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## Postmodernism Seen from a Critical Perspective

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**Abstract:** Postmodernism is the contemporary intellectual movement which originated in the West, and now affects the entire socio-cultural and political milieu of our times. It has within itself a wide variety of views and even conflicting conceptual positions. Its moral and religio-cultural positions are a challenge to all the existing socio-political and religio-metaphysical views and the ways of life that we all take for granted. Its influence is reflected in almost every walk of life. Postmodernism is making its presence felt in literary circles, youth movements, scientific communities, feminist and homosexual movements, and the spectrum of academic disciplines such as art, media, music, politics, theology, pedagogy and empirical sciences. Postmodernism questions the thrust of modernity, namely, methodical and monological reason. It rejects such a reason and calls for the affirmation of plurality and diversity. Nevertheless, it has failed to offer a credible alternative to reason, even a relative one, and hence all that it offers are preposterous proposals. Knowing well, that there are a lot of persons who wish to be labeled as postmodern in our own country in various disciplines, this essay seeks to examine direction, of postmodernism as well as its consequences.

**Keywords:** Postmodernism, Monological reason, Critical perspective, Religio-cultural positions, Religio-metaphysical views

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## Postmodernism Seen from a Critical Perspective

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### Introduction

Postmodernism is the contemporary intellectual movement which originated in the West, and now affects the entire socio-cultural and political milieu of our times. It has within itself a wide variety of views and even conflicting conceptual positions. Its moral and religio-cultural positions are a challenge to all the existing socio-political and religio-metaphysical views and the ways of life that we all take for granted. Its influence is reflected in almost every walk of life. Postmodernism is making its presence felt in literary circles, youth movements, scientific communities, feminist and homosexual movements, and the spectrum of academic disciplines such as art, media, music, politics, theology, pedagogy and empirical sciences. Postmodernism questions the thrust of modernity, namely, methodical and monological reason. It rejects such a reason and calls for the affirmation of plurality and diversity. Nevertheless, it has failed to offer a credible alternative to reason, even a relative one, and hence all that it offers are preposterous proposals. Knowing well, that there are a lot of persons who wish

to be labeled as postmodern in our own country in various disciplines, this essay seeks to examine direction, of postmodernism as well as its consequences.

The term postmodernism is widely used to denote a number of philosophical views developed in France in the late sixties. Originally known as post-structuralists this group of philosophers were trained in structuralism. According to them, all societies and cultures possess particular and variant structures which shape and form the consciousness of the members of that socio-cultural group. Postmodern philosophers agree with this position of the structuralist thinkers in toto and argue further that there are no objective universal meanings of words or texts or any such permanent structures that are at the foundation of human consciousness. All structures are relative. According to postmodern authors, socio-cultural structures are a burden on humanity. The earlier we get rid of them from our cultural discourse and practice, the better it is for us all. Then we can live our freedom and creativity in its fullness. Postmodernists stand for the creation of new meanings

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and values, and wish to let the symbols to dance and sing in a free play of creation.

## History of Postmodernism

The term postmodernism was first used as early as 1917 by a German philosopher, Rudolf Panwitz to describe the nihilism of the century culminating in Nietzsche. Later the word appeared in one of the Spanish literary critique Frederico de Onis in 1934 to refer to the backlash against the literary modernism (Madrid 1934: xviii-xix; see Rose 1991). In 1939 Bernard Iddings Bell, an English theologian used it to refer to the failures of secular modernism in the religious sphere. Arnold Toyenbee has used the term in his historical writings to denote the post first world war mass society. In philosophy the term is currently used to refer to the post-structuralistic philosophy of the French philosophers Gilles Deleuze, Jacques Derrida, Michael Foucault, Georges Bataille, Jean Francois Lyotard and a host of contemporary thinkers.

