

## Post-Modernism features in English Literature

Ammar Rezaei

Ph.D. student at English department,  
Osmania University Hyderabad, India.  
ammar.rezaei@gmail.com.

**Abstract:** *The present article is an attempt to reflect on new openings and recent developments in literature, literary theory and culture which seem to point postmodernism and raise a question whether what appears as newness is not rather a return to traditional concepts, theoretical premises and authorial practices.*

*Post-Modernism can be described as a particular style of thought. It is a concept that correlates the emergence of new features and types of social life and economic order in a culture; often called modernization, post-industrial, consumer, media, or multinational capitalistic societies. In Modernity, we have the sense or idea that the present is discontinuous with the past that through a process of social, technological, and cultural change (either through improvement, that is, progress, or through decline) life in the present is fundamentally different from life in the past. This sense or idea as a world view contrasts with what is commonly known as Tradition, which is simply the sense that the present is continuous with the past, that the present in some way repeats the forms, behavior, and events of the past. I would propose that traditional ways of life have been replaced with uncontrollable change and unmanageable alternatives, but that these changes and alternatives eventually create something that may result in the society that traditionalists actually seek after ;the balance between Nature and Technology.*

*The term “postmodernism “ – a style of art, especially in the 1980s, which uses an unusual mixing of old and new forms – was itself a movable feast , and its theoretical associations were changing again ; it meant the “postmodern condition “ itself. It was explained by the philosopher Jean Francois Lyotard : there were no Grand Narratives left on which thinkers or writers , could depend ; “simplifying to the extreme , I define postmodern as incredulity toward meta – narratives “ .*

*The Postmodernist reconstruct the modernist literature. They removed so much as to reach Minimalism, in which the functioning of the remaining elements was based on the principle of “less means more “. Narrative was reduced (in “Ulysses “and in the French nouveau roman). Tendencies have crystalized to shape new genres. One broad grouping is the Metafiction, or the novel that exposes conventions only to discard, perhaps by the use of an obviously naïve narrator. Recent writers have gained confidence into the Magic Realist or Poetic novel (Salman Rushdie, J. Irving, A. Carter). Here real places and traditional events are often introduced, but all in a distorted or poetically molded form. These fabulators return to the loose Dikensian form of the novel.*

**Key words:** modernism, postmodernism, cultural pluralism

### Introduction:

Postmodern literature is part of socio-cultural and historical development and can be seen as a specific way of a depiction of the postmodern life and culture. It shows a crisis of identity of human being (ethnic, sexual, social and cultural) and its struggle for legitimization in a hypocritical society. This theme was treated by other authors before (example), but it started to be treated much more systematically after the Civil Right Movement in the USA in the 1960's (Martin Luther King, ethnic and sexual/homosexual and lesbian minority rights), the Vietnam and student protests in Europe and the USA. While this movement led to democratization of the public life, more prerogatives, education and publishing opportunities for minorities in the Western countries, the East and Central European countries became much more authoritarian under the influence and control of the USSR, especially between the 1950's – 1980's. With a more employment, educational and public opportunities to find a place in the society, new authors representing minority ethnic (in addition to quite well-established Jewish and Black-American authors, especially Native-American, Asian-American and Hispanic-American authors), gender (female), sexual (gay, lesbian) started to gain a prominent position in American literature, for example. Later similar development could be observed in British, Australian and Canadian literature in which the authors coming from different cultural background, usually former British colonies, started to appear (Ben Okri, Kasugio Ishiguro, Salman Rushdie, Hanif

Kureishi, for example, in British fiction; or the representatives of formerly oppressed original inhabitants such as Collin Johnson, Kath Walker, Sam Watson and Kim Scott in Australian literature). In literary theory and criticism, it was especially the emergence of **feminist and post-colonial theories** which was a result of this development. At the same time, literatures in English, especially American literature, depicted a growing awareness of the negative effects of industrialization and commercialization of public life leading to the ecological crisis and consumerism (the Beatnik authors such as Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, William Burroughs, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Robert Snyder, Gregory Corso and others). These authors expressed negative attitudes to the Western civilization and emphasized oriental vision and understanding of the world (Zen-Buddhism, Buddhism, Hinduism), pacifistic and peaceful way of life along with the appreciation of drugs, alcohol and spontaneity as a liberating alternative to the Western ethical norms, hypocrisy, and civilization.

