

POSTMODERNISM A Critical Overview

ABSAR AHMAD*

Postmodernism as a philosophical movement or rather mood essentially and in terms of its origin and source belongs to Continental Philosophy which emerged in the 20th century. Unlike many other philosophical traditions and schools of thought, Continental Philosophy is less a seamless fabric than a patchwork of diverse strands. Phenomenology, hermeneutics, existentialism, structuralism, critical theory, semiotics, deconstruction – these are some of the salient movements which have developed in Continental Europe between 1900 and the 1990s. Till mid 60s, the differences which existed between Anglo-American Philosophy and Continental Philosophy were largely appreciated as those between phenomenology and existentialism on the one hand and linguistic analysis on the other. An intelligent journalist, writing in the American magazine “Time” (January 7, 1966) characterized them thus: “Philosophers belonging to the latter school may be referred to as logicians, because of their interest in logic and language, whilst those belonging to the former may be referred to as lotus-eaters, because of their concern with subjective experience.” But particularly since April/May 1968 Continental Philosophy and in particular French Philosophy has expanded tremendously and assumed many diverse shapes and dimensions. I have no intention to make this presentation anecdotal, but I would like to mention that during my one month stay in Paris in April 1968 I myself keenly observed the socio-political turmoil through which French intellectuals in general and academic institutions in Paris passed and motivated them to write on socio-political and philosophical issues that led to Postmodernism. The purpose of this paper is to provide a short guided-tour of Postmodern thinking. This write up is my best shot at elucidating Postmodern Philosophy, yet I approach the task as an admiring outsider, not really an expert.

*Professor Dr. Absar Ahmad is Chairman, Department of Philosophy, University of the Punjab, Lahore (Pakistan).

Postmodernism as a term was used by Jean-Francois Lyotard (*The Postmodern Condition*, 1979) to refer to the radical and constant mutability contained within the concept of Modernism itself; it is not to be understood simply as a “stage” that comes after or replaces Modernism. As an influential challenge to the notion of the autonomous subject guided by the metanarratives of the historical consciousness, Postmodernism has affected varied intellectual domains, such as philosophy, literature, and art. The word itself defies strict description principally because its adherents leave its definition deliberately vague, but it does appear to represent some sort of anti-Enlightenment position wherein its advocates believe that what has gone before as “Modernism”, is inappropriately dependent on Reason, Rationalism, and Wisdom, and is furthermore, inherently elitist, non-multicultural and therefore oppressive. Finding fertile ground in academic departments of literature (particularly literary criticism), art, history, and sociology – and more recently, in history and political science, its origin can be traced to the French academy of the 1970s whose proponents are now called “deconstructionists”, the essence of which is that in any literary creation or any text, the actual meaning of the screed is to be found in the reader, not in the author. A text, the Postmodernist insists, is “ultimately self-contradictory” (except, of course, the texts written by Postmodernists!). In the sense that the Enlightenment encapsulated an acquired series of rational observations into Truths, and then wove those Truths into a coherent philosophy of the world, general laws which apply to it, and the consequences of such laws to its inhabitants, the Postmodernists reject the notion that anything can be resolved to be True. Everything is in the mind of the beholder: relative, forever shifting; and anything perceived to be a “fact” is the mere disillusionment of a cultural bias. With such a philosophy, adherents can move beyond the critique of books to the critique of anything, even science, about which they tend to be supremely ignorant.

Postmodernism is a cluster of theories most often associated with a group of 20th century French philosophers including Jacques Lacan, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Julia Kristeva, Lyotard, Jean Baudrillard, *et al.* It is the unifying philosophy of the academic Left which has replaced discredited Marxism. It might also be claimed that Marxism has morphed into Postmodernism. Like all academic foolishness, it has an argot of jargon, tropes and incoherent phraseology recapitulated continuously by the cognoscenti. It distills, ultimately, to mere posturing as a substitute for intellectual fervour. Although, nothing according to the Postmodernist can be determined to be “true”, Postmodernism itself is, of course, true. Paying homage

at the Postmodernist altar are all sorts of new academic disciplines, chief of which are “Women Studies”, “Black Studies”, and “interdisciplinary studies” and an assortment of crusades such as Campus Political Correctness and even environmental wackiness. These are the truly disenchanting: coagulated in the academy after having been rejected in the real world, they continue their search for a nihilistic nirvana.