Most of these French authors have been influenced by the structuralist thought as well as the phenomenological ideas coming from German philosophy. They agree with the structuralists that there are no universal structures or categories of thought that form the human self. However, these post-structuralist thinkers refute the structuralists' position that cultural signs and symbols are the key to the formation of human self. According to these authors, it is not cultures that create man; rather it is man who creates his culture. Postmodern authors are intent on deconstructing the

symbolic world of man in view of self-liberation and free self-formation.

With these thinkers, philosophy in France underwent a sea change in the sixties. Marxist existentialism and phenomenology, which called for the restoration of the alienated self, received further contributions from the post-structuralist group of philosophers. Merleau Ponty and Sartre were displaced by these radical thinkers giving a new impetus to cultural evaluation and critique. Their criticism is not only directed to the socio-political situation, but to the very legitimacy of the western culture and civilization. They review the basic principles that contribute self-formation in our cultures such as rational thought, universal moral code, sexual differentiation and all universal socio-political and cultural values and regulatory premises of life.

Postmodernity expresses its radical views not only in philosophy but also in a variety of disciplines, art, architecture, morality, religion, literature, social and political behavior and many other socially significant fields and disciplines. The idea of staid and functional modern architecture of urban dwellings was the point of criticism in *Death and Life of Great American Cities* by Jane Jacob. She exposed the hollowness of urban reform movements in America and showed its anti-urban and anti-human tendencies. In his *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, Robert Venturi promoted architectural extravagance in the place of simplicity and functionality. The student revolution of the late sixties in Europe played a crucial role in the making of a postmodern

sub-culture. Postmodernists challenge the medieval awe for authority on which is based the socio-political and cultural order of the West. It is this unquestioned authority, postmodernist authors in the beginning had challenged. Most of the postmodern criticism is focused on delegitimising authority that and emphasizing freedom and spontaneity. Daniel Bell (1973) notes this change as one which alters the social, political and cultural order of the West in a radical manner. The era of the triumphant industrialism, which reconstructed life for most of the European world, is over and a new era dawns where the West is forced to recognize the competing universe of co-players.

The history of postmodernism in the 70s and the 80s is basically one of widespread acceptance of the ideas spread by Jacques Derrida, Jean Franco Lyotard, Georges Bataille, Michel Foucault etc. Their postmodernist ideas could be gathered together below.

## Major Features of Postmodernism

1. Postmodernism criticizes the notion of 'presence' or 'presentation' in knowledge, as the phenomenologists explain it. Presence refers to the immediate phenomenal datum available to man of an object in his knowledge of that object. Is this datum self-given by the object? Postmodernist authors, especially Derrida, take up this question for discussion. He denies that there is any pure presentation of objects in our consciousness. Nothing is immediately given, he would say. All objects in presenting themselves are represented through our sign systems, language and

interpretation etc. There is nothing that is directly presented to the human mind without the medium of our cultural and linguistic categories. Hence, all presentations are representations. Derrida vehemently rejects any such thing as 'pure presentation', i.e., an immediate, unmediated, transparent givenness of the object.

2. Postmodernism also criticizes the attempt of rational enquiry to look into the origin or source of all human knowledge. According to the postmodern authors, there are no ultimate foundations for our knowledge. Beyond the phenomena there is nothing. Phenomena are all what reality is. Going beyond phenomena is a futile exercise in imagination and achieves nothing. The possibility to return to the origin of phenomena, to recapture the original text, and the attempt to look into the foundations lead to nothing. 'Every author is a dead author'. Digging into the history of the text can never recapture an author's intentions. There is no authoritative foundation in interpretation, argue these authors holding a radical hermeneutic position. And authorial intentions are not relevant to understanding a text. This would mean that there is no single right interpretation. All readings are correct. As many readings there are, so many meanings are possible.

3. Thus, postmodernism criticizes the claim to unity in knowledge. Knowledge is plural as interpretations are plural. All our knowledge is relational. And relational knowledge can never be single - it will always be plural. All texts are read differently by different persons.

