



The Concept of Reality from Postmodern Perspectives

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Abstract

Postmodernism is an academic movement in philosophy that evolved as a reaction to modernism. Postmodernism holds that reality cannot be known nor can it be described objectively. From the intellectual point of view postmodernism begins to perceive the reality in a new way. In both the cases of our understanding of knowledge and view of science, it brings a revolution.

Postmodernism does not accept any definite description about anything. The modern intellectual outlook is radically rejected by this philosophy. More particularly it can be said that this philosophy announces the end of this universe.

In this paper I shall try to explore the basic tenets of postmodernism and its concept of reality in contrast to modernism and finally show that how far this is tenable.

Keywords: knowledge, modernism, postmodernism, reality, truth.

Introduction

The two terms 'modernism' and 'postmodernism' are very much useful in recent times. All of us know that modern philosophy begins with the arrival of Rene Descartes in the philosophical zone. But none can say the exact date and year of the beginning of Postmodernism. But yet it is believed that the birth place of Postmodernism is St. Louis in 1972 on a July and after seven years it could occupy the intellectual mind when Jean Francois Lyotard, a French philosopher published his work *The Postmodern Condition: A Report of Knowledge*.

The foundations and structure of modern philosophy are criticized by postmodern philosophy. This philosophy also began by criticising the continental philosophy. In the 19th century the most powerful influences on postmodernism are existentialism, particularly the writings of Soren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche. In the early-to-mid 20th century philosophers like phenomenologist Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger, language philosopher Wittgenstein have also influenced postmodernism. There are different values and assumptions that we derived from modernism, such as the essence of humanity that distinguishes human beings from other animals, or that among the different forms of governments, one is better than another. Postmodernism is very much skeptical or nihilistic towards these values and assumptions. There is a close relation between postmodern philosophy and substantial literature of critical theory.

In contemporary culture there is a tendency to accept only objective truth and postmodernists reject this tendency. This type of thought is actually a departure from the modernist approaches and this approach is intentional. But in spite of all these descriptions about postmodernism it is true that this term is indefinable. There are different books written on postmodernism but most of

these are written in obscure tongue. A fair characterization of postmodernism is a very difficult task because it is a loose coalition of diverse thinkers from different academic disciplines. The strengths and weaknesses of postmodernism are understood by its friends and foes very well. The best way to describe it is that it is a set of critical, strategic and rhetorical practices.

Definition of Postmodernism

In the *Encyclopedia of Cultural Anthropology* (1996) Ryan Bishop in a concise article defines postmodernism as a diverse movement, which originates in aesthetic, architecture and philosophy. On grounded theoretical perspectives, it espouses a systematic skepticism.

Bishop (1996) further says "postmodernists are suspicious of authoritative definitions and singular narratives of any trajectory of events". He says that based on their basic belief that there is no objective truth, the post modernists attack on ethnography. It denies the implementation of any authentic scientific method.

Another thinker named Sarup (1993) defines postmodernism as "there is a sense in which if one sees modernism as culture of modernity, postmodernism is the culture of post modernity".

Baudrillard (1984:38-9) termed post modernism as the period of second revolution in the twentieth century. He says that it is the period where there is immense process of the destruction of meaning which is equal to the earlier destruction of appearances. He also says that in this period of post modernism whoever lives by meaning also dies by meaning.

Postmodernism believes that it is impossible to have a correct description of Reality. It is undoubtedly a skeptical view. The famous advocates of this view among oth-



ers are – F. Nietzsche, L. Wittgenstein, Karl Popper and Thomas Kuhn. They are called the extreme skeptics.

Basic Tenets Of Postmodernism

From the point of view of philosophy it can be said that the primary task of postmodernism is to reinterpret the question- what knowledge is and what can be treated as knowledge. Postmodernists do not believe any objective existence of reality, truth, value, reason and so forth. These are, according to them, social construction, creation of linguistic practices. In no way these are absolute. These are relative to the social groups that share a narrative and not to any individual being.

An anthropological critic Melford Spiro's gave a synopsis of the basic tenets of postmodernism: "The postmodernist critique of science consists of two interrelated arguments, epistemological and ideological. Both are based on subjectivity. First, because of the subjectivity of the human object, anthropology, according to the epistemological argument cannot be a science; and in any event the subjectivity of the human subject precludes the possibility of science discovering objective truth. Second, since objectivity is an illusion, science according to the ideological argument, subverts oppressed groups, females, ethnics, third-world peoples (Spiro 1996).

