

Scepticism in Douglas Coupland's *Hey Nostradamus!*

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Abstract

The present research paper attempts to explore scepticism reflected in Douglas Coupland's novel *Hey Nostradamus!* (2003) Douglas Coupland is the most influential Postmodern Canadian writer who succeeds to capture the panorama of postmodern society and the postmodern philosophy of disbelief. He opened new vistas that enable the readers to contemplate over the postmodern scene of chaos. His novels are the reflection of the harsher realities of the life including lack of religious values, economic instability, rapid and radical proliferation of technology, media diffusion, adolescent love, altered cultural consequences and its impact on the human life. They successfully depict the explosion of media oriented knowledge that enabled the postmodern man to question and subvert the contemporary scene of metanarrative. Unlike other novels, Coupland's *Hey Nostradamus!* focuses on the strong disbelief of its narrators over the traditional religious values which failed to explain the reasons of the school massacre. The novel is centred on the aftermath of a fictional school shooting in North Vancouver in, 1988. The paper is divided into three sections. The first section deals with the substantial theoretical framework; second section focuses on the analysis of the novel in the light of the theory developed in the first part; and the third section concludes the paper with research findings. Thus, the present paper is a modest attempt to explore postmodern incredulity towards metanarratives and scepticism depicted in Douglas Coupland's novel *Hey Nostradamus!*

Key Words: scepticism, incredulity, postmodernism, religion, media diffusion

Section I

The term postmodernism is emerged after the horrors of the World War II in response to the prominent tendencies that were rooted in its precedent modernism. It undermines this ideology of modernism to expose its hypocrisy. It rejects the assumed certainty of scientific efforts to explain reality and further traces that reality comes into being only through one's interpretation. The sense of loss of reality makes the postmodernists to destroy traditional pretensions. For postmodern theorists the traditional mode of looking at the world as a reality which traces identity, unity, authority, and certainty is

inadequate. They consider the world as extraordinary, horrific or absurd, which explores difference, separation, textuality, scepticism, and only an imitation of reality. That means historical discourses of metanarratives are inadequate to establish a proper ground that will sustain the human faith and drive him to believe in the narrated truths. Jean-Francois Lyotard concentrated his thoughts around this incredulity of postmodern society towards metanarrative. In this section, an attempt is made to put forth the perceptions of Lyotard regarding the grand narrative and human values to develop a theoretical frame for the further analysis of the novel.

Jean-Francois Lyotard's postmodern monument *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* is published in 1984, in which he explains his understanding about the cultural transformations in the contemporary period. As the postmodern world is marked by the fundamental, rapid and radical changes in the human life, human breed have to face various challenges in the altered political, cultural and social context. These changes are analysed by Lyotard and generalized certain maxims which afterwards become the major principles of the postmodern philosophy and the important features of the postmodern literature. Lyotard defines postmodernism as: "I define *postmodern* as incredulity toward metanarratives" (xxiv). He identifies 'metanarratives' with the grand narratives and throws light on the emergence of the 'little narratives' which create the world of fragmented truths and the altered conception of reality which become the major thematic concerns of the postmodern literature.

Lyotard draws his assumption about postmodernism on the basis of the philosophy of a sociologist Daniel Bell. Bell argues that post-industrial, computerized society is the fruit of the changed status of knowledge. Lyotard accepts the concept of Bell to reject modernist's idea that knowledge is universal and applicable everywhere; instead according to him knowledge is partial or localized. He rejects the Enlightenment philosophy of Kant, Hegel, Rousseau and Habermas that put forth an idea of grand stories. Lyotard uses the term metanarrative for these grand stories through which the modern religion, politics, philosophy and science attempt to impose their idea of knowledge. He particularly focuses on the scientific

discourses and the role assigned to it by the Enlightenment that is the liberation of humanity with the accumulation of scientific knowledge. In this way science presents the universally applicable knowledge and acquires the status of metanarrative – other discourses perform the role of human liberation under these metanarratives. Nicol explains this phenomenon as:

Metanarratives are a form of ideology which functions violently to suppress and control the individual subject by imposing a false sense of 'totality' and 'universality' on a set of disparate things, actions, and events. A metanarrative is like a literary narrative in that it is essentially a means of ordering discrete elements in a particular form and thus presenting a rhetorical case about the way things work or are connected, which legitimates political positions and courses of action. (11)

The idea of universality is aptly expressed in the modern fiction of the writers like James Joyce and T. S. Eliot. For example James Joyce's *Ulysses* depicts the journey of Leopold Bloom in eighteen chapters with the diversity of style, but at the end points to single grand narrative. Lyotard argues that postmodernists do not believe in the power of metanarratives as they recognise its extravagant function. It has lost its power of making truth for the liberation of humanity. Instead, they believe in the little narratives which present limited truth related with the particular situation. For example, Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973), is full of intertextual references, which initially highlights the role of metanarrative, but at the end of the novel,

points out little narrative with the help of localized stories. Douglas Coupland's *Hey Nostradamus!* also questions to the role of religious metanarrative which failed to explain the reasons of the massacre in which many lives are either directly or indirectly destructed.

Section II

Hey Nostradamus! (2003) is more illustrative novel about the concepts of religion and institutional belief system as well as its power of controlling the human rationale as a universal discourse in the postmodern period. In this novel, Douglas Coupland tries to present the dark side of human nature and the possibility of achieving transcendence through redemption. He finds solutions of human sufferings in spiritual impulses of an individual but not with the help of orthodox values. Hence, the novel directly rejects the age-old institutional beliefs by raising questions regarding the sacred notions of love, life, suffering, and death.

The belief that orthodox religion or what Lyotard calls, 'grand narratives,' can provide a solution to the human suffering by bringing out the good from the human being and it will improve the mankind is deconstructed in the novel. The characters of the novel are more religious having faith in the Christianity; but in their actual behaviour, they are unsympathetic and cruel. The members of *Youth Alivers!* and Reg are the most religious characters in the novel but their behaviour is contradictory to their religious beliefs. Despite their religious faith they are suffering. Their manipulative, cruel, and controlling natures create more sufferings than offering comforts.

The novel centres around high school massacre in which a girl named Cheryl

dies. Her boyfriend Jason, a Christian boy whom she secretly marries for six weeks, plays a key role in bringing the massacre to an end yet his heroics are misinterpreted by his insanely fundamentalist Christian father, Reg. Jason is mistaken for supporting the killers in the massacre. The novel also narrates Heather's relationship to Jason and Reg. Heather's interactions with Reg bring him to more human Christianity.

The novel is narrated by four different narrators with four different points of views focusing on the lives of its characters which are either directly or indirectly influenced by the massacre. The first part of the novel begins with Cheryl, who typifies the postmodern tendencies and is sceptical regarding the religious values as she failed to understand the reasons behind the massacre even after her death. She unfolds the incidents of her life before and after the massacre of which she is a victim and narrates them beyond the grave. She tells that she wants everything in her life but she doesn't want it through the way her friends have achieved. So, she uses religion as a means of getting the things she wanted. Her conversion to religion was her plan to attract Jason. She was brought up in such a family who believes that they are the controller of their own life and not God. Her attitude towards religion is clearly expressed in her words when she says, "I did want Jason but, as I've said, only on my own terms, which also happened to be God's terms" (16).

The novel begins with the words of hope pointing to the dominant role of religion in the lives of the characters and also revealing the brutality of human nature. Cheryl's the first narration begins with the words:

I believe that what separates humanity from everything in this world – spaghetti, binder paper, deep-sea creatures, edelweiss and Mount McKinley – is that humanity alone has the capacity at any given moment to commit all possible sins. Even those of us who try to live a good and true life remain as far away from grace as the Hillside Strangler or any demon who ever tried to poison the village well. (3)

Cheryl's words expose the darker side in human nature which has a capacity of committing all possible sins. According to her, human being is worst than animal as he can turn himself into a demon anytime and can commit sin. Jason is also fed up with this brutality of human nature and wish to be an animal. This sceptical attitude of almost all characters in the novel points to the postmodern disbelief in the orthodox values which are inadequate to establish a coherent meaning in the lives of human being. Thus, Coupland tries to peep in the human psyche and puts forth the worst part of human nature in the form of Delbrook Massacre which is certainly an example of human cruelty.