And the reader of a text too is never the same. Individuals too are plural and relational. Everything is constituted by relations, even the self. As a text is read in different ways, so too an individual person is according to his relations, plural. There is no unity or universality of the self. We are different at different times and situations. Human self is a multiplicity of forces and relations.

4. Postmodernism also denies the transcendence of such ideas as truth, goodness, beauty, rationality etc. These are, according to postmodern writers, simply socio-cultural products, and there is nothing absolute or transcendent about them so too all norms of conduct are relative and relational. There is nothing per se sacrosanct about them. Norms vary from place to place and from people to people. Jürgen Habermas, a major critique of postmodernism, would complain that what postmodernists promote is anarchy, not liberation. But one thing is obvious: postmodernism calls for a critical analysis of our smug complacency towards accepted norms and traditions.

5. These postmodernist features are complimented by most of these authors by their focus on the marginalised, the outlawed and the abnormal of the society. "The other" in the society is often excluded and sidelined. The postmodernist writers will show how abnormal we ourselves have become with our obsession with normality. This is true not only of every society, but even of our own acceptance of ourselves. We tend to hide or ignore certain constitutive aspects of our lives such as sex, aggressiveness, jealousy as unaccept-

able. Normal society rejects the insane, the mad, the poor and the wretched, the homosexual, the feminine and the cast-offs. Postmodernists will embrace these sections of society and focus their attention on them.

### **Some Representatives**

Having described these major features of postmodernism, I shall now discuss a few postmodernist authors. I have selected these authors as representatives of postmodernism with a view to showing the unbeaten path they take in their writings. From a philosophical point of view postmodernism challenges the modernist and medieval mind-set. It has threatened the religio-metaphysical and mythical world-views and moral positions. A new anthropological project is envisioned. Nietzsche is credited with initiating this change in western philosophy. He exploded the myth of the liberating capability of the Enlightenment Reason. He argued that reason is nothing but the will to power. Reason overtly or covertly operates for power and domination. In science, morality, in art and even in metaphysics, power is the major category. Knowledge for him is a means of power.

This Nietzschean critique of reason introduced western philosophy to a new era. Nietzsche flattened out the genre of knowledge into the level of self-aggrandizement and domination. This, according to Habermas, one of the prominent contemporary critique of Postmodernism, "is enthroning taste, 'the Yes and No of the palate' as the organ of a knowledge beyond true and false, beyond good and evil" (1987: 96).

Habermas objects to the aestheticising of reason by Nietzsche. According to him, Nietzsche has failed to recognize reason in its manifold expressions. Aestheticising of reason with his theory of power gets him entangled in the dilemma of a self-enclosed critique of reason and prevents him from recognizing the capacity of reason for critical assessment. According to Habermas, argumentation is the ground of judgement, and it is based on logic, not on taste. Logic does not admit the category of power for validation in any of the human sciences.

Nietzsche has inspired many contemporary thinkers in the West to look at knowledge differently. Heidegger and Derrida have been led on the Nietzschean anti-metaphysical path to subject centered philosophy, while Bataille, Lacan and Foucault have carried on the skeptical project of Nietzsche by unveiling the distortion of the will to power.

### *1. Martin Heidegger (1884-1976)*

Heidegger is one of the most prominent philosophers of the West in the twentieth century. He disputed the very foundation of western theory of knowledge by challenging the primary premises of western metaphysics. Metaphysics in the West as it was developed since Aristotle and Plato was, according to Heidegger, a final answer to the ontic enquiries. It was in his terms, onto-theology, not ontology. It was always the study of the Being of beings as the presumed explanation of beings and never the question of Being itself. He undertakes to unveil the forgotten his-

tory of Being as that which the Being itself closes and hides. For Heidegger, Ontology is not an objective study as other sciences are but a subject's intuitive inquiry into the self. It is the self-enquiry of what Being reveals and hides. It is then phenomenology – a study of the experiential-existential phenomenon of the Dasein. Ontological enquiry, according to him is primordial to any ontical enquiry. It is before all relations. Hence it is before any objective thought. Metaphysics is not an after thought of sciences. Sciences are only one way of man's thinking, not the whole of his thought. They are objective inquiries.

