has no voice, yet at the following scene he has used her life as the basis for his novel without her formal permission. In Anna's words, Dan “steals Alice's life” (Marber, 1999, p.17).

The apogee of his “borrowing” (Marber, 1999, p.17), as is called by Dan himself, comes when he pretends to be Anna, the female photographer with whom he is obsessed, and has cybersex with Larry, a male dermatologist, and the appropriation even extends to the suggestion that they should meet at the Aquarium in London Zoo, a place Anna has told Dan she often visits. This sort of distance-free erotic activity through the Internet satisfies the subjective emotional stimulation that Dan wants to obtain, but at the same time, it obliterates the ritualistic and ceremonial space of the past heterosexual interaction. The online world was originally created to bridge the gap between the self and “the Other”, but now it has become an island of narcissism where the self is infinitely amplified while the “the Other” is excluded, and where sameness prevails. The continuous revelation of the private psyche makes the individual drowning in infinite intimacy with himself, and gradually loses the ability to define himself via encountering the other in the public space, resulting in the failure of the formation of a stable self-image.

Furthermore, from the same scene it can be seen that the protagonist is apt to replace the uniqueness or “heterogeneity” in “the Other” that can provoke love by a self-imagined “homogeneity” that can only stimulate sexual desire (Han, 2003, p.2). By recourse to the

anonymity of the internet, Dan constructs a fictional Anna as he wishes—“Dark hair. Dirty mouth. Epic tits (Marber, 1999, p.23), and who sexually services a group of male strangers, like a cum hungry bitch, 1 in each hole and both hands” (Marber, 1999, p.24). Obviously, “Anna” becomes a composite of clichés gathered from the annals of pornographic writing—the products of what Larry later calls men's “Home Movies ... the shit that slops through our minds every day” (Marber, 1999, p.60). The double verification of this point can be seen in Alice's summary of men's perfect woman in the opening scene—“androgynous, tough, but sexually voracious but simultaneously poised in their enjoyment” (Marber, 1999, p.15)—which finds a few similarities in Dan's portrayal of “Anna”. Dan's version of Anna becomes a man-made creation that encompasses what men ideally want a woman to be. Thus, women, as “the Other” in heterosexual relationship, are significantly absent; and men, who flat out “the Other”, live with what they dream, ALONE.

The search for the Other and the denial of homogenization impede the high-speed circulation of information and capital, and in this regard, they can only live on borrowed life in a society that pursues unlimited efficiency, or even be obliterated indirectly or directly. But when the only thing left between the sexes is a homogenized imagination of each other, then the individuals' ability to listen and communicate will gradually vanish, and he or she will be reduced to a narcissistic subject who perceives everything only in his or her own shadow. Once this capability has been degraded, the individual's desire to know others will dwindle away. That is to say, people will either be like the main characters in *Closer*, futilely trying to engage in some ineffective conversations, and ending up with their minds infinitely far away despite their physical closeness, or they will seal off both their bodies and their minds and become isolated from the rest of the world.

2.2 Commodification and Profanation of Love to Pornography

This sense of human isolation is compounded further when the heartbroken Larry runs into Alice at a strip club called “Paradise Suite”, where love is profaned into pornography. Strip club can be a perfect illustration of the fact that “Capitalism is aggravating the pornographization of society by making everything a commodity and putting it on display” (Han, 2003, p.4). As a stripper, Alice's body—with its display value—has become a commodity, “a sexual object for procuring arousal” (Han, 2003, p.12). And her pornographic face says nothing. It has no expressivity or mystery: “From love to desire, then to sexuality, finally to pure and simple porno; the farther you go, the closer you come to the lesser secret, the smaller enigma. In contrast, the erotic is never free of secrecy (Han, 2003, p.32)”. The nude bodies and faces that

are erotically displayed are pathetic; they make it their business to flirt with others and no longer have a sacral value. Therefore, this kind of nudity cannot present the sublime trait of being exposed, as Kant would say, after all the superficial coverings have been removed.

Furthermore, the “heterogeneity” of the strippers who could have been the distinctive Others has been completely eradicated to curb romance and produce identical services. The excessive and compulsory display greatly diminishes the human attributes of the stripper and dramatically increases the characteristics of the commodity. The person under such an identity given by the capitalist consumerist economy will be difficult to be loved but constantly exploited. Also, in the club there are a set of strict rules that govern allowable conduct between dancer and client and densely-installed cameras that keep dancer and client under constant surveillance, both acting as reminders of the principle here that one cannot love—one can only consume.

Christopher Innes regards this scene as a “deliberately constructed commercialized delusion” for the male to vent their sexual lust (2002, p.433). However, it is worth noting that such delusion can blur the identity of Alice who descends to human product there. Alice tends to subsume her identity as part of the club’s brand and ideology: when asked by Larry what her pudenda tastes of, she describes it using the term “Heaven” (Marber, 1999, p.49), a corporate simile based on the name of the suite in which she performs for customers. This ambiguity of identity eventually leads to her temporarily failing to distinguish the difference between the rules governing the club and those of the outside world. In scene eleven, when Alice threatens to call security and eject Dan from their hotel room, he points out, “You’re not in a strip club. There is no security” (Marber, 1999, p.50). Clearly, with the uncertainty of true self-identity, one can barely love.

Moreover, such breakdown in the demarcation between what is real and fake can be found not only in the stripper but in the customer, as is manifested in the elaborate charade played out involving Alice pretending not to know Larry and Larry trying to ascertain Alice’s true identity. Paying increasingly large sums of money for the answer, Larry gets Alice’s reply of “Jane Jones” (Marber, 1999, p.52), Alice’s very real name. Nevertheless, Larry refuses to believe that the answer is true and is still convinced that her identity resides under the false credentials of Alice Ayres and that “you all use stage names to con your selves you’re someone else so you don’t feel ashamed when you show your cunts and arseholes to Complete Fucking Strangers” (Marber, 1999, p.52-53).

