Postmodernism and Literature

Postmodernism broadly refers to a socio-cultural and literary theory, and a shift in perspective that has manifested in a variety of disciplines including the social sciences, art, architecture, literature, fashion, communications, and technology. It is generally agreed that the postmodern shift in perception began sometime back in the late 1950s, and is probably still continuing. Postmodernism can be associated with the power shifts and dehumanization of the post-Second World War era and the onslaught of consumer capitalism.

The very term Postmodernism implies a relation to Modernism. Modernism was an earlier aesthetic movement which was in vogue in the early decades of the twentieth century. It has often been said that Postmodernism is at once a continuation of and a break away from the Modernist stance.

Postmodernism shares many of the features of Modernism. Both schools reject the rigid boundaries between high and low art. Postmodernism even goes a. step further and deliberately mixes low art with high art, the past with the future, or one genre with another. Such mixing of different, incongruous elements illustrates Postmodernism’s use of lighthearted parody, which was also used by Modernism. Both these schools also employed pastiche, which is the imitation of another’s style. Parody and pastiche serve to highlight the self-reflexivity of Modernist and Postmodernist works, which means that parody and pastiche serve to remind the reader that the work is not “real” but fictional, constructed. Modernist and Postmodernist works are also fragmented and do not easily, directly convey a solid meaning. That is, these works are consciously ambiguous and give way to multiple interpretations. The individual or subject depicted in these works is often decentred, without a central meaning or goal in life, and dehumanized, often losing individual characteristics and becoming merely the representative of an age or civilization, like Tiresias in The Waste Land.

In short, Modernism and Postmodernism give voice to the insecurities, disorientation and fragmentation of the 20th century western world. The western world, in the 20th century, began to experience this deep sense of security because it progressively lost its colonies in the Third World, worn apart by two major World Wars and found its intellectual and social foundations shaking under the impact of new social theories an developments such as Marxism and Postcolonial global migrations, new technologies and the power shift from Europe to the United States. Though both Modernism and Postmodernism employ fragmentation , discontinuity and decentredness in theme and technique, the basic dissimilarity between the two schools is hidden in this very aspect.

Modernism projects the fragmentation and decentredness of contemporary world as tragic. It laments the loss of the unity and centre of life and suggests that works of art can provide the unity, coherence, continuity and meaning that is lost in modern life. Thus Eliot laments that the modern world is an infertile wasteland, and the fragmentation, incoherence, of this world is effected in the structure of the poem. However, The Waste Land tries to recapture the lost meaning and organic unity by turning to Eastern cultures, and in the use of Tiresias as protagonist

In Postmodernism, fragmentation and disorientation is no longer tragic. Postmodernism on the other hand celebrates fragmentation. It considers fragmentation and decentredness as the only possible way of existence, and does not try to escape from these conditions.

This is where Postmodernism meets Post structuralism —both Postmodernism and Post structuralism recognize and accept that it is not possible to have a coherent centre. In Derridean terms, the centre is constantly moving towards the periphery and the periphery constantly moving towards the centre. In other words, the centre, which is the seat of power, is never entirely powerful. It is continually becoming powerless, while the powerless periphery continually tries to acquire power. As a result, it can be argued that there is never a centre, or that there are always multiple centres. This postponement of the centre acquiring power or retaining its position is what Derrida called differance. In Postmodernism’s celebration of fragmentation, there is thus an underlying belief in differance, a belief that unity, meaning, coherence is continually postponed.

The Postmodernist disbelief in coherence and unity points to another basic distinction between Modernism and Postmodernism. Modernism believes that coherence and unity is possible, thus emphasizing the importance of rationality and order. The basic assumption of Modernism seems to be that more rationality leads to more order, which leads a society to function better. To establish the primacy of Order, Modernism constantly creates the concept of Disorder in its depiction of the Other—which includes the non-white, non-male, non-heterosexual, non-adult, non-rational and so on. In other words, to establish the superiority of Order, Modernism creates the impression- that all marginal, peripheral, communities such as the non-white, non-male etc. are contaminated by Disorder. Postmodernism, however, goes to the other extreme. It does not say that some parts of the society illustrate Order, and that other parts illustrate Disorder. Postmodernism, in its criticism of the binary opposition, cynically even suggests that everything is Disorder.

