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Demystifying Postmodernism

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Abstract:

Postmodernism has posed a great deal of obscurity regarding deciphering its meaning in totality. Its propensity and fluctuating tendency mystifies its scope and implication. Postmodernism is the byproduct of the disillusionment, despair and the state of obliteration engendered by the two world wars. It refuses the totalizing hypothesis and effects, and the distinction between high and low culture induced implicitly or explicitly. It questions the linear thought system, centrality and the canon of literature. It challenges the conventions and propagates fragmentation, absurdity, contradiction and admixture of different genres. Postmodern writers undertake to experiment with language and employ different themes and techniques to mingle reality and fiction so as to put forward a new and innovative postmodern product. Its conglomerative impact of various themes and techniques brought upon a mood of skepticism among the masses. My endeavor in this paper is to simplify the concept of postmodernism, how it is different from modernism and to discuss the critical approaches and also to touch upon the postmodern features in prominent texts.

Keywords: Postmodernism, de mystification, skepticism, absurdity, disillusionment, fragmentation, admixture.

Is Postmodernism a progression of modernism? What makes it a source of an effective experience? How does it [re]present the truth? The answers to these questions are as baffling in nature as the questions are. It problematizes the very idea of the concept as it adopts certain features of other theories and also questions those theories. So, the problematization of the concepts and the puzzled result which undermine the authenticity and validity of those concepts are some basic features of postmodernism.

The term Postmodernism was first used by Arnold Toynbee for the current and final phase of the Western history. It is generally applied to the literature and art produced after the World War II. It is sometimes seen as the progression of the modernism but it involves various attempts to set forth a new phase different from the former, which becomes in turn conventional, and to overturn the elitism and high art by taking diversion towards the mass culture as represented in film, television, cartoons, popular music and newspapers. Unlike Postmodernism, Modernism strives for the unity, universality, centrality and high individual truths. These truths are widely accepted through the fizzy boundaries which postmodern writers attempt to

deconstruct for interpreting the world in totality through the fragments. Thus, confusion becomes the new fashion.

Postmodernism is not totally the abandonment of modernism as it tries to extract a meaning from the world through symbols, formal complexity as in T.S.Eliot; in turn it enjoys absurdity or meaninglessness such as to combine resignation, fatigue and playfulness.

Modernism questions the notions of art and its production, genre distinction, and the different forms of the era prevalent in art and literature. Fragmentation, pastiche, parody, bricolage, irony, playfulness, simultaneity, ambiguity, rejection of the formal diction, practiced to make a new way for the interpretation of the world and get to know about the complexity in the post Victorian era in a complex way to present an objective correlative. Postmodernism also shares most of the concerns of modernism. But difference lies in its view, attitude, presentation, consideration and approach. Postmodernism doesn't undertake to treat the fragmented presentation of human life or situation as disastrous and unfortunate, on the other hand it presents the disorderly and absurd world with the celebrated idea of incoherence, playfulness and fragmentation. Postmodern writers aspire to purport the meaning from the world of meaninglessness by providing an access to a wide range of applications, views and elucidations. Peter Barry in this regard opines:

For the postmodernist ... fragmentation is an exhilarating, liberating phenomenon, symptomatic of our escape from the claustrophobic embrace of fixed systems of belief...the modernist laments fragmentation while the postmodernist celebrates it (*Beginning Theory*, p.81).

The reality for them is the admixture of nonlinear and contradictory views which form the complex web of meaning. They have susceptibility to de-naturalize some of the dominant features of life which they suppose can be experienced as natural and common in the society. In this respect Gary Alysworth writes:

Postmodernism is set of critical, strategic and rhetorical practices employing concepts such as difference, repetition, the trace, the simulacrum, and hyperreality to destabilize other concepts such as presence, identity, historical progress, epistemic certainty, and the univocity of meaning(Alysworth).

Both modernism and post-modernism in literature have many similar features but they stand apart in several ways. Post – modernism rejects fixed form and order; linear narrative to socio-cultural transformation ethnic complexities, problematization, self-reflexivity and conglomeration of different narrative genres. They oppugn traditional or orthodox, realistic beliefs and employ the techniques of pastiche, parody, paranoia etc. by which the literary form, style and language gets into innovative dimensions. Non-linear thinking is the pre-dominant characteristic of post-modernism. Post-modernism, Linda Hutcheon stated "takes over the form

of self-conscious, self-contradictory and self-undermining statement”(The Politics of Post-Modernism,p.1).

With the attention to language postmodern writer focuses on narratives to see that how tension, confusion, contradiction and ambiguity portray the multiple levels of knowledge circulating at one time. In postmodernist terms language is not to be taken as transparent to see through it; we cannot see through it. It is the illusion that we can comprehend the world through this medium, but there is nothing outside the language. Language constructs meaning for us; and, in turn we use it to construct the reality for us. Language is not linear to provide a direct and simple interpretation; it baffles and counters the existing stability.