The primordial enquiry of Being for Heidegger then becomes an analysis of the Dasein (the being-there), and later of language. In this way, Heidegger converts Husserlian phenomenology into an ontological hermeneutics. According to Husserl's epistemological theories, phenomena are self-given to our mind and are intuitively grasped by man. Heidegger questions this assumption and argues that phenomena are always presenting themselves in an interpretative mode. It is always given within a format. These are no pure showing themselves of phenomena. Heidegger's conversion of Husserlian phenomenology into an ontological enquiry takes him to the path of his fundamental ontology. Truth is an uncovering. Being true means being uncovering. This uncovering, is the way of the being of Dasein. This uncovering has the character of doing violence. Violence is, for Heidegger, the distinctive ontological character of the Dasein.

The ontological enquiry of Dasein becomes an existential enquiry now. Fundamental ontology takes an anthropological turn. In that enquiry, Heidegger asserts that Dasein's authenticity/inauthenticity would finally be the deciding factor in the revelation of Being. We can either ignore in our inauthenticity the revelation to Being or else in our concern, solicitude and care, affirm it.

Heidegger successfully exploded the myth of the onto-theological notions of Being. However, he failed to explain further what this Being is and what is the essence of reason. He also stumbles by his immersion with the subject-centered philosophy in Being and Time. Consequently, Heidegger in his later writings becomes cautious. Henceforth, he speaks only of the revelation of being. Language now mediates Being to Dasein. Language is then the happening of Being. It is the house of Being where man dwells! Man thus becomes a guest, a shepherd and a mere guardian. Reflection and evaluation of language is forfeited at the altar of Being. Heideggerian opposition to the Onto-theology retreats into a mysticism of Being.

Habermas bitterly criticises Heidegger for this sacrifice. "The language of Being and Time had suggested the decisionism of empty resoluteness: the later philosophy suggests the submissiveness of an equally empty readiness for subjugation," he writes (1987 *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, 141). Habermas considers the entire philosophical enterprise of Heidegger as not merely

antimetaphysical, rather as a legitimating argumentation for the German fascist National Socialism. Heidegger was yoked to the ideals of German nationalism and the Führer more than to the realization of the destiny of Dasein. Habermas points to Heidegger's blunder in his philosophy of Being in the following statements (159-60):

With in the frame of this concept, Heidegger's fascist error takes on significance related to the history of metaphysics. In 1935 Heidegger still saw the inner truth and greatness of the National Socialist movement in the 'encounter between global technology and modern man.' At that time, he still trusted in the National Socialist movement to enlist the potential of technology in the service of the project the new German Dasein. Only in the later course of the debate with Nietzsche's theory of power does Heidegger develop the concept of technology in terms of the history of ontology as that of Gestell. From that time, he was able to view fascism itself as a symptom and to classify it, alongside Americanism and communism, as an expression of the metaphysical domination of technology. It is only after this turn that fascism, like Nietzsche's philosophy, belongs to the objectively ambiguous phase of the overcoming of metaphysics.

Those who admire Heidegger and his philosophy do not always remember that he was one of the spiritual guides of Nazism. As Habermas has remarked, "The story of Heidegger's influence is great. Perhaps this very case makes understandable why our relationship with greatness is a broken one" (1985: 62).

## 2. *Jacques Derrida (1930)*

This Algerian born French philosopher too has evolved his philosophy of a radical hermeneutics from the ideas of signs and meaning developed by Edmund Husserl. Husserl understands that meaning is derived for a sign by its intention. Signs have their meaning in the intention of the sign-user/s. According to him, there are two aspects of a sign: a *leibliche seite* (a bodily aspect), and an *ideale seite* (ideal aspect). The bodily aspect is different from the intentional aspect. However, both are connected to each other in a special way. The bodily aspect exteriorizes the mental aspect. According to Husserl, meaning is an act of expression. Expression is guided by rules, grammar, logic etc. Meaningful language is limited to expressions. For Husserl, the ideal aspect of expression is fixed.

