

*Inventive*  
 Peer-Reviewed, Open Access Journal  
 ISSN: 2773-7977 (Print)  
 ISSN: 2773-8183 (Online)  
 Volume 2, July, 2020, PP: 27-34

## **Postmodernism: A Brief Introduction**

**Nagendra Bahadur Bhandari**

Lecturer, Department of English, T.U.,  
 Prithvi Narayan Campus, Pokhara, Nepal  
 E-mail: nagendra@pncampus.edu.np

### **Abstract**

*This article gives a brief introduction of postmodernism; a broad intellectual and cultural movement initiated from mid twentieth century. Developed in response to the claims of Enlightenment, it opposes the universality and rationalism. Moreover, it emphasizes on particularism against universalism and localism against globalism. In culture, it favours popular culture against high culture. In the same way, this intellectual movement supports fragmentation and disorder in opposition to unity and coherence in literature.*

**Keywords:** Postmodernism, enlightenment, simulacra, grand narratives

---

*Received 17 March 2020,      Reviewed 21 June 2020,      Published 21 July 2020*

---

### **Introduction**

Philosophically, postmodernism has emerged in reaction to the certain claims of Enlightenment. Enlightenment was cultural and intellectual which developed in the Western Europe during the seventeenth century and reached in height in the eighteenth century. The basic features of Enlightenment are summed up by Jean Flax in the following points:

1. There is a stable, coherent, knowable self. This self is conscious, rational, autonomous, and universal – no physical condition or differences substantially affect how this self operates.
2. This self knows itself and the world through reason, or rationally, posited as the highest form of mental functioning, and the only objective form.
3. The mode of knowing produced by the objective rational self is science, which can provide universal truth about the world, regardless of the individual status of the knower.
4. The knowledge produced by science is truth and is the eternal.

5. The knowledge/truth produced by science will always lead toward progress and perfection. All human institutions and practices can be analyzed by science and improved.
7. Reason is the ultimate judges of what is true, and therefore of what is right, and what is good.
8. In the world governed by reason, the true will always be the same as the good and right.
9. Science thus stands as the paradigm for any and all socially useful forms of knowledge.
10. Language, which is used in producing and disseminating knowledge, must be rational. To be rational, language must be transparent. There must be firm and objective connection between the objects of perception and the words used to name them (between signifier and signified). (67)

The works of Jean Francois Lyotard, a postmodernist thinker, principally questioned and raised doubt on such claims of Enlightenment. Lyotard thought that postmodernism is an attack on the reason and rejects the doctrine of its unity. It refuses to conceive of humanity as a unitary subject trying to achieve the goal of perfect coherence in beliefs or of perfect coherence and stability in practice. Tim Wood elaborates:

Postmodern theory is suspicious of the notion of human processing 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. (10)

Postmodernism emphasizes on fragmentations against usual perception of undivided and unified self, and universal rationality. In this sense, it has close affinity with another literary and cultural movement of early twentieth century: Modernism.

### **Postmodernism and Modernism**

It is hard to define postmodernism because it is a concept that appears in wide variety of disciplines or areas of study including art, architecture, music, film, literature, sociology, communications, fashion and technology. However, the features of the period of high modernism would be helpful to understand postmodernism. Peter Barry points out the following features of modernism:

1. A new emphasis on impressionism and subjectivity, that is on HOW we see rather than on WHAT we see (a preoccupation evident is the use of the stream of consciousness technique) is perceived.
2. A movement (in novels) away from the apparent objectively provided by omniscient external narration, fixed narrative point of view, and clear cut moral positions.
3. A blurring of distinctions between genres, so that novel tends to become lyrical and poetic, for instance, and poems more documentary and prose like.

4. A new liking for fragmented forms, discontinuous narratives, and random seeming collages of different materials.
5. A tendency toward reflexivity, so that poems, plays, and novels raise issues concerning their own nature, status and role. (82)

Postmodernism, like modernism, follows most of these ideas. It rejects boundaries between high and low forms of art, rejects rigid genre distinction, and emphasizes on pastiche, parody, irony and playfulness. Postmodern art also favors reflexivity and self-consciousness, fragmentation and discontinuity, ambiguity, and an emphasis on the deconstructed, decentered and dehumanized subject. However, postmodernism differs from modernism in its attitude toward a lot of these trends. Modernism presents fragmentation as something tragic, something to be lamented and mourned as a loss. Postmodernism, in contrast, does not lament the idea of fragmentation, provisionally, or incoherence, but rather celebrates that.

