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GRAND NARRATIVES AND POSTMODERNISM: CRITICAL EVALUATION

Research Paper Submitted for the M.A. in English

by

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PREFACE

The context of my research is a very complex one. In my research I have critically evaluated how postmodernism denies grandnarratives and the different perspectives of postmodernism counter grandnarratives.

I offer criticisms of grandnarratives in terms of the different perspectives viewed by postmodernists. I have also made my effort at literature review. I have studied a lot of scholarly works on the subject, and among them the texts of John Storey and Barbara Epstein helped me a lot to go for a critical standing.

I did not include chapter division and other conventional things as I did not feel them necessary in terms of the pattern of my study.

Thanks are due to my supervisor Dr. Fakrul Alam, from whom I came to know a lot of things regarding my topic, and whose guidance and assistance were helpful. Thanks are also due to Dr. M. Shahidullah from whom I came to know about the methodologies of research in the 'Research Methodology' course that he offered.

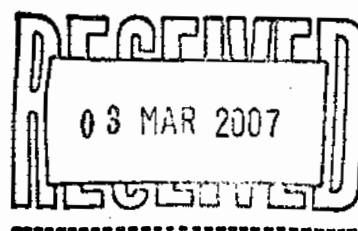


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INTRODUCTION

I have chosen this topic for my research because it is topical and because it is thought provoking. I also believe that the paper will help readers and scholars to think differently about postmodernism. The aim of my research is to convince my readers that grand narratives are suspect in the eyes of postmodernists for good reasons.

I have studied a lot of works which have helped me a lot in developing my critical perspectives. I have come across a wide range of views on grand narratives and the logic of postmodernism in course of my study.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Postmodernism is a cultural phenomenon of the contemporary age that is worth discussing. The term 'postmodernism' was used by a number of writers in the 1950s and 1960s. The concept cannot be said to have crystallized until about the mid-1970s. Scholar Peter Barry says, ". . . the term 'postmodernism' was used in 1930s, but its current sense and vogue can be said to have begun with Jean Francois Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge . . .*" (Barry, 2002, p.86). This masterpiece of Lyotard was published in 1979.

Postmodernism does not view that everything goes by reason. There are failures behind reasoning of everything. So postmodernism celebrates moods of irrationality. It comes to suspect reason. It says that there is no final determinism. It believes in performativity. Besides, it does not bother with morality. It tries to break away from the repressive ethos of morality. It bears elements of irresponsibility. Postmodernism makes fun of the idea of seriousness of modern projects.

The great modern projects started with great optimism. Basically with Newton's scientific theory and French Revolution modernist came to rationalize everything. They came to relate scientific and rational explanations with everything. But in the end enlightenment and other modern projects becomes failures. In the first half of the twentieth century the world experienced two world wars which presented scenes of massacre, havoc, desolation, atrocity, refugees, fanatic nationalism, anarchy and frustration. In the eye of postmodernists, modern projects are doomed now. Instead of enlightening the world, they caused chaos and anarchy.

It is not easy to achieve a precise definition for the concept of postmodernism. Epstein in "Postmodernism and the Left" says, "To attempt to define postmodernism would itself be quite unpostmodern, since postmodernism rejects all encompassing truths or definitions." (Epstein, 1997) There are also a lot of 'post' about at the moment, as for example: postimperial, postindustrial, poststructuralism, postmarxist etc. Besides, theorists are found keen to proclaim the death or end of one thing or another; for example: the death of the author, the death of the subject, the end of history etc. Epstein again says:

. . . following Theodor Adorno I have used the name 'Auschwitz' to signify the extent to which recent Western philosophy seems inconsistent as regards the 'modern project of the emancipation of humanity'. My argument is that the modern project (of realization of universality) has not yet been abandoned, forgotten, but destroyed, 'liquidated'. There are several methods of destruction, several names which are symbols of it. Auschwitz can be taken as a paradigmatic name for the tragic incompleteness of modernity. It is also claimed that 'Grand narratives have become barely credible' [by Lyotard]. (Epstein, 1997.)

It has been already mentioned that after the appearance of Lyotard's text *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* the talks of postmodernism spread widely. The term "grandnarratives" has come from Lyotard. The term Lyotard uses, however, is *grand recite*, the French word for 'story'; one will find writers in English using the term 'story', as well as 'narrative'. By grand 'stories' postmodernists refer to the stories that have been told by kings, thinkers, revolutionaries, statesmen and theologians about reality and history. For example, the enlightenment belief in the power of rationality, in progress and discovery have shaped some narratives.

