



IRAQI
Academic Scientific Journals



العراقية
المجلات الأكاديمية العلمية



ISSN: 2663-9033 (Online) | ISSN: 2616-6224 (Print)

Journal of Language Studies

Contents available at: <https://jls.tu.edu.iq/index.php/JLS>

Split Scenes Technique in Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*: A Postmodern Study

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Received: 12/12/ 2024, Accepted:8 /1 /2025, Online Published: 30/9/2025

Abstract

Postmodernism is an intellectual and philosophical movement that emerged in the late 20th century as a response to the modernist ideas that had dominated various fields, including literature, the arts, architecture, and the social sciences earlier in the century. This movement rejects the authority of grand narratives and embraces pluralism and subjectivity instead of the Enlightenment ideas of reason, rationality, and objective truth. In literature and specifically in the field of playwriting, postmodern dramatists have used a variety of techniques, to challenge conventional dramatic structures and norms. Therefore, the aims of this research is to study the postmodern narrative technique, particularly split scenes, in Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* to examine how this work challenges conventional narrative structures and themes and how the employed technique

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contributes to the understanding of postmodern theatre. The study also aims to show how these technique affect the audience's engagement with the work, thus improving their understanding of this play through the lens of postmodernism.

Keywords: Postmodernism, split scenes, Tony Kushner, and *Angels in America*.

المستخلص

ما بعد الحداثة هي حركة فكرية وفلسفية ظهرت في أواخر القرن العشرين كرد فعل للأفكار الحداثية التي سيطرت على مجالات مختلفة، بما في ذلك الأدب والفنون والهندسة المعمارية والعلوم الاجتماعية في وقت سابق من هذا القرن. ترفض هذه الحركة سلطة الروايات الكبرى وتعتنق التعددية والذاتية بدلاً من أفكار التنوير حول العقل والعقلانية والحقيقة الموضوعية. في الأدب وتحديداً في مجال الكتابة المسرحية، استخدم المسرحيون ما بعد الحداثيون مجموعة متنوعة من التقنيات لتحدي الهياكل والأعراف الدرامية التقليدية. ولذلك فإن أهداف هذا البحث هي دراسة تقنية السرد ما بعد الحداثي، والمشاهد المنقسمة في مسرحية ما بعد الحداثة المختارة، وهي مسرحية توني كوشنر ملائكة في أمريكا، لدراسة كيف يتحدى هذا العمل الهياكل والموضوعات السردية التقليدية من خلال استخدام تقنية ما بعد الحداثة، والمشاهد المنقسمة. وكيف تساهم التقنية المستخدمة في فهم مسرح ما بعد الحداثة. وتهدف الدراسة أيضاً إلى إظهار كيفية تأثير هذه التقنيات على تفاعل الجمهور مع العمل، وبالتالي تحسين فهمهم لهذه المسرحية من خلال عدسة ما بعد الحداثة. الكلمات المفتاحية: ما بعد الحداثة، المشاهد المنقسمة، توني كوشنر، الملائكة في أمريكا.

1. INTRODUCTION

Postmodern theater performs a critique of the projects of modernity, working against, namely, the emancipatory paradigms of the Enlightenment, universalism, rationalism, essentialism, dialectics, truth values, and consensus (*Encyclopedia of Postmodernism*).

Postmodernism is an intellectual and philosophical movement that appeared in the late 20th century as a reaction against the modernist ideas that had dominated various fields, including literature, the arts, architecture, and the social sciences earlier in the century. This movement critiques the Enlightenment notions of reason, rationality, and objective truth, challenging the authority of grand narratives and embracing pluralism and subjectivity instead.

In the realm of playwriting, postmodern dramatists have employed various techniques to deconstruct traditional dramatic forms and conventions (Conway 12). This

innovative approach to drama began as a significant departure from conventional theatrical practices. Reflecting the broader postmodern movement, postmodern playwriting questions grand narratives, embraces plurality, and challenges established norms. Postmodern artists and theorists are particularly fascinated by radical forms of canon renovation, especially through the use of metatheatrical techniques.

To illustrate the application of postmodern playwriting technique, split scene, this study will examine a renowned contemporary play: Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*.

Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* is a comprehensive epic play that was influenced by the policies of the Republican Party during the presidency of Ronald Reagan, during the 1980s. The play explores various themes such as politics, religion, sexuality, and the AIDS epidemic. The play's fragmented narrative structure, use of magical realism, and breaking of the traditional dramatic conventions are characteristic of postmodern theater. Kushner's work also reflects the postmodern preference to challenge and deconstruct dominant ideologies and power dynamics.

By subverting traditional dramatic conventions and embracing postmodern techniques, the playwright challenge the audience's expectations and invite them to actively engage with the work, reflecting the postmodern emphasis on the reader/viewer's role in the construction of meaning.

Moreover, this work grapples with the politics of authority in postmodern theater, as discussed by scholars like Philip Auslander and David Savran. They raise questions about the possibility of truly transgressive art within the cultural logic of late capitalism and explore ways to subvert traditional performance structures that position the performer as a "charismatic other" against a passive spectator (Auslander 63; Savran 53). *Angels in America*, for example, the characters' struggles against the related conventional politics and against societal norms and political oppression. This highlights the play's exploration of power and resistance.

Although this play varies in themes and settings, it exhibits postmodern elements by employing a certain postmodern playwriting technique, split scene, to question theatrical conventions. The focus of postmodernism on language, subjectivity and power in influencing cultural constructs offers a lens for examining how the playwright subverts this recognition, question perspectives and blur the boundaries, between the real and the imagined.

Postmodern playwright technique, split scene, challenges conventional theatrical forms and traditions. This research makes an argument that postmodernism influences playwriting in addition to the larger social and cultural themes that are reflected in postmodern play through a detailed examination of the key technique used in this play that was chosen.

The study deals with postmodern playwriting technique, split scene, in Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*. Thus, the study will examine the application of split scene in this play. To achieve the first objective, the study will discuss the structure and themes of this play. Examining the effects of employing postmodern technique in the mentioned play is the study's second objective. In order to accomplish this goal, the study will examine how the technique used enhances our comprehension of postmodern theatre by addressing significant theoretical structures. The third objective is to demonstrate how this technique influences the audience's interaction and participation with the work.

In order to achieve the above mentioned objectives, this study will attempt to answer the following questions.

1. How does *Angels in America* incorporate postmodern playwriting technique, split scenes?
2. What are the implications of using postmodern playwriting technique, split scenes, in this play for the understanding of postmodern theatre?
3. How does the postmodern playwriting technique, split scenes, employed in this play affect the audience's engagement with the work?

2. METHODOLOGY

This research will combine a textual analysis of the chosen play with a qualitative descriptive method. The analysis will emphasize and look at the use of postmodern playwriting technique, split scene, by focusing on the play's subjects, characterization, and structure. Additionally, it will examine significant secondary sources, such as research articles, critical essays, and theoretical works on postmodernism and postmodern drama. With a focus on the fundamental ideas of postmodern theatre, the analysis depends on the theoretical framework of postmodernism.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

The selected play has been the subject of wide scholarly analysis, particularly in the context of using postmodern playwriting techniques. Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* is an innovative play that explores themes of marginalization, illness, politics, and love, particularly in the context of the AIDS epidemic in America during the 1980s and 1990s. Many famous authors, critics, and scholars have attempted to analyze this piece with different methods, concepts, and themes.

Hussein Al-Badri's book *Tony Kushner's Postmodern Theatre: A Study of Political Discourse* explores the political themes in Tony Kushner's postmodern theatre, highlighting the complex relationship between politics and culture in contemporary drama. Al-Badri locates Kushner's work within the context of modernist political theatre, drawing connections to influential figures such as Brecht and Piscator. By analyzing how Kushner engages with and challenges established conventions, Al-Badri provides a framework for understanding the evolution of political theatre. His study enriches the discourse on Kushner's postmodern theatre by uncovering the political commentary within the playwright's works. While Tanner J. Underwood "Prior's blindness: Magical Realism in Kushner's *Angels in America*" uses magical realism to analyze Kushner's *Angels in America*. Rather than accepting the fantastical aspects of the play, which gives its social critique more depth, magical realism combines realistic and fantastical elements. This forces the characters—especially Prior—to go through difficult and painful processes of reconciliation. A deeper understanding of the play's themes of spirituality, religion, and cultural marginalization can also be gained by examining the use of magical realism. As a result, it centers on Prior Walter, an AIDS-affected homosexual man, and examines his spiritual experience to demonstrate how Kushner uses him to shift from limited perspectives of the unknown towards acceptance.

