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## Postmodernism – Theoretical Perspectives

Dr V. Nithyanantha Bhat

It is generally agreed that postmodernism is a complicated term or a set of ideas which is not easy to define, describe or classify. It is hard to define especially because it is a concept that appears in a wide variety of disciplines or areas of study, which includes art, architecture, music, film, literature, sociology, communications, and technology. As an area of academic study, postmodernism emerged in mid-1980s. Some critics consider it a set of approaches which are closer to attitudes about the world and about the nature of knowledge. In *Studying Literary Theory* Roger Webster argues that "postmodernism and its antecedent – modernism, are problematic categories for a number of reasons." According to him, "the distinction between modernism and postmodernism is itself rather blurred: it is difficult to define a clear boundary in chronological, aesthetic or political terms," (*Studying Literary Theory: An Introduction*, 122). Some theorists and critics would consider the two movements as closely linked, others as quite antithetical. What can be said about both movements is that they are international – they transcend any strong national identification. The two movements embrace a wide range of creative activity from literature and painting to architecture and music – postmodernism going beyond the "high" or fine arts to include popular and consumer products. Another rather simplified way of viewing it is to see a developing relationship from realism to modernism to postmodernism: that is, from a predominating concern with an apparent truthfulness or verisimilitude to an apparent reality, to a preoccupation with the forms in which aversion of reality could be represented and a rejection of conventions of realism, to an increasing conviction that it is not possible to represent reality at all – there is no sense of a unified or underlying reality.

The nature of the distinction between modernism and postmodernism is summarized in Jeremy Hawthorn's *Concise Glossary of Contemporary Literary Theory*. According to this, both modernism and postmodernism give great prominence to fragmentation as a feature

of the 20<sup>th</sup> century art and culture, but they do so in very different moods. The modernist features it in such a way as to register a deep nostalgia for an earlier age when faith was full and authority intact. Ezra Pound calls his major work *The Cantos*, a "rag – bag", implying that this is all that is possible in the modern age, but also implying regret about that fact. In *The Waste Land*, too, the persona says, as if despairingly of the poem, "These fragments I have shored against my ruins." In instances like these there is a tone of lament, pessimism, and despair about the world . . . For the postmodernist, by contrast, fragmentation is an exhilarating, liberating phenomenon, symptomatic of our escape from the claustrophobic embrace of fixed systems of belief. In short, the modernist laments fragmentation while the postmodernist celebrates it.

For critic Ihab Hassan, postmodernism is one of the three modes of artistic change in the last hundred years – avant-garde, modern, and postmodernism. While modernism has been "hieratic, hyptactical and formalist," postmodernism is "playful, paratactical and deconstructionist" (*The Postmodern Turn: Essay in Postmodern Theory and Culture*, 86). Hassan identifies indeterminacy (with its traits like irony, rupture and silence) and immanence as two major tendencies in postmodernism. As Christopher Norris remarks, most of the critics of postmodernism ... have opted for the "open-ended free play of style and speculative thought, untrammelled by 'rules' of any kind" (*Deconstruction: Theory and Practice*, 91).

Linda Hutcheon attempts to describe postmodernism thus:

In general terms it (postmodernism) takes the form of self-conscious, self-contradictory, self-undermining statement. It is rather like saying something whilst at the same time putting inverted commas around what is being said. The effect is to highlight or 'highlight', or to subvert, or 'subvert', and the mode is therefore a 'knowing', and an ironic – or even 'ironic' – one. (*The Politics of Postmodernism*, 1)

It is interesting to consider postmodernist attitudes towards the nature of knowledge.



