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## Postmodernism as an unique elixir: Re-thinking postmodernist theory in the contemporary literary world

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### Abstract

The term Modern implies 'time-now' as opposed to 'time-passed', therefore, making modernism a temporal experience, whereas post-modern stands for 'think-again' or represents the internal critique of modernity. We no longer live in a modern society but instead entered into a distinctly new postmodern world. Whether advances in science and technology or reconfiguration of relationship of individuals to the other people of the society, modernity is a break from tradition which seeks the optimistic orientation about our ability to resolve problems, to remedy the human suffering and to enrich social life and contrary to this, postmodernism is exhaustion of modernism, portraying the pessimistic outlook of fragmentary life. The efforts to sustain the relevance of post-modernism in the contemporary world by combining the innovative reuse of the existing scientific techniques and mannerism with unaltered realities, making the unlit villages with expressways on their edge, the perfect motif of postmodernism.

**Keywords:** Postmodernism, unique elixir, literary world

### Introduction

Postmodernism represents the repudiation of the Western Philosophical tradition and extreme skepticism about our ability to carry on the sociological tradition. The contemporary form of postmodernism is the nihilistic approach, the negation of moral principles. It is linked with Anti-foundationalism and cultural relativism of Stanley Fish and Michael Foucault, where the cultures are discrete and incommensurate and there is no shared language that permits people to transcend local and facilitate more sustainable societies. Portraying postmodernism as revolutionary step is dismissed as overrated whereas it is the Anti-rationalism of postmodernism. Frank Kermode traces Post-Modernism as the visionary strain in particular to Dadaism and Surrealism of 1916, which was anti-modernist wings that were already present, thus making the overall case for continuity. Both Graff and Kermode oppose the radical claims of postmodernism, which baffled the literary text as noise or communication. Postmodernism is to be seen as a radical disjoining movement from Modernism but rather as a logical culmination of the premises of Modernist movement. The cultural debate that provides premises for Postmodern academic studies-"Whether the liberal west is leading the rest of the world to a freer and more prosperous future or whether its heavy-handed intrusiveness in foreign policy and its command of the international financial markets are exporting its McJobs to non-Western nations, locking them into the system and destroying their indigenous cultures."<sup>[1]</sup> (Hicks, Pg. 19)

As Gerald Graff said-The Ultimate futility of arts, which informs Postmodernism, was already implicit in the arguments of Modernist and Romantics that tried to elevate literature to the status of a surrogate religion. Postmodernism as a term of recent vintage, it refers to "a cultural sensibility that occurs in response to and chronologically after, modernism"-Lyotard. The concept of fragmentation echoed in the philosophy of Durkheim (division of labor) and George Simmel who were interested in the phenomenon of social differentiation permeated in all facets of everyday social relations. Simmel's work- "The Philosophy of Money" (1991) considered modern world to be undergirded by economic system, to establish a 'wholly

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<sup>1</sup> Hicks, Stephen. Explaining Postmodernism: Skepticism and Socialism from Rousseau to Foucault. Ockham's razor Publication, Pg. 19.

transitory connection' described as 'cold intimacies' by removing emotional involvement. "The deepest problem of modernity flow from the attempt of the individual to maintain individuality of his existence against the sovereign powers of society, against the weight of the historical heritage and the external culture and technique of life."<sup>[2]</sup> (Simmel, Pg. 20)

Marshall Berman's '*All that is solid melts into air*' is a seminal work that states- "To be modern is to find ourselves in an environment that promises us adventure, power, joy, growth, a transformation of ourselves and the world- and, at the same time, that threaten to destroy everything we have, everything we know, everything we are. Modern environment and experiences pours us all into a maelstrom of perpetual disintegration and renewal of struggle and contradiction, of ambiguity and anguish." Idea of Modernity is known to all traditions and generations, as this is a relative term as Berman opines, the only difference is that of the degree. The acceleration of changes enhances the modernity quotient whereas the first instance of it is associated with increase of mobility by the development of infra projects in the later 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Be it the Suez Canal in 1869 or the Trans Siberian Rail route from Paris to Vladivostok in 1904, migration became the central reality of Modernism. Due to the six fold increase in population, realms of anxiety and possibility have changed the mindset resulting as- "Awaken the dead and make whole what as being smashed".

