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A Multifaceted Shift from Modernism to Postmodernism

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Abstract

The term multifaceted reflects the diverse aspects of modernism and postmodernism. The title directs us towards the period after the Modern period. To understand postmodernism, we have to go through the history of English literature. Modernism is a conscious movement having philosophical, aesthetic and literary dimensions. Modernism was the phenomenon of the 1920s, the post-war period (World War I). Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot were the pioneers of modernism. Modernism seeks truth, meaning and history while Postmodernism rests only on representations of surface reality. Postmodernism could be interpreted as a philosophical reaction against several assumptions concerning modernity. Unlike Modernism, Postmodernism is more concerned about differences, transformation and change. It is ambivalent in nature. The publication of *The Death of the Author* (1968) marks the beginning of Postmodernism. The author was made irrelevant, and the only relevant thing was language. Originally, the idea came from the German philosopher Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche's *God is Dead*. This break allowed various voices to decline the importance of the writer and to break the chain of an ongoing tradition. Modernists never ignored the importance of authors, as they were significant landmarks in constructing and enriching the tradition. This paper aims to study the multifaceted approach towards the developments and shifts from modernism to postmodernism. It will explore the ideas and theories of Roland Barthes, Ferdinand de Saussure, Jacques Derrida and Michael Foucault.

Keywords: Modernism, Postmodernism, English Literature, Language, Multifaceted, World War I.

Introduction

The term 'modern' could be considered as an adjective that specifies a point in time. More appropriately, the term represents a time that is current and present. The term modern came into existence in English during the late Middle English, referring to the poetry of Geoffrey Chaucer as one of the earliest instances of modern literature in English. The modern period applies to the works written after the beginning of World War I. The literary works of the period reflect bold experimentation in subject matter, style, form, narrative, verse and drama. Although modernism was antagonistic to modernity. According to a German philosopher, Theodore Adorno, "modernism is a form of modern culture that says 'no' to modernity." Historically, the term postmodernism is a time frame of the end of World War II. The period witnessed the development of a sense of fragmentation into a sense of absurdity. The term is more likely as a broad perspective working towards the intensification of the traits of modernism that have become uncontainable within the same sphere, hence a new terminology came into existence. The term postmodernism was first used in 1979, in the work of French philosopher, sociologist and literary theorist Jean-François Lyotard in his work *The Postmodern Condition*. According to J. A. Cuddon, the term is described as "an eclectic approach, aleatory writing, parody and pastiche." The description could be understood as the use of fragmentation in form, including randomness, and the letting go of divine authorship. According to Peter Barry, "Modernism was an earthquake in the arts which brought down much of the structure of pre-twentieth century practice in music, painting, literature and architecture." Vienna, being the centre during the 1890s and 1910s, saw many artistic and cultural developments which were very much nearly impossible to think of again. But, due to the effects of World War II, modernism started to retreat. It is extremely difficult to make a clear point as a line between the start and end of Modernism and Postmodernism.

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Modernism is said to be the inadequacy of traditional literary modes to represent the discordant, harsh realities of the post-World War period. This is also the case with the postmodernists, as they also wanted to break away from the modernist forms, which in their turn had become conventional. Postmodernism is the continuation of modernism to an extreme, with unconventional experiments with modern literary forms. They focused on fragmentation, vagueness, and inconclusiveness and got rid of the content related to the war. To show this socio-historical change in people's perception, several critics used the term Postmodernism. This also marked the development and growth of advanced technologies that could be seen in culture, thought and communication.

Nietzsche is one of the important precursors of postmodernism. Nietzsche, in his work *The Gay Science*, accepted one of the ideas of Charles Baudelaire that modernity is "the transient, the fleeting, the contingent" and is repeated in all ages. It says that nothing in the world occurs as it has never occurred before. Nietzsche also gave the phrase that 'God is Dead' the idea is to reflect that it is a god less world. Until the Victorian Age, people used to believe in God, but after the war, things changed. This inspired the French literary theorist Roland Barthes for his essay *Death of the Author* (1968). This essay marked the beginning of the postmodern wave, as the modernists never declared the death of the author. For them, authors were very significant as they were the landmarks in the contribution towards the enrichment and strengthening of the ongoing tradition, which the postmodernist authors declined.

