

# Postmodernism, Postcolonialism and Bapsi Sidhwa

## Introduction

Postmodernism is the name given to the period of literary criticism that is now in full bloom. Just as the name implies, it is the period that comes after the modern period. But these are not easily separated into discrete units limited by dates as centuries or presidential terms are limited. Postmodernism came about as a reaction to the established modernist era, which itself was a reaction to the established tenets of the nineteenth century and before.

What sets Postmodernism apart from its predecessor is the reaction of its practitioners to the rational, scientific, and historical aspects of the modern age. For postmodernists this took the guise of being self-conscious, experimental, and ironic. The postmodernist is concerned with imprecision and unreliability of language and with epistemology, the study of what knowledge is.

An exact date for the establishment of Postmodernism is not easy, but it is said to have begun in the post-World War II era, roughly the 1950s. It took full flight in the 1960s in the social and political unrest in the world. In 1968 it reached its zenith with the intense student protests in the United States and France, the war for independence in Algeria, and the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia. The beginning of space exploration with the launch of Sputnik in 1957, culminating in the 1969 landing of men on the moon, marks a significant shift in the area of science and technology.

At the same time, Jacques Derrida presented his first paper, *Of Grammatology* (1967), outlining the principles of deconstruction. The early novels of Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. and Alain Robbe-Grillet were published; Ishmael Reed was writing his poetry. The Marxist critics, Fredric Jameson and Terry Eagleton, who saw a major shift in the social and economic world as a part of the postmodern paradigm, were beginning their creative careers. As time progressed, more and more individuals added their voices to this list: Julia Kristeva, Susan Sontag, and, in popular culture, Madonna.

In a speech at Independence Hall in Philadelphia on July 4, 1994, Vaclav Havel, president of the Czech Republic, said the following:

The distinguishing features of such transitional periods are a mixing and blending of cultures and a plurality or parallelism of intellectual and spiritual worlds. These are periods when all consistent value systems collapse, when cultures distant in time and space are discovered or rediscovered. They are periods when there is a tendency to quote, to imitate, and to amplify, rather than to state with authority or integrate. New meaning is gradually born from the encounter, or the intersection, of many different elements.

This speech outlines the essence of Postmodernism in all its forms: the mixing, the disintegration, and the instability of identities.

### **REPRESENTATIVE AUTHORS**

#### **Donald Barthelme (1931-1989)**

Donald Barthelme, Jr. was born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, on April 7, 1931. He has been characterized as an avant-garde or postmodernist who relies more on language than plot or character. He is well known as a short story writer, novelist, editor, journalist, and teacher.

#### **Jacques Derrida (1930-)**

Jacques Derrida was born in El Biar, Algeria, on July 15, 1930. His work beginning in the 1960s effected a profound change in literary criticism. In 1962 he first outlined the basic ideas that became known as deconstruction in a lengthy introduction to his 1962 French translation of German philosopher Edmund Husserl's *Origin of Geometry*. The full strategy of deconstruction is outlined and explained in his difficult masterwork, *Of Grammatology*, published in English in 1967. It revealed the interplay of multiple meanings in the texts of present day culture and exposed the unspoken assumptions that underlie much of contemporary social thought.

#### **Terry Eagleton (1943-)**

Terence Eagleton was born on February 22, 1943, in Salford, England. As one of the foremost exponents of Marxist criticism, he is concerned with the ideologies found in literature, examining the role of Marxism in discerning these ideologies. His concise *Marxism and Literary Criticism*, 1976, discusses the author as producer, and the relationships between literature and history, form and content, and the writer and commitment. He is the foremost advocate of the inclusion of social and historical issues in literary criticism.

#### **Michel Foucault (1926-1984)**

Michel Foucault was born in Poitiers, France, on October 15, 1926, and received a diploma in 1952 from Ecole Normale Supérieure and the Sorbonne, University of Paris. He used what he called the archaeological approach in his work to dig up scholarly minutia from the past and display the "archaeological" form or forms in them, which would be common to all mental activity. Later he shifted this emphasis from the archaeological to a genealogical method that sought to understand how power structures shaped and changed the boundaries of "truth." It is this understanding of the combination of power and knowledge that is his most noteworthy accomplishment.

