



REVIEW ARTICLE

Vol. 2. Issue 4.,2015 (Oct. -Dec.)



INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA

2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

REVISITING POSTMODERNISM

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ABSTRACT

Postmodernism became a dominant mode of interpretation in the mid-eighties and decades after, it is not only difficult to theorize about it and about the complex web of questions it gives rise to, but the question of its current plight is also equally difficult to gauge. For some it never existed, so it does not matter for them whether it is living or dead. For some it has already died out much before the turn of new millennium. Lyotard declared (back in 1988) that postmodernism was an “old man’s occupation, rummaging in the dustbin of finality to find remains” (Waugh 289) and John Frow in 1990 used past tense in his essay “What was Postmodernism?” However the existence of postmodernism simply cannot be denied not only because the term kept so many cultural and literary critics and writers engaged, and because of the tremendous vogue that it enjoyed, but also because it has been fully academized, internationalized and institutionalized. It has its anthologies, readers and canonized texts and its histories. So many new concepts have been poured out by postmodernism that it has its dictionaries also. Hence, it cannot be ignored because it has dealt with almost everything in a comprehensive way.

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It was the philosophical debates during the 1960s that provided the greatest impetus for postmodernism. It was the writings of Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida and Jean François Lyotard that led to postmodernism. It started with the never before seen rigorous skepticism towards the Enlightenment and modernist notions of reason, autonomous rational subject and foundational truth. This skepticism led to the repudiation of the notion of progress, unity of self and rationalistic subject, rationalism, positivism, autonomy of art, justice in politics, validity in history and authenticity and objectivity of science. Enlightenment philosophy had established trust in man’s reason as an adequate vehicle for dealing with all human problems and also for achieving justice and dispelling prejudice. Hence human beings with their reason could free themselves from influences of tradition, passions, prejudices, feelings, likings and “arrive at objective, true knowledge of the way things are in the world. And, along with the progress of rational inquiry would come the improvement of human life” (Jones 2).

Friedrich Nietzsche was the first person to thoroughly criticize the Enlightenment idea of rational subject and foundational truth. In *The Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche decried the “dangerous old conceptual fiction that posited a pure will-less, painless, timeless knowing subject” and espoused that “There is only a

perspectival knowing” (Nietzsche III 3). For him human beings have little reason and that too is subordinate to desires, prejudices and contingencies, they do not interpret the world as it is but as their needs and power urges want them to interpret it and what has been established as truth is nothing but “the will to be master over the multiplicity of sensations – to classify phenomena into definite categories” (Waugh 300). According to Woods:

Postmodernism pits reasons in the plural—fragmented and incommensurable—against the universality of modernism and the long standing concept of the human self as a subject with a single, unified reason. The subject is the space demarcated by the ‘I’, understood as a sense of identity, a selfhood which is coherent, stable, rational and unified. Based upon this sense of individuality ... it is believed that people possess agency and can use their capabilities to alter, shape and change the world in which they live. Postmodern theory is suspicious of the notion of humans possessing an undivided and coherent self which acts as the standard of rationality, and guarantees all knowledge claims irrespective of time and place. It no longer believes that reasoning subjects act as vehicles for historically progressive change (Woods 9-10).

The anti-Enlightenment discourses were always present, Dostoevsky’s novel *Notes From Underground* can be cited as an example. The novel “challenges everything from Kantian and utilitarian ethics to scientific socialism and gender-blind universalism, in terms remarkably prescient of much postmodern thought” (Waugh 291), but these thoughts received new impetus by the horrors of the holocaust and the rise of totalitarianism and fascism. Even in the forties and fifties, the skepticism of rationality and progress was already voiced by philosophers such as Hannah Arendt, Michael Oakeshott, Karl Popper and Isaiah Berlin. And whatever was left of Enlightenment and modernism was ousted by Derrida’s onslaught on the very concept of foundational truth, so that certainty in the matters of truth, epistemology, language and meaning was replaced by pervasive doubt. In this connection Patricia Waugh writes:

By the 1970s,...objects of knowledge [became] not so much entities on which language reflects as artifacts actually constructed through and within language. By 1979, when Lyotard published his influential book, new and burgeoning forms of epistemological and cultural relativism were already well out of their infancies. Truth, Knowledge, Self and Value were no longer to be regarded as foundational categories, but as rhetorical constructions masking relations of power and strategies of oppression and marginalization. In the modern condition, philosophy had claimed the position of privileged metanarrative, claimed to be the discourse which might discover that final vocabulary which would ground the very conditions of knowledge. Postmodernists now claimed to have cut away this final ground in recognising there were only ever vocabularies to invent (292).

