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Postmodernism and its Reflection on Understanding Islam

Abstract

Postmodernism is defined by an attitude of skepticism or distrust toward meta-narratives, ideologies, the existence of objective reality and absolute truth. It apt to deconstruct all of those elements in the current intellectuals, arts and cultural processes. Postmodernism allows multiplicity of views, thus enhances the possibility to know and understand one another. Islam is a universal religion that approves some injunctions as absolute and eternal. It encourages to use reason to understand the revelation but like postmodernism does not accept reason as supreme authority. This paper is important because it attempts to show that how the universal religion Islam, the worldview, can communicate with the society that is nurtured by the skeptic and nihilistic thought. This study shows that Islam could be understood by some aspects of postmodernism that are not contrary to Islamic faith.]

Key words: Postmodernism, meta-narratives, deconstruction, postmodern consciousness, relativism

Introduction

We are now living in post-modern age which has nothing in common, in its philosophy, sciences, sociology, religion, politics etc., with the modern age. As a matter of fact, the postmodern period is distinct and different from modern age since modernism believes that through reason and rational thinking man has the ability to acquire the knowledge of absolute truth. They consider reason as the superior power of human being to know the objective reality and universal knowledge. Modernist had a strong faith in an objective and impersonal truth and made remarkable progress in the realm of knowledge in general and in science particularly. But after the devastating consequences of World War II and the bad impact of colonization, the claim of progress of modernism became futile.

The contemporary man of postmodern age has no faith in the objective truth. For him any talk of ideology or ethical code is nonsense. But being a creature with spirit and social instincts he cannot dispense with them. The predicament of post-modern man is that he has lost faith in the very thing which is his absolute existential necessity. Consequently he falls into a severe crisis – the crisis of meaninglessness. In this situation it is crucial to determine how to treat with Islamic faith that admits some things as absolute and meaningful. This paper focuses on this point.

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As a complete code of life, Islam is not merely a religion in the sense in which Hinduism or Christianity are religions, but as an ideology it can serve all in all ages. But there are still some people who think old and outdated way, since they even not fully aware of the great changes that have taken place in the various domains of knowledge. To overcome this deficiency, we should understand and interpret Islam anew- in the light of new life conditions, new realities and new philosophical thought. In this paper it will be shown how contemporary philosophical thought postmodernism plays a vital role in understanding Islam in changing societies.

Method

Since this is a conceptual research, it has its own methods which is different from research methods of natural and social sciences. In a conceptual research, researcher has journeyed through different ideas and concepts that are developed in the related field. After analyzing and compared those ideas, researcher points out the gap of the research and try to fill up the gap by developing his new idea and concept. In this study, we have followed this method. To perform this research we have used different sources including primary and secondary sources of reference. These includes printed books, original texts, online books and journal articles, video lectures of prominent scholars that are pertinent to my research.

Postmodernism

Postmodernism is a difficult concept to be defined accurately. It is the critique of modernism. The problem with modernism lay precisely in the assumption of universality and its claims to some kind of purity or absoluteness. The postmodern difference lies precisely in its refusal include the radical critique of the modern and its inability to establish such absoluteness. Postmodernism just is the collapse of universals, and so it can ever be local and strategic (Connor, p. 83). It disqualifies all those terms such as rationality, reality, objectivity, truth that the way modernists have.

Modern philosophy focuses on the abilities of human beings to discover natural and social truths. Modern theorists assume that reason is deemed distinctive power that would enable humans to dominate nature and create moral and just society. Faith in rationality was born in Renaissance of sixteenth and seventeenth and enthroned in the eighteenth century Enlightenment. But many philosophers disparage and eschew the notion of truth altogether. Among them, Friedrich Nietzsche is one who is called the first postmodern philosopher. He declares the 'truth' to be nothing more than 'a mobile army of metaphors' and 'the more useful errors of mankind'. This is the rejection of Enlightenment thinking that embodied the idea of 'truth'. Nietzsche argues that there are no eternal facts, just as there are no absolute truths (Best & Kellner, pp. 286-289). Thus, postmodernism is defined by an attitude of skepticism or distrust toward grand narratives, ideologies, and various tenets of Enlightenment rationality, including the existence of objective reality and absolute truth. It suggests a rejection of very idea of 'human nature' and reconsideration of the nature of philosophy (Solomon, p. 2).