However, a careful review of existing literature shows that previous studies on Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* have mainly focused on analyzing the work from various perspectives, themes, theories, and methodologies, with an emphasis on humanistic and literary approaches. While there have been some examinations of Kushner's work through a postmodernist lens, these studies have been relatively limited

in scope and have not thoroughly explored postmodern techniques, especially the technique of split scenes.

Thus the present work contributes to enriching the theatrical landscape by challenging traditional norms, exploring cultural identities, and deconstructing established myths, showing how Tony Kushner uses his craft to create multiple portrayals of the theatrical landscape in the light of postmodern theory.

4. APPLICATION OF SPLIT SCENES TECHNIQUE IN THE PLAY

In *Angels in America*, Tony Kushner's innovative use of split scenes that is adopted from modernism, and is still in use today, serves as a postmodern narrative device, enabling a simultaneous exploration of multiple perspectives and themes. This technique reflects the fragmented nature of the characters' lives, mirroring the disjointed reality of the world they inhabit. Kushner employs the split scene technique to juxtapose the political and the personal, the actual and the fantastical, as well as the intricate relationships between individuals. This method not only facilitates the fluid transition between diverse narrative threads but also deepens the audience's understanding of the characters' multifaceted lives. According to Ricarda Klüßendorf, Kushner's ability to "connect everything with everything" is a hallmark of his postmodern approach, which challenges the notion of a unified, stable reality (2007, xxi). The split scenes in *Angels in America* serve to highlight the interconnectedness of the characters' lives, as well as the ways in which their individual experiences are shaped by larger societal and political forces.

This approach reflects the postmodernist tendency to embrace diversity of viewpoints and break down conventional narrative structures. The split scenes technique is not only essential to the performance's flow but also to achieve a thematic goal by literally demonstrating to the audience how these characters' lives become increasingly entangled in the complex and fragmented postmodern world. The scenes illustrate the collapse of boundaries between different realities, creating a sense of chaos that mirrors the characters' internal and external conflicts. As noted by Al-Badri, this technique allows for "a multiplicity of voices and perspectives that challenge the audience's understanding of truth and reality" (2014, 102). Furthermore, the relationship between these fragmented narratives emphasizes the characters' struggles, as they navigate their identities within a chaotic social landscape, reflecting the postmodern condition of dislocation and uncertainty (McHale & Platt, 2016 45).

In the split scenes, multiple worlds unfold simultaneously, allowing readers or spectators to draw parallels between the two situations (Neilson, 2013, 16). The characters frequently disrupt the border of their scenes and cross over, experiencing a profound sense of displacement (McHale & Platt, 2016, 259). Through this technique, the playwright contrasts or complements different story elements, allowing the audience to witness these worlds coming together. In this way, viewers or readers can compare these events and gain a deeper understanding of how the characters' experiences are connected and sometimes clash.

Kushner proposes that each performance incorporates quick scene changes to create a montage effect that heightens the drama unfolding on stage. A particularly

relevant example of this technique is the use of split scenes, which frequently feature characters such as Harper and Joe, as well as Louis and Prior. This approach allows the audience to observe the contrasts and similarities between the two couples as their relationships deteriorate. As noted by Cohen-Cruz, “the rapid transitions between scenes serve to amplify the emotional stakes, drawing the audience into the characters' turmoil” (2012, 112). This technique not only enhances the dramatic tension but also underscores the interconnectedness of the characters' experiences, illustrating how personal struggles resonate within a broader societal context.

Kushner's main goal in creating this montage is to imitate Brecht's alienation effect that corresponds with split scenes technique. Reminding the audience that they are watching a performance that causes the alienation effect. Brecht argues that in order for the play to elicit thought in the audience, there must be a critical detachment. The alienation effect aims to provoke thought on a specific topic, to create a greater understanding of the characters' challenges and the larger cultural effects by shedding light on the complex nature of disconnection, be it political or social, without being explicitly propagandistic (Gorney, 2005, 45-47).

