

Theory of Postmodernism

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Abstract

Postmodernism is an umbrella term. It represents specific setoff contemporary ideas. To some it is perpetual present. Postmodernism stands for : collapse of cultural distinction, skepticism, the space between old and the new, plurality, hybridity, deconstruction of established metanarratives, space and scope for little narratives, resisting closure, a new aesthetic style, an inclusive theory, incredulity to metanarratives, fully developed modernity or hyper-modernity, challenge to traditional exploitative center or unity. Postmodernism is an inexplicable umbrella term which various theorists and critics have tried to define. The postmodernists celebrate difference, plurality, and are always conscious of the global change and exchange of ideas and information traffic which has created a process of hybridization at all levels with the help of globalization of cultural ethos. Postmodernism reveals fragmentation, ephemerality and discontinuity, preferring difference over uniformity. The postmodernists put an emphasis on local factors or plural explanations, like the micro-politics of power relations in different social contexts and in relation to specific discourses, language games or interpretative communities. They stand for local narratives, ethnic groups, religious minorities, women and weaker sections with unified voice.

Key Words : Postmodernism, plurality, metanarrative, hybridity, deconstruction, little-narratives, difference, fragmentation, micro-politics

Postmodernism is an umbrella term. It is, to some extent, like a party manifesto which has at its base a set of beliefs which are not in fact held by all, and are unlikely to reflect the universal condition of men and women in contemporary society. To **J.G. Ballard**, postmodernism is a conceptualization of the present that seeks to historicize the effacement of the historical – thus, in some ways eternalizing itself, freezing the movement of time.¹

Balsamo thinks that, the dominant interpretative theory of postmodernism concerns the penchant to celebrate the perpetual present.²

Postmodernism stands for collapse of cultural distinction and the process of

cultural mongrelization. It is the most “democratic” of literary codes which has very much to do with the practicalities, not only of history but of life, individual, society, and his choice of political agenda. **Stuart Sim** defines postmodernism as an updated version of scepticism.³ Postmodernism, in its wider popular reception appears to be a rather vague, nebulous word for everything that is more modern than modern. **Brian McHale** describes postmodernism as: “The shift of dominant from problems of knowing to problems of modes of being – from an epistemological dominant to an ontological one”.⁴

Postmodernism is only the representative system of an ‘inflation of discourse’, in the

spheres of culture and communication. Postmodernity may be defined as those plural conditions in which the social and the cultural become undistinguished. **Arnold Toynbee** defines postmodernism as: The decline of Western civilization – into irrationality and relativism since the 1870s.⁵

Postmodernism is the space between the old and the new. It is a movement of merging, a deliberate complication of the idea of generic integrity. The postmodern spirit lies coiled within the great corpus of modernism. This is to see postmodernism partly as a kind of Dionysian virus within modernism, tempting it to the extremes of madness and self-dissolution, and partly as the secret inner principle of modernism. **Brian McHale** defines literary postmodernism as : “a riotous cacophony of conflicting discourses or ‘heterotopia’ of incompatible geographies”.⁶ Postmodernism is a term synonymous with that current of contemporary theoretical debate whose main focus is the representation and analysis of a perceived breakdown in the universalizing and rationalist metanarratives of the Enlightenment. According to **Radhakrishnan**, the very term “Postmodernism” is a necessary misnomer; a misnomer, since it attempts to “periodise” a break, and necessary, since the language of the break has initially to mention and problematize its immediate antecedent before it commences its own projects.⁷

Postmodernism resists closure. Postmodernism also recognizes, however, that human beings cannot live without trying to **make** sense. Neither innately positive nor negative, postmodernism is an opening a space created for a particular awareness, interrogation. According to

Fredric Jameson, postmodernism is not merely a new aesthetic style, but rather a new stage of ‘cultural development of the logic of late capitalism. It is the cultural dominant of late capitalist society, eclipsing modernist styles in various art forms and creating new forms of consciousness and experience that predominate over older modern forms.