Basis of Postmodernism:

Basically postmodernism always being relates to the subjectivity and elasticity of values in human life, anti-rationalism and skepticism towards meta-narratives (Abdullah, p. 36). There are some bases of postmodern thoughts:

1. The Death of the Author or Subject:

This view hold that human beings do not have concrete and reliable consciousness of the reality. Text is nothing but a free play of signs within language. The reader/listener involved in the articulation or interpretation of this play of language should act independently of any supposed intentions of author. Attention to an author for the meaning of the text means favoring of a particular set of meanings (Butler, p. 23). From Sigmund Freud to Nietzsche- believed that human does not possess any concrete consciousness. Claude Levi Strauss rejected the existence of human objective consciousness and proposed culture and its structure as a medium in understanding human cognitive ability (Abdullah, p. 36). For Derrida, 'subject' is only a construction of culture and the author does not play any role in constructing the 'meaning'. Michel Foucault announced the 'Death of the Author'. For him, 'author' is a modern phenomenon that never exist in primitive and traditional society (Foucault, pp. 141-160).

The text is thus really constructed by the reader. Meanings became the property of the interpreter, who got freedom to deconstruct them. It was thought to be both philosophically wrong and politically regressive to attempt to determine the meaning of a text to particular ends. So, the postmodernists tend to reject the domination of author in constructing the meaning of a text.

2. Denial of Reality:

Most of the postmodernists denied the existence of objective reality. They asserted that the 'reality' is just the construction of human mind or the result of social process in certain context (Abdullah, p. 36). In this regard Baudrillard stressed that the 'reality' is just reflection of images which have no bases of 'real' matter. These baseless images give human being a kind of burden, which is the 'information loads' in the form of meaningless image simulations (Baudrillard, p. 79).

3. The Absence of Transcendental Signified meaning

Most of the postmodernists believe that there are meaning in text but they are dependent on the interpretation of readers. We cannot reach to the transcendental signified meaning through socially constitute language since there is no immediate access to reality. For Derrida, difference is at the heart of everything: language has meaning only through a linguistic chain of differentiations (Best & Kellner, p. 291). He hold that discourse or text is just symbol and does not contain any meaning as he mentioned that "the text is all and nothing exist outside it" (Derrida, p. 3). Meaning is created by human through linguistic chain which differs from man to man and there is nothing but an endless chain of signifiers, or 'intertextuality'.

4. Rejection of meta-narratives and absolute truth

Metanarratives are “interpretive frameworks or ways of understanding the world that are claimed to have truth or validity that crosses all spatial and temporal boundaries, true for all people, at all times and in all places” (Hermida, p. 98). Postmodernist thinkers tend to reject any meta-narratives and deny any claims of truth. Among them Jean Francois Lyotard is pioneer who declares postmodernism as incredulity towards meta-narratives. He argued that we now live in an era in which legitimizing ‘master narratives’ are in crisis and in decline. These narratives implied by major philosophies, such as Kantianism, Hegelianism and Marxism or includes theories or world-views that claim that history is progressive, that knowledge can liberate us, and that all knowledge has a secret unity. Lyotard attacks two main narratives of the progressive emancipation of humanity-from Christian revitalization to Marxist Utopia and that of the triumph of science. He considers that such doctrines have lost their credibility since the Second World War (Butler, p. 13).

Postmodern philosophers such as Foucault and Derrida agreed that there are no knowledge that is able to describe the truth about the reality of man and humanity. Since they denied any kind of objective reality, there could not be any absolute truth. So, postmodernists conclude that universal truth is impossible and relativism is our fate.

5. Deconstruction:

The basic method in postmodern analysis is the ‘deconstruction’ which was introduced by some French philosophers like Derrida. Deconstruction is not as the same as destroy. It attempts to undo logical contradictions and turn over rigid conceptual oppositions. Simultaneously, deconstruction constructs new concepts and meanings that could not be included in the old system (Best & Kellner, p. 291).

Jacques Derrida argues that each truth-claim can be deconstructed and shown to be not based on any objective criteria. He and his followers also claim that philosophy and literature in the western tradition had falsely supposed that the relationship between language and world was well founded and reliable. It implies that the meaning of a word has its origin in the structure of reality itself and hence makes the truth about that structure directly present to the mind. This false logocentrism in language as the mirror of nature is an illusion. For Derrida, all this amounts to a false ‘metaphysics of presence’. His skepticism allowed his followers to attack the beliefs that philosophy, science or the novel really described the world accurately, or that a historical narrative can be true (Butler, p. 17).

