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## Values and Truth in Postmodernism

Md. Azabul Haque

Modern literary theories such as structuralism, post-structuralism, deconstruction, semiotics, postmodernism, feminism and postcolonialism have already established themselves as a separate branch of the academic study of literature. It functions culturally and historically as a form of writing and knowledge. Any theory takes new interpretations because of the variable nature and importance of the context of the reader in terms of history, gender, class, etc. Nowadays, the theories are being practised as if they were unproblematic, quite natural, and worthy of being allowed as aspects of literature and literary study. The terms and categories it employs and its activities associated with the study of literature formulate reading into criticism, and need to be interrogated and constantly reassessed. Many think that these theories should not be allowed to stand unchallenged because they impede the traditional values of thinking and define truth from the point of relativism.

The contemporary literary theories are intimately connected to each other. The study of these theories not only helps to understand but also makes clear how they complete, correct and aid each other. Of these, postmodernism is overtly or covertly related to many modern theories. I hope the following discussion will enable the readers to determine the exact meaning of values and truth in postmodernism and thus help to remove a lot of suspicions. Though postmodernism does not believe in any authenticity of history, it has not appeared overnight. It maintains a chain with the previous theories without which it remains undefined and underestimated.

The English association, the main body to develop the English literary culture in educational institutions, first promoted the concept of culture tied to moral improvement in 1907. Matthew

Arnold had initiated it by using the term 'criticism' with particular emphasis. Since then the various approaches to literature in the 19th century became closely connected with the concepts of culture, morality and civilization. 'Tradition', one of the keywords in the earlier twentieth century gave literature a set of values. 'Tradition and the Individual Talent'- a very influential essay by T.S. Eliot (1919) considers the values and timeless qualities to be the embodiments of literature and as a form of cultural heritage as well:

... the historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence; the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his whole country a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order. This historical sense, which is the sense of the timeless and the temporal together, is what makes a writer traditional.<sup>1</sup>

T.S. Eliot speaks of a sense of unity and value that dehistoricize literature both from the past and present in any material sense. Based on the intuitive realization of shared human understanding, this sense promotes a spiritual history without any specific moment of recorded events. And tradition is a recognition where individual writer or reader's experience is merged into the larger sense of experience. It argues that literature with its timeless qualities embodies universal and stable values. But most of the modern theories consider these values to be pragmatic, contextual, local and unstable.

It can be asserted that the Renaissance that dominated the world of economics, philosophy, music, architecture, literature, intellect and so on enlivened Europe in the 15th, 16th and early 17th centuries. Preserving the right to take decision, it gave emphasis on individualism even if it was not above suspicion in many cases. Aristotle whose word had been considered to be the law in the Middle Ages was highly esteemed as a wise philosopher. The conception of this well-rounded man emerged as an original guide, and worldliness was connected to all-rounded development.

Aristotelian philosophy of God being perfect and matter imperfect yet constantly striving to be perfect inspired the Renaissance men to flower into a richness of colour and emotion and a response to the beauty and excitement of the physical world. Stimulated by the learning of Greece and Rome, they avoided religious values and invented materialistic theories. Secularism that brought about a tremendous shake-up in the field of thought around 1527 AD is one of the outcomes of these inventions.

Later, in 1848, Marxism, "a political and economic theory that the dominant class has exploited the other classes and that socialism and a classless society will inevitably supersede capitalism", changed and rejected many past theories of economics, literature, psychology and other fields of study. Nihilism, the rejection of all religious and moral principles, often in the belief that life is meaningless, came following secularism in 1860, and added many new ideas. Around 1900, Freudian explanation of the human relationship, along with Marxism and Nihilism, formulated many new thoughts and strengthened themselves that in turn gave rise to new theories and doctrines. Faith shifted from religion to reason. Love for fragmentation got rooted and a new liking for collages of random materials was seen everywhere. It was the Age of Reason, the Age of Enlightenment. Thinkers like Nietzsche, Heidegger and Kant discarded God and started arguing for faith in the powers of human reason. By exercising reason, according to them, a tradition would emerge that would be capable of solving all sorts of problems in the society. Thus reason was empowered to explain and interpret anything of the past and present. God in this way was replaced with Reason.