The salient features of postmodernism often correspond to the idea of Jean-Francois Lyotard's concept of the 'meta-narrative' and 'mininarrative', Jacques Derrida's concept of 'play' and Jean Baudrillard's 'simulacra'. The problem is that the grand narratives are so important to us that we judge the other works in the light of these grand narratives. Mathew Arnold propounded the concept of "touchstone" method to judge 'the relative value of passages and poems', but postmodern writers take recourse to debunk these as just they are- big stories, myths and fiction. The metafiction gets prioritized adroitly by postmodern writers to undermine the univocal control of the author. The loss of the real as Baudrillard propounded it that in postmodern scenario we are under the influence of images from film, TV, and advertisement which has led to the blurring of the distinction between real and imagined, reality and illusion, surface and depth: "There are no hard distinctions between what is real and what is unreal, nor between what is true and what is false" (*Pinter Art* 6). The collapse of this distinction led to a belief that everything is an image or the surface without the depth; that is called the hyperreality.

The postmodern writers- prominently absurdist writers like Samuel Beckett- undertake to subvert the foundations of the accepted mode of life so as to unveil the underlying abyss of life. They find philosophy having failed to provide the answer to the fundamental question of existence. They find it futile to ask some traditional orthodoxical questions. For Beckett the tragedy of man is to strive for an order in the world of chaos. He sees the ultimate reality in the state of chaos:

Man misunderstands himself when he seeks the light, seeks 'the meaning of his existence,' or a 'goal' which will be illuminated for him. Beyond the light giving function which man, as Dasein, himself is, and there is no further source of illumination (qtd in *English Studies in India* vol XVII, p. 138).

Postmodernism sometimes is used synonymously with Poststructuralism. Poststructuralism is a reaction towards the structuralism as postmodernism to modernism. The language for poststructuralists is ruptured "its seeming meaningfulness dissipates, for a rigorous inquirer, into a play of conflicting indeterminacies" (Abrams and Harpham, p. 228).

Postmodernism is reciprocal to post structuralism as the repudiation of grand narrative and rejection of difference between low and high art gets manifested through the reference to poststructuralism. Derrida a leading proponent of post structuralism argues that the purpose of deconstruction is not to substitute the hierarchical set up of structuralism or to counter the concept of arbitrariness of language but to create tension without trying to resolve it. Like Postmodernists, poststructuralists prefers margins instead of the main theme or argument to eradicate the binary opposition by which the marginal or the 'other' gets a partial and biased treatment. So, deconstruction is "demystifying a text, tearing it apart to reveal its internal, arbitrary hierarchies and presuppositions" (qtd in Bloland, p. 527).

Poststructuralism analyses the relationship between knowledge and power through various apparatuses and reveals that there is not a single notion of 'truth' instead several interpretations and revelations. The system of uncovering the truth in religion, science and social science etc. gets criticized and paving a way to the playfulness while questioning the grand theories of totalizing. Postmodernism using the poststructuralist tools to refute and resist the domination of grand narratives by exposing the prevalent contradictions inherent in them. Phillips and Ockham state that "Postmodernism repudiates any appeal to Reality or Truth. The very attempt to propose totalizing metanarratives that define and legitimate Reality are denounced as oppressive" (13).

Postmodern literature like Postmodernism share some basic and important features with its progenitor modernism and also opposes it to draft a new path of writing where the writer questions and make the facts and details ambiguous and problematic for the readers to decipher. The movements like Dadaism, Surrealism, and Magic Realism created an atmosphere for the development of postmodern literature. Postmodern literature doesn't only evince a particular introversion or turning towards the art of writing but it is more than that to reveal a self-contradictory and a disruption of the facts regarding the "center". Postmodern novel is a polyphony of narrative voices and none of them is reliable. There is a kind of prevalent anarchy in postmodern novel where no voice or manifestation of a single meaning is given importance. The notion of open-endedness and bypassing any kind of solution to the problems raised in the text forms a characteristic feature of the postmodern text. The absence of a grand narratives implies that any definitive ending to the text is also nonexistent. In postmodern literature the temporal, localized and equally plausible endings to the narrative, like John Fowls' *The French Lieutenants Woman*, having three endings and the author in the final ending enters the narrative as a minor character to provide an alternative ending to the novel. In the course of the novel Fowls admits that he didn't know his characters well, which is the postmodern attitude towards the authorial validity:

I do not know. This story I am telling is all imagination. These characters I create never existed outside my own mind. If I have pretended until now to know my characters' mind and innermost thoughts, it is because I am writing in... a

convention universally accepted at the time of my story: that the novelist stands next to God. He may not know all, yet he tries to pretend that he does (95).

Jonathan Safran Foer's post-9/11 novel *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, is a postmodern experimentation in which Bildungsroman, epistolary, and graphic novel formats are juxtaposed to explore the role of collective mourning and recuperation. Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* opens with the luster of myth and then takes recourse to fantasy and realism. But at the end Azaro's father adopts a visionary tone after recovering from a long trance like sleep and reveals through the mystic proclamations the disruption of linearity and authenticity to relativity. Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*, Vladimir Nobokov's *Ada*, Joseph Heller's *The Catch 22*, Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*, *White Teeth* by Zadie Smith and *Times Arrow* by Martin Amis are some remarkable postmodern novels.

To conclude, Postmodernism questions the central themes of enlightenment, the claims of truth to be achieved by any medium or source. In it the marginal voices get prominence and remain central and important to the narrative and the orthodoxical center either in relation to the main character or the class or any other trait considered superior to the other gets subverted without giving the other that place of importance. It explores the new areas of culture and society by improving critical theories like modernism, and looking through the prism of history so as to put it in a new way to counter its rhetoric of preference and authority.

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