It is great irony that Larry should go all out to find out the truth in an ersatz strip club which defines human interaction to a series of commercial transactions. Although Alice says “You’re the customer, I’m the service” (Marber, 1999, p.54), the service, according to

the rules set by the club, does not include “any form of touching nor sharing of genuine human contact” (Marber, 1999, p.50). Larry points out the paradox to Alice that even if ostensibly divesting her clothes she still “wears armor” (Marber, 1999, p.51). In ordinary parlance, Alice’s nakedness as she strips for him does not reveal her inner feelings. As the scene progresses, Larry asks bitterly, “Do you think it’s possible you could perceive me as something other than a sad slot machine spewing out money” (Marber, 1999, p.54)?

Finally, far from entering the Paradise Suite, for Larry the place comes to represent a Miltonic hellhole where he can only perceive coldness instead of closeness:

LARRY. You’re cold. You’re all cold at heart. WHAT D’YOU HAVE TO DO TO GET A BIT OF INTIMACY AROUND HERE?

ALICE. Well, maybe next time I’ll have worked on my intimacy.

LARRY. No. I’ll tell you what’s going to work. What’s going to work is that you’re going to take your clothes off right now and you’re going to turn around very slowly and bend over and touch the fucking floor for my viewing pleasure.

ALICE. That’s what you want?

(Beat.)

LARRY. What else could I want? (Alice looks straight at him and begins to undress, slowly.)

(Marber, 1999, p.55)

Disappointed and desperate, Larry can only face up to the cruel fact that he can find anything but authentic and passionate love here. Intimacy is such a joke in the glacial process of giving money in exchange for sex. Larry’s outburst is illustrative of a key theme in *Closer*—the restless hunt for intimacy. Seeming to be an environment that seems to promise it, the lap dancing club in fact denies any chance of engaging meaningfully with another person.

2.3 Complex Competition between the Two Sexes

It is equally worth noting that Marber describes the previous scene as “an extraordinary whirlpool of complex power relationships” (Sier 191), as the pair engage in a war of attrition which is different for both. Larry wishes to reveal his true feelings at the loss of Anna and at the same time confirm that Alice reciprocates in kind about Dan. In contrast, Alice attempts to conceal as much about herself as possible for her own interest as a stripper, although paradoxically she does reveal her real name, which Larry chooses not to believe. When Alice declares “it’s not a war”, Larry’s only response is to laugh (Marber, 1999, p.55). However, it is a battle which Larry ultimately seems destined to lose as he not only admits to his own sense of pain and rejection by Anna, but gives away his inability to take control of Alice through their relationship of client and service.

While at the end of Larry’s stay with Alice, he asks whether many of the men who visit the club end up “crying their guts out”, to which she replies, “Occupational hazard” (Marber, 1999, p.54), which reveals his deep

sense of self-loathing and weakness along with many of his confessions before, there is also another equal strand constructed around his masculinity—the uncensored male libido that is highly manipulative and misogynistic. For instance, Larry at one point makes a comment to Alice in the club: “You don’t understand the territory because you are the territory” (Marber, 1999, p.55). With its associations of hunting and prey, it gives the impression that Larry spontaneously seals himself almost hermetically off from real emotional understanding between the sexes.

Although Richard Eyre suggests that *Closer* is more concerned in exploring sex rather than sex politics, it is arguable that the subtle power relationship between Larry, who is an incompatible mix of masculinity and vulnerability, and Alice, who is frequently called “bloke” by her ex-boyfriend (Marber, 1999, p.52), can be seen as the epitome of the relationship between the “New Lads” who are “self-centered and male identified with a certain boylike vulnerability or melancholia for a lost past supposedly making up for their deficiencies” (Whelehan, 2001, p.5), and the “ladette”, those young women who take part in laddish behavior and promote feminine glamour through a creed of selfish individualism designed to “get what you want out of life” like a boy (Aston, 2003, p.6). It is imaginable that the “New Lads” and the “ladette” can hardly fall in love with each other in a genuine way, for both “care more about themselves” (Han, 2003, p.46).

Lamentably, the last scene of the play also becomes a coda—not only for Dan, Larry and Anna to mourn the death of Alice who has died in a car accident in New York—but for love itself. As David Ian Rabey observes, by the end of the play, the characters are less “closer” than ever before, “deliberately flouting romantic hopes” (2003, p.199). This desolate ending is underscored by Dan’s account of meeting his ex-lover Ruth who has translated a collection of his poems entitled “Solitude” (Marber, 1999, p.84). By the end of the play it seems the remaining characters are moving inexorably towards the same fate: Dan stays alone; Anna has bought a dog and retreated to the countryside to live alone; while Larry is now with a nurse called Polly, who he confides to Anna is not “the one” (Marber, 1999, p.81).

3. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, *Closer* adopts an overall bleak sensibility to postmodern heterosexual relationships, portraying an archetypal image of the self-absorbed me-generation of the 1990s who live in an advanced capitalist society and profoundly affected by the wave of consumerism. As can be perceived in the play, these young men and women suffer from the agony of love for many reasons, namely, their egocentric inclination to appropriate and tap into the Other for their own ends; their replacement of uniqueness in the Other with self-imagined Homogeneity; the profanation or more specifically, commodification of love to pornography in society which causes their uncertainty of true identify and inability to distinguish what is real from what is fake; and their complex play of power relations between two competitive sexes, all of which can act as lessons for the adults nowadays who want to authentically fall in love and successfully cultivate a healthy and enduring relationship.

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