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Postmodern literature: Practices and Theory

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About the Author

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Introduction: Postmodern literature is a form of literature which is marked both stylistically and ideologically, by a reliance on such literary conventions as fragmentation, paradox, unreliable narrators, often unrealistic and downright impossible plots, games, parody, paranoia, dark humour , and authorial self-reference. Post- modern literature also often rejects the boundaries between ‘high’ and ‘low’ forms of art and literature as well as the distinction between genre and forms of writing and story- telling.

Keywords: Post- modernism, literature, stylistics, movements, philosophy.

Philosophy

Postmodern literature serves as a relation to the supposed stylistics and ideological limitations of modernist literature and the radical changes the world underwent

after the end of World War- 2. Post- modern literary writers have also been greatly influenced by various movement and ideas taken from post -modern philosophy. Post- modern philosophy tends to conceptualize the world as being impossible to strictly define or understand. Post-modern philosophy argues that knowledge and facts are always relative to particular situations and that its both futile and impossible to attempt to locate any precise meaning to any ideas , concept or event.

Origin of Post-Modernism

In recent years , new social, political and literary theories have emerged resulting from the post-modern debates that cover a wide variety of disciplines like art, architecture, literature ,film, sociology, communication, philosophy etc. Its potency also marked in the cultural , intellectual and aesthetic domains. The term ‘post-modernism’ was used in the Latin-American literary criticism and in the Anglo-American literary debates in the 1930s and 1940s, the main analysis of post – modernism got force mainly in the 1970s (Preda , 2001).

Post-modernism cannot be understood by ignoring modernism. Modernism originated from the thought of ‘European Enlightenment’ that roughly began in the middle of 18th century. Hollinger (1994:xiii) highlighted the characteristic of modernity in the following way ; “Following common application , the term modernity is used to donate the type of society that arose in the West during the Enlightenment. A society that is highly differentiated from a structural- functional point of view, dominated by a capitalist (market) economy, with a complex division of labor, industrialization and urbanization , science and technology , political and ethnical individualism , literal utilitarianism and social contract theory.”

Modernism appreciates human intellect as the significant strength and identifies this strength as the basis of a scientific mentality. Modernity can be characterized as an era of scientific mentality that stemmed from the revolutionary development in the disciplines like physics and biology . Social scientists thought of using the methodology of natural sciences in the social sciences. Technology and giant industries became the most dominant characteristics of modernist society. Science was regarded as power and the nature of the world was regarded as mechanical. In literature modernism is an aesthetic movement that got popularity from around 1910 to 1930. The main figures of high modernism include Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, Marcel Proust and Franz Kafka.

Here are some examples of stylistic techniques that are often used in post- modern literature.

Pastiche : The taking of various ideas from previous writings and literary styles and pasting them together to make new styles.

Intertextuality: The acknowledgement of previous literary works with another literary work.

Metafiction: The act of writing about writing or making readers aware of the fictional nature of the very fiction they are reading .

Temporal Distortion: use of non-linear timelines and narrative techniques in a story.

Minimalism: The use of characters and events which are decidedly common and non-exceptional characters.

Maximalism: Disorganized, lengthy, highly detailed writing.

Magical Realism: Introduction of impossible or unrealistic events without clearly defining what is factual or what is fictional.

Reader involvement: Often through direct address to the reader and the open acknowledgement of the fictional nature of the events being described.

Main Characteristic of Post- modernism:

Post-modernist highlighted some different views and established new discourses and theories. The following are some basic features of post- modernism.

- Ambiguity is a common practice in post modern literature.
- Rejection of the ultimate faith on science.
- Anti-positivist and anti- verificationist stance. Dealney(2005;263) highlighted that post-modern thinkers attack the idea of objectivity in social research, an autonomous rational mind and grand narratives.
- Individuality- subjective views got more emphasis . Subjective perception of different people produces knowledge through which they constitute subjective realities.
- Truth is a matter of perspective: in post – modernism , truth is considered as a matter of perspective and not universal.
- Blurring the old distinctions. Post- modernism disregards binary opposition (like male vs female, black vs white east vs west).
- Globalization and multiculturalism – because of huge globalization , different cultures are getting mixed. We can see the effect of this on architecture , food, music, literature, education, fashion, organizations etc.
- Post modern information and media – The huge access to information and media makes the post-modern life difficult and different. Post- modern

society is getting molded by media. Consequently, our thoughts and media defined reality have become ‘hyper real’.

