



THE CONCEPT AND THEORY OF POSTMODERNISM: A BRIEF NOTE

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Abstract

This article focuses on the literary theory, Postmodernism which emerged in the middle of the twentieth century as a radical protest against all ways of existing representation by incorporating various marginalized thoughts issuing from metafiction, intertextuality, burlesque, pastiche and black humour by throwing light upon old and new techniques employed in texts in which the frontiers between high culture and commercial culture were broken and reality was replaced “by a hyper reality, a world of self-referential signs”

Postmodernism emerged in the middle of the twentieth century as a radical protest against all ways of existing representation. Like modernism it is an elusive term and rather difficult to define. Stuart Sim says, “one of the best ways of describing postmodernism as a philosophical movement would be as a form of scepticism - scepticism about authority, received wisdom, cultural and political norms, etc... . (vii). Jean-Francois Lyotard pioneered the postmodern attack of the western philosophy by proclaiming war on metanarratives or the grand narratives:

We now live in an era in which legitimizing ‘master narratives’ are in a crisis and in decline. These narratives are contained or implied by major philosophies, such as Kantianism, Hegelianism, and Marxism, which argue that history is progressive, that knowledge can liberate us, and that all knowledge has a secret unity. (Butler 13)

Lyotard argues that such doctrines have lost their credibility since the Second World War. According to him “our incredulity is now such that we no longer expect salvation to rise from these inconsistencies, as did Marx” (510). In challenging the grand narratives the postmodernists were hitting out at the enlightenment project. The enlightenment project was Anderson notes, “an ideology of progress: a belief in ‘linear progress, absolute truths, and rational planning of ideal social orders’” that dominated western culture since the eighteenth century and that worked toward the emancipation of man from economic want and political oppression. Postmodernists hold that such grand narratives oppress humanity and “force it into certain set ways of thought and action” (Sim vii).

Anderson remarks that the postmodernist’s suspicion of preceding philosophical theories was due to the various culture shocks—the experience of having to come across people with entirely different values and beliefs—that the postmodern society had to confront. This exposure to various cultures and beliefs beyond their own resulted in the perception of a pluralistic world forcing the people to change their beliefs: “Surrounded by so many truths, we can’t help but revise our concept of truth itself: our beliefs about belief. . . . truth is made rather than found” (Anderson 8). People came to understand that their truths are not the absolute truths. Truths and beliefs are only social constructs. They realised that their highlighted grand narratives were actually social constructs and were incompetent before the various truths of the other societies. Thus the postmodern age was one of multiplicity and plurality, a time of “incessant choosing ... an era when no orthodoxy can be adopted without self-consciousness and irony, because all traditions seem to have some validity” (Kvale 23).

Hassan in *The Postmodern Turn* traces the history of the term “postmodernism”. He says that Federico de Onius used the term *postmodernismo* in his *Anologia de la poesia espanol e hipanoamericana (1882-1932)*, published in Madrid in 1934; and Dudley Fitts used it again in his *Anthology of Contemporary Latin-American Poetry (1942)*. Hassan tries to bring out the major difference between modernism and postmodernism in a set of opposing phrases like:

“purpose”/“play”; “design”/“chance”; “hierarchy”/“anarchy”; “logos”/“silence”;
“synthesis”/“antithesis”; “reading”/“misreading”; “signified”/“signifier”;
“paranoia”/“Schizophrenia”; “determinacy”/“indeterminacy” (91-92)

Weisenburger observes:... the most powerful and encouraging definitions locate postmodernism as a survivable middle ground between the self-cancelling polarities of modernist thought” (3).

