

Post-modern Approaches in English Literature

Dr.Rani Somnath Sarode, Asst. Prof.
YEWS National Senior College,
Sarda Circle, Nashik-01

Introduction

The term **Post-modern literature** is used to describe certain characteristics of post World War II literature and a reaction against Enlightenment ideas implicit in literature. Postmodern literature like postmodernism as a whole is hard to define and there is little agreement on the exact characteristics, scope and importance of postmodern literature. But as is often the case with artistic movements, postmodern literature is commonly defined in relation to its precursor. For example a postmodern literary work tends not to conclude with the neatly tied-up ending as is often found in modernist literature but often parodies it. Postmodern authors tend to celebrate chance over craft and further employ met fiction to undermine the writer's authority. Another characteristic of postmodern literature is the questioning of distinctions between high and low culture through the use of pastiche, the combination of subjects and genres not previously deemed fit for literature.

Postmodernist writers often point to early novels and story collections as inspiration for their experiments with narrative and structure: Don Quixote 1001 Nights, The Decameron and Candide among many others. In the English language Laurence Sterne's 1759 novel The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman with its heavy emphasis on parody and narrative experimentation is often cited as an early influence on postmodernism. There were many 19th century examples of attacks on Enlightenment concepts, parody and playfulness in literature, including Lord Byron's satire especially Don Juan Thomas Carlyle's Sartor Resartus Alfred Jarry's ribald Ubu parodies and his invention of 'Pataphysics; Lewis Carroll's playful experiments with signification the work of Isidore Ducasse, Arthur Rimbaud, Oscar Wilde. Playwrights who worked in the late 19th and early 20th century whose thought and work would serve as an influence on the aesthetic of postmodernism include Swedish dramatist August Strindberg the Italian author Luigi Pirandello and the German playwright and theorist Bertolt Brecht. In the 1910s artists associated with Dadaism celebrated chance, parody, playfulness and challenged the authority of the artist. Tristan Tzara claimed in How to Make a Dadaist Poem that to create a Dadaist poem one had only to put random words in a hat and pull them out one by one. Another way Dadaism influenced postmodern literature was in the development of collage, specifically collages using elements from advertisement or illustrations from popular novel. Artists associated with Surrealism which developed from Dadaism, continued experimentations with chance and parody while celebrating the flow of the subconscious mind. André Breton the founder of Surrealism suggested that automatism and the description of dreams should play a greater role in the creation of literature. He used automatism to create his novel Nadja and used photographs to replace description as a parody of the overly-descriptive novelists he often criticized. Surrealist René Magritte's experiments with signification are used as examples by Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault. Foucault also uses examples from Jorge Luis Borges an important direct influence on many postmodernist fiction writers. He is occasionally listed as a postmodernist although he started writing in the 1920s. The influence of his experiments with met fiction and magic realism was not fully realized in the Anglo-American world until the postmodern period.

Comparisons with modernist literature

Both modern and postmodern literature represents a break from 19th century realism. In character development both modern and postmodern literature explore subjectivism turning from external reality to examine inner states of consciousness in many cases drawing on modernist examples in the stream of

consciousness styles of Virginia Woolf and James Joyce explorative poems like *The Waste Land* by T. S. Eliot. In addition both modern and postmodern literature explores fragmentariness in narrative and character-construction. *The Waste Land* is often cited as a means of distinguishing modern and postmodern literature. The poem is fragmentary and employs pastiche like much postmodern literature but the speaker in *The Waste Land* says, These fragments I have shored against my ruins. Modernist literature sees fragmentation and extreme subjectivity as an existential crisis, or Freudian internal conflict, a problem that must be solved, and the artist is often cited as the one to solve it. Postmodernists however often demonstrate that this chaos is insurmountable the artist is impotent and the only recourse against collapse is to play within the chaos. Playfulness is present in many modernist works and they may seem very similar to postmodern works but with postmodernism playfulness becomes central and the actual achievement of order and meaning becomes unlikely.

Shift to postmodernism

As with all stylistic eras no definite dates exist for the rise and fall of postmodernism's popularity. 1941 the year in which Irish novelist James Joyce and English novelist Virginia Woolf both died is sometimes used as a rough boundary for postmodernism's start. Irish novelist Flann O'Brien completed *The Third Policeman* in 1939. It was rejected for publication and remained supposedly lost until published posthumously in 1967. A revised version called *The Dalkey Archive* was published before the original in 1964, two years before O'Brien died. Notwithstanding its dilatory appearance the literary theorist Keith Hopper regards *The Third Policeman* as one of the first of that genre they call the postmodern novel.