## Meaningless Poetry and the Music of Meaning

Dr V. S. Antony

Gerard Manley Hopkins and Stéphane Mallarmé without knowing each other's work were striving to attain an ideal of poetry in the direction of the semiotics of music. Both of them were doing revolutionary things in poetry, one in English and the other in French during the same period. Michael Sprinker observes that the similarity of their work became known when Paul Valéry, the great disciple of Mallarmé, happened to come across the works of Hopkins (39). Valéry conveys his admiration and wonder in these words:

I discover this morning on the table that serves as a night table, a volume of poems by a certain Gerard Manley Hopkins—with notes by Robert Bridges. I open it and decipher a bit with a vague grudge and without sensing that I am about to find “twenty minutes” of light. The preface by Charles Williams seems to me ordinary or absurd—at first—then it wakes me, and I grope through the poems and the notes by Bridges. Then I see clearly how all this suits me, situates me. An excellent guide that justifies my idea of poetry—which now comes clear to me. I understand also the Englishman's contempt for our poetry, all the poverty of the French way of teaching language—total negligence of the element of music. (Qtd in Sprinker 39)

In the new poetic scheme of Hopkins, Mallarmé, and Valéry meaning, interpretations, and ideas of poetry take a back seat. It is form and formlessness of resonance that foreground. The idealistic, logocentric, Platonic theory of form becomes “decentred form,” which is “similar to contemporary deconstructive theories of interpretation, which are admittedly not at all new in the Western tradition” (Sprinker 24).

Hopkins, from his student days, was preoccupied with the aesthetic principle of form, though he considered this thinking as eccentric and

solitary. However, the French Symbolists were also moving in the same direction. Even before Mallarmé crystallized his ideas on form and formlessness, Hopkins had completed his undergraduate essay, “On the Origin of Beauty: a Platonic Dialogue” containing a systematic presentation of the aesthetic principle of similarity and difference, which brought forth great admiration from Roman Jakobson later. The principle of beauty in similarity and difference found in a seminal form in this essay develops further in his aesthetics and reaches the ideal of music in his mature poetry. Sprinker comments on this: “Form does not radiate from a center but arises spontaneously from the comparison and differentiation of separate and distinctive parts within the whole” (25).

For Hopkins the possibility of rhyming exists between not only similar but also dissimilar things in nature, art, and language. He finds that “any two things however unlike are in something like” (*Sermons* 123). In music, “two strings not tuned to the same pitch may still be in resonance, as are middle C and the octave above, or as are C and G. Such notes are harmonic chimes of one another, bound together by a subtle mathematical relation in their vibrations” (Miller 90). Hopkins was convinced that “all forms of beauty, in nature and in art, are different versions of the relation which holds between unlike things which are similar” (*Journals* 105). He adds further: “Likeness therefore implies unlikeness . . . , and unlikeness, likeness” (*Journals* 105). As Miller says, “The fundamental method of Hopkins' poetry is to carry as far as it will go, into every aspect of his verse, the principle of rhyme” (93).

Hopkins's elaborate and subtle discussions on diatonic and chromatic principles of beauty in the essay, “On the Origin of Beauty” have elicited penetrating analysis by several critics, the most illuminating being by J. Hillis Miller. The successive repetitions of chromatism are brought into the differential structure of diatonism opening up the dialectics of similarity and difference. Differences in rhythmical structure do not shatter the unity of a work; on the contrary, such differences give the work diatonic beauty (Sprinker 26). As Hopkins says:



## Beyond Dialectics: Bataille, Foucault And Postmodern Transgression

Dr Varghese C. Abraham

*The road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom.*

William Blake

The incursion into the universal and the eternal by the individual and the contingent is one of the distinguishing features of postmodernity. Universal discourses are viewed with suspicion for their proclivity for totalizing and for the way they legitimise the authoritarian by displacing dialogue and by enforcing closure. Postmodernism is, in many ways, an attempt at an alternative—the impetus of which could be traced back to the Sophists in their parodic contestation of Plato's rational discourses and to the Nietzschean repudiation of the Western canons of Apollonian authority and enlightenment rationality. The Cartesian systematisation of the Platonic dialectic had put in place, during the enlightenment age, a transcendental and objective logos that presumably officiated the rational world as a *fait accompli*. Hegel elaborated on the Cartesian binaries to formulate an epistemology based on dialectical methodology in which all differences, except the overriding one of the conceptual, were eliminated for the sake of the rational system. The Hegelian legacy lurks within the core of Modernity even as it purports to rebel against the traditional and constrictive structures, the binaries of Structuralism being a case in point. Jurgen Habermas, himself an ardent modernist and a zealous critic of postmodernity (as his squabble with Lyotard testifies), observes: "Hegel inaugurated the discourse of modernity. He introduced the theme—the self-critical reassurance of modernity. He established the rules within which the theme can be varied—the dialectic of enlightenment" (51). The "self-critical reassurance of modernity" could be easily translated as the totalizing, unproblematic and rational discourse that engages the "other" in a binary after positioning itself as the legitimate centre and its claims to self-criticism boil down to attempts at self-preservation. The result of this, in literature, was the emergence of

artificial categories like high brow and low brow (locked in a binary where the high brow legitimises itself and the lowbrow is forever doomed to be a lack—the absence of literature) and the insistence that modernist experimentations were the means to purify the dialect of the tribe. Literature was regarded as an enterprise reserved for the serious author who created a world of substantive literary experience for an exclusive group of cognoscenti (the writerly text). John Docker exposes the hypocrisy of the modernist culture in *Postmodernism and Popular Culture: A Cultural History*. He observes wryly:

A kind of puritanic rationalism does become important in modernist cultural criticism, the necessity of "severe thought" about the plight of the epoch, last bulwark against the pleasures, the dissipating distractions, of the deluge of bestsellers, newspapers, film, broadcasting, advertising [. . .]. Important too would be the dislike of pluralism. (21-22)

In fact, Habermas himself is aware of the dictatorial proclivity of modernism when he concedes that:

The parties that have contented about the correct self-understanding of modernity since the days of the Young Hegelians all agree on the point: that a far-reaching process of self-illusion was connected with the learning processes conceptualized in the eighteenth century as "enlightenment." Agreement also exists about the fact that the authoritarian traits of a narrow-minded enlightenment are embedded in the principle of self-consciousness or of subjectivity. (55)

Postmodernism rejects the absolutization of any discourse and advocates multiplicities, differences (as substitute to binaries), self-reflexivity and polyphony. The imperious centre appearing as the unified 'I' who observes and records, the uncomplicated text amenable to a designated set of readings, the language of representation capable of conveying conclusive and objective meaning, and characters who are the unproblematic representations of real people are all dissolved and in their place postmodernism posits shifting perspectives, differential readings and problematized language in search of the liminal. Lyotard,

## Depending on the Oppressive "Saviour" : Jelinek's *Women as Lovers* as a Derision of Women's Submission to Patriarchy

Ramesh K. G.

Mighty ideological tools of the colonizers kept the colonized under the colonial spell for centuries. The postcolonial age beheld the undermining of those colonial ideologies by theorists like Frantz Fanon, Homi K. Bhabha, Edward W. Said and Stephen Slemon. Colonization was actually motivated by the desire of the West for extra-living spaces and the extraction of riches. Looting the colonized spaces by dominating the native indigenous people was their actual agenda. But they covered it within the showy ideological mask of their nurturing and civilizing mission. Really, they were oppressors in the guise of saviours. Asserting the supremacy of the colonizing culture and perspective, they constructed Europe's others as inferior, disordered, irrational and primitive beings dipped in barbarism and dominated them for centuries. But the domination of men over women has a far more extensive history. Centuries before the establishment of European colonies men conquered and colonized female consciousness by debauching it with patriarchal ideologies. The rise of the Feminist movement was to decolonize the female psyche by dethroning the patriarchal values. But majority of women are still following the bad faith and live within the patriarchal ideologies as members of the "weaker sex" depending entirely upon men. For them men are their saviours. Such women lose a lot because of this dependence. Simone de Beauvoir says:

Man-the-sovereign will provide woman-the-liege with material protection and will undertake the moral justification of her existence; thus she can evade at once both economic risk and the metaphysical risk of a liberty in which ends and aims must be contrived without assistance. . . . Thus, woman may fail to lay claim to the status of subject because she lacks definite resources, because she feels the necessary bond that ties her to man regardless of



reciprocity, and because she is often very well pleased with her role as the *Other* (9).