As the novel develops, a transformation in the character of Cheryl can be found, who begins to believe in God's existence in the universe, but could not be able to develop a strong belief. She begins to learn, pray and read religion, but still that was only a drill of remaining moral. She took inspiration from the religious sermons to hide her secret marriage from the society. She thinks that Jason will disclose their secret marriage to his friends, so she has taken a promise of not disclosing the secret of marriage to anybody from him. Her inability to trust anybody is, in fact, her sceptical attitude developed as a result of

altered post modern socio-cultural scene. She has not formed her concepts of God firmly and writes on her binder: "GOD IS NOWHERE/GOD IS NOW HERE /GOD IS NOWHERE/GOD IS NOW HERE" (9). Her act of writing these words on binder was her attempt to clear out her concepts and make a firm stand either in the religious world or in the world around her, created by her parents – a Godless world. She knows that she is "no longer a part of the world and . . . not yet part of what follows" (*ibid*). She is at the other side of the world of which she is going to be a part. From there, she hears "the only sounds [of] prayers and curses; they're the only sounds with the power to cross over to where" she is (*ibid*). Cheryl's words reveals the fact that the only acts and deeds, whether in the form of prayers or curses through which one acknowledges God, have the power to cross the gates of Heaven. Confronted by the brutality of human nature, she hears the prayers from the earth, asking God:

Dear God,

I'm going to stop believing in you unless you can tell me what possible good could have come from the bloodshed. I can't see any meaning or evidence of divine logic. (14)

The prayers raise doubt in the divine logic of the act of Almighty. By indenting prayers in the novel Coupland raises the questions to the existence of God in the postmodern world:

Lord,

I *know* I don't have a fish sticker, or whatever it is I'm supposed to have on my car bumper, like all those stuck-up kids who think they're holier than Thou, but I also don't think they have some sort of express

lane to speak to You, so I imagine You're hearing this okay. I guess my question to You is whether or not You get to torture those evil bastards who did the killings, or if it's purely the devil's job and You subcontract it out. Is there any way I can help torture them from down here on earth? Just give me a sign and I'm in. (21-22)

The initial stress on the word '*know*' by making it italic indicates the emptiness of postmodern society towards religion. This disbelief in God can be explained with another prayer:

Dear Lord,

If You organized a massacre just to make people have doubts, then maybe You ought to consider other ways of doing things. A high school massacre? Kids with pimento loaf sandwiches and cans of Orange Crush? I don't think You would orchestrate something like this. A massacre in a high school cafeteria can only indicate Your absence – that for some reason, in some manner, You chose to absent Yourself from the room. Forsake it, actually.

Cheryl – the pretty girl who was the last one to be shot. She wrote that in her binder, didn't she? "God is nowhere." Maybe she was right. (24-25)

The inadequacy of Christianity which fails to explain school massacre, confirms the postmodern disbelief in metanarrative. Christianity fails to provide any absolute answer and fails to sustain the faith of people over its preaching. They pray but they don't know whether they are right or wrong. Further, Cheryl's remark adds

insight to this postmodern disbelief in religion, who says, "It always seemed to me that people who'd discovered religion had both lost and gained something. Outwardly, they'd gained calmness, confidence and a look of purpose, but what they'd lost was a certain willingness to connect with unconverted souls" (27). Thus, Cheryl hears the prayers from those who are suffering on the earth. Their prayer encompasses the doubts, anguish, confusion, devotion which enables them to ask the questions to Gods authority: "Dear God, I'm prayed out, and yet here I am, still knocking on Your door, but I think this could be the last time" (31).