Postmodernism has been described differently by different writers, it becomes very pertinent to ask ‘which postmodernism’ we are talking about. Brian McHale in his book *Postmodern Fiction* writes in this regard:

there is John Barth’s postmodernism, the literature of replenishment; Charles Newman’s postmodernism, the literature of an inflationary economy; Jean- Francois Lyotard’s postmodernism, a general condition of knowledge in the contemporary informational regime; Ihab Hassan’s postmodernism, a stage on the road to the spiritual unification of human kind; and so on (4).

To this list Linda Hutcheon adds a few more important brands of postmodernism:

McHale’s postmodernism, with its ontological ‘dominant’ in reaction to the epistemological ‘dominant’ of modernism. ... Fredric Jameson’s postmodernism, the cultural logic of late capitalism; Jean Baudrillard’s postmodernism, in which the simulacrum gloats over the body of the deceased referent; Kroker and Cooks (related) hyperreal dark side of postmodernism; Sloterdijk’s postmodernism, of cynicism or ‘enlightened false consciousness’; and Alan Wilde’s literary ‘middle grounds’ of the postmodern (Hutcheon 11).

In this situation when a number of writers have their own respective brands of postmodernism, it becomes necessary to talk about them in more detail. Jean- François Lyotard, one of the most important theorists,

defines postmodernism as “incredulity towards metanarratives” (Lyotard XXIV). By metanarratives he means all those absolute explanations which try to make sense of the world in concrete terms, for example, explanations offered by religion, science or by philosophers based on ‘foundational truth’. For Lyotard, metanarratives include:

the progressive emancipation of reason and freedom, the progressive or catastrophic emancipation of labour ..., the enrichment of all humanity through the progress of capitalist techno science and ... the salvation of creatures through the conversion of souls to the Christian narrative of martyred love (Baker 65).

For Lyotard postmodernism cannot give overarching explanations of reality, as was given by the Enlightenment and the modernists. It has to contend with ‘petites histories’ and encompass instead of one grand theory, plural, micro, local and temporary explanations. For another theorist of postmodernism, Jean Baudrillard, postmodernism is an era dominated by “simulation, implosion and hyper reality” (Woods 26). In this era the distinction between reality and illusion get blurred out and everything becomes simulacra. For Baudrillard simulacra is a state in which “a social sphere [is] so saturated by images and signs that a resultant crisis in representation has overtaken its capacity to insist on the real, on truth, and on meaning”(Baker 79). It is a state where “the image ‘bears no relation to any reality whatever’” (80). Similarly implosion is a state when there is a “collapse of signification as a set of discernible and discrete units of meaning” (Woods 4-5). TV, media, advertisements, digital world, computer simulation, Disneyland are the prime makers of hyper reality or simulacra. Accordingly for Patricia Waugh, postmodernism can be understood as:

a gradual dissolution of the modern idea of separate autonomies of the spheres of art, science and morality or politics, and can be viewed as an increasingly pervasive aestheticisation of all spheres of knowledge and experience, from philosophy to politics and finally to science (Waugh 291).

The intrusion of aestheticism – all pervasive uncertainty and relativism – in all branches of knowledge is the most fundamental transition brought about by postmodernism. Waugh analyses the effects of intrusion of aestheticism in the fields of literature, philosophy, politics and science. Aestheticism in literature entails that it has to give up the modernist claim for autonomy and impersonality, hence everything merges into one another, life into art and mass culture into high art and vice versa. The consequences of involving aestheticism in politics are even more far-reaching. Postmodern understanding is that we cannot come out of our instruments of evaluation, judgment or interrogation; these instruments can be primarily language, rationality and self, which we need in order to know the truth. When there remains no centre, no fundamental truth; then in politics also there can be no pure justice, because we can never understand what is justice or we can never reach to a consensus of what is justice, therefore in politics there can be no:

universal subject of emancipation; no pure procedural justice derived from a ‘view from nowhere’ and grounding the discourse of equality and individual rights; no universally acknowledged concept of the ‘good’ derived from the telos of history.... Politics therefore becomes ‘micropolitics’: the exercise at best of a situated rationality and a conversational practice grounded in the internal practices and claims of particular groups or communities. Claims to universality are to be regarded as strategies of exclusion and domination (298).

The aftermath of postmodernism in the philosophical field was that philosophy had to give in its claim for authentic discourse, its claim for finding and establishing ‘truth’. Majority of philosophers, particularly Derrida and Lyotard followed Nietzsche in completing the critique of the Enlightenment epistemology or that of the idea of fundamental truth and of the rational subject and hence established philosophy as poetry or art. This brand of philosophy champions pervasive prespectivism, taking the lead from Nietzsche’s statement that “there is only a prespectival knowing” (Nietzsche SIII 3). Instead of classifying and validating knowledge they dismiss altogether all ‘totalities’ as unreliable and dangerous and all language games as equally inadequate. Yet there has been another strand of philosophy that although does criticize the idea of rationalist thought and the idea of freedom, but they do not forego the desire for justice and emancipation. This school of thought rejects the validity of single fundamental knowledge and espouses that all knowledge is relative and is modulated by

cultural practices and beliefs, but nevertheless, believes that it is human need to invest in and establish some sort of fundamental truth for the sake of achieving justice.

