

POSTMODERNISM: ISSUES AND PROBLEMS

Dewan Mahboob Hossain¹, M. M. Shariful Karim²

¹Department of Accounting & Information Systems, University of Dhaka,

²Department of English, Comilla University, Comilla,

BANGLADESH.

¹ dewanmahboob@univdhaka.edu, ² karimsharif@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This article is a general reading on postmodernism. After modernism, as a new literary and sociological trend, postmodernism got huge attention as well as criticism. This article, at first, discusses on the origin of postmodernism. Then, the main characteristics of postmodernism are discussed. After that the article presents with the discussions on several scholars who contributed superlatively in the postmodern sociological literatures. Lastly, some criticisms of postmodernism are highlighted.

Keywords: Postmodernism, literary and sociological trend

INTRODUCTION

The two decades, particularly, 1970s and 80s marked the development of postmodern forms in literature, poetry, painting and architecture. A strong reaction to high modern style of formalism and purity is seen in the field of postmodern architecture. Webster (1996; 124) notes, “the term postmodernism does not come into general usage though in Britain and America until the postwar period, and it is in 1980s that the most intense theorization and debate takes place- the ‘moment’ of postmodernism in the sense of the intersection of cultural, political and historical forces together with a heightened awareness of the movement.”

In the sociological literature, the issue of postmodernism is not new anymore. Preda (2001) designates postmodernism as ‘an extension of sociological inquiry’, ‘new forms of sociological expression’, ‘a form of social analysis’ and ‘a kind of sociological sensibility’. This idea originated in the sociological thoughts because many sociologists started to believe that we have begun to move towards a new and peculiar kind of society where the concepts of modernity are becoming confusing and misleading. Postmodernism also involves a preoccupation that there is nothing absolute or unified sense behind reality. Postmodernists hold the view that representation of reality is not possible at all. Some scholars identified postmodernism as a new trend and others said that ‘it is not a phase beyond modernity but represents the most advanced, and possibly final, stage of modernity’ (Delanty, 2000; 131). Lemert (1997; 21) stated that:

“It hardly need be said that postmodernism has something to do with what is allegedly happening to modernism. So, if modernism is a culture of modern age (or, simply, of modernity). Then postmodernism has something to do with the breaking apart of modernism”.

Fuchs (1996; 58) defined postmodernism as ‘the ideology of a “new class” of symbolic workers who specialize in self-referential techniques for manipulating signs, images, and multiple layers of representation’. Postmodernism is a ‘culture’ that emphasizes that ‘there is a better world than the modern one’ (Lemert, 1997; 22).

The main objective of this article is to provide an overview of the idea of postmodernism. In the next section of this article, the origin of postmodernism is discussed. Then the main characteristics of postmodernism are presented. Finally, some criticisms of postmodernism are highlighted. The article is fully based on the available literature on postmodernism.

The Origin of Postmodernism

In recent years, new social, political and literary theories have emerged resulting from the postmodern debates that cover a wide variety of disciplines like art, architecture, literature, film, sociology, communication, philosophy etc. Its potency is also marked in the cultural, intellectual and aesthetic domains. Though the term 'postmodernism' was used in the Latin-American literary criticisms and in the Anglo-American debates in the 1930s and 1940s, the main analysis of postmodernism got force mainly in the 1970s (Preda, 2001). The main ideology highlights the social realities in a different way than modernity did. Postmodernism cannot be understood by ignoring modernism. Positioning from different perspectives, both react to the Twentieth Century industrialized and mechanized society.

Modernism originated from the thought of 'European enlightenment' that roughly began in the middle of 18th Century. Hollinger (1994; xiii) highlighted the characteristics of modernity in the following way:

“Following common application, the term modernity is used to denote 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 ethical individualism, liberal 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. Rather than focusing on the theological and metaphysical aspects, a positivist and materialist way of thinking got importance from the thinkers. 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, Gertrude Stein and Franz Kafka.

The rise of capitalism and rational thinking has triggered the emergence of modernism. To Frederick Jameson, both modernism and postmodernism are actually the cultural formations which accompany particular stages of capitalism (Klages, 2006; 166). Modernists stress on empiricism. Objectivity or scientific explanation got much priority. In search of objective truth the modernists disregard some other things in our life, for example, the spirituality in particular. Consequently, secularization stemmed from such notion and they move away from god challenging many conventions, social dogmas and their corresponding institutions. A tremendous progress and change in all walks of life ranging from literature, art, philosophy, sociology, technology etc. is found. Based on rational thinking, their main concern was to determine how the society, in this changed condition, should be operated. Modernism highlighted the issue of progress through science, research and discoveries. It

covers the notions of enlightenment and emancipation celebrating human knowledge and scientific explanations.