Jean Francois Lyotard makes paradoxical claims about the relationship of modernism and postmodernism. He claims that a work can become modern only if it is first postmodern. He argues:

Modernism is an aesthetic of sublime, though a nostalgic one. It allows the unrepresentable to be put forward only as the missing contents; but the form, because of its recognizable consistency, continues to offer to the reader or viewer matter for solace or pleasure. Yet these sentiments do not constitute the real sublime sentiment, which is an intrinsic combination of pleasure that reason should exceed all presentation, the pain that imagination or sensibility should not be equal to concept. The postmodern would be that which, in the modern, puts forward the unrepresentable in presentations itself: that which denied itself the solace of good forms, the consensus of taste which would make it possible to share collectively the nostalgia for the attainable; that which searches for new presentations, but in order to impart a stronger sense of the unrepresentable. (qtd. in Wood 22-23)

Thus, Lyotard's concept of postmodernism is aesthetic rather than historical. He argues that it is a particular form rather than a particular period. For him, postmodern is an attitude that raises doubts on universality of grand theories.

### **Incredulity towards Grandnarratives**

French philosopher Lyotard was commissioned by Quebec government to write a report on knowledge, science, and technology in advanced capitalist societies. The result was the book *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1979) which is the best known and most influential work in the field of postmodernism. Lyotard argues that postmodern era is one of that lost faith in all grand narratives or metanarratives. Grandnarratives are the stories that a culture tells itself about its practices and beliefs. Grandnarratives are a kind of meta-theory or meta-ideology, which is an ideology that explains an ideology or a story that is told to explain the belief system that exists. A grand narrative in American culture might be the story that democracy is the

most rational form of the government, and that democracy can and will lead to universal happiness. For Marxist, the grand narrative is the idea that capitalism will collapse in itself and socialist world will evolve. Lyotard opines that there is disillusionment with such grand narratives. Such grand narratives offered by religions and political ideologies are ambitious total explanation of reality. Instead, there is a growing interest and preferences for smaller scale or smaller issues, what he calls 'petites histories' or micro narratives. Postmodernism, then, is the critique of grand narratives, the awareness that such narratives serve to mask the contradictions and instabilities that are inherent in any social organization or practice. Postmodernism favours 'mini narratives: stories that explain small practices, and local events, rather than large scale universal or global concepts. Postmodern 'mini narratives' are always situational, provisional, relative, contingent, and temporary, making no claim to universality, truth, reason and stability. They provide a base for the action specific groups in particular local circumstances. He proposes a postmodern world in which decisions are made on the basis of local conditions and are applicable only in that limited context. The lesson, beliefs and practices of one side are not transferable to another. Thus postmodernism deconstruct the basic aim of Enlightenment that is the unitary end of history and of a subject.

Tim Wood summarizes Lyotard's concept of postmodernism in the following points:

1. It is first and foremost incredulity towards mental narratives' and an anti-foundationalism.
2. Although it presents the unrepresentable, it does not so nostalgically, nor does it seek to offer solace in so doing.
3. It contains pleasure and pain, in a reintroduction of the sublime.
4. It does not seek to give reality but to invent allusions to the conceivable which cannot be presented. In the respect, there is something theological in his concept of representational art.
5. It actively searches out heterogeneity, pluralism, constant innovation.
6. It is to be thought of not as an historical epoch, but rather as an aesthetic practice.
7. It challenges the legitimation of positivist science. (23-4)

In this sense, Lyotard opposes the universality of thoughts and practices, and emphasizes on local issues in the local situation with in given time and context. Moreover, Postmodernism raises question about the very existence of real and truth in the age of highly advancement of science and technology.

## Loss of Real

Another aspect of Enlightenment thought is the idea that language is transparent, words serve only as representations of thoughts or things, and do not have any function beyond that. Reality resides in signified in Ferdinand Saussurean division of signifier: visual and auditory representation and signified: meaning of sign system of language. In postmodernism, however, there are only signifiers. The idea of any stable or permanent reality disappears. Rather, for postmodern societies, there are only surfaces; without depth, there are only signifiers without signified.