Lyotard has emerged as the champion of differences and plurality in all theoretical realms and discourses, while energetically attacking totalizing theories and methods. What he opposes are overarching and totalizing systems of thought such as Marxism, Nazism, Democracy, Communism, Socialism, or any religion that tell universal stories (metanarratives) which organize and justify everyday stories and narratives. For Lyotard the enlightenment project which Habermas wishes to continue and purport is actually fallacy and fruitless as well.

Grandnarratives, on the other hand, are fostered in order to cover injustice, enslavement, opposition etc. As a result, what happens is that the commitment embraced by grandnarratives slips out. It seems that the dream of a happy world has faded away. On the other hand, John Storey says that there is the collapse of certainty and the desolation of metanarrative of truth. Storey says, "... Modernity was the era of what he [Baudrillard] calls the 'hermeneutics of suspicion', the search for meaning in the underlying reality of appearances." (Storey, 1993, p. 165). Storey also says, "... all have lost their authority. . . as the centers of authenticity and truth..." (165)



As postmodernists believe that the dependence on Grandnarratives has passed away, as they do not work any longer, and as the world did not experience utopian society, as instead of utopia the key ideas end with anarchy and frustration, so the concepts of Marx, Hegel or Kant have become hopeless. The great projects of modernism are gradually losing their grounds. On the other hand, instead of one super-narrative we can have many mininarratives. Let us see what Hawthorn tells regarding Lyotard's views in his glossary:

From now on we have to derive meaning from little narratives. From local justifications. 'The narrative function is losing its functions, its great hero, its great dangers, its great voyages, its great goal. It is being dispensed in clouds of narrative language elements - narrative, but also denotative, perspective and so on'. To describe the grand-narrative, Lyotard argues that the society of the future falls less within the province of Newtonian anthropology such as STRUCTURALISM or SYSTEMS theory, and [but] more with a PRAGMATICS of language particles, a world of many language games. (Hawthorn, 2000, p. 143)

Let us see what Peter Barry says about Lyotard's views. He says, "Hence Lyotard's famous definition of postmodernism, that it is simply, 'incredulity towards metanarratives'. Grand - narratives of progress and human perfectibility, then are no longer tenable" (86-87)

So postmodernists believe that instead of one explanation for the problems of the chaotic world, there should be many explanations for the solutions of the problems of the world. Postmodernists believe that such metanarratives will be pragmatic.

EVALUATING POSTMODERNISM

For postmodernists, knowledge has an essentially pluralistic character - we may, in fact, find it more appropriate to speak of 'knowledge's' or 'truths' in the plural. The 'totalizing metanarratives' such as functionalism or Marxism, which lay claim to a total explanation of history and social life are no longer credible. They are obsolete. Let us see what Baudrillard says. He says, "Truth is what we should rid ourselves of as fast as possible and pass it on to somebody else. As with illnesses, it's the only way to be cured of it. He who hangs on to truth has lost." (Epstein: op. cit: 15).

Lyotard and Baudrillard both see that modern societies have shifted from productive to reproductive cultures. In such cultures signs predominate. Any distinction between appearances and 'reality' is lost. The overproduction of signs by the media wipes the distinction between the image and the reality. It leads to the loss of any stable meaning. The notion of ideology is thrown into question. For Baudrillard that is no more than a legacy of conceptual discourse which is already archaic or ancient.

There are spats between post-modernists and moderns regarding the question of 'critical distance'. It's a little difficult to see just what intellectuals of modernism are 'for'. People like F. R. Leavis had the ideology that elite minority should manipulate culture. And, on the other hand, masses are for civilization. It's surprising that many anti - post - modernist's rejected relativism. The traditionalists hanker after critical distance in the application of 'method'. On the other hand, the postmoderns argue that the apparent critical distance of traditional method is illusory, since method itself is a social practice and thus cannot be 'distant' from the social practices. But the critical theorists claim for critical distance. On the other hand, postmodern critiques tend to be more 'literary', more 'self - reflexive' than is conventional. Again, where the post - moderns are accused of being dangerously irrational and relativistic, the traditionalists, in their turn, are accused of being totalitarian rationalists.