Philosophical naturalism and confidence in reason and individualism made John Locke, Francis Bacon and Rene Descartes, the formative figures of modernism. As Richard Rorty says- "The postmodern task is to figure out what to do now when both the Age of Faith and the Enlightenment seem beyond recovery." A place where progressive ideals like liberty, equality and opportunities for everyone finds a constant combat from sexism, racism, and the class bound ceiling. Thus, postmodernism maintains the duality and the fragmentation is acknowledged but tried to be whole. Nostalgia for the last phase of life vanishes in modern scenario, with European Colonialism at peak with invention of war machinery. Joseph Conrad's fiction shows the unknown experience, both exotic and unsettling. These peculiarly lived experiences are given aesthetic art form by modern writers- Freud's discovery of 'unconsciousness', Automatic writings of Andre Breton, Walter Benjamin's 'Philosophy of History', painter Paul Klee's 'Angelus Novus' (Angel of History) are few motifs of modern aesthetics. Similarly, Paul Picasso's 'Girl with a Mandolin' depicts the fragmented reality of modern world, where coherence is missing from this period.

Postmodernism: The Visionary Strain - "The collapse of Modernism/liberal humanism and its attendant New Criticism has been a moment for jubilation. To the critics, it marks the liberation of literature and literary studies from the stuffy atmosphere of intellectual abstractions of high, academic circles. This Dionysian school, as it is called, is to be distinguished from the Apollonian for whom the collapse of liberal humanism is a matter for rueful reflection and apocalyptic utterances."<sup>[3]</sup> (Pillai, Pg. 23)

This issue was the central theme of T.S. Eliot's "The Wasteland", Joyce's 'Ulysses' and an array of works which highlighted 1922 as the miracle year of Modernism. The writing style mixed with stylistic techniques and the mythic element gives the sense of connectivity or wholeness to these creations. The critique of this wholeness was presented by Jean Francois Lyotard in his book of 1979- 'The Postmodern Condition' putting forth the idea of 'Incredulity towards Meta-narrative' emphasizing on 'little narrative' which implies the not only the acceptance of fragmented reality but also its celebration. Another name in the postmodern vanguard is Ludwig Wittgenstein who gave the concept of 'language games' which propounds the fact that meaning making is guided by a unique set of rules, rooted in a specific context. It is to deny that final or true definitions are possible or ever reliable, since all language systems are inherently unreliable cultural constructs. Postmodern displays the paradoxical nature, it tells that 'Truth' is a myth, 'Reason' is an authoritative mental construct, and 'Equality' is a veil for oppression and 'Progress' as a reminder of power.

In post-modern context, to understand through the lens of single grand-narrative in the name of unity is considered illegitimate; little narrative is honored over grand meta-narrative. The plurality of little narrative gives space for the growing sensitivity towards the possibility of multiplicity of equivalent narratives. Thus, all the cultures and interpretations are valid and all the ways of life are legitimate. This highlights the counter-Enlightenment aspect of postmodernism which was presented by Immanuel Kant, paving the beginning of the epistemological route to postmodernism. Similarly, the problem of presentation and the notion of relativism is depicted by Edward Said, who in his *Orientalism* (1978) attempted to show the distorting effects of the projection of the Western grand narrative of imperialism upon Oriental societies. As Said notes, when Flaubert slept with an Egyptian courtesan, Kuchuk Hanem, he wrote to Louise Colet that 'the oriental woman is no more than a machine; she makes no distinction between one man and another man. Hence, a typical postmodernist conclusion, that universal truth is impossible, and relativism is our fate.

Disruption of narrative makes postmodernism anti-elitist, anti-hierarchical and dissenting, as much of the postmodernist art pays attention to marginalized form of identity and behavior. The aim of the many working in the avant-garde arts was very often the traditional modernist one, of defamiliarization, now guided by a more radical postmodernist epistemology. The aim, post Derrida, Foucault, and Barthes- whose ideas in variously garbled forms swarm over the pronouncements of artists since the 1970s- was to prevent the consumer-as-subject from feeling 'at home' in the world, for that would lead to a merely conservative pragmatic accommodation to it.

Postmodern novelist have an ontological uncertainty about the contradictory nature of the world projected by the text, naming few- Beckett, Robbe-Grillet, Fuentes, Nabokov, Coover, and Pynchon. Simple facts about the world of the novel are contradicted; there will be no reliable centre of consciousness and the narrator, for example, Oedipa Maas in Pynchon's *The crying of lot 49* (1967), may be confused with the ambiguous mental state which affect a fair number of postmodernist protagonists. Robbe-Grillet believes 'things are things' and 'man is only man' to state that it is

<sup>2</sup> Simmel, George. 1978. *The Philosophy of Money*. Routledge Press, Pg. 20.

<sup>3</sup> Pillai, Sebastian Dravayam. 1991. *Postmodernism: An introduction*. Theresa Publication, Pg. 23.

chiefly in its presence that the world resides. The distance between the world and the man exists where the man is looking at the world but the world is doesn't look back. His association with *Nouveau Roman* (New Novel) trends of 1960s makes his a realist or 'Phenomenological' as Heidegger says; repetitive descriptions of objects to create a hallucinated reality. "At the edge of the patches, new scales of the paint are easy to chip off; it is enough to slip a fingernail beneath the projecting edge and pry it up by bending the first joint of the finger" (Jealousy, 1975). He messes up with space and time in ways that force the reader to reconstruct the story. In his novel *Jealousy*, he chooses a limited point to view through a narrator who never uses the personal pronoun 'I'.