Another postmodern theorist Jane Baudrillard's book *Simulation* (1981) manifests the idea of 'the loss of real.' Because of the influence of the images from film, TVs, and advertising, there is a loss of the distinction between real and imagined; reality and illusion; and surface and depth. The result is culture of hyper reality in which the distinction between these is eroded. In the past sign was a surface indication of an underlying depth or reality. But what, Baudrillard asks, if a sign is not an index of an underlying reality; but merely of other signs? Then, the whole system becomes a simulacrum. He substitutes representation with the notion of simulation. He argues that signs do not refer to the real anywhere be it speech or writing, television or ethnology. Baudrillard has listed four successive phases of images. These phases have to do with the images or sign's successive distancing from the object of representation. The phases are as follow:

- a) The sign reflects basic reality (classical realist text)
- b) The sign misrepresents or distorts the reality.
- c) The sign masks the absence of a basic reality (The idealized of masculinity or femininity and surrealism)
- d) The sign bears no relation to any reality at all (pure simulacrum) ( In Barry 85)

In such gradually transformation in the relation of sign and reality, the notion of real and its universality has been lost and we are living in the world surrounded by massive flood of signs without any references to reality. Such concept has influenced people perception of knowledge.

## **Knowledge and Information**

Postmodernism is also concerned with questions of the organization of knowledge. In modern societies knowledge was equated with science. Knowledge was good for its own sake. One gained knowledge via education in order to be knowledgeable in general or to become an educated person. In postmodern society, however, knowledge becomes functional. We learn things, not to know them but to use that knowledge. Educational policy today puts emphasis on skills and training, rather than on a vague humanist ideal of education in general. Knowledge in postmodern characterized by its utility. It is also distributed, stored, and arranged digitally in postmodern societies than on modern ones. Especially, the development of computer technologies has revolutionized the modes of knowledge production, distribution, and consumption in our society. Such revolutionary ideas about human perception of reality, knowledge and ideas also influenced the mode of writing and interpreting literature. The following section discusses postmodernism as a form of literary criticism.

## **Postmodern Literary Criticism**

Bijay kumar Das writes that postmodernism in relation to literary criticism owes its origin to Charles Olson who first used the term in his essay in 1950. Later on critics like Ihab Hassan, Susan Sontag, Leslie Fiedler, Linda Huncheon and Fedrich Jameson have discussed postmodernism in relation to literature and to the arts. Das opines:

Postmodernism in literary criticism is closer to deconstruction and cultural criticism. It shares with deconstruction the undecidability of text and goes along with cultural criticism which erases the boundary between high and low culture... Postmodernist literary developments includes such genres as the absurd, the antinovel, concrete poetry and other forms of avant-garde poetry written on free verse and challenging the ideological assumption of contemporary society. (203)

Postmodernism, in its radical approach, favours the experimentation in literature and consequently much experimentation in form and contents of literature takes place in late twentieth century. Such experimental writing demands new approaches in the analysis of literature.

Discussing postmodern literary criticism, Peter Barry has listed the following points that the postmodernist critics try to find in the text:

1. They discover postmodernist themes, tendencies, and attitudes within literary works... and explore their implications.
2. They foreground fiction which might be said to exemplify the notion of the 'disappearance of the real' in which shifting postmodern identities are seen, for example, in the mixing of literary genres (the thriller, the detective story, the myths, saga and the realist psychological novel, etc.)
3. They foreground what might be called 'intertextual element' in literature such as parody, pastiche, and allusion, in all of which there is a major degree of reference between one text and another, rather than between the text and a safely external reality.
4. They foreground irony, in the sense described by Umberto Eco, that whereas a modernist realizes that the past must be revisited, but 'with irony'.
5. They foreground the element of 'narcissism' in narrative technique, that is, where novels focus on and debate their own ends and processes, and thereby 'de-naturalise' their content.
6. They challenge the distinction between high and low culture, and highlight texts which work as hybrid blends of the two.

In this sense, the philosophical approach of postmodernism has also influenced the critical practices of literary activities. In their engagement in literary texts, critics attempt to discover postmodern themes like loss of real and end of grand narratives. For this, they explore intertextuality, parody, irony and challenge the distinction between high and low art. Such anti-foundational and anti-traditional approach of postmodernism also invites criticism to it.