The play's first split scene occurs when Prior's illness is revealed. In this scene, Louis is in a graveyard talking to the Rabbi about his worries regarding how he will react to Prior's illness and his feelings of regret about missing the chance to see his grandmother while she was ill. In the middle of all of this, Joe and Harper are talking about the idea of moving to Washington, something Harper is unwilling to do, which shows her serious anxiety alongside her mental issues. This is followed by another split scene where both couples are talking. On one hand, there are Harper and Joe, with Harper attempting to confront Joe about his sexuality using the information she learned from Prior's hallucination. On the other hand, there are Prior and Louis, where Louis remains in love with Prior but cannot fully contend with his illness.

Prior: I'm dying! You stupid fuck! Do you know what that is! Love! Do you know what love means? We lived together four-and-a-half years, you animal, you idiot.

Louis: I have to find some way to save myself.

Joe: Who are these men? I never understood it. Now I know.

Harper: What?

Joe: It's me.

Prior: GET OUT OF MY ROOM!

Joe: I'm the man with the knives.

Prior: If I could get up now, I'd kill you. I would. Go away. Go away or I'll scream. (*Millennium* 85-86)

In this split scene, Prior and Louis are in the hospital, while Harper and Joe have a conversation at home; it's a juxtaposed split scene. Louis informs Prior that he is leaving, stating that he needs privacy, that he won't accept criticism, and that he is doing his best. Prior screams for him to leave, which Louis does. On the other hand, Joe informs Harper that he still loves her and that he won't leave her behind. Joe upsets Harper, who orders him to leave her alone and go anywhere or to Washington. While arguing, they both come to the realization that Joe is the same man who frightened Harper during her hallucinations. So she calls Mr. Lies. Now, with courage, she leaps into her imagination to be taken away by her imagined friend, Mr. Lies. When Mr. Lies shows up, she returns

to her fantasy. Both Prior (in the hospital) and Joe (at home) discover that their partners have abandoned them by the end of this split scene (Sindhuliya, 2013, 34-35).

In this regard, the dialogue in the split scenes is fast-paced and appears to be randomly alternating, which can have unexpected results and increase the play's overall complexity, which calls for participation and active engagement from the audience rather than passive audience interaction as in Aristotelian theatre. This technique is associated with Fredric Jameson's term 'cognitive mapping' which would make it possible for both individual and group subjects to explore the constantly complicated and vague postmodern communities. For example, Kushner shows Louis talking with a stranger in Central Park, as Louis's conversation with the Man is especially tragicomic. Louis informs the man that he has been a very, very horrible person and that he wants to be punished. At the same time, Joe and Roy are speaking in a bar and he's attempt to clarify to Roy the nature of his relationship with Harper and the reasons he is unable to separate from her, begs her to stay: "Only you. Only you love me. Out of everyone in the world. I have done things, I'm ashamed. But I have changed" (Kushner, 1993, 283). In this different split scene from the second act of *Millennium Approaches*. The conversation goes something like this:

JOE: Can't Washington wait?

ROY: You do what you need to do, Joe. What you need.

You. Let her life go where it wants to go. You'll

both be better for that. Somebody should get what they want.

MAN: What do you want?

LOUIS: I want you to (*Millennium* 60)

Furthermore, by employing split scenes that are set in multiple simultaneous locations or sequences in which characters from various eras interact, the plays' structural support for hybridization not just that in its thematic content. To prompt the audience to consider the repetition of history and the importance of confronting the illness and the prejudices it involves, Prior encounters two of his ancestors in one of his hallucinations: Prior 1 from the Middle Ages and Prior 2 from the 18th century. Both of these ancestors were also victims of the Black Death (Muñoz, 2006, 5).

Ghosts from the past can also be considered examples of "becoming-other," as they challenge the traditional view of time and present the idea of time as a flow and not fixed, and show the connection between the past and the present, portraying it as a non-linear and complicated continuum. Which also shows in the conversation between Belize and Louise that challenge grand narrative.

