

LITERATURE AND POSTMODERNISM: AN OVERVIEW

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Abstract:

Postmodernism as a concept is very challenging and pandemic. We speak of Postmodern Literature, Postmodern Culture, Postmodern Philosophy, Postmodern Thinking, Postmodern Logic and Postmodern Architecture. The list is endless. Postmodernism as a word is very easy to utter but fathoming and understanding its meaning, relevance, and context is very difficult and at the same time vexing. Postmodernism is many things at a time. Some opine it as a stance; some call it as an ongoing trend, some call it as a reaction against Modernism, some say it is a continuation and extension of Modernism, for some it is a philosophy, for some it is a particular attitude of looking at things, and for some Postmodernism is all about language games. And nowadays, we speak of Postmodern style, Postmodern techniques in literature. But what Postmodernism is in actuality and reality is a very far seen conclusion. The paper attempts to study what Postmodernism and Postmodern Literature is. The study of Postmodernism in the present paper will be mainly definitive and explanatory and the main argument will only be about Literary Postmodernism or Postmodern Literature.

Key Words: *Postmodernism, Concept, Pandemic, Literature, Relevance, Meaning, Stance, Explanatory.*

Introduction:

In the first instance, postmodernism like Modernism, Post colonialism, Romanticism, Post structuralism etc. designates a temporal and periodical trend. In common logic, whatever comes after Modernism is Postmodern or related to Postmodernism. Concise Oxford Dictionary defines Postmodernism as: Any style in art, architecture, literature, philosophy, etc., that reacts against an earlier modernist movement. Modernism as a popular trend and style began in 1922 and ended in 1939. M. H. Abrams in his book *A Glossary of Literary Terms* says:

The term Postmodernism is often applied to the literature and art after World War II (1939-1945), when the effects of Western morale of the first war were greatly exacerbated by the experience of Nazi totalitarianism and mass extermination, the threat of total destruction by the atomic bomb... Postmodernism involves not only a continuation, sometimes carried to extreme, of the counter traditional experiments of modernism, but also diverse attempts to break away from modernist forms... (168)

Modernist literature, as we know, is highly innovative, technical and hence elitist in style. Postmodernist literature that came in reaction to Modernist literature is also technical but in different sense. It is not elitist in its stance and perspective. In a word, we can say postmodern literature is a literature that abandons the technical newness, superior or elitist style, uniformity or virginity of Modernist literature. In postmodern literature there boundary between high and low art and style has eroded. Postmodern literature employs hybrid styles and themes. Patricia Waugh in her acclaimed book *Literary Theory and Criticism* writes:

By the mid to late 1970s, postmodernism had become a buzz-word, a catch-all term to define art that was neither realist nor Modernist. It was a manifestation of the counter-culture, a form of anti-art reflecting a post-war change in the 'structure of feeling' which was ant-elitist, anti-establishment, and counter-aesthetic (406)

Postmodern literature whether in the form of poetry, novel or drama is characterized by pastiche, parody, collage, intertextuality, fragmentation, simulacrum, hyperreality, magic realism, fictionalization of history. Postmodern literature is also characterized by randomness and abruptness. In this regard, J. A. Cuddon in his *Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory* describes Postmodern literature as characterized by 'an eclectic approach [by a liking for] aleatory writing, [and for] parody and pastiche.' (269)

We have a plethora of Postmodernist literary works that exhibit the postmodernist techniques given in the above paragraph. If we look at T.S. Eliot's poem *The Waste Land*, it serves as the best and perfect example of postmodern poem for it employs every technique of postmodernism. It has an element of intertextuality, narrative fragmentation, parody, pastiche, collage. It also expresses the loss of sublime, technique of anti-elitism, and the feelings of anti-establishment which are the explicit characteristics of Postmodernist literature.

Novel is the most preferred genre of postmodern writers. The most famous postmodern novelists are Zadie Smith, Salman Rushdie, John Fowls Thomas Pynchon, John Barth, Gunter Grass and many others. Zadie Smith's novel *White Teeth* (200) is a prototype postmodern novel. It belongs to the postmodern genre of novel called hysterical realism. Salman Rushdie's novel *Midnight's Children* (1980) also is the best example of postmodern literature or novel. It employs the elements of magical realism, historiographic metafiction hyperreality. Further, in it as a postmodern novelist, Rushdie tampers with the historical events. Gunter Grass's *Danziger Trilogy* is also a piece of postmodernist literature to reckon with. The titles of postmodern novels are very unique and absurd. We have Thomas Pynchon's novel titled *V* (1963). Likewise Zadie Smith has written a novel titled *NW* (2012). This is one the specialty of postmodern novel. So, we can say postmodern literature is very exceptional and technical kind of literature. It entertains as well as teases us with techniques of magic realism, historiographic metafiction etc.

Defining Postmodernism:

Postmodernism as a term was coined by Arnold Joseph Toynbee in 1939. The term postmodernism is a very debatable term. It is used very extensively in every field of knowledge. Defining Postmodernism is not an easy job for it is used in different fields and subjects. The term Postmodernism has different purport in different areas of study. We cannot give a complete meaning of the term Postmodernism in single sentence and fancy phrases. It is an umbrella term, so we can only give its characteristic features. But in order to simply this term different theorists have defined it in different ways. Lyotard who is one of the notorious postmodern theorists has given many definitions of postmodern or postmodernism. In his much acclaimed book *The Postmodern Condition* he writes:

The postmodern would be 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 strong sense of the unrepresentable... (81)

So, from the definition given above what comes to fore is that postmodernism is all about the strange presentation of things, about self-reflexivity, about the tampering of good forms and styles. One of the most concise and funny definitions of postmodernism is given by Terry Eagleton. According Terry Eagleton, "Postmodernism is among other things a sick joke at the expense of revolutionary avant-gardism." (*Brainy Quote*)

Postmodernist literature is always addressed by language games, hybrid styles, and pastiche. Unlike Modernist literature, there is no uniformity of style and tone in postmodern literary works. In this regard Leslie Fielder writes:

Postmodernism could be seen as a ruptural break with Modernism; a way in which

Modernism's hierarchies of aesthetic value could be broken down to create a new, mongrelized literary form which would collapse any valuing system dependent upon distinction between art and pop. (Qtd. In *Literary Theory and Criticism* 406)

One of the relevant and accurate definitions of Postmodernism has been given by Gary Alysworth. The definition is given as under:

Postmodernism is a set of critical, strategic and rhetorical practices employing concepts such as difference, repetition, the trace, the simulacrum, and hyperreality to destabilize other concepts such as presence, identity, historical progress, epistemic certainty, and the univocity of meaning. (Alysworthy)

Postmodern literature abandons the binaries and hierarchies between high art and low art. There is a complete erasure between sublime and common style. Featherstone in his book *Postmodernism* (1988) opines the same thing as under:

... The effacement of the boundary between art and everyday life; the collapse of the hierarchical distinction between high and mass /popular culture; a stylistic promiscuity favouring eclecticism and mixing of codes; parody, pastiche, irony, playfulness... the decline of the originality/ genius of the artistic producer and the assumption that art can only be repetitious.(203)

Conclusion:

Hence, from the definitions of many postmodernist theorists, it can be safely concluded that postmodern literature is a literature that employs multiplex techniques, styles and media in order to bring home the point. It is a literature characterized by narrative fragmentation, narcissism, pastiche, parody, intertextuality, claque, and heteroglossia.

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