Here Derrida differs. Derrida argues that an ideal meaning is never a pure presentation. It is not fixed. Ideal meaning itself is a representation and is constituted in repetition, and it is never completed for us as finite beings. Linguistic meaning can never be ideally completely present. There can never be an absolutely significant content or an absolutely identical or univocal meaning in language. A post card can have as many meanings as there are readings. This is the contention of Derrida. According to him, Husserl has platonised meaning. Derrida overturns the project of Husserl. He shows the primacy of signs over meaning. Meanings can vary. Signs remain open to various interpretations. Meaning is liberated of being, truth and presence in an act of creativity and innovation.

Having liberated signs from meanings imposed on them, Derrida lets signs dance. In this freedom signs achieve the capability for creation. Derrida speaks of two types of signs: signs of rabbinical order and signs of poetical order. Rabbinical order restricts signs, whereas in the poetical order they are let to dance and sing and express themselves freely and creatively. Derrida wants the future to be approached by laughing and dancing, not in trembling and fear. Caputo, an appreciative commentator of Derrida, captures the spirit of Derrida in the following words:

But the work of deconstruction is not work but play. That is the point of the DerridSan stylus, and that is the "contribution" he makes to radical hermeneutics. We must understand that any talk of solicitation and anxiety in Derrida is subordinated to a Dionysian laughter and exuberance. He is no captive of the spirit of seriousness. He makes the austere pages of transcendental phenomenology rumble with deconstructive energy. He spirits the signifier across the borders of a priori grammar and sets it free to produce effect in its own region, without regard to intuition and objectification. Whatever solicitation and trembling is here is made to dance. Whatever anxiety is here has learned how to laugh (Caputo 1987: 147).

From a critical perspective Derrida's rhetoric of deconstruction is ignorant of the contemporary speech act theories. He, just as Nietzsche, has failed to recognize that speech acts are different kinds. Signs are not employable in poetic manner in scientific or philosophical writings. Literature or poetry may belong to one type of genre. Sci-



ence, philosophy, logic and mathematics cannot be placed in a poetic and imaginative speech mode. Aestheticising of language is not liberation. It can simply become at the most day-dreaming. Paradoxes of modern age, Habermas – a contemporary critical theorist would argue, need answers which will solve the anomalies of the age. Mere deconstruction cannot replace the exigency of the times for new paradigms and logical solutions.

The same host of problems as his mentor, Heidegger, also plagues Derridean deconstruction. Only difference is that, avoiding the authoritarian Being, Derrida walks on an anarchist path. Deconstruction sings the lines, 'everything goes.' "Derrida means to go beyond Heidegger; fortunately, he goes back behind him," writes Habermas in the *Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (1987: 183). The problem with Derrida is that he has no answers to the self-contradictions of modernity. Habermas suspects in him some sort of a leaning towards Jewish mysticism as the sort of answer that he proffers for the problems that he himself has raised in his Grammatology. Habermas writes, "Derrida's grammato-logically circumscribed concept of an arche-writing whose traces call forth all the more interpretations the more unfamiliar they become, renews the mystical concept of tradition as an ever delayed event of revelation" (1987: 183). Derrida seems to revive the tradition of Jewish aleph – the mystical Word. Habermas holds that grammatological mysticism to the simmering modernity is no answer at all. Derrida is only reviving the rabbinical

hermeneutics in a displaced way, he complains.

