



Postmodernism : Concept and Aspects



Dr. Jaynarayan D. Pardeshi

Assistant Professor

Department of English

Yeshwantrao Chavan Arts, commerce &
Science college, Sillod. Dist. Chhatrapati Sambhajinagar

Mail ID: jdpardeshi4u@gmail.com

Abstract :

Postmodernism is a significant critical term which is used to describe the literary development in the second half of the 20th century. The term postmodernism was coined by Arnold Toynbee in 1939. However postmodernism flourished in 1960s. In 1979, Jean Francois Lyotard's seminal work 'The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge' was published and thereafter the term Postmodernism came to be widely used in the field of literature and humanities. Postmodernism can be seen at the same time as continuity

and discontinuity from Modernism. Postmodernism considers Modernism as anti-model and sets out to subvert/pervert it so as to keep it incomplete. Fragmentation, decentralization, indeterminacy, ambiguity, absurdity, incoherence, relativism, anti-form and irony are some of the attributes of Postmodernism.

Keywords :

Postmodernism, indeterminacy, fragmentation, absurdity, plurality, incoherence, decentralization etc.

RESEARCH PAPER

Introduction

The present research paper undertakes to study the concept of postmodernism. While studying the term, it also sheds light on the different aspects related with the term. It is rather difficult to define postmodernism as it is a very broad concept and runs across divergent disciplines like Arts, Literature, Criticism, Architecture, and Philosophy. Postmodernism makes a departure from modernism as it is a reaction to it. This paper sets out to differentiate between the terms modernism and postmodernism. It also tries to elaborate on the distinction between two similar sounding terms postmodernism and postmodernity. This paper also takes a cursory glance at some famous exponents of postmodernism and it also tries to underline the salient features of postmodernism like indeterminacy, fragmentation and plurality etc.

Objectives:

1. To study the term postmodernism
2. To compare it with modernism
3. To find out the salient features of Postmodernism

Research methodology:

This research paper is of interpretative nature and falls into the category of secondary research. For this paper qualitative data has been collected and it is interpreted by using analytical and descriptive method.

Postmodernism is an important phase of literary development in the second half of the twentieth century. The term *postmodernism* was coined by Arnold Toynbee in 1939. Postmodernism is an umbrella term therefore it is very difficult to define it. Different critics give different definitions of the postmodernism. There are a number of definitions, claims and counterclaims. The term Postmodernism is not to be confused with the term Postmodernity. There is a conceptual distinction between postmodernity and postmodernism. Postmodernity is a fusion of the contemporary socio cultural experiences of certain society whereas postmodernism is an approach or framework to understand and explain not only the postmodern condition but its stylistic representation. Postmodernity can be described but

postmodernism needs to be defined. Catherine Burgass differentiates between postmodernism and postmodernity. She deems postmodernity as a historical period and postmodernism as a stylistic category. Postmodernism is influenced cumulatively by anthropology, psychology, linguistics, philosophy and literary theory. The term postmodernism is fairly complex and relates to different approaches by different practitioners of postmodern techniques. The term does not relate to a fixed set of characteristics or criteria but rather it is a fluid term that depicts different aspects when used by different critics and different social commentators. In postmodernism centrality of the centre is being questioned as postmodern literature constantly appears to be in a state of flux. Postmodernism has a number of conspicuous features. Some of the Salient features of postmodernism are fracturing, fragmentation, indeterminacy, plurality etc. Postmodern critical theory is frequently noted for indeterminacy, devotion to textual problematics, and its indifference to real social problems. The term postmodernism alludes to two things at the same time: a) a historical period and b) a particular state of mind as well as a series of cultural and social tendencies. The postmodernism describes the broad aesthetic and intellectual prospects in the contemporary social milieu. The postmodern mindset is prone to computers, e-mails, Internet, tele/video-conferences, videos etc. with fragmented images that can be erased, moved forward or backward with great speed and allows recreation of them. As the French theorist Lyotard contemplates, the world is converted into a global village. It has become a Federation of different cultures. The world has become more like Carnival with no fixed attributes and rules for anyone. One can have breakfast in India, lunch in England and dinner in USA. One may eat western food for lunch and local indigenous cuisine for dinner. Thus postmodernism is a state of mind, way of life and a way of feeling, all taken together.