Thus, women who depend entirely on men usually get marginalized without liberty and they often lose their status as separate subjects. 2004 Nobel Prize winner, Austrian writer Elfriede Jelinek's *Women as Lovers* takes a scornful look both at those women who like to become the other of men and at the system that moulded them so.

In *Women as Lovers* Jelinek adopts a surprisingly original writing style where all conventions slip away. She never indents the first words of her paragraphs from the left margin and is not ready to stick on to the tradition of using capital letters to initiate paragraphs, sentences or names. She uses capital letters only occasionally to stress some words or ideas. By breaking conventions, she tries to denude the absurdity of them because they have no role in conveying the meaning.

*Women as Lovers* portrays the endeavours of two women – brigitte and paula – to attain a better future. Quite paradoxically, they see their future not in themselves but in their insensitive “lovers” – heinz and erich respectively. Their self-negating attempts to acquire the attentions of heinz and erich are mocked without pity.

brigitte works in a textile factory, where she sews brassieres. But she has no sense of duty and considers her work a burden. She “loves” heinz, an electrician, and dreams that he will liberate her from the sewing machine. She wants to become a parasite because she has no faith in herself. The narrator mocks: “brigitte wants to have her future made. she cannot produce it herself” (Jelinek 8). Born and brought up in a patriarchal society she has been trained to see her future in a man: “in this special case life is called heinz. real life is not only called heinz, it is heinz” (Jelinek 6). She has no choice but only heinz. What disturbs her most is the thought that, unlike her, he has enough options to choose from. She terribly fears losing him to someone else and without any sense of honour always pursues him like a shadow. Thus brigitte's life is no more at her hands. The narrator says:

it is left completely to chance, whether brigitte lives, with heinz, or escapes life and goes to waste.

there are no rules for that. fate decides brigitte's fate. it's not what she does and is that counts, what counts is heinz and what he does and is. (Jelinek 6-7)

This over dependence is a blind submission to patriarchy and ultimately to slavery. It's worth mocking and that is what Jelinek does.

Serving heinz, brigitte is always behind him. But he knows all the privileges of being a member of the “superior sex” and is often quite indifferent to her concern for him. But it is worth mentioning that he is never indifferent to her body. “Female sexuality,” says Luce Irigaray, “has always been conceptualized on the basis of masculine parameters”(350). Quite obviously those masculine notions of female sexuality privilege only the sexual needs of men. Irigaray says:

Woman, in this sexual imaginary, is only a more or less obliging prop for the enactment of man's fantasies. That she may find pleasure there in that role, by proxy, is possible, even certain. But such pleasure is above all a masochistic prostitution of her body to a desire that is not her own, and it leaves her in a familiar state of dependency upon man. Not knowing what she wants, ready for anything, even asking for more, so long as he will “take” her as his “object” when he seeks his own pleasure. Thus she will not say what she herself wants; moreover she does not know, or no longer knows, what she wants. (Irigaray 351)

In *Women as Lovers*, the relationship between heinz and brigitte demonstrates Irigaray's ideas. brigitte is only a passive receptacle of heinz's active sexual feelings:

heinz is happy at last to have found a person to rut. hardly has heinz set eyes on the person brigitte, than he's unbuttoning himself and going into the starting position. while brigitte is still explaining to him that she loves him, and at the same time feels something like respect for his professional success, while brigitte is still letting her thoughts wander from love and respect to wedding and house renovation, before she even has time to watch out, she already has heinz the rutter clinging to her body like a leech.