However, their conversation takes place in act three, scene two, about how American history is connected to racial, identity, and political issues. Louis, known for his liberal direction, says that because America is a more new colony than Europe, it faces fewer racial problems and that its main concern is one of political power: "there are no gods here, no ghosts and spirits in America, there are no angels in America, no spiritual past, no racial past, there's only the political, and the decoys and the ploys to manoeuver around the inescapable battle of politics[...]" (Kushner 98). "No angels in America" in Louis' opinion, implies avoiding having a history in America that could contribute to issues like race.

In this split scene Louis has assimilated so much that he has forgotten about his Jewish heritage and the history of Jewish marginalization in America. The basis of his

argument is that, although people in Europe have history and race, the issue of race in America is mostly about winning political argument. Belize rejects this claim by labeling it as "racist bullshit" (Kushner 99). Interwoven by the conversation between Emily the nurse who takes care of Prior (Underwood, 2019, 114), he tells Emily about his mental instability and how he hears a voice in his dreams telling him he is a prophet. He is unable to clearly articulate what is occurring to him, "I feel like something terrifying is on its way, you know, like a missile from outer space, and it's plummeting down towards the earth, and I'm ground zero" (Kushner 104).

EMILY (Removing IV drip from prior's arm): Treatment number ... (Consulting chart) four.

PRIOR: Pharmaceutical miracle. Lazarus breaths again.

LOUIS: Is he. ... How bad is he?

BELIZE: You want the laundry list?

EMILY: Shirt off, let's check the... (*Millennium* 101)

Meanwhile, in Part two, when Louis brought Joe back to his flat for the night. Act III, Scene one is a split scene, with two different scenes taking place onstage. Joe and Louis shared a scene, and another included Harper and Joe's mother, Hannah. While Louis is still asleep at his apartment, Joe has gotten up early to get ready for work. Joe entered the scene at the beginning of it as a happy man who at last did not have to disguise his sexual orientation, thus he had sex with Louis. On the other hand, Harper was getting aid from Hannah to change into a dress. At the point where the two scenes came together, after Hannah left, Harper and Joe met and talked with each other while Louis was still asleep. Harper addressed Joe and expressed her wish for his death, on knowing he was in love with Louis (Tailor, 2014, 24).

By presenting various narratives at once through split scenes, Kushner improves the storytelling. This technique allows for multiple viewpoints and promotes a sense of connection among characters and themes. By linking together these fragmented narratives, Kushner deepens the complexity of his characters and mirrors the fragmented reality of the postmodern world they live in.

5. CONCLUSION

Postmodern movement is marked by a reevaluation of its key ideas and the acknowledgment of many endings associated with this age. Postmodernism challenged metanarratives and traditional beliefs, leading to a change in cultural and artistic expressions. The movement brought about major changes in different fields, including art, architecture, design, fashion, and literature, with an emphasis on deconstructing established norms and embracing new forms of creativity.

While writing their plays, pioneer writers frequently drew inspiration from their own life experiences, current events, and popular principles. Kushner is no exception of that. The playwright was chosen for a reason: he approaches new topics in a unique and unconventional way. His methodology was based mostly on experimentation and the search for new forms. He examined and experimented with several patterns before developing his own unique styles and structures.

Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*, associated to Epic theatre, explores several techniques to challenge existing beliefs and give voice to marginalized communities. Split scene that is adopted from modernism, and is still in use today, is a significant

dramaturgical device used by Tony Kushner in *Angels in America* to highlight the characters' lives' thematic diversity and interaction. Kushner skillfully illustrates the fragmentation and intertwining of political and personal conflicts throughout the Reagan era and the AIDS crisis by presenting overlapping acts and conversations. Additionally, by allowing the audience to analyze and interact with the story rather than just passively receiving it, the split scenes support a Brechtian method that raises empathy and social consciousness for the difficulties of marginalized groups, particularly gay men.

Therefore, the research concludes that Postmodern playwriting technique, split scenes, in Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* subvert traditional narrative, reflecting the more fundamental characteristics of postmodern theatre and literature. Thus, this narrative device highlights the postmodern focus on ambiguity, plurality, and the deconstruction of metanarratives, providing a diverse and complex method of storytelling that subverts audience perspective and expectations.

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