Postmodernist thinkers have anti-positivist and anti-verificationist stance to attack the objectivity in social research. Truth is viewed as a matter of perception not a generic idea which blurred the old distinctions of binary. Shifting the paradigm from patriarchy to women centric discourse as well as manifestation of postmodernism as the rise of Post-Colonial studies were two significant turns in the contemporary scene. Leslie Fiedler says in his article 'What was the Death of the Novel?' that postmodernism is de-Eliotisation movement in art where the literature has taken to be rebarbarization with a vengeance, which strives to close the gap between art and popular entertainment, between high and low art, between elite and popular culture by absorbing its corpus elements of contemporary culture. This does away with the distinction between the critic 'Leader of the Taste' and the audience 'follower'. Nabokov's *Lolita* shows no more a dysfunctional individual trying in vain to make sense of a fragmented society but a 'schizophrenic' multi character in Humbert. The novel tries to draw a line between hidden problems and capable reasoning but never succeeds as they are mixed as one: deranged father, an insane lover, evil and good blended forever.

Jean Baudrillard argues that there is saturation in culture due to media, information technology and global advancement which has resulted in a world of no difference between the real and the images, leads to the creation of *simulacra*, finally as the emergence of what he refers to as *Hyperreality*. The term implies that at 'once not real and more real than real'-Baudrillard. The current stage is that of a 'Liquid Modernity' as the 'Age of uncertainty' showing the patterned social conduct, making the everyday relations no longer durable. People in the contemporary scenario should be perceived as consumers rather than producers. The postmodern situation creates a unimaginable consumer choices which affected the functionality in a regressive manner-

"We appear to have been reduced to the roles of mall rats in quest of objects of desire and excitement, couch potatoes playing with TV remote control, and voyeurs peering into the private lives of rich and famous. We are thoroughly enmeshed in our social worlds but incapable of controlling them or of operating in a genuinely autonomous way. The implicit message of Baudrillard's work seems to be that we should passively accept- and even enjoy to the extent that we can-the spectacle and the carnival that is Postmodern Culture."<sup>[4]</sup> (Kivisto, Pg. 105)

<sup>4</sup> Kivisto, Peter. 2014. Postmodernism in a Global Perspective. SAGE Publication, Pg. 105.

The basics of Postmodernism involves dispersal of central point, parody of quest, employment of pastiche, discontinuity of pluralism, challenges of ethnocentricity, replacement of Ptolemaic system by Heliocentric, self-insufficiency of art and the exposure without explicit condemnation.

"An elegant example of awareness to this 'post' relationship is to be found in Jeff Wall's *Picture of women* 1979, which is a subtle echo of the indirect perspective of the Manet's Bar at the Folies-Bergere. Wall, with the release button of his camera in one hand, is staring at the reflection in a mirror of a girl who is posed like Manet's barmaid. This not only intriguingly complex relationship between two figures, but is also a witty variation on the indirectness on the 'male gaze' as analyzed by feminist critics in this period"<sup>[5]</sup> (Butler, Pg. 86)

Martin Heidegger in his *An Introduction to Metaphysics* sees the clashing wills, wild speculation and troubled emotion at the forefront in the philosophy of Continental Tradition, which accepts all the mainstream traits of postmodernism. It also approves that the logical contradiction is neither a sign of failure nor significant; the feelings like morbid anxiety are deeper guide than reason; words and concepts are obstacles to understanding in subjective manner, thus, has to be destructed ; conflicts and contradiction are deepest truth of reality. "Authentic speaking about nothing always remains extraordinary. It cannot be vulgarized. It dissolves if it is placed in cheap acid of merely logical intelligence".<sup>[6]</sup> (Heidegger, Pg. 26)

Heidegger approves Hegel's concept of anti-humanism, to feel guilty before being, to be obedient to pay homage to being- if we are still allowed to be logical by sacrificing ourselves to nothing. Postmodernism does contain the flavor of anything obvious but in most cases, it is something that rejects any format of simplicity. Whatever may be the field, whether it is art, music, architecture, literature or sociological theory, lack of format has become the identity of post modernity. The post-modernists highlight the problem without pointing any solution. Many people believe that post-modernism is just a theory and not a fact. The postmodernist critique has worked very well as exhortation, but it has no convincing claim to a unique insight into the true of our condition, or to an accurate and complete description of society. It is therefore important to see postmodernist ideas and achievements as part of the larger picture of interaction with other tradition of belief.

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