In course of time, many theories challenged the power of reason and started giving new explanations to literary texts. Structuralism emerged, and now it manipulates language to construct the world. It explains everything from the linguistic point of view and takes the meaning of texts from the particular to the general. Rejecting the existence of the particular and reasonable meaning of any word, Saussure, the supposed father of structuralism, says that the precise or fixed meanings of words depend on 'syntagmatic chain'. According to this, where there is

no chain in function and meaning each of which could be substituted for any of the others, there is no precise meaning of any word. So reality or values can not have any constant or stable meaning in itself. Sometimes it depends upon its relation with other meaning and sometimes upon pair opposites such as, 'male' and 'female'. With their opposite characteristics they help us to find out the actual meaning of these words. Now the fact is that truth may require falsehood for its precise meaning, but it can never be accepted that truth and falsehood are based on personal choice rather than any reason or system. Instead of the content, structuralism puts emphasis on the form of a story. In this way, literature is considered to be a kind of collective Utopian dreaming instead of a way of knowing reality. As to history, it seems to have a tendency to belittle the truth in it. Deeply involved in the idea of relational and arbitrary meaning of anything good or bad, structuralism denies the fundamental human desires that bring about civilization.

Post-structuralism, skeptical in philosophy, flamboyant in style, euphoric in tone and textual in attitude, deconstructs structuralism. Nietzsche, a German philosopher and follower of fascism, and Heidegger, another German existentialist and atheist, and Freud, an Austrian psychoanalyst, play the most significant roles in bringing a radical change in thoughts, and prompt to decentre the intellectual universe where there is no absolute or fixed point. In post-structuralism, 'there are no facts, only interpretation' which seems to welcome everybody through its door named deconstruction. Most probably deconstruction sparks off the most remarkable changes in attitude and thoughts towards philosophy and literature, that leads to postmodernism.

A close reading reveals that once reason took the place of God. In structuralism, reason is used to scale the meaning to some extent. But in post-structuralism, deconstruction considers reason to be dormant. Supposing undecidability as the indispensable part of philosophy, it says that there is nothing reasonable and stable at the same time. Since meanings are always incomprehensible, they are provisional and relative. According to Derrida:

"There's no assured essence of "Literature" or "philosophy"

They're unstable categories with no guarantees. If they seem secure and natural, it's because they're governed by a powerful consensus, premised on foundational thinking".<sup>2</sup>

Derrida strongly suggests not bringing any sort of boundary or limitation in finding out the meaning of a word. A literary text can share its views with psychological, philosophical, legal or political views of other texts at random. It also says that deconstruction is engaged in discovering the unknown rather than the known dimension of the text. That there is repressed unconscious in the text is another invention of deconstruction. A simple example can clarify the matter. The word 'host' originates from the Greek word 'hostis', meaning an enemy. Here the conception of 'hostility' is the repressed unconscious meaning of the word 'host'. In this way deconstruction tries to make the not-seen seen to us. Finally, deconstruction aims at reading a text to unmask the internal contradictions or inconsistencies in the text. So any essence or truth of text is ambiguous in itself. A text cannot ensure the reliable meaning of any word. Truth may lie under falsehood and vice versa. According to Derrida:

"Undecidability and derailments of communications are always and already at work, in all discourse - in law, politics, education, the military, medicine, etc. as well as in philosophy and theory".<sup>3</sup>

This is a world impregnated with uncertainty and suspicion that lead to postmodernism. Unless we tell something about modernism, postmodernism will remain incomprehensible.

The modern thinkers had tolerance for neither morality nor reason nor universality nor progress. They proclaimed the "death of God" as well as the death of morality and metaphysics. The impressionists like Manet and Monet left the solid world and emphasized the decomposition of light into fragments. In literature, writers such as D.H. Lawrence, T.S. Eliot, James Joyce and William Butler brought exotic myths from the Eastern and tribal culture. All these writers depicted the picture of a soul and a society of fragmentation and despair, where reason and science both proved absurd and unusable. Cubism, Dadaism, Surrealism,

and Futurism fractured the values and created a chaotic situation in the world of thought. Suspicion of science and technology, and disgust at commercialism, led men to an aimless goal. According to Jermy Hawthorn:

But the work of T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, D.H. Lawrence, Franz Kafka, Knut Hamsun - to take some representative names - is typically characterized by a pessimistic view of the modern world, a world seen as fragmented and decayed, in which communication between human beings is difficult or impossible, and in which commercial and cheapening forces present an inseparable barrier to human or cultural betterment.<sup>4</sup>

The theory of evolution accelerated the materialistic philosophy that mocked at and threatened various religious faiths. Morality and traditional values disappeared and postmodernism emerged as a standard of assessment in the world of philosophy.