Postmodernism focuses on four basic critiques of Western philosophic thought:

1. Critique of the Human Subject
2. Critique of History
3. Critique of Meaning
4. Critique of Philosophy

Postmodernism is suspicious of subject-centred reason or philosophy of consciousness. It has no faith in the progressivist and speculative discourses of Modernity and the assumptions of the Enlightenment. It abandons all metanarratives which could legitimise foundations of truths, and claims that metanarratives are not needed nor are they desirable. Postmodernism is about how we are defined within specific historical, social, and cultural matrices. It is about race, class, gender, erotic identity and practice, nationality, age, and ethnicity. It is about power and powerlessness, and about empowerment. It is about threads we trace, and trace, and trace, but to no conclusion. To increase knowledge, yes. But never to innocent knowledge. To better understanding, yes. But never to pure insight.

Postmodernism is about history, but not the kind of “History” that lets us think we can know the past. History in the Postmodern moment becomes histories and questions. It asks: Whose history gets told? In whose name? For what purpose? Postmodernism is about histories not told, retold, untold. Histories which are forgotten, hidden, invisible, considered unimportant, changed, eradicated. It is about the refusal to see history as linear, as leading straight up to today in some recognizable pattern – all set for us to make sense of. The Postmodern moment is not something that is to be defined chronologically; rather, it is rupture in our consciousness.

As already stated above, Postmodernism calls into question Enlightenment values such as rationality, truth, and progress, arguing that these merely serve to secure the monolithic structure of modern capitalistic society by concealing or excluding any forces that might challenge its cultural dominance. To counter this hegemony,

Postmodernism draws upon the post-structuralist understandings of representations or signifiers as embedded within a matrix of differential relationships to other signifiers (rather than as standing in a correlative relationship to actual objects) in order to open up space for difference within and against the abstraction and uniformity of modernism. Thus this attitude values heterogeneity over purity, diversity over unity, the local over the universal, and popular over elite culture or high art. Postmodernism is said to describe the emergence of a social order in which the importance and power of the mass media and popular culture mean that they govern and shape all other forms of social relationships. The idea is that popular culture, signs and media images increasingly dominate our sense of reality and the way we define ourselves and the world around us. It implies that there is no distinction between reality and simulation: an emphasis on style at the expense of substance. The argument is that we increasingly consume images and signs for their own sake rather than for their usefulness or for the deeper values they may symbolize. Surface and style are said to predominate at the expense of content, substance, and meaning.

The Core of Postmodernism

The concept of privileging information is at the core of Postmodernism: many concepts of Postmodernism are often discussed in the context of what is privileged and what is silenced. For example, Barton and Barton claim that viewers are empowered by visual images that present both the “big picture” and detailed information. The accuracy and effectiveness of information are often discussed in terms of privilege as well. Beverly Sauer, for instance, discusses how certain accident reports are ineffective in helping prevent future accidents because they tend to privilege one version of the accident. And finally, the Postmodernist rejection of metanarratives, also called grand or master narratives, is based on the idea that these are totalising, privileging only one point of view. For the Postmodernist, essential ingredient for professional success are an unquestionable flair for literary exploits, an intuitive inkling of what is going on, and strictly non-scientific ambitions. Dosed down with a sense of the absurd and the ironic, these ingredients go together to make up an *avant garde* movement. The positive side of the movement is that it criticizes the reductionist thinking of the present-day science. The message is that sciences are leading us up the garden path. However, it is not certain that this movement is not doing much more than leading us down the other end of the same path.