Types Of Postmodernism

Rosenau divides postmodernism into two broad heads – Skeptics and Affirmatives. Let us explain the two forms of postmodernism in details.

Skeptical Postmodernism: Postmodernists, according to Rosenau, are extremely critical of the modern subject. To them, subject is nothing but a linguistic convention. In explaining time they say that modern understanding of time is oppressive on the ground that it controls and measures individuals and thereby they reject time. Not only this, postmodernists also rejected theory. They say that there are innumerable theories but none can be considered more correct than others. Moreover, theories do not manifest real things rather they conceal, distort and make obscure the real things. Theories are used as means to exclude order and control the rival powers and thereby these are alienated, disparate and dissonant.

Affirmatives Postmodernists: like the skeptical, this group of postmodernists also denies the possibility of truth and thereby they reject Theory. By this rejection they do not intend to abolish Theory but to make transformation of it. This group has full support on movement for peace, environment and feminism and thereby they are not as rigid as the skeptical postmodernists.

The present age is the age of globalization where there is a process of eruption of differences and similarity. As a

result of globalization circulation of people, cultural intersections, local and global knowledge intersection are increasing, and these factors are unavoidable. But the post modernists are in anxiety of these.

In order to destabilize the different concepts which were primarily concerned by modernism, such as presence, identity, historical progress, epistemic certainty and the univocity of meaning, postmodernism employs certain concepts such as, difference, repetition, the trace, the simulacrum and hyper reality.

Postmodern view of Reality

According to postmodernism, apparent realities are only social constructs and thereby these are not static but subject to change. It emphatically believes that for the formation of ideas and belief, the role of language, power, relations and motivations are immense. This approach of thought does not believe any sharp line of demarcation or classification between male and female, straight and gay, white and black or imperial and colonial. It does not believe any absolute truth. Rather it believes that reality is plural relative and dependent. The description of reality is dependent on the persons and their nature who describe it. Moreover, the description of the world is dependent on the persons who perceive it and thus this description is subjective. Many cultural fields including religion, literary etc. are influenced by postmodernism.

Postmodernism differs from modernism on different aspects such as literature, drama, architecture, cinema, journalism and design. In the late 20th and early part of 21st century marketing, business and the interpretation of law, culture and religion are influenced by postmodernism. Thus in that sense it can be said that although postmodernism is particularly an academic movement, yet it has immense influence on different aspects of human civilization and as such it is a reaction to modernism in the humanities. The primary concern of modernism is the principles of identity, unity, authority and certainty. But postmodernism, on the other hand, often found to be associated with plurality, textuality and skepticism. Thus explaining the nature of postmodernism Fredric Jameson, a literal critic says that of late capitalism, postmodernism is a dominant cultural logic. By the term 'late capitalism' he means the phase of capitalism after World War II which is specified by Earnest Mandel, a Marxist theorist. The period of late capitalism is also known as the period of globalization, multinational capitalism or consumer capitalism.

Modern philosophy emphasizes on epistemology and it put forwards different methods of knowing. But postmodernism is a revolution in the field of knowledge. It can be emphatically stated that postmodernism appeared in the history of philosophy with a different perspective



of world view. It does not accept any definite description about anything. The modern intellectual outlook is radically rejected by this philosophy. More particularly it can be said that this philosophy announces the end of this universe.

Modern philosophy has a particular world view which is the object of our perception. It also believes the possibility of knowing this unified world. Postmodernism, on the other hand, does not believe the reality of single and correct world view. It believes the reality of many worlds. By doing so the postmodernism replaces the modern world-view and instead believes multiplicity of views and worlds. Instead of knowledge it believes interpretation.

Modern philosophy assumes that there is an objective world around us and this world is not chaos but running in an orderly manner. There are laws of nature that are manifested in different ways and we, the rational beings, are able to understand and discern these natural laws. They also believe that by discovering and utilizing these laws human beings are capable to fulfill their needs. Moreover, these laws have important roles for the benefit of human beings. It is for this reason that modern outlook is called the enlightenment project. The modernist has a realistic outlook about the world. Thus understanding of our knowledge of the world is the foundation of modernity.