Derrideans insisted that all words must be explained only in terms of their relationships to the various systems. It follows that we are at best relativists and can only know what *they* permit us to know about reality. Whatever we say, we are caught within a linguistic system that does not relate to external reality in the way we expect. This is because every term within each system also depends upon the existence of other terms that are absent. For example, in English there is a family of words for degrees of anger- from ‘irritated’ to ‘furious’. And French has its own different family of words for this area. All the terms within each

language's family rely upon one another to divide up the field of 'anger' for native speakers. But neither system, English or French, can fairly claim to finally encode the 'truth' about states of anger in the world. Therefore, for Derrideans, language only seems to mark out clear differences between concepts. For meaning continuously slips away from word to word within the linguistic chain (Ibid, p. 19). However, in spite of such differences we can understand through family resemblance.

According to Derrida, we tend to rely upon particular 'transcendental signifiers' such as 'God', 'reality', the 'idea of man' to organize our discourse. The conceptual oppositions we tend to employ to do this organization for us, such as, speech versus writing, soul versus body, literal versus metaphorical, natural versus cultural, masculine versus feminine – make us get lots of fundamental relationships wrong. In particular, we tend to put one of these terms above the other. For example, 'woman' is thought as inferior to 'man' or 'Oriental' is inferior to 'Western'. But within a more relativistic conceptual scheme, we can see that they 'really' depend on one another for their definition, because one cannot be defined without the existence of other. Indeed, what apparently opposites are really need one another. The relativists claim that the world, its social systems, human identity are constructed by us in language. This construction can never be justified by the claim that this is the way that such things 'really are'. We live, not inside reality, but inside our representations of it. All this can give us the confidence that the way we see the world can and should be changed and deconstructed.

Postmodern Consciousness in understanding Islam

Every culture provides for man a certain world-view which is formed by the general philosophical and scientific conditions of the time. To Muslim, Islam is a world-view that is for all and equally applicable for all time. But Islam is confronted today some kinds of contradictions. Now the fundamental task of an Islamic thinker is to point out the inner contradictions and inconsistencies to which the alien world-view of his time is exposed and give Islamic solutions which can surmount these contradictions and incongruities.

Skepticism, nihilism and relativism are three main ingredients of postmodern mind. There is an absolute and pervasive doubt that troubles every section of society and every aspect of human life. There is an inevitable intrusion of subjective element in all cognitive process which narrows the possibility of their being completely objective, impersonal and non-human. When man perceives reality it is always through a certain perspective which comprises the perceiver's cognitive apparatus, his socio-historical environment, the language he speaks and his basis and prejudices and interests. Man cannot by any means eschew these perspectives. As a Word of God the universal message of the Quran cannot simply exist for itself, but must meaningfully refer to the interpreter's own experience, knowledge and environment. For Rahman, this highlights a circularity of meaning: between the reader's prior understandings and the text's own normative content, which returns meaning to, and for, the reader. This movement 'from the present situation of Quranic times, then back to the present' is the basis of any living intellectual tradition (Rahman, p. 5).

Kant had shown that all the categories in terms of which man apprehends outside reality, even the space and time, are in his own mind. Besides, man is born and brought up in a social setting which influences and determines his vision of truth to an immeasurable degree. He cannot get rid of these influences and consequently cannot perceive facts quite objectively. Therefore, objectivity in the province of knowledge and truth is a complete myth and nothing more (Haq, p. 52).

Now the question is – what kind of relationship does Islam possess with this postmodern condition? How postmodern philosophy affects in understanding Islam? What may be the nature of response that an Islamic intellectual can offer having been faced to it? Should he succumb, or make compromises or oppose it wholesale? Moreover, in the case of conflicts what may be his basic task that he should undertake in order to make his religion relevant and reasonable? In the ensuing sections, there will be an endeavor to answer all these questions.

Postmodern consciousness is partly applicable to Islam. This new consciousness offers several new methods in Islamic jurisprudence especially in the epistemological level. It has gained strong attraction on some parts of Muslim society as it promotes new ideas such as promoting equality of rights among citizens and genders and safeguarding the minority groups' rights, honoring spectrum of opinions in society. In the contemporary global world, these ideas are highly acceptable and are also pertinent with Islamic faith. In this respect postmodernist thought is complementary to understand Islam.

Postmodernism has also liberated human being from the shackles of the authority of reason. Postmodern attitude to the superiority of reason is almost similar to that of Islam. Islam does not accept the authority of reason as the supreme power, instead it encourages to use reason to understand the Islamic fundamentals by proclaiming in Quran in different verses. In Islam, reason is not contradictory to the revelation, but cannot operate in a proper manner without the guiding force of revelation. Ibn Taymiyya, in this connection, says that as Quran is the gift of God, reason also one of the gift of God. Therefore, through reason we have to understand revelation. It does not mean that reason is the final authority, which is also admitted by the postmodernist. Reason cannot determine what is good or evil without revelation. Yet, through reason people can determine *what* they should do or should not do, only revelation can show them *why* they must do so. "Thus reason can discover the existence of God and identify His most important qualities, but cannot determine the correct forms of worship; revelation prescribes all the details of the law of inheritance, but omits mention of the details of governmental organization" (Kerr, pp. 110-116).