It was Derrida who has coined the term deconstruction, which has become the rallying point for much of this movement. In his letter to a Japanese, he makes a relatively serious effort to define what he means by this term – something related to a dictionary definition “to disassemble the parts of a whole”. This implies a model of action, but any such model must itself be also subject to the deconstruction process. In the letter just mentioned, Derrida can start having fun – “What deconstruction is not? Everything of course! What is deconstruction? Nothing of course!” In response to the question of what it is that is to be deconstructed, Derrida would probably come up with the enigmatic and frustrating response “Everything, anything, and nothing”. In Derrida land, it seems that everything and anything goes. However, if we repeat Derrida’s exercise of finding a single word of expressing what is fundamentally implicated, then we maybe able to demystify the concept somewhat. The word I propose is the generic. It is the generic which is to be deconstructed and it must be deconstructed generically.

I have decided that the best way to provide a conceptual overview is to tell a simple story. It is meant to serve as a scaffold for making sense out of the word “Postmodern”. It is a classical story about worldview: the ancient worldview. In many ways, the ancients of Greece and Rome were a lot like us. They faced some of the same questions we face now – namely – How is it that we know things? How can we get at the truth? How is the world made up? The ancients recognized that appearances can be deceiving – that what looks reliable and stable on the surface may actually be in flux and changing. How can we get at the way things really are? To address this problem the Greeks differentiated between the world that we see with our eyes and the “real” world which was perfect, whole, and Divine. God, in fact, was what made it possible to catch glimpse of the “real”, idealized world. Left to our own inclinations, we see imperfections, weakness, and lots of jagged edges. With the help of Divine logic and mathematics, the jagged edges become smooth, and the perfect thing-behind-the thing is made manifest to us. Concepts are Divine revelations of the way the world really is – our usage of “ideas” stems from the ideal forms sought by the ancients. The ancient view of things dominated human thinking for many centuries, in fact through medieval era. Beginning with the Renaissance, however, we gradually shifted our focus. Taught to look for God for truth – and for God in the temple and received texts – many bright thinkers started to believe their own eyes and faculties. Rather than God assuming the central role in the universe, man himself became the standard for judging the truth of things. Man’s discovering truth

and evaluating evidence came to be considered reliable and sufficient for gaining access to the "truth". Superstition and tradition were replaced by rationality and the scientific method. It was thought that technology and the progress of science would signal a corresponding progress in society, until man perfected himself and controlled nature through his knowledge and tools.

Still, philosophers troubled over the same question of how do we know the truth? Kant realized that we will never really get at the way things really are, but that we can get pretty close – we create schemas in our mind that roughly match up with how things are. The word "phenomena" comes from Kant, and means essentially "close to the real thing". Over the years, however, it became clear to philosophers that there remained an insurmountable gulf between ourselves and the truth. We live in a specific time and place, conditioned by a particular culture and experiences. How can we transcend our limitations and reach beyond ourselves to the way things really are. These are tough questions that have persisted through the ages. The Postmodern worldview, as the term implies, is largely a response to modernity and it is essentially inspired by Nietzsche's critique of transcendental metaphysics and traditional morality. Thus, from Nietzsche to Derrida we see the human subject – traditionally the focus of philosophical thought as the place of experience, morality, choice, and will – gradually abandoned. Deconstructionists share Nietzsche's antipathy to metaphysical systems and a suspicion of the values of "truth" and "meaning". Whereas modernity trusted science to lead us down the road of progress, Postmodernism questioned whether science alone could really get us there. Whereas modernity happily created inventions and technologies to improve our lives, Postmodernism took a second look and wondered whether our lives were really better for all the gadgets and technical devices. Postmodernism looked at the culmination of modernity in 20th century and pointed to its dehumanising, mechanizing effects in our lives.