This realistic attitude of knowledge and truth is rejected by the postmodernism and on the contrary it accepts non-realist attitude about the world. In a sense the notion of the objective world is abandoned by postmodernism. By doing so it moves from the objectivist outlook to a constructionist outlook.

Regarding world, knowledge and truth we common people have an objectivist understanding because in our day to day activities we come in contact with the objective world which cannot be denied. Common sense view also believes that the objective world is real and it is self evident. Thus objective world is not only real but it also exists independent of ourselves having the capacity to display inherent order which is independent of human activities. There are many people who believe that these inherent laws of objective world can be understood by human beings accurately. In regard to language, they believe that it is the product human mind. With the help of this language we are equipped to narrate the nature of the world, both to ourselves and to others.

This objectivist assumption of the common people and of us about knowledge and world very much agrees with the corresponding theory of truth. According to this theory, truth or falsity of an assertion is determined by

comparing with the objective world. If someone says 'the door is open'. The truth or falsity of the statement can be verified empirically. If after empirical verification it is found that the door is really open, then the statement is true but if it is found that the door is not open, then the statement is false. Thus based on this objectivist assumption, the realists believe that truth is ascertained by comparing the statement made about something and the objective world.

The prevailing theory of truth that we find in modernism is the correspondence theory of truth. According to correspondence theory, if our utterances agree with objective reality found in the world then it is true, if not, it is false. Keeping faith on this theory, people believe that both scientific truth and absolute truth are equal. But the postmodernism believe that these two types of truths are not equal. They also believe that to find out any exception, if exists, one needs to go through an infinite number of observations. Thus postmodernism helps us in understanding the limits of our reasoning ability and knowledge, and it corrected modernism. By rejecting the utility of correspondence theory of truth postmodernism adheres to the coherence theory of truth. According to this theory, if something coheres with the established truth of the world then it is true, otherwise false.

In our everyday life the objectivist understanding about the world works very well. But the enlightenment realists go a step beyond the objectivist assumption. They attempt to make this theory of truth into a general theory. According to them, theoretically the whole reality can be grasped by the human mind and thus the true and complete description of the actual world can be devised by them. Not only the everyday objects that we find in our surroundings but also the knowledge that has been explored by the natural sciences can be grasped by us. The enlightenment realists firmly believe that knowledge of all realm of human enquiry, including history, can be attained by us.

But this fundamental assumption of the enlightenment realist is strongly rejected by the postmodern thinkers. According to them, the world that we find out there and to which we encounter is the construction of our own mind. We construct it by using our own concepts. Whatever reality is out there is our own construction and beyond this structure of the world there is no fixed vantage point from which we can have objective view.

Another assumption that we find amongst the enlightenment realists is that we use language to describe the nature of the world. And in between the bits of language that are used to describe the nature of the world and the bits of world itself there is a one-to-one relationship. This relationship, according to them is simple. But this



assumption of the realists is declared by the twentieth century linguistic philosophers as faulty. To them, we never make any match between the bits of language and the bits of world. Moreover, an accurate map of the world cannot be achieved by the use of language. Language, according to them, is nothing but the social conventions of human beings. Depending on the context of speaking the world can be mapped in a variety of ways by the use of language.

But here an obvious question arises as to how many kinds of sentences are there? Or how many kinds of assertion, question or command are there? In this connection Wittgenstein says that they are of innumerable kinds. He says, "There are countless kinds: countless different kinds of use of what we call "symbols", "words", "sentences". And this multiplicity is not something fixed, given once for all; but new types of language, new language games, as we may say, come into existence, and others become obsolete and get forgotten"[1].

Here the meaning of the term 'language game' is that we can define each of the categories of utterances with the help of rules that specify their properties and uses to which they can be put. It is as like as the game of chess. There are certain rules which determine the procedure for moving the pieces of chess. The main implication of this comparison is that the way we experience the world is coloured and altered by our various language games. Thus from the above standpoint the postmodernists rejected the realist view of the world and on the contrary adopted a non realist or constructivist view. Constructivists hold the view that apart from the ever changing and social creation, there is no world and in order to access in this changing world language plays an important role. The world where we are living is a symbolic world, a social reality and it is through our common language that we construct this world. As our social context is not fixed but ever changing so our world, and this change we see through our language.