There are certain fields of knowledge that cannot acquire through only reason, something more is needed, which is beyond reason. In this regard, postmodernist claim that there is no absolute or true knowledge whilst Muslims believe that the revelation is true which the Word of God, hence absolute is. In scriptural text (Quran), there are some fundamental principles, which are unchangeable and absolute for all and everywhere. This is the departure of postmodern thought of Islam, and postmodernists' rejection of author as a constructor of meaning is relatively appropriate in understanding Quran. But there are some injunctions and guidance that are related to cultural, social and environmental factors, which

should be time-bound issues. These issues are subjective and should treat in the light of postmodernist thought, such as hermeneutics. For the purpose of present understanding of Quran's universal message, an interpreter should understand the Quran's 'linguistic encoding' within a specific social and historical context. 'Since the message of Islam is believed to be valid to all human beings, regardless of time and space', Abu Zayd asserts that the Quran requires 'an endless process of interpretation and reinterpretation which cannot but differ in time' (Nasr, p. 39). This does not mean that the essential meaning of the text is open to change inasmuch as its application to different circumstances. To understand the Islam's eternal teaching and to interpret Quran correctly it is essential to separate the normative aspect from the historical content of the sacred text.

Islam stands against the skeptical and nihilistic ethos of the new world of postmodernism. Skepticism amounts to a total denial of knowledge- knowledge of the world and knowledge of one's self; and nihilism is the state of one's being completely disoriented in the matters of truth and value (Haq, p. 55). On the contrary, Islam is a positivist and world-affirming religion. It takes for granted the existence of physical universe and encourages people for the belief in God by proclaiming in the Quran:

Say, "Do you indeed disbelieve in He who created the earth in two days and attribute to Him equals? That is the Lord of the worlds. And He placed on the earth firmly set mountains over its surface, and He blessed it and determined therein its [creatures'] sustenance in four days without distinction - for [the information] of those who ask. Then He directed Himself to the heaven while it was smoke and said to it and to the earth, "Come [into being], willingly or by compulsion." They said, "We have come willingly." Then He made them seven heavens in two days and revealed to each heaven its law. And We adorned the lower heaven with lamps, and firmly secured it. All this is the firm plan of the All-Mighty, the All-Knowing" (al-Quran, 41:9-12).

Islam affirms the knowledge that man receives through senses or intellect or intuition by proclaiming in the Quran: "Lo! We create man from a drop of thickened fluid to test him; so We make him hearing, seeing" (al Quran, 76:2). And "And by the soul and Him who perfected it. And inspired it (with conscience of) what is wrong for it and (what is) right for it" (al Quran, 91:7-8).

Besides, there is an especial knowledge, *Ilm*, which God imparts to man by revealing it to His chosen people, the Prophets, through some angelic agency:

"And thus We have revealed to you an inspiration of Our command. You did not know what is the Book or [what is] faith, but We have made it a light by which We guide whom We will of Our servants. And indeed, [O Muhammad], you guide to a straight path". (al Quran, 42:52).

In a word, Islam, as against the new spirit of faithlessness and non-commitment, is a religion of absolute faith and total commitment. It accepts the possibility and in some cases the certainty of knowledge. This dimension of Islam is different from postmodern philosophy.

So far as the idea of relativism is concerned, it is as unacceptable to Islam as it is dangerous for society. Islam is deeply opposed to relativism of knowledge and of

values which postmodernism advocates. Muslim societies face threats from the propagation of tastes and lifestyles associated with consumerism and globalization resulting from postmodernism, which threaten religious identity and adherence (Emad Bazzi, p. 72). Moreover, relativistic attitude of truths and values and their practical applications can result into a complete return to barbarism and social anarchy. For, a person differs in his interests and attitudes as much as a society differs from another society. If one admits to the demand of each society to have its own personal system of truths only on the ground of unavoidable peculiarities and characteristics, then he is bound to make the same concession for the individual also. Consequently, there should be as many truths as the number of individuals. This may put the social existence of man in peril (Haq, p. 57). The point is that if relativism is true, then all individuals should be given equal opportunity to live their life according to their own whims and wishes. It is inconceivable since it never happens that a whole society or even a majority of its members consciously agree upon this. This will also cause turmoil in the society, consequently the social coherence will fall in threat.