Postmodernism is a regression behind the progressive advances of the Enlightenment. It has become such a pervasive phenomenon in modern literary history and the term is used to denote so many trends that it may soon meet the fate of similar ‘inclusive’ terms such as Romanticism and one might be tempted to say like **Lovejoy** on Romanticism that it means ‘everything’ and therefore ‘nothing’.⁸

Postmodernism is a phenomenon, literary and cultural, that points to the collapse of Western humanism and of the literature and culture sustained by it. It is fundamentally the eclectic mixture of any tradition with that of the immediate past which is both a continuation of modernism and its transcendence. Its best works are characteristically double coded and ironic, making a feature of the wide choice, conflict and discontinuity of traditions, because this heterogeneity most clearly captures pluralism.

Postmodernism is the privilege of a particular group within Western Society. It is the ultimate justification, the master alibi, for the continued exploitation and oppression of non-western cultures. **Charles Jencks** sees postmodernism in terms of ‘paradoxical dualism’ or ‘double coding’.⁹

Not all postmodern historical theorists are hostile to explanation on principle, but that

is certainly the tendency of the postmodern milieu, and it is virtually a definition of postmodernism that it is hostile to explanatory models – in other words, more or less the same thing as incredulity towards metanarratives.

In its earliest manifestation an architectural style, postmodernism has come to be regarded as a view of culture which is wholly skeptical towards any claims of certainty in science or society and conflates representation with reality. In historiography it is identified with the linguistic turn so that historian's attention is shifted towards texts and discourse rather than what these purport to reveal about historical reality.

According to **Beatrice Skordili**, postmodernism can be defined as the eruption of differends in the sociopolitical horizon in the wake of the breakdown of grandnarratives.¹⁰ Postmodernity, to **Zygmunt Bauman**, is fully developed modernity. Modernity for itself; modernity emancipated from false consciousness.¹¹

The postmodern moment is not something that is to be defined chronologically, rather it is a rupture in consciousness. Its definition lies in change and chance, but it has everything to do with how people read the present, as well the past. Postmodernism is a name given to the deconstructive intensification of logic of modernism to the point where the two binary extremes are seen to include and imply each other. **Lyotard** defines postmodernism as : “Simplifying to the extreme, I define postmodern as incredulity towards metanarratives ”.¹²

Lyotard further defines postmodern as that which, in the modern, puts forward the unrepresentable in presentation itself; that which denies itself the solace of good forms

the consensus of a taste which would make it possible to share collectively the nostalgia for the attainable; that which searches for new presentations, not in order to enjoy them but in order to impart a stronger sense of the unrepresentable. Postmodernism is the explicit rejection of metanarratives, i.e. the presupposition that human history is following any particular course of development, whether in religious, liberal , particularly identified with the Enlightenment, or Marxist guises. **Fredric Jameson** points to a defining sense of the postmodern as : “ The disappearance of a sense of history’ in the culture, a pervasive depthlessness, a ‘perpetual present’ in which the memory of tradition is gone.”¹³

Postmodernism is the very vast term used to describe the new aesthetics, cultural and intellectual forms and practices, which emerged in the 1980s and 1990s. It stands for confusion of meanings stemming from two riddles . It resists and obscures the sense of modernism and implies a complete knowledge of the modern which has been surpassed by a new age. Postmodernism represents a flow of ultra-technological images in a consumerist hyper-reality. It also implies dominance of multinational corporations on the world and the data they control as a power game of big nation .In a general sense, post-modernism is to be regarded as rejection of many cultural certainties on which life in the West has been structured over the last couple of centuries.

Since its inception as a literary term in the late 1950s and its wider use as a critical term in the 1980s and 1990s, postmodernism has emerged as a significant cultural, political, and intellectual force that defines contemporaneity . Definitions of postmodernism range from eclecticism and montage to neoscepticism and anti-

rationalism. Postmodernism, in its contradictory, sometimes misguided, and various deployments, has consistently challenged understanding of unity, subjectivity, epistemology, aesthetics, ethics, history and politics.