The Modernist belief in order, stability and unity is what the Postmodernist thinker Lyotard calls a metanarrative. Modernism works through metanarratives or grand narratives, while Postmodernism questions and deconstructs metanarratives. A metanarrative is a story a culture tells itself about its beliefs and practices. For example, India tells itself that it is a democratic and secular country, though there are numerous anti-democratic, anti-secular factions and practices in India. In other words, India makes itself believe the falsehood that it is a democratic, secular country. Democracy and secularism are thus metanarratives. In short, metanarratives create and propagate grand but untrue conceptions of a society and culture. These include a society’s dependence on such concepts as objective truth, progress, order and unity.

Postmodernism understands that grand narratives hide, silence and negate contradictions, instabilities and differences inherent in any social system. Postmodernism favours “mini-narratives,” stories that explain small practices and local events, without pretending universality and finality. Postmodernism realizes that history, politics and culture are grand narratives of the power-wielders, which comprise falsehoods and incomplete truths.

Having deconstructed the possibility of a stable, permanent reality, Postmodernism has revolutionized the concept of language. Modernism considered language a rational, transparent tool to represent reality and the activities of the rational mind. In the Modernist view, language is representative of thoughts and things. Here, signifiers always point to signifieds. In Postmodernism, however, there are only surfaces, no depths. A signifier has no signified here, because there is no reality to signify.

The French philosopher Baudrillard has conceptualized the Postmodern surface culture as a simulacrum. A simulacrum is a virtual or fake reality simulated or induced by the media or other ideological apparatuses. A simulacrum is not merely an imitation or duplication—it is the substitution of the original by a simulated, fake image. Contemporary world is a simulacrum, where reality has been thus replaced by false images. This would mean, for instance, that the Gulf war that we know from newspapers and television reports has no connection whatsoever to what can be called the “real” Iraq war. The simulated image of Gulf war has become so much more popular and real than the real war, that Baudrillard argues that the Gulf War did not take place. In other words, in the Postmodern world, there are no originals, only copies; no territories, only maps; no reality, only simulations. Here Baudrillard is not merely suggesting that the postmodern world is artificial; he is also implying that we have lost the capacity to discriminate between the real and the artificial.

Just as we have lost touch with the reality of our life, we have also moved away from the reality of the goods we consume. If the media form one driving force of the Postmodern condition, multinational capitalism and globalization is another. Fredric Jameson has related Modernism and Postmodernism to the second and third phases of capitalism. The first phase of capitalism of the 18th -19th centuries, called Market Capitalism, witnessed the early technological development such as that of the steam-driven motor, and corresponded to the Realist phase. The early 20th century, with the development of electrical and internal combustion motors, witnessed the onset of Monopoly Capitalism and Modernism. The Postmodern era corresponds to the age of nuclear and electronic technologies and Consumer Capitalism, where the emphasis is on marketing, selling and consumption rather than production. The dehumanized, globalized world, wipes out individual and national identities, in favour of multinational marketing.

It is thus clear from this exposition that there are at least three different directions taken by Postmodernism, relating to the theories of Lyotard, Baudrillard and Jameson. Postmodernism also has its roots in the theories Habermas and Foucault. Furthermore, Postmodernism can be examined from Feminist and Post-colonial angles. Therefore, one cannot pinpoint the principles of Postmodernism with finality, because there is a plurality in the very constitution of this theory.

Postmodernism, in its denial of an objective truth or reality, forcefully advocates the theory of constructivism—the anti-essentialist argument that everything is ideologically constructed. Postmodernism finds the media to be a great deal responsible for “constructing” our identities and everyday realiites. Indeed, Postmodernism developed as a response to the contemporary boom in electronics and communications technologies and its revolutionizing of our old world order.

Constructivism invariably leads to relativism. Our identities are constructed and transformed every moment in relation to our social environment. Therefore there is scope for multiple and diverse identities, multiple truths, moral codes and views of reality.

The understanding that an objective truth does not exist has invariably led the accent of Postmodernism to fall on subjectivity. Subjectivity itself is of course plural and provisional. A stress on subjectivity will naturally lead to a renewed interest in the local and specific experiences, rather than the and universal and abstract; that is on mini-narratives rather than grand narratives.