Some further argue that the beginning of postmodern literature could be marked by significant publications or literary events. For example some mark the beginning of postmodernism with the first publication of John Hawkes' *The Cannibal* in 1949 the first performance of *Waiting for Godot* in 1953 the first publication of *Howl* in 1956 or of *Naked Lunch* in 1959. For others the beginning is marked by moments in critical theory Jacques Derrida's *Structure, Sign and Play* lecture in 1966. Brian McHale details his main thesis on this shift although many postmodern works have developed out of modernism is characterized by an epistemological dominant while postmodernism works are primarily concerned with questions of ontology.

Post-war developments and transition figures

Though postmodernist literature does not refer to everything written in the postmodern period several post-war developments in literature. These developments are occasionally collectively labeled postmodern more commonly some key figures Samuel Beckett, William S. Burroughs, Jorge Luis Borges Julio Cortázar and Gabriel García Márquez are cited as significant contributors to the postmodern aesthetic.

The work of Jarry the Surrealists Luigi Pirandello and so on also influenced the work of playwrights from the Theatre of the Absurd. The term Theatre of the Absurd was coined by Martin Esslin to describe a tendency in theatre in the 1950s he related it to Albert Camus's concept of the absurd. The plays of the theatre of the Absurd parallel postmodern fiction in many ways. For example *The Bald Soprano* by Eugène Ionesco is essentially a series of clichés taken from a language textbook. One of the most important figures to be categorized as both Absurdist and Postmodern is Samuel Beckett. The work of Samuel Beckett is often seen as marking the shift from modernism to postmodernism in literature. He had close ties with modernism because of his friendship with James Joyce however his work helped shape the development of literature away from modernism. Joyce one of the exemplars of modernism celebrated the possibility of language Beckett had a revelation in 1945 that in order to escape the shadow of Joyce he must focus on the poverty of language and man as a failure. His later work likewise featured characters stuck in inescapable situations attempting impotently to communicate whose only recourse is to play to make the best of what they have. As Hans-Peter Wagner says mostly concerned with what he saw as impossibilities in fiction identity of characters reliable

consciousness the reliability of language itself and the rubrication of literature in genres Beckett's experiments with narrative form and with the disintegration of narration and character in fiction and drama won him the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1969. His works published after 1969 are mostly meta literary attempts that must be read in light of his own theories and previous works and the attempt to deconstruct literary forms and genres. Beckett's last text published during his lifetime, *Stirrings Still* breaks down the barriers between drama, fiction and poetry with texts of the collection being almost entirely composed of echoes and reiterations of his previous work. He was definitely one of the fathers of the postmodern movement in fiction which has continued undermining the ideas of logical coherence in narration formal plot regular time sequence and psychologically explained characters.

The Beat Generation is a name coined by Jack Kerouac for the disaffected youth of America during the materialistic 1950s Kerouac developed ideas of automatism into what he called spontaneous prose to create a maximalist, multi-novel epic called the *Duluoz Legend* in the mold of Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*. Beat Generation is often used more broadly to refer to several groups of post-war American writers from the Black Mountain poets, the New York School the San Francisco Renaissance and so on. These writers have occasionally also been referred to as the Postmoderns. Though this is now a less common usage of postmodern references to these writers as postmodernists still appear and many writers associated with this group appear often on lists of postmodern writers. One writer associated with the Beat Generation who appears most often on lists of postmodern writers is William S. Burroughs. Burroughs published *Naked Lunch* in Paris in 1959 and in America in 1961 this is considered by some the first truly postmodern novel because it is fragmentary, with no central narrative as it employs pastiche to fold in elements from popular genres such as detective fiction and science fiction it's full of parody paradox and playfulness and according to some accounts friends Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg edited the book guided by chance. He is also noted along with Brion Gysin for the creation of the cut-up technique a technique in which words and phrases are cut from a newspaper or other publication and rearranged to form a new message.