### **Criticism of Postmodernism**

Because of its radical claims and statements, postmodern theory has invited responses and criticism from different scholars and theorists. The oppositional voices are not homogeneous. British social philosopher Alex Callinicos criticizes postmodernism for ignoring history and installing a reactionary conception of subjectivity. He further argues that postmodernism has acted as a surrogate discourse for the vested power interests of late capitalism. One of the outspoken critics of postmodernism is German philosopher Jurgen Habermas. His most frequently quoted

critique postmodernism is "Modernity – an Incomplete Project". He defines himself as the defender of the 'project of modernity' against the anti-modern sentiments of postmodern and deconstruction. He thinks that modernity has yet to be fulfilled as a social and political enterprise, and that to proclaim its demise is actually a neo-conservative reactionary argument which ignores modernity's democratic and liberatory potential. He links modern with the ideas of Enlightenment. He is also critical of relativism of deconstruction and postmodernism as they undermine the socially agreed and normal status of social values. Similarly, language for him is not only the chain of signifiers without any reference to the world.

Frederic Jameson criticizes postmodernism relating with the particular stages of capitalism. Jameson outlines three primary phases of capitalism which dictate particular culture practices. The first is market capitalism, which occurred in the late nineteenth century in Western Europe, England, and the United States. This first phase is associated with particular technological developments, namely the steam –engine and with particular kind of aesthetics namely realism. The second phase occurred from the late nineteenth century until the mid-twentieth century; this phase is monopoly capitalism. This is associated with electric and internal combustion motors, and with modernism. The third phase, in which we are in, is multinational or consumer capitalism. It emphasizes on marketing, selling, and consuming commodities. It is associated with nuclear and electronic technologies, and correlated with postmodernism. Jameson regards postmodernism as cultural deterioration. In order to combat with it, he proposes an 'aesthetic of cognitive mapping.' Cognitive mapping is a reorientation of our experience of time and space in an era where the opportunity to place ourselves into a definable time-space location of global capitalism.

Feminists have divided opinions about postmodernism. Feminists like Helene Cixous and Luce Irigaray perceive postmodernism as opening door for preciously marginalized gender narratives. Other feminist theorists like Linda Nicholson, Fraser, Nancy have questioned the relevance of postmodern feminist theory as postmodernism undermines metanarratives of emancipation.

## Conclusion

In recapitulation, postmodern theorists emphasizes on fragmentation against unity, disorder against order, particularism against universalism, syncretism against holism, popular culture against high culture and localism against globalism. They have also emphasized on the presentation of unrepresentable and the loss of gap between real and unreal. With such radical stances, postmodern ideas influence the form, content and critical practices of literature.

## Works Cited

Barry, Peter. *Beginning theory: An Introduction to literary And Cultural theory*. Manchester UP, 2007.

- Berg, Maggie. "Luce Irigaray's 'Contradictions': Poststructuralism and Feminism." *Signs*, vol. 17, no. 1, 1991, pp. 50–70. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/3174445](http://www.jstor.org/stable/3174445).
- Callinicos, Alex. *Against Postmodernism: A Marxist Critique*, St Martin's Press, 1990.
- Das, Bijay Kumar. *Twentieth Century Literary Criticism*. 5<sup>th</sup> ed. Atlantic, 2005.
- Farmer, David John. "Medusa: Helene Cixous and the Writing of Laughter." *Administrative Theory & Praxis*, vol. 23, no. 4, 2001, pp. 559–572. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/25611543](http://www.jstor.org/stable/25611543).
- Flax, Jane. *Thinking Fragments Psychoanalysis, Feminism, and Postmodernism in the Contemporary West*. California UP, 1990.
- Fraser, Nancy, and Linda Nicholson. "Social Criticism without Philosophy: An Encounter between Feminism and Postmodernism." *Social Text*, no. 21, 1989, pp. 83–104. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/827810](http://www.jstor.org/stable/827810).
- Habermas, Jurgen . "Modernity: An Unfinished Project." *Habermas and the Unfinished Project of Modernity: Critical Essays on the Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*. Maurizio Passerin D'Entreves and Seyla Benhabib (Editor). Cambridge UP, 38-58.
- Jameson, Fredric. *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Duke UP, 1991.
- Waugh, Patricia, editor. *Modern Literary Theory and Criticism*. Oxford UP, 2007.
- Wood, Tim. *Beginning Postmodernism*. Viva Books, 2010.

©©©