Postmodernism delegitimizes the myths of enlightenment with which the modernists try to westernise all of history. It concentrates on all that has been marginalized by the modernist thought like “speech and orality, the feminine, the folkloric, the mass-cultural, the ethnographically ‘strange,’ even the monstrous” (4). Weisenburger observes: Postmodern culture has broken the spell of various binary, ‘othering’ dualisms common to modernism: not only the signified and its signifier but also such thought-pairs as higher/lower, mind/body, conscious/unconscious, subject/object, male/female, nature/culture. Postmodern art doubts these polarities in profound yet playfully degenerative ways, and thereby reenergizes the universe of contingent, undecideable, immanent, and pluralistic speech. Despite all their apparent negativity or nihilism, then the



subversive carnivals of postmodernism bear witness to the opening of a 'pagan' discourse that was always at the heart of modern darkness. (4). The postmodern incorporation of various marginalized thoughts resulted in metafiction, intertextuality, burlesque, pastiche, and black humour. Old and new techniques were employed in texts in which the "frontier between high culture and so-called mass or commercial culture" (Jameson 3) were broken and reality was replaced "by a hyperreality, a world of self-referential signs" (Kvale 19).

Narrative satire is the favourite medium of the postmodern writer by which he/she "interrogates and subverts authority" wanting to know as Lyotard points out "who decided knowledge and who knows what needs to be decided (Weisenburger 5). The target and attitude of the postmodern satirist are different from those of the modernists. The target of the postmodern satirist is no longer "the bourgeois society" but the "contemporary mega-bureaucracy and its blindly progressive 'information society,' including the "fast image world of advertising, politics, electronic media, and the like" (Weisenburger 6). The postmodern satirists were degenerative unlike the conventional generative satirists. They did not believe that the world as such could be corrected and did not attempt to correct the world of its follies and thereby their satire became degenerative.

The purpose of satire in the degenerative mode is "delegitimizing ... in concord with deconstructionist thought, it functions to subvert hierarchies of value and to reflect suspiciously on all ways of making meaning, including its own" (Weisenburger 3). The degenerative satirist invented various new tools of satire and reinvented certain old tools. This was because they discovered that the old tools of satire were not sufficient to address the dilemmas of the modern world. So the postmodern writers took recourse to burlesque, irony, parody, black humour and various metalanguage techniques for fictionalizing their perceptions of the world.

Postmodernism in American literature flourished during the 60s in the writings of John Barth, Donald Barthelme, Bruce Jay Friedman, Thomas Pynchon, Kurt Vonnegut Jr., Ken Kesey, Ishmael Reed, Thomas Berger and Joseph Heller. Charles B. Harris summarizes the major concerns of these writers

The 'new' logic, with its acceptance of the illogical, and modern science, with its denial of causality and its concept of entropy, elevate chaos to the level of scientific fact. Recent sociological tracts argue convincingly that we are a lonely crowd of organization men, growing up absurd. Modern existential philosophy warns that we face a loss of self in a fragmented world of technology that reduces man to the operational and functional. Each of these theories seems to lend support...[to the view] that ours is a disintegrating world without a unifying principle, without meaning, without purpose: an absurd universe. (17).

The Postmodernists had to confront a generation that took absurdity as a basic premise, an everyday fact. . ." (Harris 19). This new challenge turned them into metafictionists and black humourists. Richard Kostelanetz notes that the speciality of these novels is the fusion of an "absurd base" with an "absurd surface" (Harris 21). Their absurd vision is reflected in plot construction, language, and characterization. The plots are loosely constructed and lack coherence and order typical of conventional fiction. Time sequence is not maintained. Incidents repeat and overlap one another and the text becomes an arena where multiple plots encounter each other. The language used in the postmodern fiction, as Eugene McNamara observes, is characterized by "lexical distortions, meaningless puns, and insistent repetition of empty words, clichés, exaggeration, and deliberately misplaced particulars, and juxtaposed incongruous details" (Harris 22). The characters appearing in the postmodern novels are twodimensional, distorted, exaggerated, and caricatured. On the whole the 60s was a "topsy-turvy age that often turned trash into art and art into trash, that gaily pursued topical fascinations and ephemeral performances . . ." (Dickstein 124).

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