Born in France, taught in Algeria, Brazil and California and involved in a group called Socialism or Barbarism, Professor Jean-Francois Lyotard, one of the map-makers of postmodernism, becomes disillusioned with Marxism. He uses two terms named 'scientific discourse' and 'narrative discourse' to make his position clear. In narrative discourse, the teller of the myth does not have to argue or prove it while chanting stories. There lies a sense of natural awareness that opens from the mythic time to the narrative period. The deliberate acts of self-assertion progress towards the realization of a distantly idealized goal. Myths in this way legitimize them easily what science cannot do. Since science cannot depend upon itself to legitimize its activities, it must turn to the narrative. This narrative, according to Hegel's philosophy of the 'unity of all knowledge', plays the pivotal role in the gradual evolution of the human mind from ignorance to total being. The liberation of humanity and the attainment of a pure, self-conscious spirit are a self-legitimizing myth, a 'grand narrative' or 'metanarrative'. These are supposedly universal, absolute or ultimate truths that are used to legitimize various political or scientific projects. Projects like Marxism, Darwinism and Freudianism are meant to liberate humanity. Lyotard has defined the postmodern condition as

"skepticism towards all metanarratives". He thinks that people have stopped believing in metanarratives because such narratives marginalize minorities. These narratives go against justice but people universally believe in justice. So, he celebrates the fragmented, contradictory, heterogeneous, incompatible, ambivalent and multiple nature of this postmodern society. According to postmodernism ideology, Christianity or Buddhism or Marxism, does not have any value individually. Islam or Hinduism is just one brand of the many, available in the market.

Lyotard argues that knowledge will never survive if it is not translated into computer language. For learning, there is no need of any association between teachers and students. Computer will produce information in the form of knowledge and huge multinational corporations will dominate states. Knowledge will be produced in order to be bought and sold where the main goal is 'to exchange'. There will be no 'use-value' of knowledge; it will end in itself. This irreversible change is the cornerstone of postmodernism.

Inspired by Mandel, Frederic Jameson, another Marxist and map-maker of postmodernism, divides history into three sections where postmodernism is given the latest position. He asserts that the culture of postmodernism shows the dislocation and fragmentation of language communities that come off as splinters. There every individual speaks:

"... a curious private language of its own, each profession developing its private code or dialect and finally each individual coming to be a kind of linguistic island, separated from everyone else".<sup>5</sup>

Jameson portrays that postmodern city-dwellers are alienated and living in a hallucination, an exhilarating blur, and a reality evaporating into mere images. These images are stolen from consumer culture and reproduced with industrial repetition. He gives the examples of the bottles of Coca-Cola and colleges of identical images of Hollywood stars such as Marilyn Monroe, where there is depthlessness with no link to any reality. Here anyone can be the direct or indirect victim of TV, computer, and advertising. The tube and the obscene flow of images can

hypnotize anyone in this world.

In a postmodern society, everybody grows up in a world of objects that make men more object-like. Buying and consuming commodities are the main base of postmodernism. It believes in consumption no matter whether it brings happiness or not. It says that everybody desires to distinguish himself from another through some systems of social differentiation. If you buy a Mercedes instead of Volkswagen, you buy a whole system of needs rational, homogeneous, systematic and hierarchical at once.

Baudrillard, another map-maker of postmodernism describes this era as simulacrum. It means 'false copy' that overshadows our experience of the essential and ideal forms. Everything, even art, yields to the force of mechanical reproduction governed by market and media forces. Postmodernism has discarded the very idea of true copy. The matter can be made clear by an example. A nun in medieval Europe is seen to worship an icon of Madonna. The painting is so lively that the nun in her meditations feels the spiritual presence of Mary. Is she an idolater? The iconoclast explains the matter saying that images do not reveal divinity but mask and pervert the divine. So such images are evil, and bad copies of the original, and should as such be destroyed. The skeptic considers the whole thing as farcical and denies the presence of any divine being. What do the postmodernists say? They say that the 'real' is dead and the icons, images and copies have taken the place of the 'dead real', that are more 'real' than the first 'real'. They create a reality by themselves, what is termed as hyperreality in which truth or reality is eroded. So there is no distinction between the real and unreal.

There is a loss of 'real' in the icon and that does not matter at all because "everything is a model or an image, all is surface without depth". Here images are bred incestuously in such a way that reality becomes redundant and there remains no reference to reality or meaning.

It can be said from this that the real is concealed and the unreal turns into the real. According to Baudrillard:

This anticipation, this precession, this short circuit ... all the possible interpretations, even the most contradictory - all are true, in the sense that their truth is exchangeable, in the image of models (codes) from which they proceed, in a generalized cycle.<sup>6</sup>

Truth in postmodernism is ever-changing and unstable. It is fragmented and subject to change from person to person, area to area and time to time. Nobody can frame or fix anything since everything is floating in this world. The idea of having any 'centre' is the root of all evils according to this theory. It therefore celebrates fragmentation. Any thought based on any particular truth or ideal marginalizes, represses, chains and ignores the human being. According to the postmodernist thinkers:

"If you have a culture which has Christ in the center of icons, then Christians will be central to that culture, and Buddhists, Muslims, Jews ... anybody different ... will be in the margins, marginalized, pushed to the outside".<sup>7</sup>

Diversity, plurality and local differences are believed to liberate the human being. But there is no reason for thinking that postmodernism is merely a fictional and contrived game, played with theories:

... but it is the name of the game, a hidden game, practised globally and adapted locally, enthusiastically and slavishly. Perhaps it is the new invisible hand of the cyborg who has only one 'head' but many arms with their fingers on various buttons or centres of civil and non-civil vested interests, if you like.<sup>8</sup>

Here the acts of charm are more alluring and harmful than any direct acts of harm. It is a world of make-belief where sense and sensibility frequently go awry. Non-sense and insensitivity turn into sense and sensitivity without any lamentation.