**Discussion:** Postmodernism” is a fairly recent phenomenon, and is more evident in America and France than in England, except in the field of Drama. Beckett, being settled in Paris (France) and being French as well as English writer, showed “Postmodernist” tendencies more than any other English writer. His plays as well as novella are typical examples of Post-Modernist writings. Among other Post-Modernist, prominent examples are works of John Fowles, Alain Robbe Grillet, Thomas Pynchon, John Barth, Kurt Vonnegut, Leonard Michaels, Brigid Brophy and Richard Brautigan. Post-modernist writers break away from all the rules and seek alternative principles of composition conforming to their content of existentialist thought. They seek to capture human situation in its most concentrated form and tend to employ a form which can fully assimilate human existence, which is capable of accommodating the meaninglessness, purposelessness and absurdity of human existence. They have employed various devices such as

fragmentation, paradox, questionable narrators, Contradiction, Permutation, Discontinuity, Randomness, Excess, Short Circuit etc. which manifest chaotic condition of the world in equally chaotic technique and form. Unifying features often coincide with Jean-François Lyotard's concept of the "**metanarrative**" and "**little narrative**", Jacques Derrida's concept of "**play**", and Jean Baudrillard's "**simulacra**." For example, instead of the modernist quest for meaning in a chaotic world, the postmodern author eschews, often playfully, the possibility of meaning, and the postmodern novel is often a parody of this quest.

#### Some of postmodernism literature features:

- 1) **The thematic level** (thematization of ecological crisis, criticism of consumerism, appreciation of freedom and spontaneity, oriental vision of the world), but also in the changing nature and understanding of art and its form. Thus art started to be seen not as separated, but a part of reality and experience, art became closer to the public and was often presented in the form of show, happening or performance. **The Beats**, for example, often wrote poems not for intimate reading at home, but they were often recited on public places (sport stadiums, concert halls) and accompanied by the pop, jazz, or rock bands and music (Bob Dylan, Rolling Stones). Also their poetry and fiction used irregular and open, often fragmented form as well as the rhythms of popular music such as blues, jazz and rock. Painters and sculptors presented their artistic works outside traditional galleries directly in the urban environment or in nature, sometimes not only un-artistic objects, but also living or dead animals or human beings became the artistic objects (see photography, visual arts, dead corps...). It does not, however, mean that the ethnic or other formerly marginalized authors (female, gay, lesbian) became postmodern only because of the thematization of this difference or because of their ethnic or sexual identity, or ecological crisis and consumerism. Civil right movement has enabled these authors to gain an access to education, science and publishing opportunities, but their work became postmodern because of their use of postmodern narrative techniques and the vision of the world.
- 2) the most important postmodern feature is **indeterminacy**. Nothing is certain: we cannot be certain about anything. This indeterminacy is also partly due to our sense of fragmentation. The seamless totality of the classical and the Christian worlds are lost to us. With the death of God, the world is fragmented; the society is fragmented; the family is fragmented; the process of fragmentation is an on-going process. In post-modernism, this is reflected in the breaking of forms, use of montage and collage and mixing of genres in an unexpected manner. Since post-modern culture is essentially mass culture, all canons are discredited. The traditional values are flouted; the culture is de-canonized. Art is trivialized and carnivalized. Post-modernism insisted on the pleasure of the moment and looked for things easy to like.

3) In postmodern literary text, the idea of **originality and authenticity is undermined** and parodied. Postmodern literary work does not pretend to be new and original, but uses the old literary forms, genres, and kinds of literature and art, kitsch, quotation, allusion and other means to recontextualize their meaning in a different linguistic and cultural contexts to show a difference between the past and present as well as between the past and present forms of representation as was mentioned in famous John Barth's essay *The Literature of Exhaustion* in which he points out „an exhaustion” of the old forms of art and suggests a creative potential of the use of the old forms, genres and styles. Postmodern authors intentionally build the meaning on the use not only of the old forms and genres, but also by a deliberate use of plagiarism, kitsch, false or pretended quotations from well-known literary and other texts (by false or pretended I mean the authors' close imitation of the ideas or style of famous authors, works or philosophers without giving a bibliographical note). Plagiarism is not meant to “steal” the authors' ideas, but to evoke a parody effect and an ironic distance from these texts. Some critics speak not about plagiarism, but **pla(y)giarism** in a postmodern literary work, that is a creative use and recontextualization of already existing texts through the use of techniques reminiscent of plagiarism (unjustified use of these texts) and their further modification by the use of linguistic and textual play.