But what about the age-old questions about truth and knowledge? A Postmodern might say "Truth is what people agree on", or "Truth is what works", or "there is no Truth, only lots of little truths running around out there!" Postmodernists tend to reject the idealized view of truth inherited from the ancients and replace it with a dynamic changing truth bounded by time, space and perspective. They tend to celebrate the dynamic diversity of life. I shall here outline some key features of Postmodern thinking liberally paraphrased for simplicity:

1. A commitment to plurality of perspectives, meanings, methods, values – everything!
2. A search for and appreciation of double meanings and alternative interpretations, many of them ironic and unintended. Better resist meaning and interpretation.
3. A critique or distrust of Big Stories meant to explain everything. This includes grand theories of science, and myths in religions, nations, cultures, and professions that serve to explain why things are the way they are. Stress on fragmentation.
4. Granting a plurality of perspectives and ways of knowing, a recognition that there must be multiple truths. A deep suspicion of Hegel, Marx, and any form of universal philosophy.

A Philosophical Critique

I here venture a few points by way of a philosophical critique of Postmodernism and Deconstruction:

1. Postmodern theory is heavily tendentious and political. The goals it espouses are mainly the right ones, but the question is whether its overall philosophical stance is conducive to their realization. That cause is certainly not served by suggesting that there is a one-to-one correlation between unity/diversity on the one hand, and justice/injustice on the other; unity producing oppression, multiplicity liberation. We should not honour the otherness of the Other if we did not also recognize her/his identity with us. Surely discord and anarchy are not happy conditions. Deconstructionists' crusade against universalistic and tyrannizing claims generally, their celebration of difference over identity, and their obsession with variety, heterogeneity, plurality, and otherness is philosophically extremely problematic. To say that truth (whether with capital T or otherwise) marginalizes and occludes is, to say the least, naive and unincisive. Is it not true that no idea is worth its salt if it does not discriminate, sifting truth from error, or at least relevance from irrelevance. In this respect every idea that is meant to be taken seriously discriminates – yes, discriminates against: marginalizing is the preferred Derridian word – its contrary, implying the irrelevance (if not invalidity) of the latter for purposes at hand.

In my opinion, "Deconstruction" amounts to nothing short of dephilosophizing philosophy itself. The question that arises is: How are we to balance Piaget's "decentration" to Postmodernism's incessant plea for differences? Piaget reports that in the course of human development, individuals normally reach a stage of "decentration" wherein they can adopt increasingly universal standpoints giving up particular egocentric or sociocentric ways of understanding and acting to move towards the "universal communications community".

2. Nietzsche's vision of postmodernity is the atheistic vision *par excellence*. It is free of the sentimentalising morality and ethics which is so characteristic of modern atheists. Modernist thought suffers from a truly bizarre contradiction: On the one hand it basically denies the existence of God, but on the other it goes on to waste an incredible amount of ink writing about such noble concepts as justice, peace, humanity, equality, freedom, brotherhood, etc. As Nietzsche so acutely noted, it is not possible to deny the existence of God and then talk about such noble concepts because these concepts are all intrinsically connected to religious morality and ethics. A denial of God also requires a denial of the morality and ethics which is central to the religious ethos. Consequently, Nietzsche argued that since God was dead anyway, it made no sense in trying to revive him. Man, in reality the Superman, had to rise and construct a whole new morality and ethics which was beyond good and evil, to replace the old religious ethos.
3. In place of Modernity's alienated man, Postmodernism gives us a picture of man who lives a fragmented life and is condemned to singularity and particularity. However, in religion and in perennial wisdom we have a belief that the sense of ultimate belonging is not only a psychological resource but a metaphysical birth right that has been obscured from view. I am talking of religion in the sense in which it provides man beneficent bondjngs, ultimate belonging, and primordial connectedness. In the recent religio-philosophical thought of the Indo-Pak subcontinent, Allama Muhammad Iqbal is the paradigmatic thinker and advocate of this type of religion.