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# Postmodernism: An Era of Self Reflection and Interrogation

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**Abstract**
The central examination of this paper concentrates on notion of postmodernism and its tremendous significance on ideas of self reflexivity. The term 'postmodernism' has been highly contentious and in spite of its very common use in contemporary discourse, disagreement about its nature and scope persists. Thomas Docherty notes that "although the term 'postmodern' has become one of the insistently used terms in cultural debates in recent years, it is a term which has often been used with a great deal of imprecision". In literature and the arts, postmodernism has been appropriated through a focus on the politics of representation. Jean François Lyotard has argued against the idea of 'truth' and its representability in one of the key texts of postmodernism, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*: "The postmodern would be that which, in the modern, puts forward the unpresentable in presentation itself; that which would make it possible to share collectively the nostalgia for the attainable; that which searches for new presentations, not in order to enjoy them but in order to impart a stronger sense of the unpresentable". Lyotard's emphasis on the politics of representation suggests that postmodernism is not necessarily and always related to chronological positioning, but is also an approach, an attitude and a cultivation of scepticism towards all that are taken for granted. The importance given to representation has meant that there is in postmodern cultural structures-texts and artifacts that announce their postmodern character by a rejection of foundational beliefs -a tendency to interrogate the self,often manifested in the condition term "Self-Reflexivity". In literature such a character is reflected in novels like *Midnight's Children*(1981) by Salman Rushdie or *The French Lieutenant's Woman*(1969) by John Fowles.
**Keywords**: Postmodernism, fiction, representation, truth, character, structure.

INTRODUCTION: Given the multiplicity of contexts to which it is subjected and the various agencies in which its presence is noted, it does not readily offer itself to a concretely locatable or definable structure. Thus, its use must be seen in terms of the contexts in which it has been used ever since it appeared in critical discourse. It was used by Arnold Toynbee in 1939 to refer to a kind of chronological order in his *A study of History*, where he applied it to organize the historicity of the postmodernperiod. Toynbee's use was conditioned by the philosophic figuration of a future moment in history, which he chose to call the postmodern,and as such it was not accommodated to engage the theoretical polemics to which it refers to today. Intellectually,postmodernism has been associated with French critical theory of the Twentieth century which in the 1960s sought to revise many of the assumptions that were commonly accepted and taken for granted. The first aspect in this intellectual interrogation relates to the

challenging of the 'foundational' (assumptions based on solid foundations) nature of many belief-systems. These anti-foundational perspectives of viewing 'reality' destabilized the concrete ideas that had been unquestioningly accepted. The theoretical framework of the French intellectuals in the 1960s, however, was informed by the philosophical heritage of some thinkers like Nietzsche, who had commented on the impossibility of certainly in the Nineteenth century. Thus,the early philosophic writings of French thinkers like Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault built upon the philosophic heritage they inherited and organized their questioning of the foundations of traditional beliefs in the context of such a legacy.

The questioning of foundations also implied the adoption of new ways of seeing the world and the unshackling of previously assumed constants was brought about by the engagement of various agencies. First,the idea of a 'grand narrative'(a narrative that totalized everything within its purview) was challenged and postmodernists claimed that the fragments are more important than the whole and also that it is never possible to view the whole as such. The focus on the fragments-in culture, in politics, in literature and the media-drew attention to the inability of language to be comprehensively accommodative in respect of providing the view of reality. The rejection of grand narratives also led to the view that ideas about reality can only be provisional. It is one of the common places of postmodernism to valorize the variety of perspectives instead of privileging just the dominant. In this sense, postmodernism is a democratizing process and is related to the deconstruction of the dominant central principle governing any structure. The movement away from a foundational or central thesis as the only organizing principle of reality is closely associated with deconstruction. The term 'deconstruction' was used by Jacques Derrida to show that inconsistencies persist in any given structure,irrespective of whether they are immediately perceived or not. Technically,or rather within the given terms of the phenomenon, to offer a definition of deconstruction would be self-defeating,as it too would be subjected to the same principles it seeks to explain. Derrida proposes that the intellectual framework of western philosophy has long been governed by the 'metaphysics of presence' and that the playful nature of language cannot be ignored. According to him, all ideas of the real are structured through the relations of signs which are not fixed but relative and provisional. The view that sign-systems are structures which do not permit a complete view of reality is related to another Derridean concept,that of deferral. Not only does meaning differ from one another, is it also in a constant state of deferral. The impossibility of arriving at a final meaning is one aspect of language that Derrida draws attention to and this aspect of relativism has been extended by many thinkers beyond the realm of the linguistic sign to explore the perspectives of contemporary cultural narratives. In the field of literature, this focus on the language of texts is closely aligned to the proposition, put forward by Roland Barthes that the author does not exist. This is not to imply that the historical author is physically dead but it suggests that a text's existence does not rely on any external authority and also that it is independent of authorial control. The idea that a text is "plural" has had serious implications for the entire philosophic tradition of the west. The postmodern attention to the textuality of literature has been used to read history as representation and not fact. This means that like other texts, historical narratives too are structured and are informed by certain paradigms that control and determine them. The questioning of the facticity of history is another way of challenging the fixed idea of the "real". This characteristic of viewing the real with scepticism has also led to questioning of the

foundational assumptions of scientific knowledge and thus even apparently "solid" theoretical structures (the theory of evolution is one such example)are understood relatively.