The second part of the novel is narrated by Jason in the form of letters to his nephews, which exposes the religious conduct of his family, especially of his fanatic father Reg. Reg, a religious fundamentalist who turn to belief as his salvation undergoes a transformation from narrow fundamentalist to more open human being. His hypocritical nature is aptly exposed by Cheryl. She observed him as a man who, always imparts his philosophy on others by saying, "Love what God loves and hate what God hates," but more often than not I had the impression that he really meant 'Love what Reg loves and hate what Reg hates'" (28). Not only Cheryl but even Jason's another girlfriend, Heather also points out the paradox in Reg's behaviour. The explosion of media oriented knowledge of Cheryl and Heather leads them to point out this paradox and generated sceptical notions in their minds.

Born and brought up in such an orthodox family, Jason is not able to clear his notions of God. His attitude towards God is shaped by his father's belief who, always tries to impose his ideals on him.

Reg blindly follows his Christian belief and drives his son to the destruction accusing him as a murderer for his heroic act. At the massacre, Jason has saved the lives of children by killing one of the mad shooters. But his father's condemnation, "What I understand is that my son experienced murder in his heart and chose not to rise above that impulse I understand that my son is a murderer" (77) breaks Jason and his family and Jason lives a life in his attempt to achieve redemption. However, he was also aware that his father's religious beliefs will not help in overcoming the sufferings of him or his family.

Jason also points out how the notions of sin and transcendence are treated in the society. Jeremy Kyriakis, one of the killers who shot most of the students, was forgiven for his act of repentance and was emerged as a celebrity in the massacre. Media's sensational exploitation of him by misinterpreting his association with Youth Alive and also with Cheryl intensified his grief.

Jason continues to live his destructed life until he was kidnapped by Yorgo who takes him to a riverside where in their fight, he almost going to kill Yorgo but he remembered the scene of cafeteria massacre and realized that he is going to commit the same crime which ultimately leads him to decide to leave Yorgo. So the choice of life over death provides him with a kind of redemption. His act of not killing Yorgo gives him a feeling of hate-free person but he has not achieved redemption in a real sense. He says that "Redemption exists, but only for others" (135). He tries to build his own universe free from hypocrisy but again he ended up with the faithlessness as he finds no mercy in his father's world. His last words indicate the

same darker side of human nature as it was pointed at the beginning of the novel by Cheryl. He says: "We're all born lost, aren't we? We're all born separated from God . . . and I feel like the unholy thing on earth" (146). His last words point out the incredulity of metanarrative as it enables to sustain the faith of postmodern man in its power.

The last part of the novel is narrated by Reg, in the form of letter to his missing son which indicates the span of almost fifteen years after the massacre. It is narrated as atonement for Reg's previous action as he has realized the faults in his particular belief system. He says that he has spent all his life preaching gospel and thinking "that God had a startling revelation to hand him, a divine mission" (234). He also confessed that he had rejected his son only because God has chosen his son for the divine mission and not him. He says: "he was jealous that God had given a mission not to him, but to his son" (235). Through his confession he begins to liberate himself. His realization of his mistakes and bitterness towards his family, especially to his son reveals his transformation. His faith in the orthodox religious values is fade away as he realised whatever he has done was totally wrong. Reg's spiritual exploration which gradually turns into a sympathetic figure is impressive. His realization in the novel again hints to the incredulity towards religious metanarrative that failed to sustain his belief.

Section III

In the light of analysis and interpretation, it would be appropriate to conclude that the novel *Hey Nostradamus!* aptly express the incredulity towards religious metanarrative and its inability to establish a coherent ground in which a postmodern

man can believe. Each character in the novel rejects the orthodox belief system and its preaching, and questions the existence of God. The high school massacre incidents generates the sceptical attitude in the minds of the characters who begin to doubt the power of grand narrative and its ability of bringing out good from the humanity. Coupland

skilfully handled the issue of massacre at school and succeeds in presenting the postmodern sensibility shaped with the chaotic scenes in altered socio-cultural context. Coupland's insight into the claustrophobic world of devout faith is impressive. The novel effectively presents the scepticism in the postmodern society.

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