According to Lyon (1999; 27), the accomplishment of modernity can be said as ‘astonishing’. He highlighted the following achievements of modernity:

1. Differentiation: The industrial society created division of labor and labor became specialized in many forms.
2. Rationalization: Max Weber highlighted the ‘world of commodities’ that is guided by the ongoing search for profit. Lyon (1999; 30) highlighted that ‘to observe, to calculate, these are the hallmark of modernity for Weber. The scientist’s laboratory method, the capitalist’s ledger of profit and loss, and bureaucrat’s rules and ranks within the organization, all testify to the significance of rationalization’.
3. Urbanism: There was a huge migration and a great social shift from rural areas to the industrial urban areas.
4. Discipline: Modernity had a controlling impulse and there was a rise of military as ‘a specialist aspect’ in the modern states (Lyon, 1999; 32). Discipline was given emphasis by eliminating criminal and deviant behavior.
5. Secularity: There came a need for changing the fate of the religion and dethroning the God and thus establishing newer principles for social organizations that are not guided by religion (Lyon, 1999; 33).

Discussing modernism from literary perspective Klages (2006, p.165) lists a number of characteristics : a blurring of the distinctions of genres, rejecting the division between high and low or popular culture, intellectual creativity and a tendency toward reflexivity or self consciousness. She also notes that modern literature is characterized by fragmentation, discontinuous narratives and random seeming collages of different materials. Stream of consciousness technique was popular among the modernist writers.

Despite the revolutionary changes that modernism brought about, it could not avoid criticism by the thinkers and theorists of the age. The devastating effects of the two world wars forced them to question the existing world view. Postmodernists rejected the conventional views of reality that the modernists held. They highlighted the collapse of modernism and opined that objective representation of reality is not possible. Postmodernists consider the ideas of enlightenment and reason to be invalid to find solution to the issues of complicated society which has gone so far after modernism. The supremacy of science as well as established ideas of government is questioned. Huge bombing and technologies were used in the world wars causing immeasurable catastrophe to mankind. This event made the use of science questionable. As a result, the existing ideas of science, philosophy, sociology, political science and other established beliefs of people on the prevailing modern thoughts were brought in question. Lyon (1999) highlighted the following negative impacts of modernism:

- a. Alienation and exploitation: Modernity created alienation and exploitation. Huge technological market centered thinking, capital and other characteristics of the modern society made human beings slaves to the machines and profit became the main motive. As a result, capitalists exploited the working class and the working class lived a life in poverty. Migration from rural to industrial areas within and across borders, led cultural displacement. Work became their main objective of life and thus other relationships of life were overlooked. People suffered from isolation.
- b. Anomie and loss of direction: People also got uprooted from tradition. According to Lyon (1999; 36): “Traditional ties of family, kin and neighborhood, torn by new

- mobility and lack of conventional regulation, were replaced only by a sense of uncertainty, loss of direction, and a feeling that the individuals were somehow on their own”.
- c. The iron cage: The problems of bureaucracy, in many cases, are unavoidable. Weber was afraid of the fact that ‘... bureaucracy would simply hasten the inhumane’ (Lyon, 1999; 38). Lyon (1999; 38) comments that ‘not only would individuals suffer stunted development under its influence; democracy too was jeopardized by bureaucracy’.
 - d. The society of strangers: Engels, as a result of capitalism, found the city of London as the ‘isolation of individuals, each guided by his private principles and each pursuing his own aims’ (Lyon, 1999; 39).
 - e. Control: For the instrumental character of modernist society, the freedom highlighted by the enlightenment thoughts becomes ‘a hollow one’ (Lyon, 1999; 40). Rather than becoming free and liberated, individuals find themselves victims of a mechanical system.

Being frustrated by the sufferings caused by the capitalism, industrialization, cultural differentiations, commodification, urbanization and bureaucratization, many theorists looked for new concepts of life in society. Unlike the defenders of modernity, “postmodern theorists, however, claim that in contemporary high tech media society, emergent processes of change and transformation are producing a new postmodern society and its advocates claim that the era of postmodernity constitutes a novel stage of history and novel sociocultural formation which requires new concepts and theories” (Best and Kellner 1991; 3).

Furthermore, postmodern worldview is instigated by the development in the fields of physics. Contrary to the Newtonian physics that focuses on the belief in an absolute orderly mechanism, postmodern worldview is constructed by probabilities based on theories of relativity and Quantum mechanics.

Postmodernists criticize modernist thoughts and the modernist society for their drawbacks. Postmodernists believed that everything is about choice. Any fixity of moral code is denied; rather there develops a belief of multiple and subjective moral codes. There are many ways to do things and not one. According to Preda (2001):

“This debate raised a series of questions about the validity claims of scientific theories, the nature of scientific truth, and the status of the knowing subject, arguing that: (a) all knowledge is contextual and local; (b) the validity claims of any scientific theory are not to be found in some abstract, universal criteria, but rather the results of either negotiated consensus or power struggles; and (c) as a consequence, the knowing subject does not dispose of universal criteria to ascertain the validity and truth of his or her knowledge”.