There is another reason which helps much to diminish the position of objectivist understanding. Among the people in the west there is an assumption that western culture is the most advanced and civilized culture in the world. They also assume that the western ideal would be appreciated by all the human beings in the world and they will extend their effort to be benefited by it. But this dream of the modernist has no credibility in the post-modern period. In the phenomenon of globalization this dream of the modernists has fallen victim.

"The collapse of belief we have been witnessing throughout the twentieth century comes with globalism", says Anderson. "The postmodern condition is not an

artistic movement or a cultural fad or an intellectual theory - although it produces all of those and is in some ways defined by them. It is what inevitably happens as people anywhere begin to see that there are many beliefs, many kinds of belief, many ways of believing. Postmodernism is globalism, it is the half discovered shape of the one unity that transcends all our differences."[2]

Thus now-a-days instead of one single culture the western are confronted with a variety of cultures and each of the culture reflects the picture of the world in its own way. Thus the monistic world view of enlightenment theory has been subverted and there becomes a different world view which is globalised and pluralistic. It is the firm conviction of the post moderns that apart from our apparent differences there is no prospect to discover the one, universal symbolic world which can unite humanity. They, on the other hand, hold that the world in which we are living is a multiple realities. As the different groups of people encountering with different experiences so they construct different stories about the world. They are also experiencing their lives in different ways through their different languages. Consequently, we find that there are different political opinions and religious beliefs which people hold. At the same time it is also true that in respect of personal identity, time and space, people are actually living in different worlds.

There are two fundamental assumptions on which the postmodern understanding of knowledge is built. These are-

- a) Reality is construction of mind and as such it is not objectively true although useful.
- b) Outside the constructed reality we have no ability to step.

Thus in the name of reason the postmodern outlook constitutes attack on realism. Post moderns hold the view that apart from the structure of the world that we construct, there is no other world and our theories and propositions cannot be measured by comparing this objective and external world. On the contrary, the different worlds are created by our theories that we devise, where we inhabit. In this connection Hilary Lawson says, "Through language, theory and text we close the openness that is the world. The closures we make provide our world.....We do not have different accounts of the same 'thing', but different closures and different things". [3]

Thus on the basis of this type of argument the postmodernism has built up their theory and has been accused to ruin the entire modern project. Regarding knowledge, they have adopted a pluralistic view. As they believe in the reality of many worlds and reject the view that validity of thought and knowledge can be judged by a single basis, so side by side they believe in the existence of



both competing and conflicting constructions. The correctness of a proposition is not an issue to them rather they think about the outcome or activities.

There are some postmodernists who think that realism is dead and they see themselves as the cause of this downfall of realism. People generally assume that there are universal concepts. But postmodernism hold that all these concepts are constructed by culture and they try to find out the ways to bring this truth.

Summary Of The Paper

The main assumption regarding truth, theory, reality etc. of the postmodernists can be summarised on the following few lines –

- a) Truth is nothing fixed. It is always evolving. Nothing can be said certainly about it. Whatever is said about is approximate. It is also limited. This view is advocated by Nietzsche, Popper and Kuhn.
- b) We cannot prove a theory as true but we can show the falsity of it. This view is advocated by Popper.
- c) All things can be consistently explained with the help of any theory.
- d) Our minds and ideas of things and the thing-in-itself are always separate. This view is advocated by Kant.
- e) All physical realities are indeterminate.
- f) Concepts of science are constructed by our minds. This view is advocated by logical positivism, Mac, Carnap and others.
- g) Metaphysical concepts are empty.
- h) Truth that is absolute and certain, with the help of which we explain everything, cannot be obtained.

Conclusion

Postmodernism appears in the world of philosophy by reacting modernity. But this philosophy leads to an exaggeration in correcting the problems from the past. Thus so far it makes correction of the past problem, it could manifest its strength but when it overcorrects the problem, its weakness reveals to us. Truly speaking, Postmodernists have been excluded from mainstream philosophy because the traditional concern of philosophy is not reflected in their philosophy.

Moreover, it is also true that postmodernism is the most depressing philosophy that spring from the western mind. Talking about postmodernism is really a difficult task because none can confidently say that he understands it.

Lastly, postmodern position is found to be paradox as it doubts all the principles. But it obviously implies that they doubt their own principles. As the philosopher Richard Tarnas states, postmodernism "cannot on its own principles ultimately justify itself any more than can

the various metaphysical overviews against which the postmodern mind has defined itself."

(Source:

<http://www.pbs.org/faithandreason/gengloss/postmbody.html>)

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