But Islam cannot take any such attitude without honoring its independent disposition. It is a religion with complete objectivity in metaphysical as well as ethico-political realms. Islam's insistence upon ideological objectivity is quite reasonable. Man cannot dispense with it as he is a member of a frame of reference in which different individuals through their behavioral interaction build an objective socio-political structure. The political organization of every nation assumes an objective world-view upon which it bases its notions of rights and duties, crimes and punishments etc. No society can eschew formulating these notions unless it is willing to expose itself to the danger of complete annihilation. (p. 58). But for postmodernists, there is no truth claim that is objective, each idea is in deconstructed form. If we assume that view is correct, then the truth of the Quran is also seem to be deconstructed, thus not objective. It is quite contrary to Islamic faith. In Quran, there are some principles related to *aqida* and *ibadat* and explicit injunctions related to practical life that are objective and true regardless of time and place. Simultaneously, there are some other issues that can be reconstructed with the change of time and place. Islam acknowledges and encourages this reconstruction but not deconstruction. However, Islam is not fully opposed to relativism. In fact, it may be content with relativism in the context that all human interpretations of reality contain certain human elements. Obviously man cannot avoid his prejudices and interests. He also cannot grasp reality in all its complex multiple aspects. Therefore, relativism is a genuine doctrine since it emphasizes this fundamental fact. But where it goes wrong is its view that all truths are relative. In Islam, there are certain truths that are absolute. Islam itself having its sources in a Being, Who is completely free from human limitations and handicaps, thus absolute. One cannot bracketed Him with human ideologies whose relativity is beyond doubt.

Indeed, whether it is relativism or nihilism, the source of all evils lies in the limitations of man's capability and skepticism towards the possibility of knowledge. Therefore, the most fundamental task for an Islamic intellectual is to provide knowledge a new basis from a new perspective. It appears that it is only possible through one way and that is to reconstruct knowledge. By reconstructing

knowledge one can restore and rehabilitate man's confidence in the truth, in the objectivity of truth and finally in Islam itself. Moreover, the Quran is not only an ordinary philosophical book but also is the book of knowledge and spirit, which is revealed as the Word of God to the prophet for all mankind. So, the language of the Quran is different from any worldly text. There is far difference between philosophical interpretation and Quranic interpretation, where the former is unrestricted and open and the latter is restricted with certain conditions. And Allah has provided the restrictions which protecting the Quranic language from becoming distorted. This has been proved that the language of Quran is still remaining undistorted and intact. Theologically, in Quran Allah Himself proclaim that He has revealed the Quran and He Himself will protect it. In addition, Allah also declare in Quran that "Indeed, upon Us is its collection [in your heart] and [to make possible] its recitation. So when We have recited it [through Gabriel], then follow its recitation. Then upon Us is its clarification [to you]" (Quran 75:17-19). Therefore, where Allah Himself takes the responsibility to protect the Quranic language, and after 1500 years of its revelation the Quran remains the same as before, this means that there are must be a neutral and permanent Being who maintains all of these things. In addition, we have to understand Quranic language through 'commonsense reasoning' in which some-thing is established through a simple inference. For example, the existence of God is established simply by pointing to the extra-ordinary order and arrangement in the cosmos. We can infer an indivisible Creator from the visible phenomenal world. So the point is that the new reconstruction of knowledge must be based upon this simple procedure of reasoning, not upon a mysterious intuitions.

Concluding Remark

Postmodernism dominates all spheres of life in contemporary societies. It marked as a departure of modernism which affirmed the power of human beings to create, improve and reshape their environment with the aid of rationality, practical experimentation, scientific knowledge or technology. But in the long run it brought immense sufferings to the humanity by the bad impact of two world wars and colonization. Consequently, there developed a new world-view that reject the supreme authority of rationalism, realism as well as the dominance of meta-narratives and absolute truth, which are the hallmark of postmodernism. This world-view is penetrating a new dimension to Islam for ensuring it stays relevance with the changes of time, place and condition. We have to understand Islam with this new perspective. Although there are some principles and injunctions that are absolute and not changeable, but a lot of injunctions are historically related and time bound, thus open to interpretation. We have to understand these time bound issues with critical approach of postmodern perspectives that respect openness, plurality of opinions, and alternative views. However, not all aspects of postmodernism are applicable to Islam since there is an absolute Being who is ultimate reality and as a Word of that absolute God the Quran is true for Muslims. It does not mean that as a whole the Quran is not the subject of interpretation, still there is scope for independent reasoning to understand and interpret the changeable issues. These interpretations may vary from one to another due to the differences in understanding, and the diversity of interpretations are accepted until they do not contradict with the basic faith of Islam.

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