4) Postmodern literary work often questions its own fictional status thus becoming **metafictional**. Metafictional means that a literary work refers to itself and the principles of its construction by using various techniques and narrative devices. Simplistic understanding of metafiction is that “metafiction is a fiction about fiction”, but postmodern fictional work is far more and about more issues than only about fiction. The term was coined by an American author and critic William Gass, but it can have various meanings (R. Scholes, P. Waugh). I argue **metafiction, metafictional elements, and metafictionality** is a dominant feature of a postmodern literary work. I think perhaps Patricia Waugh's definition of metafiction is the most suitable to understanding its working in literature. In her view, metafiction is  
A term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artifact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality. In providing a critique of their own methods of construction, such writings not only examine the fundamental structures of narrative fiction, they also explore the possible fictitiousness of the world outside the literary/fictional text.

5) One of the most important aspects of a postmodern literary work closely connected to metafiction is, however, **intertextuality**. Broadly speaking, intertextuality, a term coined by a Bulgarian/French theorist Julia Kristeva, expresses a connection between the texts through various devices and techniques discussed above. It is not, however, a single mechanical connection, but rather a creative transformation of the the referred texts in different linguistic and cultural contexts. In Julia Kristeva's understanding, literary text is not only a product of single author, “but of its relationship to other texts and to the structures of language itself”. In her view, “[A]ny text is constructed of a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another”. The meaning of intertextuality has later been transformed as Silvia Pokrivčáková and Anton Pokrivčák comment on it more in detail in their *Understanding Literature*. Julia Kristeva derives her theory of intertextuality from Michael Bachtin's idea of a “polyphonic novel” open to various voices and interpretations and understands a literary text as part of other literary texts in the history of the literary tradition. Thus, what stems from it is the undermining of the idea of **authorship** – the text is not a product of an author, but exists within specific literary and cultural contexts and thus is open to various understandings and interpretations. In this sense, the role of an author is diminished as is the study of his biography as in traditional criticism.

6) Another important aspect of a postmodern literary work is the use of postmodern **parody, pastiche and radical irony**. Postmodern parody was theorized especially by Linda Hutcheon (*A Theory of Parody*, 1985), Margaret A. Rose, and partly Frederic Jameson. As it was mentioned above, in difference from traditional parody, the main aim of **postmodern parody** is not to mock the parodied author or style for its own sake, but this parody lacks this mocking, ridiculing aspect and by using irony it emphasizes a difference between the past forms of art and sensibilities, a distance between the past and present. This critical aspect, in Hutcheon's view, manifests itself especially in the use of irony. It seems Hutcheon often uses a term modern parody to actually refer what could be labeled as postmodern parody. It is often difficult to identify irony within parody in postmodern literary texts since they are often closely connected and even inseparable. Hutcheon later emphasized the political and ideological aspects of parody because of 37 their subversive impulse, but this impulse and emphasis is not quite acceptable, in my view, since any parody can be understood as including the political and ideological impulse which is not always the most important aspect of this literary device. In Linda Hutcheon's view, “Postmodern parody is both

deconstructively critical and constructively creative, paradoxically making us aware of both the limits and the powers of representation—in any medium” (Hutcheon 1991:228). Hutcheon, however, further adds that “As a form of ironic representation, parody is doubly coded in political terms: it both legitimizes and subverts that which it parodies...Parody can be used as self-reflexive technique that points to art as art, but also to art as inescapably bound to its aesthetic and even social past” (Hutcheon 1991:231). What Hutcheon means here is that by referring to the older forms of art (traditional and popular literary genres and styles such as detective, love stories, pornography, western, sci-fiction and others, traditional forms of writing such as realistic literature and works, traditional myths (ancient myths, religious books) and by their re-writing and putting in mostly contemporary or unexpected contexts, postmodern parody does not simply refer to these works of art, authors and styles, or simply gives a critique of them and this kind of linguistic representation, but it also creatively reconstructs them to show (often ironic) a difference between the past (traditional) and contemporary forms of art and sensibility. Postmodern parody thus becomes self-reflexive because it draws our attention not only to the parodied works of art, but implicitly also to the whole process of depiction of reality through the literary works, that is a process of linguistic representation. By re-writing, transforming and changing the motifs and styles from the parodied literary works, postmodern parody gives an alternative vision of reality, history and a position of different social, ethnic and other minority groups which forms a playful and creative alternative to the official version of history or reality as depicted in traditional literary works or through traditional narrative techniques and styles. This alternative is not aimed to be an official alternative to real history, but a **playful and artistic reconsideration and relativization** of it. That is also the reason why postmodern authors often parody histories, religious books, biographies of authors, myths, works of traditional and popular literature (historical novels, love and detective novels, thrillers, spy and crime fiction, pornography, horrors, etc.). In addition to offering an alternative and creative **reconsideration of history and reality, creation an awareness of the process of representation**, the postmodern parody also shows a difference between the past and present sensibility and can give a critique of various aspects of what is believed to be a typical aspect of some national identity.