Magic Realism is a technique popular among Latin American writers in which supernatural elements are treated as mundane. Though the technique has its roots in traditional storytelling it was a center piece of the Latin American boom" a movement coterminous with postmodernism. Some of the major figures of the Boom and practitioners of Magic Realism are sometimes listed as postmodernists. This labeling however is not without its problems. In Spanish-speaking Latin America modernismo and postmodernismo refer to early 20th-century literary movements that have no direct relationship to modernism and postmodernism in English. Finding it anachronistic Octavio Paz has argued that postmodernism is an imported grand récit that is incompatible with the cultural production of Latin America.

American author and publisher Dave Eggers is one of several contemporary authors who represent the latest movement in post-modern literature which some have deemed post-postmodernism Postmodernism in literature is not an organized movement with leaders or central figures therefore it is more difficult to say if it has ended or when it will end. Arguably postmodernism peaked in the 60s and 70s with the publication of *Catch-22* in 1961, *Lost in the Funhouse* in 1968 *Slaughterhouse-Five* in 1969 *Gravity's Rainbow* in 1973 and many others. Some declared the death of postmodernism in the 80's with a new surge of realism represented and inspired by Raymond Carver. Tom Wolfe in his 1989 article *stalking the Billion-Footed Beast* called for a new emphasis on realism in fiction to replace postmodernism. With this new emphasis on realism in mind, some declared *White Noise* in 1985 or *The Satanic Verses* in 1988 to be the last great novels of the postmodern era.

A new generation of writers such as David Foster Wallace, Giannina Braschi Dave Eggers, Michael Chabon, Zadie Smith, Chuck Palahniuk, Jennifer Egan, Neil Gaiman, Richard Powers, Jonathan Lethem and publications such as McSweeney's, *The Believer*, and the fiction pages of *The New Yorker*, herald either a new chapter of postmodernism or possibly post-postmodernism.

Magic realism

Magic realism may be literary work marked by the use of sharply defined smoothly painted images of figures and objects depicted in a surrealist manner. The themes and subjects are often imaginary somewhat outlandish and fantastic and with a certain dream-like quality. Some of the characteristic features of this kind of fiction are the mingling and juxtaposition of the realistic and the fantastic or bizarre skillful time shifts convoluted and even labyrinthine narratives and plots miscellaneous use of dreams myths and fairy stories expressionistic and even surrealist description arcane erudition the element of surprise or abrupt shock the horrific and the inexplicable. It has been applied for instance to the work of Jorge Luis Borges the Argentinian who in 1935 published his *Historia universal* regarded by many as the first work of magic realism. Colombian novelist Gabriel García Márquez is also regarded as a notable exponent of this kind of fiction especially his novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. The Cuban Alejo Carpentier is another described as a magic realist. Postmodernists such as Salman Rushdie and Italo Calvino commonly use Magic Realism in their work. A fusion of fabulism with magic realism is apparent in such early 21st century.

Techno culture and hyper reality

Fredric Jameson called postmodernism the cultural logic of late capitalism. Late capitalism implies that society has moved past the industrial age and into the information age. Likewise Jean Baudrillard claimed post modernity was defined by a shift into hyper reality in which simulations have replaced the real. In post modernity people are inundated with information technology has become a central focus in many lives and our understanding of the real is mediated by simulations of the real. Many works of fiction have dealt with this aspect of post modernity with characteristic irony and pastiche. e.g. Don DeLillo's *White Noise* presents characters that are bombarded with a white noise of television product brand names and clichés. The cyberpunk fiction of William Gibson, Neal Stephenson and many others use science fiction techniques to address this postmodern hyper real information bombardment. Steam Punk a subgenre of science fiction popularized in novels and comics by such writers as Alan Moor and James Blaylock demonstrates postmodern pastiche temporal distortion and a focus on techno culture with its mix of futuristic technology and Victorian culture.

Sum up

Literary minimalism can be characterized as a focus on a surface description where readers are expected to take an active role in the creation of a story. The characters in minimalist stories and novels tend to be unexceptional. Generally the short stories are "slice of lifestories. Minimalism the opposite of maximalist is a representation of only the most basic and necessary pieces, specific by economy with words. Minimalist authors hesitate to use adjectives, adverbs, or meaningless details. Instead of providing every minute detail the author provides a general context and then allows the reader's imagination to shape the story. Among those categorized as postmodernist literary minimalism is most commonly associated with Samuel Beckett.

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