Main Characteristics of Postmodernism

Nietzsche’s seminal works instigated many philosophers to ask some questions related to textual interpretation and language that in other words paved the way to postmodernism. Ambiguity is a common practice in postmodern literature. The proponents of postmodernism are of the opinion that all things may have two meanings at the same time and these meanings are not contradictory; rather they are integral parts of reality. Postmodernists highlighted some different views and established new discourses and theories. The followings are some basic features of postmodernism:

- i. Rejection of the ultimate faith on science: Modernism was established on the belief in science and rationality. The destruction and trauma of the two world wars had formed a negative attitude towards science and technology in modern mind. Postmodernists have observed that scientific developments led to industrialization causing damages to humankind in the form of poverty, unemployment, environmental pollution etc.
- ii. Anti-positivist and anti-verificationist stance: According to Preda (2001), postmodernism highlights that "... there is no totalizing explanatory model and no universally valid verification procedure". Dealney (2005; 263) highlighted that '... postmodern thinkers attack the idea of objectivity in social research, an autonomous rational mind, and grand narratives (grand theorizing)'.
- iii. Individuality: Subjective views got more emphasis. Subjective perception of different people produces knowledge through which they constitute subjective realities. Nietzsche's argument in this regard raised many important issues only to find the basis of postmodernism. Personal concerns have become more important than state and politics that were used to be the main concern before. Brann (1992; 7) argues that 'What each human being reports as a personal conviction is always to be taken seriously'.
- iv. Truth as a matter of perspective: In postmodernism, truth is considered as a matter of perspective and not universal. There cannot be any absolute truth. It is believed that truth is created rather than discovered (Copan, 2007). Rejecting Kant's argument about the universality of truth Nietzsche concluded that truth is a mere illusion. As we do not share the same patterns of mind, our comprehension of truth also varies.
- v. Blurring the old distinctions: Postmodernism disregards binary opposition (like male vs. female, black vs. white, east vs. west etc.) or it can be said that it is anti-dualistic (Copan, 2007). Unlike the earlier periods, the issues like gender roles, racial, ethnic and class differences have no more remained straightforward. Postmodernists celebrate the blurring of all much practiced distinctions. Now, even sex-oriented economic roles are dismantled.
- vi. 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. Postmodernism encourages the sociologists to develop the understanding of culture staying away from moral conclusions.
- vii. Information and media: The huge access to information and media makes the postmodern life difficult and different. These days, we find media covering our every aspects of life. It also creates the popular culture posing the consumption and lifestyle to become more important. Postmodern society is getting molded by media. Consequently, our thoughts and media defined reality have become 'hyper real.'
- viii. New literary trends: Postmodern authors tend to use irony and black humor in their writings. They present subject matters, even the serious ones, with playfulness and fragmentation. Intertextuality in fictions, is a common practice in this era. Pastiche, metafiction, maxiamlism, minimalism, temporal distortion etc. are the salient features of postmodern literary works. Moreover, dismantling of genres is a common practice in their writings.

Main Scholars

According to Delaney (2005; 262), most of the postmodern thoughts have mainly been originated from the 'non-sociologists' like Derrida, Lyotard, Jameson and others. Apart from

them, some other prominent writers were Foucault and Baudrillard. This section of the article deals with the thoughts of these prominent postmodern scholars.

Derrida

Derrida was an Algerian born French philosopher who followed a deconstructive approach. He used the term 'discourse'¹. He criticized 'logocentrism'. Kivisto (1998; 139) explained logocentrism as: "...our knowledge of the social world is grounded in a belief that we can make sense of our ever-changing and highly complex societies by referring to certain unchanging principles or foundations". Derrida emphasized on the hermeneutical method and used this method in analyzing the work of Foucault (Delaney, 2005; 264). Delaney (2004; 137) comments:

"The German tradition of *hermeneutics* was a special approach to the understanding and interpretation of published writings. The goal was not limited to merely understanding the basic structure of the text, but the talking of the authors as well".

Baudrillard

Studying the popular consumer culture, 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. The 'signified' no more represents the reality of 'signifier'; rather they are reality itself. Based on the relationship between signifier and signified, he has developed his concept of Simulacrum indicating a separation of signifier from the signified. His postmodern idea is convinced that now we are in the realm of 'hyper reality' where the image of something is more real than reality. Nicol (2009; 4). by mentioning Baudrillard, said that 'virtual reality is already here, and we all live in it almost every moment of our lives'. Media and technology are creating an exact replica of the imaginary world and as a result, 'the difference between the original and the copy is eliminated' (Nicol, 2009; 5). Apart from focus on reality, postmodernists 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. He highlighted the modern techniques of domination (Mirchandani, 2005; 91). According to Mirchandani (2005; 91):

"He rejects the idea of knowledge and truth and language as neutral, and instead argues that knowledge is always connected to power: modern discourses that formalize knowledge, discourses on sexuality, insanity, criminality, and so on, regulate and control our experiences".