Finally, all versions of Postmodernism rely on the method of Deconstruction to analyze socio-cultural situations. Postmodernism has often been vehemently criticized. The fundamental characteristic of Postmodernism is disbelief, which negates social and personal realities and experiences. It is easy to claim that the Gulf War or Iraq War does not exist; but then how does one account for the deaths, the loss and pain of millions of people victimized by these wars? Also, Postmodernism fosters a deep cynicism about the one sustaining force of social life—culture. By entirely washing away the ground beneath our feet, the ideological presumptions upon which human civilization is built, Postmodernism generates a feeling of lack and insecurity in contemporary societies, which is essential for the sustenance of a capitalistic world order. Finally, when the Third World began to assert itself over Euro-centric hegemonic power, Postmodernism had rushed in with the warning, that the empowerment of the periphery is but transient and temporary; and that just as Europe could not retain its imperialistic power for long, the new-found power of the erstwhile colonies is also under erasure.

In literature, postmodernism (relying heavily on fragmentation, deconstruction, playfulness, questionable narrators etc.) reacted against the Enlightenment ideas implicit in modernist literature – informed by Lyotard’s concept of the “metanarrative”, Derrida’s concept of “play”, and Budrillard’s “simulacra.” Deviating from the modernist quest for meaning in a chaotic world, the postmodern. writers eschew, often playfully, the possibility of meaning, and the postmodern novel is often a parody of this. quest. Marked by a distrust of totalizing mechanisms and self-awareness, postmodern writers often celebrate chance over craft and employ metafiction to undermine the author’s “univocation”. The distinction between high and low culture is also attacked with the employment of pastiche, the combination of multiple cultural elements including subjects and genres not previously deemed fit for literature. Postmodern literature can be considered as an umbrella term for the post-war developments in literature such as Theatre of the Absurd, Beat Generation and Magical Realism.

Postmodern literature, as expressed in the writings of Beckett, Robbe Grillet, Borges, Marquez, Naguib Mahfouz and Angela Carter rests on a recognition of the complex nature of reality and experience, the role of time and memory in human perception, of the self and the world as historical constructions, and the problematic nature of language.

1975, Colombia --- Nobel-prize winning author Gabriel Garcia Marquez sits with a copy on his book One Hundred Years of Solitude) open on his head. --- Image by © Colita/CORBISangela-carter

Postmodern literature reached its peak in the ’60s and ’70s with the publication of Catch-22 by Joseph Heller, Lost in the Funhouse and Sot-Weed Factor by John Barth, Gravity’s Rainbow, V., and Crying of Lot 49 by Thomas Pynchon, “factions” like Armies in the Night and In Cold Blood by Norman Mailer and Truman Capote, postmodern science fiction novels like Neoromancer by William Gibson, Slaughterhouse-Five by Kurt Vonnegut and many others. Some declared the death of postmodernism in the ’80’s with a new surge of realism represented and inspired by Raymond Carver. Tom Wolfe in his 1989 article Stalking the Billion-Footed Beast called for a new emphasis on realism in fiction to replace postmodernism. With this new emphasis on realism in mind, some declared White Noise in (1985) or The Satanic Verses (1988) to be the last great novels of the postmodern era.

Postmodern film describes the articulation of ideas of postmodernism trough the cinematic medium – by upsetting the mainstream conventions of narrative structure and characterization and destroying (or playing with) the audience’s “suspension of disbelief,” to create a work that express through less-recognizable internal logic. Two such examples are Jane Campion‘s Two Friends, in which the story of two school girls is shown in episodic segments arranged in reverse order; and Karel Reisz‘s The French Lieutenant’s Woman, in which the story being played out on the screen is mirrored in the private lives of the actors playing it, which the audience also sees. However, Baudrillard dubbed Sergio Leone‘s epic 1968 spaghetti western Once Upon a Time in the West as the first postmodern film. Other examples include Michael Winterbottom‘s 24 Hour Party People, Federico Fellini‘s Satyricon and Amarcord, David Lynch‘ s Mulholland Drive, Quentin Tarantino‘s Pulp Fiction.