The implications of this relativism have been wide-ranging and enormous. For instance,thinkers like Foucault question the very idea of historical or civilizational progress(another 'grand narrative')and conditions like power and politics continually inform them. Instead of seeing political and historical structures as givens, postmodernists consider them as discourses and go on to study other competing structures as well. Postmodernism has opened up interesting debate sites in cultural theory and it has affected the perceptions about almost everything in contemporary life, from detergents to the ideas of God. Roland Barthes was one of the early philosophers to highlight the structural features of objects of consumption,thereby inaugurating the need to review the idea of culture itself. Postmodern thought has contributed to the debunking of the high culture/low culture myth by emphasizing the relevance of popularly consumed material. The democratizing aspect of postmodernism is thus manifested in the organization of the perceptions relating everyday experience. On the other hand, a study of such structures has also led to an increased attention given to everyday experience and the politics and ideological implications of the agencies at work. Three features thus emerge in the context of postmodernist thought: (i) Scepticism towards the rationalistic assumptions as being the only agency of knowledge; (ii) Loss of certainty and a foregrounding of relativism;and (iii) A rejection of cultural elitism.

The Post War English fiction: The world of fiction has seen interesting experiments and adventures in the post-War period. It is important to recognize, however,that reading fictional developments in terms of periods is not problem-free. As Philip Tew notes: "All periodizations are tenuous. Clearly,any such chronological demarcation may be argued to be fraught with conceptual and ideological difficulties, but no more so than any other commensurable definitional generic or movement boundaries". Nevertheless,certain aspects of post-War English fiction may be outlined here. Stories of individual struggle and the contest for meaning constituted the major themes of the novels of the 1950s. The issues of national identity and the state of contemporary culture occupied the thematic orientations of a group of novelists usually described by epithet 'angry young men'. The novelists who made up this group were Kingsley Amis (1922-1995), John Wain(1925-1994), John Braine (1922-1986) and Alan Sillitoe(1928-)Braine's *Room at the Top* (1957)captured the angst that was part of the intellectual frustration and which found quite vocal articulators in both fiction and drama. Kingsley Amis' first novel *Lucky Jim*(1954)brought him immediate success. The novel's protagonist Jim Dixon's misadventures in situations that go beyond his control constitute the crux of the novel. The consistently boisterous and satirical incidents liven up the narrative. The novel belongs to a series of fictional writings that deal with the pretentiousness of both intellectual and cultural institutions of the time. Amis' other fictional forays haven't been as well appreciated in later times in spite of the fact that they were popular during the time of appearance. Amis was interested in detective fiction as well and his imitation of the James Bond example in *Colonel Sun*(1968),which incidentally was published under the pseudonym of Robert Markham,shows that he carried it quite comfortably. His later novels have dwelt on topical issues,especially *The Old Devils*(1986) which was awarded the Booker Prize. The rise of popular culture and the fragmentation of the welfare structure of the state,the dissatisfaction of the youth with the available conditions of social intercourse,the lack of employment opportunities and even the

collapse of empire contributed to the picture of gloom in British society in the 1950s. John Wain's *Hurry on Down*(1953)presents a theme that's very similar to Amis' *Lucky Jim*,as it also describes the university scene through the downward social movement of Charles Lumley,and the overwhelmingly satirical portrait of the unemployment situation in contemporary England preoccupied many writers of the time. In this context, *Lucky Jim* and *Hurry on Down* are generically similar because of the common positions they take and the concerns they narrate; the problem of social adjustment which constituted the themes of these novels found its dramatic platform in Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*(1956). Wain's other novels have not been followed with the same fervor even though he has dabbled in a variety of fictional adventures in his *The Contenders*(1958),*The Smaller Sky*(1968),*Young Shoulders*(1982)and *Where the Rivers Meet*(1988). Doris Lessing has been one of the most visible of the English women novelists in the Twentieth century, which did have something to do with her engagement of social issues and her preoccupation with transcultural politics.*The Grass is Singing*(1950),her first publication, deals with the politics of colour in Rhodesia:other politically alert novels of Lessing involve the figure of Martha Quest,who appears in *Children of Violence*(1964-5),novel in two volumes.*The Golden Notebook*(1962) and *The Memoirs of a Survivor*(1975)are two of her popular novels.