Before defining critical concept of postmodernism, it is necessary to understand the meaning of Post- in the postmodernism. Some of the understanding theorists have tried to analyse the meaning of post. For **Lyotard**, the post- is first of all a continuation of the work of modernist avant-garde painters, writers and thinkers (Picasso, Joyce, Freud), the work of questioning 'expressions of thought'.¹⁴

Lyotard admits to a certain discomfort with term 'avant-garde', it is nonetheless for him through 'the true process of avant-gardism' that was carried out 'a long, obstinate and highly responsible work. It's the modernist avant-garde and not, the Enlightenment philosophies, that Lyotard cites as an analogue of the post. The post is certainly in some kind of relation with the avant-garde affirmation of what might be called genre-without-genre, but not in the sense of being in receipt of fully worked out attitudes, thoughts and practices. So one can argue that, the last post was not the moment of avant-garde modernism, but in fact the era of romanticisms the time of which may be far from being up.¹⁵

The 'post' of 'postmodernism, has the sense of a simple succession, a diachronic sequence of periods in which each one is clearly identifiable. The 'post' indicates something like a conversion: a new direction from the previous one. According to **Lyotard**, the 'post' of 'postmodern' does not signify a movement of comeback, flashback, or feedback, that is, not a movement of repetition but a procedure in 'ana-': a procedure of

analysis, anamnesis, anagogy and anamorphosis which elaborates an 'initial forgetting'.¹⁶

The prefix 'post' suggests that any postmodernism is inextricably bound up with modernism, either as a replacement of modernism or as chronologically after modernism.

In the words, postmodernism, postfeminism, Postcolonialism and postindustrialism, the word 'post' can be seen to suggest a critical engagement with modernism, rather than claiming the end of modernism, or it can seem that modernism has been overturned, superseded or replaced. The relationship is something more akin to a continuous engagement, which implies, that postmodernism needs modernism to survive, so that they exist in something more like a host parasite relationship. Therefore, it is quite crucial to realize that any definition of postmodernism will depend upon one's prior definition of modernism. Steven Connor observes that:

If we live in 'post- culture', a culture wedded to all kinds of supersession post-Holocaust, post-industrial, post-humanist, post-cultural, indeed – then there remain, residually, two sides or aspects to the 'post' prefix and debates about the postmodern in the humanities and social sciences have tended to reproduce this duality. On the one hand, to designate oneself as 'post' anything, is to admit to a certain exhaustion, diminution or decay. Someone who inhabits a post-culture is a latecomer to the party arriving only in time to see the bottles and cigarette ends being swept up. Belatedness, may also imply a certain dependence, for the post-culture cannot even define itself in any free-standing way, but is condemned to the parasitic prolongation of some vanished

cultural achievement. Such a reading of the 'post' underlies. (Connor , 63) 17

In the work of **Leslie Fiedler**, **Ihab Hassan** and **Lyotard**, postmodernism is seen as a positive force. To the 'post' of postmodernism signifies not the fatigue of the latecomer but the freedom and self-assertion . What is striking about the function of the 'post' – prefix is not so much the difference between the two kinds of connotation, the one submissive and dismissive, the other iconoclastic and promotional, as the way in which both connotative fields tend to intersect.

The characteristic of postmodernism is this peculiarly complex relationship which it has with modernism which in its very name is at once invoked, admired, suspected or rejected. This relationship is overlaid with further complexities in the different disciplinary discourses of postmodernism, in which the struggle with modernism often represents an internal struggle with the discipline. The 'post' of the postmodernism which develops out of this broadly hermeneutic tradition, implies that there can be no position from outside culture from which to offer a critique of it.

The 'post' in postmodern also signifies a dependence on a continuity with, that which it follows . It also implies

intensification of the modern, as a hypermodernity, a new face of modernity, or a 'postmodern' development within modernity. Yet many postmodern theorists deploy the term – as it was introduced by Toynbee-- to characterize a dramatic rupture or break in Western history. The discourses of the postmodern therefore presuppose a sense of an ending, the advent of something new, and the demand to develop new categories, theories, and methods to explore and conceptualize this novel cultural situation. "Postmodern" simply indicates a mood, or better a state of mind.

Periodisation is often a culturally imposed activity channeled by the dominant ideology. The 'post' in discussion of postmodernist fiction often relates to a succession or supersession of modernism. The confusion is advertised by the "Post" in postmodernism identifies itself by something it is not. It is not modern anymore. But in what sense exactly is it post -?- as a result of modernism ? --- the aftermath of modernism?--- the afterbirth of modernism? the denial of modernism? Or the rejection of modernism ? Postmodernism has been used in a mix-and match of some or all of these meanings.

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