

Postmodernism: An Enquiry

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Postmodernism as a literary theory has been in circulation for a long time now and especially since 1950s. Theorists and critics have written quite a lot about it, both for and against it, still there is no consensus on it. The Phenomenon of postmodernism still remains problematic. Here the problem is that of defining of Postmodernism of what it is or it is not. The complication arises out of the linguistic apprehension of the term 'Post' 'Modern' suggesting that Postmodernism is a movement or a school of thought that supplanted or succeeded modernism. The fact, however, is that postmodernism does not wholly repudiate modernism, nor is it a mere extension of or continuation of modernism. These irreconcilable contradictions have led to many complicated notions of the theory. Notwithstanding these contradictions and difficulties, postmodernism still demands and deserves the attention of our critical facilities as it is the most current critical term in the current times as Linda Hutcheon also says, it is "a current cultural phenomenon that exists, has attracted much public debate and so deserves critical attention." (Hutcheon IX).

To make a clear explanation and demonstration one needs to begin with the basic view about how modernism and postmodernism differ. 'Modernism' is the name given to the movement which dominated the arts and culture of the first half of the twentieth century modern toppled down much of the structure of pre-twentieth century practice in music, painting, literature and architecture. The earliest effects of modernism were felt in Vienna, during the period of 1890-1910, but the effect were felt in France, Germany, Italy and eventually in Britain, in art movements like Cubism, Dadaism, Surrealism, and Futurism. Its aftereffects are still being felt today. Without the understanding of modernism, then, it is impossible to understand twentieth century culture and the phenomenon called 'Postmodernism'.

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During the period of modernism the most fundamental elements of practice were challenged and rejected. Melody and harmony were put aside in music, perspective and direct pictorial representations were abandoned in painting, in favour of degree of abstraction; in architecture traditional forms and materials (Pitched roofs, domes and columns, wood, stone and bricks) were rejected in favour of plain geometrical forms, often built in new materials like plate, glass and concrete. In literature there was a rejection of traditional realism (chronological plots, continuous narratives relayed by omniscient narrators, closed narratives, etc.) in favour of experimental forms of various kinds.

The most productive period of modernism was from 1910-1930 and the most prominent writers of this movement were T.S. Eliot, James Joyce, Ezra Pound, Lewis, Virginia Woolf, Wallace Stevens and Gertrude Stein and Stephen Mallarme, Andre Gide, Franz Kafka and Rainer Maria Rilke. Some of the important characteristics of the literary modernism practiced by these writers include the following-

1. A new emphasis on impressionism and subjectivity, that is, on how we see rather than what we see (a preoccupation evident in the use of the stream of consciousness technique.)
2. A movement (in novels) away from the apparent objectivity provided by such features as: omniscient external narration, fixed narrating points of view and clear-cut moral positions.
3. A blurring of the distinctions between genres, so that novels tend to become more lyrical and poetic for instance and poems more documentary and prose like.
4. A new liking for fragmented forms, discontinuous narratives, and random seeming collages of disparate material.
5. A tendency towards 'reflexivity' so that poems and novels raise issues concerning their own nature, status and role.

Thus modernism produced a literature which was dedicated to experimentation and innovation. Here, the question arises, whether postmodernism opposes or continues these traits. To decide upon this we may work out a definition of postmodernism. J.A. Cuddon in his **Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory** describes postmodernism as characterized by 'an eclectic approach, aleatory writing, Parody and Pastiche'. This, however, does not make the differences clear between modernism and postmodernism, since the word eclectic suggests the use of the fragmented forms which are characteristic of modernism. For example T.S. Eliot's **The Waste land** is a collage of juxtaposed, incomplete stories or fragments of stories. Aleatory forms mean those writings which incorporate the element of randomness or chance and were used by Dadaists of 1914, who, made poems from sentences, plucked randomly from newspapers. The use of parody and pastiche is related to the abandonment of the divine pretensions of authorship implicit in the omniscient narratorial stance and this too was a vital element in modernism. Thus, one way of establishing the distinction between modernism and postmodernism is to dissolve the sequential link between them as they are not only two successive stages in the history of the arts but two opposed moods or attitudes.