Other novelists of distinction writing in the post-War period include Anthony Burgess (1917-1993), William Golding (1911-1993), John Fowles, John le Carre, Martin Amis and Ian McEwan among others. Burgess' *Clockwork Orange*(1962)used a combination of American,Russian and English slang vocabulary to explore the gap between the younger and the older generations. *The Eve of Saint Venus*(1964),*Enderby Outside*(1968),*Earthly Powers*(1980),*The End of the World News*(1983),*The Kingdom of the Wicked*(1985),*Any Old Iron*(1989),and *A Dead Man in Deptford*(1993) are the other fictional works of Burgess. His exploitation of linguistic possibilities in his fiction and unconventional storylines separate him from his contemporaries. William Golding's novels provide pictures of social inadequacies and in dealing with issues of cultural corruption(best evidenced in his first and most famous work *Lord of the Flies*,1954),he has explored the flexibility of the novelistic genre to the fullest. His last novel *The Double Tongue*(1995),while dealing with the same preoccupation with the politics of culture,takes the frame of the Delphic oracle to present a contemporary reading of primitive society. The presence of the primitive in man was the subject in his *The Inheritors*(1955) and *The Spire*(1964),both dealing with Pre-modern cultures.*Pincher Martin* (1956),*Free Fall*(1959),*The Pyramid*(1967), *Darkness Visible*(1979), *The Paper Men* (1984),*Rites of Passage* (1980),*Close Quarters*(1987) and *Fire Down Below* (1989)are the other works of Golding. Narrative playfulness characterizes the most famous novel of John Fowles, *The French Lieutenant'sWoman* (1969). Its resourceful exploitation of the conventional Victorian narrative has been well celebrated in the history of post-War English fiction. Fowles has remained a very adventurous novelist and has tried something new in each of his novels. *A Maggot*(1985) goes back to the Eighteenth century, while the exciting *Mantissa*(1983)parodies the assumptions of structuralism. He also tried his hand at thrillers with *The Collector*(1963) and *The Magus* (1966).The thriller genre,however,found one of the major exponents of the Twentieth century in the works of John le Carre. Of the many Le Carre's novels,which have become classics of the spy-thriller,genre *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold*(1963),*Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy*(1974),*The Russia House*(1989),and *The Constant Gardener*(2001)are the famous ones. The character of George Smiley, who appears in some of Le Carre's novels, has been one of the Twentieth century fiction's well known fictional figures.

Martin Amis's satirical verse has been seen as a commentary on the irrelevance that is associated with much of modern living and in novels like *Money: A Suicide Note*(1984)and *The Information*(1995),he demonstrates his quiet but assured response to the state of contemporary society. Martin Amis is one of Britain's most important novelists writing today. In novels like *London Fields*(1989),where he engages his fascination for angst within the frames of metafictional narrative, Amis's satire is both scathing and unrelenting. The many layers of narrative enunciation make *London Fields* a remarkable exercise depicting the experience of postmodernity. The novels of McEwan,especially the Booker Prize winning *Amsterdam*(1998)and *Atonement*(2002),have had a mixed reception, in spite of their being concerned with contemporary social and cultural structures. His earlier fiction showed the influence of continental writers like Thomas Mann and Franz Kafka. An interesting experiment in novel writing was the work titled *A History of the World in 10 Half Chapters*(1989) by Julian Barnes. Barnes had previously written *Metroland*(1981)and *Flaubert's Parrot*(1984),but his 'history' engages many of the motifs of postmodern fiction as it amalgamates fact and fiction,pastiche and parody,rhetoric and representation to reproduce the Noah's ark structure within completely revised parameters. Another interesting work by Barnes in *England,England*(1998) which exposes the certainties of English national identity and shows how complex the idea of meta-England is, which he incidentally uses to great effect.

In conclusion the cosmopolitan of English society in the second half of Twentieth century is reflected in the many-cultured and multivoiced fictional experiments that have drawn from the cultural resources of various non-Englishcentres. Writers like Ruth Prawer Jhabvala, V.S. Naipaul, Salman Rushdie, Anita Desai,Vikram Seth, AmitavGhosh(all of Indian descent) and Kazoo Ishiguro(Japanese)have contributed to the development of contemporary English fiction in ways that have not been replicated in the same terms in other non-English cultures. These writers are usually clubbed within the frame of postcolonial literature, but they are also aligned to the tradition of modern British culture in that many of their narratives derive either directly or indirectly from such a heritage. Their presence in the novel –writing scene has invigorated and enriched the genre of the English novel.

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