#### **Toni Morrison (1931-)**

Toni Morrison was born Chloe Anthony Wofford on February 18, 1931, in Lorain, Ohio, to a black working class family. After the publication of her first novel in 1970, Morrison's writing quickly came to the attention of critics and readers who praised her richly expressive style and ear for dialogue.



## THEMES

### Deconstruction

This is the term created by Derrida that defines the basic premise of Postmodernism. It does not mean destruction, but rather it is a critique of the criteria of certainty, identity, and truth.

Derrida says that all communication is characterized by uncertainty because there is no definitive link between the signifier (a word) and the signified (the object to which the word refers). Once a text is written it ceases to have a meaning until a reader reads it. Derrida says that there is nothing but the text and that it is not possible to construe a meaning for a text using a reference to anything outside the text. The

text has many internal meanings that are in conflict with themselves (called reflexivity or self-referential) and as a result there is no solid and guaranteed meaning to a text. The text is also controlled by what is not in it (referents outside the text are not a part of its meaning). The consequence of this position is that there can be no final meaning for any text, for as Derrida himself says, "texts are not to be read according to [any method] which would seek out a finished signified beneath a textual surface. Reading is transformational."

### Disintegration

One of the main outgrowths of Postmodernism is the disintegration of concepts that used to be taken for granted and assumed to be stable. These include the nature of language, the idea of knowledge, and the notion of a universal truth. The application of deconstruction to the understanding of language itself results in disintegration of that very language. Even these words are not stable in the sense that they cannot convey an unalterable message.

The consequence of this is that once language is destabilized the resultant knowledge that comes from that language is no longer a stable product. The end result therefore is that there can be no universal truths upon which to base an understanding or a social construct.

In literary works, authors often disrupt expected time lines or change points of view and speakers in ways that disrupt and cause disintegration in the very literature they are writing. *Gravity's Rainbow* by Thomas Pynchon is a good example of this.

### Cultural Studies

One major impact of Postmodernism on the structure of college and university courses is the introduction of multiculturalism and cultural studies programs. These are sometimes directly related to specific areas on the planet and sometimes to specific focus groups. Often these are not limited by political concerns and boundaries but are economically and socially organized, a major concern expressed in the writings.

### Multiculturalism

Another aspect of multiculturalism is combining specific interest areas into one area of study. This aspect of Postmodernism broadens the experiences of college students through the study of literature and history of peoples from other parts of the world. Classes whose structures combine sometimes disparate elements are found in these new departments. For example, a study of prisons and prison literature might be combined with literature from Third World countries under the broad label of Literature of the Oppressed.

## STYLE

### Schizophrenia

An important aspect of Postmodernism in literature and entertainment media is the relaxation of strict time lines, sometimes called discontinuous time. Often an author will construct a sequence of events that have no time relationships to each other. In literature this requires the reader to create a time line, which the author may upset later in the story. Therefore, the writers show one event, then show another that happened at the same time as the first. This kind of temporal disruption is called "schizophrenia" by Jameson.

### Recurring Characters

Some authors introduce a single character into several different works. Vonnegut does this with Kilgore Trout and Tralfamadorians, who appear in several of his novels.

### Irony

Irony is a specialized use of language in which the opposite of the literal meaning is intended. Its former use often had the intent to provoke a change in behavior from those who were the object of the irony. But for the postmodernist the writer merely pokes fun at the object of the irony without the intention of making a social (or other kind of) change.

### Authorial Intrusion

Occasionally an author will speak directly to the audience or to a character in the text in the course of a work—not as a character in the tale but as the writer. Vonnegut does this in several of his novels, including *Breakfast of Champions*.

### Self-Reflexivity

Many literary works make comments about the works themselves, reflecting on the writing or the "meaning" of the work. These works are self-conscious about themselves. In some instances the work will make a comment about itself in a critical way, making a self-reflexive comment on the whole process of writing, reading, or understanding literature.