New literary trends- Post-modern authors tend to use irony and black humour in their writings. They present subject-matters, even the serious ones, with the playfulness and fragmentation.

Main Scholars

Most of the post- modern thoughts have mainly been originated from the ‘non-sociologist’ like Derrida , Lyotard, Jameson and others. Apart from them, some other prominent writers were Foucault and Baudrillard . this section of this article deals with the thoughts of these prominent post-modern scholars.

Derrida – was an Algerian born French philosopher who followed a deconstructive approach . He used the term ‘discourse’. Derrida emphasized on the hermeneutical method in analyzing the work of Foucault.

Baudrillard- French scholar Baudrillard concluded that our identity or subjecthood is constructed by the signifiers we use. Thus a person’s social position is determined by the brands he is uses for his car or everyday consumer items .Apart from focus on reality post- modernist examine the utility of knowledge.

Foucault- French philosopher Foucault also gave importance on discourse. He said that truth is a relative concept and we can understand truth through a social process called discourse.

Reisman- American Philosopher Reisman, in his work titled ‘The Lonely Crowd , also highlighted the dominance of media in our lives. According to

him, from being ‘inner directed’, people in the society are becoming other directed’. People are no more getting guided by their elders or ‘adult authorities, rather they are being guided by the peer group and mass media.

Lyotard- French philosopher and famous postmodernist James Francois Lyotard worked with interdisciplinary discourse covering a variety of topics. Lyotard highlighted the recent conditions of the society like computer age , cybernetics, informatics, information storage data banks and the problems of transaction from one computer to another. Lyotard also criticized ‘totalizing and universalizing discourse’ and supported ‘difference and plurality. He found flaws in grand narratives a concept which serves the basis of ‘universal truth’ that the modernists look for justifying any form of knowledge.

Jameson- American scholar Fredric Jameson equated postmodernism with late capitalism. In late capitalism, consumerism and mass media govern the culture. In all the aspects of our lives, whether it is socialization ,education or leisure, we get influenced by mass media. He also believes that in case of consumerism production , the issue of ‘aesthetics’ became more important in this postmodern era.

Issues and Problems of PostModernism- Though postmodern thoughts can be treated as the demand of the time , these are not beyond the criticism. Scholars are also confused with the fact that whether we have really entered in a new world that can be termed as postmodern or this is just an extension of the modern era. Some common criticism are discussed here.

1. Many readers find post- modern literature is difficult to understand . Use of difficult language , forms and difficult jargons and terms. Ambiguous way of explanation makes post-modern literature almost unreachable to many readers.

2. Postmodernism does not contain the flavor of anything obvious but in most cases, it is something that rejects any format or simplicity. Whatever may be the field , whether it is art, music, architecture, literature or sociological theory, lack of format has become the identity of postmodernity.

3. Nonetheless, the multifaceted characteristic of post –modernity makes it bizarre . In most cases, the post-modernists highlights the problem without pointing any solution. Many people believe that post-modernism is just a theory and not a fact.

Shaikh (2009) states that “ post-modernity is a period of pessimism contrasting with modernity’s optimism. Post-modernism is a counter enlightenment philosophy whereas modernism is a pro-enlightenment philosophy.

Conclusion Even after the huge confusion and criticism, the trend of post-modernism offers a different approach to understand social reality. There is no doubt that over the last half century, the world has changed a lot, because of the massive dominance of the media and the great advancement in technology. We are getting tremendously influenced by the activities of the media and thus in our subconscious , a virtual world is being created and in most of the cases we are living both in the real and in the virtual world simultaneously. Moreover, because of this amazing improvement of information technology, information is not having any border. As a result, multi-culturalism is becoming a common matter. Social problems and movements are also taking new turns. Each

individual is shaping himself / herself in a different order, according to own choice.

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