Postmodern critique of epistemology not only invaded politics and philosophy but also the last epitome of Enlightenment and that of modernity, i.e. science. Science had always remained untouched by questions about its methods and its objectivity, because it was understood as the most objective field of knowledge where it could have proofs about what it asserted. Although science has received value-oriented criticism going back to “Schiller’s indictment of Newtonian mechanics which had plunged the world into a value- shorn and ‘monotonous round of ends’” (Waugh 303) and every now and then ethical questions about human cloning, or genetic engineering or nuclear research are asked, but science remained free from quarries about its epistemological foundations. Now postmodern critique has targeted the very epistemological groundings of science. Postmodern theorists and scientists like Lewis Wolpert, Richard Dawkins and Alan Sokal have pointed out that scientific knowledge is not created in a vacuum; it is equally influenced by ideological constructions and cultural practices. Scientific discourses use the same language (or language games) which are already contaminated by different ideologies. Postmodernism has aestheticised science too, that is, it has exposed science also as a form of fiction. Postmodernism has replaced all the epistemological assertions so that it is now believed that there was and there is no knowing except aesthetic knowing. In the postmodern theory and practice there is the established consensus that “Knowledge is an art of invention and not a science of discovery” (304).

Linda Hutcheon writes about many postmodernisms generated by many theorists, and then she introduces her own brand. In her words it is “paradoxical postmodernism of complicity and critique, of reflexivity and historicity, that at once inscribes and subverts the conventions and ideologies of the dominant culture and social forces of the twentieth-century western world” (Hutcheon 11). It is clear from the above statement that for Hutcheon the defining aspect of postmodernism is its being highly paradoxical or contradictory. Its contradictory nature arises from many things. For one thing it is due to the very nature of postmodernism which takes the form of a self-undermining statement. It is as if inverted commas are put around whatever is being said, hence highlighting the duplicity, self-consciousness and paradoxical nature of statements. Postmodernism is contradictory also because it is both complicitous and critical at the same time. It is complicitous with and critical of the conventions, cultural practices, social setups, ideologies and representations. It is complicitous with those values which nevertheless it still undermines, thus resulting in the simultaneous inscription and installing on one hand and subversion and denaturalization of values and ideologies on the other hand. The words of Anne Friedberg best describe this sort of contradictory nature of postmodernism. According to her postmodernism “was conservative politics, it was subversive politics, it was the return of tradition, it was the final revolt of tradition, it was the unmooring of patriarchy, it was the reassertion of patriarchy” (13). Linda Hutcheon points out the complicity that is automatically inherent in the prominent postmodern philosophers of the twentieth century. She says:

Is there not a center to even the most decentered of [postmodern] theories? What is power to Foucault, writing to Derrida, or class to Marxism? Each of these theoretical perspectives can be argued to be deeply – and knowingly – implicated in the notion of center they attempt to subvert. It is this paradox that makes them postmodern (14).

Its contradictory nature is also due to its being both self-reflexive, i.e. having no touch with outer reality and belonging to the realm of parody and pastiche depthlessness, and also at the same time historically oriented, i.e. dealing with the matters of real life, belonging to the realm of history and socio-political happenings. This contradictory mixing of fictive and worldly is typical of postmodernism.

Apart from highlighting the paradoxical or ironic nature of postmodernism, Hutcheon stresses that the other basic characteristic of postmodernism is its political nature. The dominant trend in contemporary criticism is to dismiss any involvement of postmodernism with politics, for such theorists postmodern self-reflexivity, aestheticization and ironic commitment towards representations and serious issues, makes it disqualified from any political involvement. Linda Hutcheon challenges this view. For her it is naïve to think of postmodernism as apolitical; she believes that it is inextricably interbound with politics. Postmodernism

involves both complicity and critique and it is this oblique critique of domination, power, epistemology and reality that makes postmodernism political. This state of being both complicitous and at the same time involving critique is termed by Hutcheon as "complicitous critique". It is this complicitous critique that gives postmodernism a political agenda, albeit not an overt one, but nevertheless of great significance. The complicitous critique aims

to de-naturalize some of the dominant features of our way of life; to point out that those entities that we unthinkably experience as 'natural' (they might even include capitalism, patriarchy, liberal humanism) are in fact 'cultural'; made by us, not given to us (2).

Also its blatant, self-conscious involvement with such things as language - its possibilities, limits and construction, and history writing - its validity, construction, social and ideological manufacturing, granting of meaning and values cannot be analyzed in a vacuum. One cannot avoid getting involved in ideologies about gender, religion, class, race and that makes its orientation highly politicized.

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