Another postmodernist, Jacques Derrida, a French philosopher, came up with the theory of Deconstruction in which he emphasised that the purpose of criticism is to deconstruct a constructed literary work in terms of how the whole work got constructed, or what the functioning is in the process of construction of the work, rather than to reconstruct an already constructed literary work. He states that a language not only conveys the meaning, but also puts forward the presence and absence of meaning simultaneously. The author was made irrelevant, and the language was the supreme characteristic. A literary work was made to be analysed or studied in terms of language. Before the author, socio-cultural history was important in order to relate to the people and society of the time. But the postmodernists freed themselves from these perspectives, and the only thing relevant that remained is language. Language being the supreme characteristic, a Swiss linguist, semiotician and philosopher- Ferdinand de Saussure came out as the most important figure of the age. He is considered the 'Father of Modern Linguistics'. He wrote his book *A General Introduction to Modern Linguistics*. This again changed the whole ongoing tradition of literary criticism and broke the form which had been there from the time of Aristotle. All the elements of literature, like history, writer, culture, forms, and structure, became irrelevant. The work was only available to be studied through the form of language and linguistics. Saussure's idea of language influenced many of the minds of the twentieth century. His key idea was that nothing remains in isolation without being related to one another. Thus, one must know about the relations before analysing a work of literature. In terms of language, if one wants to learn about the true nature of language, he or she must learn about its commonality with

the existing semiological systems. This also changed the isolation concerning the history of English literature from European history. By giving priority to language, the postmodern writer focuses on narratives to reflect upon how the tension, confusion, obscurity, and differences depict a parallel flow of knowledge simultaneously. In the postmodern approach, language constructs the meaning, using which we create the reality for us, and language is not something that provides simple interpretations; rather, it perplexes the stability.

Another French philosopher and literary critic, Michael Foucault, talked about his radical ideas. He wrote *Archaeology of Knowledge*. Before this work, the term was only related to the digging up of ruins, or excavations, or older civilisations, but for the first time, the term archaeology was used outside its defined premise. It supported the idea that knowledge or ideas can never stand in isolation and must have a background. This allows multidisciplinary relevance, appropriate and efficient.

Most of the ideas by the postmodernists were immensely enlightening. The modernist movement was essentially traditional, and the pioneers of modernism were medievalist and conservative. They never wanted the people to cut off the tradition and cultural roots. They encouraged the people to visit the church and to continue the ongoing tradition. This approach by T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound was questioned, challenged and discarded by the postmodernist critics and writers.

Derrida's idea of Deconstruction became the new instrument of literary criticism and further got established as a whole school of literary theory and criticism. He emphasised the critics to analyse a work not only on its face value, but rather study the origin of a literary work and to study the process by which it was constructed. Deconstruction simply means to understand the process of construction.

Eric Donald Hirsch Jr., known as E. D. Hirsch, is an American educator, literary critic, and theorist of education expressed his query for the Death of the Author supporters. In the early 1970s, Hirsch began working on the theory of writing and composition, publishing several articles and a book, *The Philosophy of Composition* (1977). The central concept in this book is the idea of "relative readability." One piece of writing is more readable, in terms of relative readability, than another if it conveys the same meaning but is easier to read and is read more quickly than the alternative passage. The *Philosophy of Composition* was widely reviewed and generated a lot of discussion in composition circles for several years, but Hirsch's work in this area is no longer widely discussed. Hirsch expressed his idea towards the death of the author concept, that somebody must have decided the order of the words, and through this arrangement, the intention of the writer must have gone into those words. If this wasn't the case, then how does an author own his own form of writing, structure of thought and language, and structure of words? It thus became very evident that one cannot just keep the writer away from his literary work. If a work has emotions and feelings, then how can a critic study that work, keeping the author's side? This is why we also have copyrights and patents.

Conclusion

From the very beginning of postmodernist theories, there are voices that keep challenging the multiplicity of authorities of Roland Barthes, Ferdinand de Saussure, Michael

Foucault, and Jacques Derrida, but are yet to be replaced by some new literary theory or ideology. Right from the time of modernism, there has been a parallel movement in Eastern Europe. This work has discussed the idea that has given the postmodernist theories the current dominance and the frequency with which these theories are working towards the paradigms of a wide range of material. These theories were applicable to literary criticism as well as politics and discussed the ways to respond to literature. By discussing the above multiple theories, it could be concluded that Literature and Literature Studies, Literary Theories and Literary Criticism cannot be studied in isolation.

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