The information and communication Technology (ICT), media and market dominated by the influential section condition our

thinking. As for an Arab, his body is only made in Arab and the rest is made in some other countries. The people of Dubai feel proud of taking their breakfast bread from France. Postmodernism welcomes it because it does not believe in any centre or originality. These charms and harms are not only seductive but also threatening. It is a world full of chaos and catastrophe.

Postmodernism believes in the power of the code. Like the code of language in grammar, the DNA code controls our biological processes. The cultural life in this hyperreality era depends on a variety of codes such as sex videos, yoga videos, cookbooks, parenting manuals, advertising, television, newspapers, dish media, etc. These codes make us not only respond with "yes" or "no", but also fix our options.

Eclectic approach, aleatory writings, parody and pastiche characterize the values and truths in postmodernism. A cut-up technique with chance and accident is a fundamental part of the process of inspiration and invention in postmodernism. Ideas or values do not derive from any school of thought but are selected from various schools.

Collages of images, jumble of ideas, cultural mixing, etc correspond to the yardstick of postmodernism. No ideas are specific and grounded at all. Everything is free-floating, ever changing and fluid in postmodern world. According to professor Syed Ali Ashraf:

It is on this basis that Dewey formulated his educational theories. He believed that society would be ever changing and, therefore, school's ideals, morals and values should go on constantly adjusting themselves to the changing concepts in the society. The uncertainty that this theory leads to has given rise to the juvenile delinquency, moral tension and total uncertainty in society.<sup>9</sup>

The era of postmodernism is identified as the era of media. It not only deforms the reality but also creates its own shape destroying the original, 'In the film *The Last Temptation of Christ* by Martin Scorsese, Christ is shown as ambivalent, coward, ill-tempered and lusty'.<sup>10</sup>

Madonna is a supreme product of the eclectic culture of postmodernism. Many specify her as a child of postmodernism. Her wit, style, gestures, sexual references and deliberate use of parody focused on religious theme reflect the postmodernist culture. Everyone greets her with applause when she sings - 'Papa don't preach',<sup>11</sup> the song about teenage pregnancy and rebellion. This pop philosopher of postmodernist culture takes high pride and intones her squeaky voice saying: 'I am a material girl in a material world'.

In fine, the more we will read the more we will find the fact that 'postmodernism is based on the indeterminacy and distrust of universal or totalizing discourses'.<sup>12</sup> Instead of clear guidance, here, any moral belief or values worries us. Even God is not above suspicion in this world. Religion, art and nature have faded away and the only thing left is a "recession of reality".<sup>13</sup> Thus it is said that values and truth in postmodernism are fragmented, distorted and overthrown.

#### Footnotes

- 1 T.S. Eliot, Tradition and the Individual Talent, in Frank Kermode, ed. The selected prose of T.S. Eliot, London, Faber and Faber, 1975, p 38. First published in 1919.
- 2 Jeff Collins and Bill Mayblin, *Introducing Derrida*, Icon Books UK & Totem Books USA, p.99. Published in 1998.
- 3 Collins and Mayblin, *Introducing Derrida*, p.90
- 4 Hawthorn, Jeremy, *A Glossary of Contemporary Literary Theory*, NewYork: Arnold, Oxford University press, P. 214. 4th ed. published in 2000.
- 5 Powell, Jim, *Postmodernism for Beginners*, Orient Longman private Limited, Hyderabad, India, p.37. First published in India in 2001.
- 6 Powell, *Postmodernism for Beginners*, p.62
- 7 Powell, *Postmodernism for Beginners*, p100
- 8 Kaplan, Yusuf, "Postmodern Coup, beyond charm. *Impact International*, February 2001. UK

- 9 Syed Ali Ashraf "Muslim Education Quarterly", editorial. Future of Islam in the twenty first Century, Vol. 14, No. 4, (1997), Cambridge : The. Islamic Academy, UK
- 10 Ahmed, Akbar S. Postmodernism and Islam, Penguin Books, India, p. 216. Published in 1993
- 11 Ahmed, *Postmodernism and Islam*, p 217
- 12 David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Cambridge and Oxford, 1989); Scott Lash, *Sociology of Postmodernism* (London, 1990).
- 13 Appignanesi, Richard and Garratt, Chris. *Introducing Postmodernism*. Icon Books UK, Totem Books USA, p150. Published in 2000

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