### Collage

This style is characterized by an often random association of dissimilar objects without any intentional connection between them or without a specified purpose for these associations. For example, the rapid presentation of bits and pieces from old news tapes that are often used at the beginning of news programs is a collage. While it intends to introduce the news, it is not the news nor is it any hint of the news to come.

### Prose Poetry

This idea seems to be a contradiction in terms but it is an effective style of writing. The passage will look like a paragraph of prose writing, but the content will be poetic in language and construction. Rather than being a literal statement, the language in this paragraph will be more figurative.

### Parody and Pastiche

Oftentimes writers will take the work of another and restructure it to make a different impression on the reader than that of the original author. Some writers lift whole passages from others, verbatim, resulting in something quite different from the original writer's material.



Parody is the imitation of other styles with a critical edge. The general effect is to cast ridicule on the mannerisms or eccentricities of the original.

Pastiche is very much like parody but it is neutral, without any sense of humor. It is the imitation or a pasting together of the mannerisms of another's work, but without the satiric impulse or the humor. Jameson says that because there is no longer a "normal" language system, only pastiche is possible.

### **Simulacra**

This is a term that comes from Plato meaning "false copy" or a debased reflection of the original that is inferior to the original. Author Jean Baudrillard claims that a simulacrum is a perfect copy that has no original. The postmodernists use this technique of copying or imitating others without reservation or hesitation. They treat it as just another process in their creative effort. Many science fiction movies deal with simulacrum characters.

### **Movement Variations**

As might be expected in a relatively new philosophic movement, there are a variety of different understandings, proposals, and approaches reflecting on the particular interests of writers and contributors to that new philosophy. Postmodernism's origin in the aftermath of World War II was not a universally scripted event. By the time Derrida and others were presenting their major papers on the basics of Postmodernism, many others were already approaching these concepts in individual ways. Additionally, as time moved on and Postmodernism developed as an accepted area of discussion, the basic ideas of Postmodernism were branching off into many facets of contemporary life. Among these variations are Marxism and political studies, Poststructuralism, feminism and gender studies.

### **Feminism**

Feminist readings in Postmodernism were initiated as a way to consciously view and deconstruct ideas of social norms, language, sexuality, and academic theory in all fields. Feminist theorists and writers (and they were not all women, e.g., Dr. Bruce Appleby, Professor Emeritus of Southern Illinois University, is a long-standing contributor to feminist writings and theory) were concerned with the manner in which society assumed a male bias either by direct action—for example, paying women less for doing the same job; or by inaction—using the term "man" to mean all of humankind. In either case, the female segment of society had been excluded. Even the modernist penchant for binary sets for discussions, good/bad, white/black, established an unspoken hierarchy that made the first of the set more important than the second. In that way the "male/female" set defined the female half as being less important or inferior to the male half of the set. This was not acceptable to the feminist writers and to those in the subsequent feminist movement. Feminist writers and theorists attempted to separate the ideas of sex (which is biological) and gender (which is a social construct), and use those ideas as a lens through which to deconstruct language, social mores and theories, economic policies, and longstanding historical policy.

### **Marxism**

It is not much of a stretch to move the discussion of gender discrimination into a discussion of class discrimination, which is the focus of many of the Marxist critics. While some issues are

different, it is easy to see that bias based on gender is just as destructive as the elitism in a society based on class differences.

Political Marxism is a topic that engenders strong emotional opinions, especially among those who see it as a threat to Western political systems. However, the basic issues that drove Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels to formulate their theories in the nineteenth century are still valid in a discussion of literature and art and the relationship between class and the arts in a society. Marxist critics assert that the products of artistic endeavors are the results of historical forces that are themselves the results of material and/or economic conditions at the time of the creation of the art.

Art then becomes the product of those who control the economic and the intellectual production of the society. Therefore, the nature of the description of an era in human history is the product of the dominant class at the time the description is given. The present era called postmodern is so labeled by the dominant class. (It is important to note that since the present era has not yet come of age, the eventual naming of it may shift if the dominant class also shifts. What that shift may be is unknown at this time.) This concept has been reduced to the simple statement that the victor writes the story of the battle.

### **Poststructuralism**