Another marked theorist, Jeremy Hawthorn in his **Concise Glossary of Contemporary Literary Theory** (Edward Arnold, 1997) says, both give great prominence to fragmentation as a feature of twentieth century art and culture, but they do so in very different moods. The modernist features it in such a way as to register a deep nostalgia for an earlier age when faith was full and authority intact. Ezra Pound, for instance, calls his major work, *The Cantos*, a 'rag-bag', implying that this is all that is possible in the modern age. But also implying regret about that fact. T.S. Eliot in **The Waste Land** says 'these fragments I have shored against my ruins' in statements like this there is a tone of lament, pessimism, and despair about the world. For the postmodernist by contrast, fragmentation is an exhilarating phenomenon, symptomatic of our escape from the claustrophobic embrace of fixed system of belief.

To sum up, the modernist laments fragmentation while the postmodernism celebrates it.

Another difference between the two is that of tone or attitude. Modernists found the over-elaborate art forms of the nineteenth century deeply offensive and repulsive. Modern Architect Adolf Loos proclaimed, 'decoration is a crime', Miles Van der Rache proclaimed, 'less is more' and Corbusier said that 'a house is a nothing for living in'. These pronouncements resulted in the 'shoe box' and 'Carbuncle' buildings which have generated such hatred particularly through the 1980s. This trait was representative in literature in the form of minimalism which shrinks poems to narrow columns of two-word lines or as in the drama of Samuel Beckett, in which a play may be reduced to a running time of thirteen minutes. Postmodernism rejects the distinction between 'high' and popular art which was important in modernism and believes in excess, in gaudiness, and in 'badtaste' mixture of qualities. It disdains the modernist asceticism as elitist and celebrates bizarrely colorful mixtures of imagery, view point and vocabulary which seem happy to be nothing but surface.

The term 'postmodernism' was first used in 1930s, but its current application and popularity began with theorists like Jean Francois Lyotard and Jean Baudrillard. Jurgen Habermas, the German theorist, wrote in 1980 that the modern period begins with the enlightenment. (1750-1850) For Habermas, Enlightenment 'project' is the fostering of the belief that a break with tradition, blind habit and slavish obedience to religious precepts and prohibition, coupled with the application of reason and logic by the disinterested individual can bring about a solution to the problems of society. This outlook is what Habermas meant by 'modernity'. For Habermas this faith in reason and possibility of progress survived into the twentieth century. The cultural movement known as modernism subscribed to this 'project' in a sense that it constituted a lament for a lost sense of purpose, a lost coherence, and a lost system of values. For Habermas, the French Post-structuralist thinkers of the 1970s, such as

Derrida and Foucault, attacked the ideals of reason, clarity, truth and progress and so he called them 'young conservatives';

Jean Francois Leotard actually popularized the theory and the term postmodernism with the publication of his book **The Post Modern Question: A Report On Knowledge** (Manchester University Press, 1979) Leotard's essay "Answering the Question: what is Postmodernism?", first published 1982 and included in Brooker's *Modernism/Postmodernism*, 1992, takes up this debate of enlightenment and writes, "I have read a thinker of repute who defends modernity against those he calls the neo-conservatives. Under the banner of postmodernism, the latter would like, he believes, to get rid of the uncompleted project of modernism, that of enlightenment." Brooker, (P-141)

For Leotard the enlightenment whose project Habermas wishes to continue is simply one of the would be authoritative 'overarching', totalising' explanations of things like Christianity, Marxism etc. These meta-narratives or supernarratives according to Leotard are really allusions, fostered to smoothen the differences, opposition and plurality. As for him, Postmodernism, is simply, 'incredulity towards metanarratives: Grand narratives' of progress and human perfectability are no longer tenable and the best we can hope for is a series of 'mininarratives', which are provisional, contingent, temporary and relative and which provide a basis for the actions of specific groups in particular local circumstances. Postmodernity thus deconstructs the basic aim of the enlightenment.

Jean Baudrillard, another major theorist of postmodernism writes in his book **Simulations** (1981) about 'the loss of the real', which is the view that in contemporary life the pervasive influence of images from film, TV and advertising has led to a loss of the distinction between real and imagined, reality and illusion, surface and depth. The result is a culture of 'hyperreality' in which distinctions between these are eroded within postmodernism, the distinction between real and what is simulated

collapses everything is a model or an image, all is surface without depth; this is the 'hyperreal', as Baudrillard calls it.

Problematizing the concepts of author and authorship is a part of Postmodernist project. The author traditionally has been seen as the organizing principle who with his God-like omniscience knows the end before he begins and towards that end he begins. Postmodernism challenges the authorial authoritarianism and questions the process of fictionality of the fiction making process. Postmodernism also questions all those structures in society and cultural practices that are accepted as 'natural' and 'logical'. For postmodernist 'natural' and 'logical' are human constructs and hence no ideology free or ideology neutral. Postmodern calls attention to the unnaturalness and illogicality of all those givens.

