

# Theoretical Perspective on Postmodernism in Literature and Use of Contemporary Narrative Technique

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**Abstract –** *The present article is an attempt to reflect on new openings and recent developments in literature, literary theory and culture which seem to point postmodernism and raise a question whether what appears as newness is not rather a return to traditional concepts, theoretical premises and authorial practices. Postmodern literature is marked with such typical features as playfulness, pastiche or hybridity of genres, meta-fiction, hyper-reality, fragmentation, and non-linear narrative. Narrative was reduced (in “Ulysses” and in the French nouveau roman). Tendencies have crystallized to shape new genres. One broad grouping is the Meta-fiction, or the novel that exposes conventions only to discard, perhaps by the use of an obviously naïve narrator.*

**Keyword:** *Theory, Postmodernism, Developments, Traditional, Narrative*

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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 humor, 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. Postmodern literature is part of socio-cultural and historical development and can be seen as a specific way of a depiction of the postmodern life and culture. It shows a crisis of identity of human being (ethnic, sexual, social and cultural) and its struggle for legitimization in a hypocritical society. This theme was treated by other authors before (example), but it started to be treated much more systematically after the Civil Right Movement in the USA in the 1960’s (Martin Luther King, ethnic and sexual/homosexual and lesbian minority rights), the Vietnam and student protests in Europe and the USA. While this movement led to democratization of the public life, more prerogatives, education and publishing opportunities for minorities in the Western countries, the East and Central European countries became much more authoritarian under the influence and control of the USSR, especially between the 1950’s – 1980’s.

Postmodernism” is a fairly recent phenomenon, and is more evident in America and France than in

England, except in the field of Drama. Beckett, being settled in Paris (France) and being French as well as English writer, showed “Postmodernist” tendencies more than any other English writer. His plays as well as novella are typical examples of Post-Modernist writings. Among other Post-Modernist, prominent examples are works of John Fowles, Alain Robbe Grillet, Thomas Pynchon, John Barth, Kurt Vonnegut, Leonard Michaels, Brigid Brophy and Richard Brautigan. Post-modernist writers break away from all the rules and seek alternative principles of composition conforming to their content of existentialist thought. They seek to capture human situation in its most concentrated form and tend to employ a form which can fully assimilate human existence, which is capable of accommodating the meaninglessness, purposelessness and absurdity of human existence. They have employed various devices such as fragmentation, paradox, questionable narrators, Contradiction, Permutation, Discontinuity, Randomness, Excess, Short Circuit etc.

## ORIGIN OF POST-MODERNISM

The term “postmodernism” 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 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 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.

Postmodernism, with its pluralism and multiplicity, allows the writers to create fictions with multiple narrative patterns. With a view to deconstructing the existing fixities and finalities in the fiction, the postmodern writers create multiple narrative styles of representation. In fictions, the writers flout the unities and create different possible ways of narrating the stories. History, in postmodern fiction, becomes a subject of postmodern narrative play. Postmodernism accepts history and acknowledges its existence and relevance in the present context, but it questions the metanarrative of its supremacy, authenticity, and objectivity. In fictions, writers like Fowles, Marquez, Doctorow, and many others narrativize history and diminish the distinction between fact and fiction, or history and fiction. They question and subvert the objectivity and transparency in the historical representations. In fact, they subvert the very difference between the historical texts and the fictions by considering them as acts of narrative, and hence, the rules of narrative equally apply to both historical documents and the fiction.

## FEATURES IN POST-MODERN LITERATURE

The thematic level: thematization of ecological crisis, criticism of consumerism, appreciation of freedom and spontaneity, oriental vision of the world, but also in the changing nature and understanding of art and its form. Thus art started to be seen not as separated, but a part of reality and experience, art became closer to the public and was often presented in the form of show, happening or performance.

**Indeterminacy** Nothing is certain: we cannot be certain about anything. This indeterminacy is also partly due to our sense of fragmentation. The seamless totality of the classical and the Christian worlds are lost to us. With the death of God, the world is fragmented; the society is fragmented; the family is fragmented; the process of fragmentation is an on-going process. In postmodernism, this is reflected in the breaking of forms, use of montage and collage and mixing of genres in an unexpected manner. Since post-modern culture is essentially mass culture, all canons are discredited. The traditional values are flouted; the culture is de-canonized.