Riesman

American philosopher Riesman, 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

¹ Wallace and Wolf (1999; 407) said that "Derrida and other post-modernists mean to emphasize the primacy of the word we use, the concepts they embody, the rules that develop within a group about what appropriate ways of talking about things. They mediate between us and reality".

‘adult authorities’, rather they are being guided by the peer groups and mass media (Delaney, 2005; 265).

Liotard

French philosopher and famous postmodernist James Francois Lyotard worked with interdisciplinary discourse covering a variety of topics (Delaney, 2005; 271). He criticized modern epistemologies and tried to develop a postmodern epistemology (Mirchandani, 2005; 92). Lyotard highlighted the recent conditions of the society like computer age, cybernetics, informatics, information storage, data banks and the problems of translation from one computer to another (Mirchandani, 2005; 92). Mirchandani (2005; 91) also highlighted that like Foucault, 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. Postmodernists propose ‘micronarratives’ instead, which has ‘use value’ for specific situations. These ‘micronarratives’ could be multiple in numbers and none of them could claim to explain or establish anything.

Jameson

American scholar Fredric Jameson equated postmodernism with late capitalism (Delaney, 2005; 279). 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 commodity production, the issue of ‘aesthetics’ became more important in this postmodern era. He also said that ‘our understanding of the world is influenced by the concepts and categories that we inherit from our culture’s interpretive tradition’ (Delaney, 2005; 281).

However, investigating the knowledge operations in the modern western world, Deleuze and Guattari came up with the analogy of a tree (Klages, 2006). Modernists perceived knowledge like that of a tree which has a centre to tie up. These postmodern scholars held that knowledge is like a *fungus*. Discarding the tree model they propose *rhizome* model. The organism of rhizome is that it does not have any beginning point, nor does it have any ending. Their model refers to postmodern idea of deterritorialization (Klages, 2006).

Problems of Postmodernism

Though postmodern thoughts can be treated as the demand of the time, these are not beyond 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. Many scholars criticized postmodernism indicating its several limitations. Some common criticisms of it are discussed here.

Critics identified postmodernism as a ‘notoriously slippery and indefinable term’ (Nicol, 2005; 1). Nicol (2005; 1) said that ‘the term became overloaded with meaning, chiefly because it was being used to describe characteristics of the social and political landscape as well as a whole range of different examples of cultural production’.

Many readers find postmodern literature difficult to understand. Use of difficult language, forms and difficult jargons and terms and ambiguous way of explanation makes postmodern literature almost unreachable to many readers. 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. Nonetheless, the

multifaceted characteristic of postmodernity makes it bizarre. As postmodernism also deals with the complexities of this complex era, the discussions and analyses thereby have become more complex. Sometimes this complexity is considered as unnecessary – ‘weird for the sake of weird’ (Nicol, 2009; 1).

In most cases, the postmodernists highlight the problem without pointing any solution. Many people believe that postmodernism is just a theory and not a fact. Spiro (1996) says that the postmodernist dismissal of scientific method is not convincing at all. Spiro disagrees with the postmodernist argument that the disciplines related to humanity cannot be termed as "scientific". Subjectivity plays as obstacle in unearthing truth. Spiro also said that the social sciences demand for different kind of techniques than the natural sciences but it does not mean that an objective scientific method is not necessary.

Rosenau (1993) identifies some contradictions in Postmodernism. For example, the anti-theoretical position of the postmodernist is nothing but a theoretical stand. Though the postmodernists focus on irrationality, they use reason in developing their perspectives. We see that postmodernists highlight the inconsistencies of modernism but they themselves depend on inconsistencies by refusing the norms of consistency. **Rosenau** (1993) opines that it cannot be said straightway that if modern criteria are invalid, there cannot be any other valid criteria of judgment.

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 criticisms, the trend of postmodernism survived in several disciplines. This is because of the fact that postmodernism offers a different approach to understand social reality. Though many scholars express a doubt on whether we have really entered into a world that can be termed as postmodern or it is just an extension of the modernity, 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 the virtual world simultaneously. Moreover, because of this amazing improvement of information technology, information is not having any border. As a result, multiculturalism is becoming a common matter. Social problems and movements are also taking new turns. Feminism, gay rights, environmental conservation, terrorism, and fundamentalism – all these are becoming the issues of the common people. This multidimensional society is creating multidimensional individuals. Each individual is shaping himself/herself in a different order, according to own choice. Such a multidimensional society that belongs to multidimensional people with differences in their choices is difficult to analyze. That is why; the postmodernists reject the scientific way of analyzing society.

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