Postmodernism appears in a wide variety of disciplines of study including arts, architecture, Humanities, film, music, literature, sociology, fashion and technology. It is very hard to locate it historically or temporally, because it is not clear when postmodernism exactly began. The salient attributes of postmodernism are fragmentation, decentralization, indeterminacy, novelty in subject matter, break with tradition, self-consciousness, free verse, discontinuous composition, distracted and dehumanized subject, ambiguity, absurdity, incoherence, relativism, anti-form, anti-narrative and irony.

Postmodernism in literature and arts is parallel to post structuralism in linguistics and literary theory. Postmodernism is a way of looking at things, a state of mind and way of life; whereas post structuralism is generally used with reference to the study of languages and literary theory.

Jean Francois Lyotard's *La Condition Postmoderne* appeared in 1979 in French. It was later on translated into English as 'The Postmodern Condition' in 1984. With the publication of this seminal work, different disciplinary diagnoses received an interdisciplinary confirmation that modernism and postmodernism are here to stay. The postmodernism did not emerge at the same time in all fields of knowledge. On the other hand, it is said to have emerged at different dates in different disciplines. Postmodernism emerged for Arts in 1950s, for architecture in 1960s, for cultural theory in 1980s and for many Social Sciences in 1990s. Although postmodernism is supposed to have emerged in twentieth century, the precursors of postmodernism are found as early as 1875. The English painter John Chapman used the term 'postmodern painting' to describe the painting which was very much avant-garde and modern around the year 1875. The British historian Arnold Toynbee adopted the term in his *A Study of History* (1947). He even went further to think the postmodern age as the fourth stage of Western history after the Dark Ages (675 AD-1075 AD), the Middle Ages (1075 AD- 1475 AD) and the Modern Age (1475 AD - 1875 AD). On this account Western civilization had entered a new transitional period beginning around 1875 which Toynbee termed as 'postmodern age' which historically succeeded the modern age.

The prefix 'post' in the word postmodernism is fairly significant as it modifies the succeeding noun 'modernism'. In the words like post- colonialism, post- feminism and post-modernism, the prefix 'post' suggests a critical engagement with modernism, rather than claiming the end of modernism, it suggests that modernism is overturned or replaced by postmodernism. The mutual relationship between modernism and postmodernism implies continuous engagement in which postmodernism needs modernism to survive and carry some sense. Thus the postmodernism and modernism exist in something more like host parasite relationship. Thus it goes without saying that while contemplating upon the definition of postmodernism, one has to take into account their prior definition of modernism. In this context Steven Connor argues:

If we live in post culture, 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.

Postmodernist critics discover postmodernist themes, tendencies, and attitudes within literary works and try to explore their implications. They challenge the difference between high and low culture, and highlight text which work as hybrid blends of the two. They adopt Foucauldian argument to show the ways in which discourses of power are used in all societies to marginalize subordinate groups. Such discoveries of power, apart from contributing to the decentering and deconstruction of the Self, they also marginalize those people who are not involved in them. Postmodernists attack notional Centre or dominant ideologies and by dint of this approach they celebrate the difference. In this connection Christopher Butler rightly observes:

Postmodernists therefore seem to call for an irreducible pluralism,...aimed at universalizable ideals of Equality and Justice. Postmodernists tend to argue that enlightenment reason, which claimed to extend its moral ideal to all in liberty, equality and fraternity, was really system of repressive, Foucauldian control, and that reason itself, particularly in its alliance with science and technology, is incipiently totalitarian.

Post-modern time is a perpetual present. In this post-modern scenario high culture and low culture is overturned by no culture. The process of globalization and hybridization at the global scale has brought about this change. Postmodernists claim that the world is fragmented, decentred and deconstructed.

Conclusion:

Postmodernism has extricated us from the ‘restrictive assumptions and elitist hierarchies’. It has brought to our notice several realities and points of view of the marginalized. It is beyond doubt that postmodernism is a debatable issue. It advocates the cause of a specific ‘set of ideas’ and travels intellectually, from western world to the remaining ‘Other’ world. This ideology gives a proper orientation to the term ‘postmodernism’ which is nothing but a ‘hall of mirrors’. Modernism was a period, but

postmodernism has become a perpetual present. The relation between modernism and postmodernism is that of contradiction. Postmodernism takes neither a radical break from modernism nor does it admit linear continuity with it. Modernism believes in a ‘single vision’, on the other hand postmodernism prefers fragmentation and plurality.

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