**Originality and authenticity:** originality and authenticity is undermined and parodied. Postmodern literary work does not pretend to be new and original, but uses the old literary forms, genres, and kinds of literature and art, kitsch, quotation, allusion and other means to recontextualize their meaning in a different linguistic and cultural contexts to show a difference between the past and present as well as between the past and present forms of representation as was mentioned in famous John Barth's essay *The Literature of Exhaustion* in which he points out „an exhaustion” of the old forms of art and suggests a creative potential of the use of the old forms, genres and styles. Postmodern authors intentionally build the meaning on the use not only of the old forms and genres, but also by a deliberate use of plagiarism, kitsch, false or pretended quotations from well-known literary and other texts

**Meta-fiction:** Meta-fiction means that a literary work refers to itself and the principles of its construction by using various techniques and narrative devices. Simplistic understanding of meta-fiction is that “meta-fiction is a fiction about fiction”, but postmodern fictional work is far more and about more issues than only about fiction. The term was coined by an American author and critic William Gass, but it can have various meanings (R. Scholes, P. Waugh). I argue meta-fiction, meta-fictional elements, and meta-fictionality is a dominant feature of a postmodern literary work. I think perhaps Patricia Waugh's definition of meta-fiction is the most suitable to understanding its working in literature.

## NARRATOLOGY

Narratology has its roots in structuralism and it is the study of the ways in which narratives function. The study of ‘Narrative’ is called ‘Narratology’. The value of narratology lies in its application. Narrative theory is concerned not with the content of individual stories but with what stories have in common. The term ‘Narratology’ was used by Tzvetan Todorov in 1969 to designate “a systematic study of Narrative firmly anchored in the tradition of the Russian and Czech formalism of the early twentieth century and

French Structuralism and semiotics of the sixties" (O'Neill 12). Though, the term is used in a broad sense for all theoretical persuasions of narrative theory, "it refers specifically to the theories of narrative structure" (Prince 4). Gerald Prince defines it as "the study of form and functioning of narrative". The term narratology may be new but not the discipline and "in the western tradition it goes back at least to Plato and Aristotle" (Barry 224).

## CONCEPT OF NARRATIVE

The term 'Narrative' has several and changing meanings. The word 'Narrative' is derived from the Latin terms 'narrare' (to relate) and 'gnarus' (knowing). The meaning of the word 'gna' in Sanskrit is 'to know'. So 'Narrative' means to relate in order to know. A narrative relates a sequence of events. The word story may be used as a synonym of narrative. In semiotics and literary theory a narrative is a story or part of a story. Stories are told not only in literature but also in other practices—personal as well as cultural. We tell stories while making confessions, while sharing our own biographical details, while singing folk songs and even while telling lies. It means narrative is everywhere, in all kinds of activities and in all walks of life. Barbara Hardy defines it as a "primary act of mind" and he observes that "we dream in narrative, remember, anticipate, hope, despair, believe, doubt, plan, revise, criticize, construct, gossip, learn, hate and love by narrative" (31). Thus, narrative encompasses most of the activities of human beings and its simple meaning is anything that tells a story. This 'anything' includes novel, short story, drama, film, painting, history book, comic strip, gossip, newspaper etc. Thus narrative can be found everywhere and its presence everywhere can be attributed to its being the oldest form of communication. Even in our own life span, a child is introduced into the order of language through narrative. Be it grand ma's tales or fairy tales, they are but a form of narrative. Narrative can be verbal or non-verbal; it can be true or untrue; it can be realistic or unrealistic; it can be fictional or non-fictional; it can be literary or non-literary.

Since the study of narrative has been institutionalized, different theorists have attempted to theorize narrative in different ways. Gerald Prince defines narrative as "the recounting (as product and process, object and act structure and structuration) of one or more fictitious events communicated by one, two or several narrators to one, two or several narratees" (Prince 4). Thus, narrative can either be by an individual or a group; or it can be for an individual or a group. Whatsoever the case may be, narrative is a set of events told by a narrator to a narratee.

## SIGNIFICANCE OF NARRATIVE TECHNIQUE

Technique is a very important weapon for the writer to write his literary work or work of art successfully. Narrative technique is the means of producing a specific effect of a novel. With the employment of right technique only the writer would be able to convey his ideas to the readers. Technique acts as the middleman between life and art which helps the novelist in interpreting and transforming reality. This creation involves employment of several devices. It helps the readers to discover and travel among other selves, other identities and other variety of human adventures. It is the 'how' (technique) rather than the 'what' (subject) is instrumental in causing paradigm shifts, in founding literary schools and in originating major literary trends. Hence narrative technique is not just an ornament or superimposed element upon the content to give it additional value but the intrinsic quality of the subject matter itself. Narrative technique is so important that we cannot find a writer who has no technique or who eschews technique. Mark Schorer remarks that if any writer does not give importance to technical refinements he/she will have to pay handsomely. Indeed the technique serves the novel's purpose. He further says, "Narrative technique is actually the means by which he discovers, objectifies, explores, and evaluates his subject and his dexterity determines his success" (251).

Narrative technique is the base for writers, without which they can write nothing relevant. Indeed it is the narrative technique that makes difference and it distinguishes the early writers from the present writers. Virginia Woolf's remark supports this idea. She says: "With their simple tools and primitive materials, it might be said, Fielding did well and Jane Austen even better, but compare their opportunities with ours!" Technique is the means by which the novelist tells his/her story effectively and it gains importance.