### 3. *Georges Bataille and Michel Foucault*

Both these above authors intend to transgress the boundaries of modernity, one in erotic excesses and the other in exposing the neurotic nexus between power and truth. They try to explode the self-confidence of modernity. Bataille, like Heidegger, opposes subjectivism as it got developed in modernity as objectivism. While Heidegger's critique is on transcendental subjectivity, Bataille focuses on a moral critique.

By transgressing the traditional morality and giving free play and spontaneity to life and its instincts, Bataille hopes to affirm the true sovereignty of the subject. Bataille, thus seeks to liberate subjectivity and establish it in total freedom. According to him these unbounding and transgression take place through the profanation of the holy. This profanation has taken various routes since modernity itself. From the anti-political and religious reformation to contemporary capitalism and religious secularism, this spirit is continuously changing the traditional world. The only area left out from the purview is the moral world and hence, through eroticism, Bataille intends to profane the moral world.

According to Bataille, the death of God concept of Nietzsche in religious world can correspond to the moral transgression of sexual horizon. He considers the transgression as comparable to the squandering ideal of nature itself. Ostentatious squandering preserves

nature's balance. Sexual ostentation can preserve the balance of unbalanced humanity. For Bataille, death and sexuality are the climax of the festival celebrated by life and nature. In ostentation and lavish indulgence purposive rationality is contradicted. In capitalism, reified labour is again and again, with great calculation, reinvested for material production and self-aggrandisement. The result will be catastrophic adventures, global wars, ecological disasters, mindless violence and terror and even nuclear holocausts. The normatively regulated capitalistic society is based on prohibitions and authority. Being a free Marxian, Bataille wants to show also the inner contradictions that are involved in Marxism.

Bataille compares erotic experiences to religious experiences. In his own words, "The inner experience of eroticism requires of the one undergoing it no less great a sensitivity towards the anxiety that establishes the prohibition than towards the desire that leads to its transgression. It is the religious sensitivity that continuously connects desire and terror, intense pleasure and anxiety, with one another" (1982; Habermas 1987: 232). Bataille considers the ideal man to be the one who establishes his own norms. He employs eroticism to transgress modernity and its discursive thought and banish morality, God and his agents from the face of earth. He intends to establish a world of erotically stimulated mysticism. Is the project of Bataille similar to that of some of the Indian Tantrics?

Michel Foucault continues this counter cultural attack on reason more

over in the same line as Bataille. Foucault considers Bataille his Guru, especially for his assessment of religion and sexuality as capable of attaining self-transcendence. Bataille, according to Foucault, has enriched our cultural debate. In his attempt to further this discourse, Foucault posits madness as a phenomenon complimentary to reason. He studies the pre-history of psychiatry in his work *Madness and Civilisation*, and discovers that madness and abnormal behaviour were sidelined by a compulsively normal society. Those who expel the abnormal and the mad are no less disfigured psychologically than the mentally abnormal people themselves. Western history of reason, Foucault will assert is a history of compulsive normalcy and a case of monological development of reason where diversity and pluralism were excluded and banished to the sidelanes. According to him, the so-called rational society has tried to restrict and eliminate the heterogeneous elements, the mad and the criminal, the poor and the eccentric from the main stream. Foucault drew up a parallel history of reason on the face of psychiatric history.

In the march of reason in the West truth has become the casualty by exclusion and elimination. The will to power hides behind every truth. Foucault tries to unmask this history of reason in his "Nietzsche, Genealogy and History". According to him, power lurks behind the genesis of all knowledge. Power constitutes the truth of discourse and even sign systems. Will to truth is a concealed form of power. Power and the will to knowledge are at the foundation

of all human sciences. At the social level too power is the deciding factor.

Postmodernism with its deconstructive turn in language has taken various forms and tried many projects. Without exception, this deconstructive project does not go beyond the realm of the mundane, and to-

day an attempt is being made to include in its purview the question of the transcendence. More than ever, it looks possible that the deconstructive project will leave the path of destruction as its main task and play a positive role in finding new paradigms of knowledge for our age. The world is in need of such paradigms.

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