Postmodernism also undermines the notions of originality and ordinariness. It exposes the fictionality of the process of making or making up of the text and through intertextuality that betrays the texts existence within a context. Modernists employed the intertextual play to enable a better apprehension of the text's structured intentionality. Intertextuality in post-modern texts operates to expose what Derrida calls "the fabric of traces" (Derrida, 84) that asserts the dependence of the text for literary existence on other texts and contexts. Intertextual play thus exists not to enhance or aid coding of the text but to allow a de-coding of the text's contextuality.

Another area which postmodernism problematizes is the categorization of literature into discrete forms and genres governed by a set of given codes. These distinctions are questioned and contested in Postmodern through deliberate genre blurring. By deliberately exposing the fictionality of traditionally considered factual forms such as biography, autobiography and history, Postmodern writings reveal them as human constructs that do not give truth which is dependent on Foucauldian question such as who is speaking? about whom? from what vantage point?, within which power structure? etc. These truths are produced and controlled by given positions within specific networks of power

structures and hence are positional rather than absolute truths. Postmodern challenges the acceptability of these truths as universal and eternal and stresses their arbitrariness, unreliability and self-serving motivational. Postmodernism thus questions received hegemonies and hierarchies that enforce a division between fact and fiction and truth and invention.

Postmodern historiographic fiction perhaps most deliberately contextualizes the postmodern interrogation of fact and fiction and contradicts the modernist view of history as a scientific and objective discipline. Postmodernism contends that the truths of history are ideology bound, teleological and positional. Moreover, since history, like fiction employs what Hayden White calls “emplotting” strategies to narrativize historical events. History, like fiction, is a subjective reconstruction rather than an objective reproduction of historical data. Since a historian, whether by design or necessity, invariably selects and orders his material in a consequential and progressional plot, history is an exploited narrative or a plot hatched by historians to suppress some facts of history and highlight others depending on the historians motivation and choice. The need to re-right/re-write history, therefore, becomes a necessity and an important goal of postmodernism historiography.

Thus as a theory Postmodernism questions and problematizes the given. Barbara Godard, Canadian critic and writer writes in her essay, “Feminism and Postmodernism in Quebec”, “Postmodernism is a site of struggle there is no uniformity or even broad agreement over the term.” (P-82) Postmodernism refuses all certainties and fixities, given hegemonies and a questioning impulse constitute some of the chief features of postmodernism. The question still remains: what precisely qualifies a text to be considered postmodern? Or does postmodernism reside in the method or in the motivation or in something else? or in other words, what is postmodernism? A theory cannot end up in negatives. All negatives cannot be claimed to expend a distinctly different postmodern discourse. These questions are raised again and again but to have no answer postmodernism is not a set of given codes that can be applied to

works of literature to show that a text is or not a postmodern work. Postmodernism expresses itself in the very quest for alternatives and not in definable positions. Richard Rorty pointed out: "It is a mistake to think that Derrida or anybody else "recognize" problems about the nature of textuality or writing which had been ignored by the tradition. What he did was to think up ways of speaking which made old ways of speaking optional and thus more or less dubious" (Rorty , 4)

Some of the critics have already posed a question mark and rejected postmodernist questioning to all givens. John O'Neill, a critic of Postmodernism, in his book entitled **The Poverty of Post-Modernism** published in 1995, questions postmodernism's potential as a theory. According to him, Postmodernism takes an anti-foundationist stance that involves deconstruction of the self, of the unified text, of integral identity. There is a celebration of an anarchistic heterogeneity. Critics are also critical of Postmodernism's sweeping rejection of grand narratives. Rejection of such narratives itself becomes a grand narrative. As a Marxist O'Neill is alarmed at the dangers implicitly in the rejection of emancipatory narratives. John McGowan points out; Postmodernism makes a truth claim about our inability to discover the truth. We need to be wary of such position in our own part of the world.

O'Neill also interrogates the moral posturing of postmodernists who believe that there can be no universal knowledge, politics or morality. He asserts that it is not the exploited people who have abandoned idealism, universalism, truth and justice but, "It is those who already enjoyed those things who have denounced them on behalf of the others. (P-1) he raises few more questions like whether reason always forecloses in terror imagination and to be fostered in the arts and sciences? Is it possible to conduct meta-discourse at all? And the debate continues in search of a new post Postmodernist theory.

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