Narrative technique produces the distinctive effect of disrupting our habitual perception of the world, enabling us to see the things afresh. The modern novelist pays much attention to his/her medium. With the technical change analogous changes have taken place in substance, in point of view and in the whole conception of fiction. The final message of the modern, postmodern and postcolonial novels is that technique is not the secondary thing, some external mechanization, a mechanical affair, but a deep and 55 primary operation. The narrative technique contains not only intellectual and moral implications but also discovers them.

## NARRATIVE STRATEGIES

Narrative strategies are rooted in our culture from the birth of language. Both narratives and language have indispensable connections with each other,

since the existence of narratives cannot lie outside language. The form and structure of narratives, ever since their origin in the distant past, have been in a flux all the while. The history of humankind has witnessed this flux in narratives: oral narratives and written narratives. Oral narratives have been supplanted/ supplemented in the changing world with various written narratives. The element of flux, however, is in motion, and consequently, the written modes such as poetry, drama, fictions, and non-fiction arts have been in the state of constant transformation. If we examine the history of narratives, we can discover the fact that they are always prone to changes. This flux of change is visible in the fiction, just as it can be seen in other forms of writings.

The function of narrative strategies in fiction is to narrate the stories or to represent the ideas of the novelists. The form of the novel generates the scope for various narrative strategies to flourish, with the help of which ideas and messages are conveyed by the writers. Narrative strategies, during various times, are assigned different roles and purposes. The novel of various eras such as the Classical Era, the Romantic Era, the Victorian Era, the Modern Era, and the Postmodern Era has passed through the phase of evolution. The novel before postmodernism has either realistic patterns or experimental patterns.

Narrative continuity, in light of the contradictions, has been threatened in favor of discontinuity. It has been used and abused, or inscribed and subverted by the postmodern writers. The nineteenth century structures of narrative closure are undermined. Modern open endings have been both used and abused by multiple endings or arbitrary closures endorsed by postmodern writers. Derrida has rightly argued that closure is not only not desirable, but also not even possible. Postmodern narrative does not seek to justify its autonomy, self-sufficiency, or transcendence, but rather it narrates its own contingency, insufficiency, and lack of transcendence. Postmodernism offers provisional alternatives to traditional and fixed unitary concepts. It cannot reject the technological advancement and international style, but it can subvert its uniformity, ahistoricity, and ideological and social aims. The novel moves away from the center and with this movement, the novel shifts from the centers such as London, New York, and Toronto and narrates the stories of the periphery such as William Kennedy's Albany and Robert Kroetsch's Canadian West. The rejection of the center paves the way for the ex-centric. Postmodernism becomes a natural platform for the ex-centric such as black, feminist, native, ethnics, gays, and the third world cultures and becomes a vehicle to oppose and dismantle the monolithic movement of the dominant culture. This move from the center to the periphery leads to liberating spirit, which deconstructs the binaries and privileges the other. In this context, Hutcheon says that, —the modernist concept of single and alienated

otherness is challenged by the postmodern questioning of binaries that conceal hierarchies (self/other) (Poetics of Postmodernism 61). She further expresses, —Difference suggests multiplicity, heterogeneity, plurality, rather than binary opposition and exclusion (Poetics of Postmodernism 61). Modernist exclusion of the other and the periphery is refuted by the postmodern celebration of the inclusion.

Postmodern rejection of metanarratives provides an apt platform for the feminist criticism to flourish and propagate feminist points of view. However, as said earlier, postmodernism creates a dual impact on feminism. On the one hand, it might just prove to be a catalyst for the development of feminism; on the other hand, it subverts the very foundations of feminism. The embodiment of the postmodern concepts and philosophical standpoints are identified in the fictions of feminist writers.

## ISSUES AND PROBLEMS OF POST-MODERNISM

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.

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 post-modernity makes it bizarre. In most cases, the post-modernists highlight 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

Postmodernism incorporates the technique of meta-fiction not as an end, in which the act of writing alone is problematized, but as a beginning, in which larger philosophical debates about the creation of meaning and reality are examined. The self-consciousness of such writing exposes the ways in which reality itself is constructed through various types of narratives, whether they are historical or ideological. The "radical critique" that Hutcheon sees possible in this kind of knowledge can lead to a deeper understanding, finally, of the inescapable condition of post-modernity. Even after the huge confusion and criticism, the trend of postmodernism



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, multiculturalism is becoming a common matter. Social problems and movements are also taking new turns.

Postmodernism is a complicated term, or set of ideas, one that has only emerged as an area of academic study since the mid-1980s. Postmodernism is hard to define, because it is a concept that appears in a wide variety of disciplines or areas of study, including art, architecture, music, film, literature, sociology, communications, fashion, and technology. It's hard to locate it temporally or historically, because it's not clear exactly when postmodernism begins. Perhaps the easiest way to start thinking about postmodernism is by thinking about modernism, the movement from which postmodernism seems to grow or emerge.

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