7) In a postmodern literary work, postmodern parody is closely connected with pastiche. **Pastiche** comes from the Italian word *pasticcio* which means “*A medley of various ingredients: a hotchpotch, a farrago, jumble*”. This implies a similarity with a postmodern literary work consisting of different styles, genres, narrative voices and devices each of which has its important role in the composition of the book. But the **original meaning of this word as used in arts was rather derogatory**. The artists referred to as **pasticheurs** were understood as the authors uncreatively and mechanically imitating other works of art, styles, or ways of writing. In postmodern literature and its interpretation, however, this term has rather **positive** meaning since the older works of art, styles and authors are first imitated but, at the same time, through the use of parody and irony further transformed, re-written and put in a different linguistic context and thus pastiche can be loosely called a blank parody as Frederic Jameson suggests .although Jameson’s understanding of pastiche is close to Linda Hutcheon’s understanding of postmodern parody and he himself defines pastiche as a kind of parody . Postmodernism rejects strict definitions and especially in a postmodern but also other works of art it is difficult to delineate strictly parody and pastiche since they often overlap and are rather inseparable.

Parody, pastiche, imitation and intertextuality are closely connected with **radical irony**. Radical irony does not necessarily manifest itself on the verbal level, but also on the level of a text as a whole, in the juxtaposition of different styles creating an ironic effect, or in the use of **travesty** or **burlesque** (burlesque meant not as a genre, but as a trope or an approach to a depiction of character) as part of the parodic mode.

**Conclusion:** postmodernism is a complicated term, or set of ideas, one that has only emerged as an area of academic study since the mid-1980s. Postmodernism is hard to define, because it is a concept that appears in a wide variety of disciplines or areas of study, including art, architecture, music, film, literature, sociology, communications, fashion, and technology. It's hard to locate it temporally or historically, because it's not clear exactly when postmodernism begins. Perhaps the easiest way to start thinking about postmodernism is by thinking about modernism, the movement from which postmodernism seems to grow or emerge. Postmodernism is "post" because it denies the existence of any ultimate principles, and it lacks the optimism of there being a scientific, philosophical, or religious truth which will explain everything for everybody - a characteristic of the so-called "modern" mind. The paradox of the postmodern position is that, in placing all principles under the scrutiny of its skepticism, it must realize that even its own principles are not beyond questioning.

At the end of my paper I want to mention some post-modernist literature features:

- Responses to modernism and its ideas.
- Responses to technological advances.
- Greater diversity of cultures that leads to cultural pluralism. (Small groups within a larger society maintain their culture identity).
- Reconceptualization's of society and history.

#### **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

1. Allen, Walter, *Tradition and Dream*, London: Chatto & Windus, 1986.
2. Bradbury, Malcom, *The Novel Today. Contemporary Writers on Modern Fiction*, London, Fontana Press, 1990.
3. Brooker, Peter, ed. *Modernism/Postmodernism*, London, 1972.
4. Bergonzi, Bernard, *The Myth of Modernism and Twentieth Century Literature*, N. York Martin Press, 1986.
5. Faulkner, Peter, *ModernisAm*, Routledge , 1993.
6. Fokkema, Douwe and Hans Birtens eds., *Approaching Postmodernism*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1986 .
7. Green, Martin, *The English Novel in the Twentieth Century ( The Doom Empire )* London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984.
8. Hutcheon, linda, *A poetics of postmodernism*, Londin: Routledge, 1988 .
9. Kari, Frederick R, *Modern and modernism: The sovereignty of the Artist 1885-1925*, New York: Atheneum, 1985.
10. Mc Hale, Brian, *Postmodernist Fiction*, New York, 1986.