Postmodernists use the term 'Marxism' as a totalizing metanarrative. Postmodernists claims that mininarratives will be based on the locality. So according to them local condition is very important for the workability of mininarratives. But it is

not transparent and it is also difficult to know from them what social condition will be there upon which mininarratives will function. From the point of view of many Marxists, the problem with postmodernists is that Marxism is undermined by them. Marxism is about the prospects for social change whereas postmodernism does not lead to any political project. Indeed postmodernists suggest that all political projects are similarly suspect. Postmodernists are in the business of dismantling conventional ideas and assumptions but they are not in the business of building any kind of social development and progressive politics, since there would be no basis on which to build.

Local language is also very important for the workability of mini - narratives. But it is surprising that postmodernist do not talk about the position of local language that how it will be corresponding, instrumental, and workable. Matter of fact is that many local languages are dying away. Some universal languages are taking over many ethnic languages. Many grand ideological apparatuses did not truly keep any language principles, policy and planning to save vulnerable ethnic languages. According to UNESCO, because of the globalization process more than half of the existing six thousand

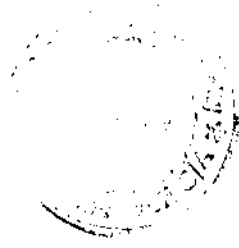
languages of the world will be lost within 2015; as for example: the Achaek language of Garo tribe. (*Prothom Alo*, 169)

Unlike those ideologists postmodernists should have thought about such circumstances. There are other problems that postmodernists have. From the postmodernist standpoint, there can be no coherent, unified representation of the world except perhaps within the temporary and shifting confines of an 'interpretive community'. There can therefore be no such thing as a universally valid project of global emancipation such as democracy. The best they say that what we can come up with is a sort of localized pragmatism. For a neo-pragmatist like Rorty, there will be no plain truths, norms and narrative facts out there in the world. For him and for Lyotard knowledge can be assessed only by looking at its performative effects. This pragmatism leads Rorty to ask why under Nazism, Danes and Italians helped Jews. Was it because those Jews were fellow human beings, or because of their essential humanity? Rorty claims that those fellow Jews were saved because some Jews were fellow Jut Landers, or of fellow members of the same union or profession.

American neo - pragmatist Rorty's logic leave me to problematize such pragmatism. If his way of pragmatism could help fellow Jews, then why it could not save lives of millions of Bosnians, Croats after the break down of former Yugoslavia, and recently thousands of lives in the border areas of Albania. Fellow Serbs killed and oppressed millions of people of same towns, same villages, and same wards. The fellow Serbs displaced , desolated fellow Croats and fellow Bosnians; village after village. This kind of localized but typical pragmatism is not better than the 'essentialist' thinking of Enlightenment metanarratives as they talk about 'universal human rights'. Also such view point is not better than those of a conventional critic who upholds the 'universal' enlightenment value.

The Marxist critic Terry Eagleton also asks, "why Rorty stops at fellow Italians or fellow Danes. Why not demonstrate compassion to those in the next apartment, while withholding it from those down the street?" (Eagleton, 1996). Eagleton also critically justifies approaches of conventional critics and traditional humanists:

Even so, some traditional humanist doctrine die hard, not least the assumption of universal value. If literature matters



today, it is chiefly because it seems to many conventional critics . . . a sense of universal value may still be incarnate . . . with the 'universal' values of a world which has not yet been thus reconstructed. The humanist is thus not wrong to trust to the possibility of such universal values; it is just that nobody can yet say exactly what they would be, since the material conditions which might allow them to flourish have not yet come into being. If they ever to do so, the theorist could relievedly lay down his or her theorizing, which would have been made redundant precisely by being politically realized, and so something more interesting for change. (Eagleton, op. cit: 208)

For Lyotard and other postmodernists knowledge can be assessed only by looking at its performative effects. Nevertheless, simply dismantling the conventional ideas and assumption means trying to occupy a whole new domain of 'post-modern' cultural debate and to give up any hope of informed rational critique. Their unprincipled pragmatism does not permit reasoned critique. The critical rationality, which permitted the cultural theorist to engage with power, ideology and institutions is simply abandoned in favor of mere passive conformism. So where will people look for a set of

truth – claims? Where do one will find an objectively valid position from which to practice one's very own ideology? The unmasking of metaarratives makes sense only if we preserve at least some sort of standard by which we can explain the corruption of all rationalism .Without such a standard, we cannot distinguish between mini narratives and rationalism of enlightenment project.

Cultural Fragmentation:

Now I should talk about the fragmentation of modern culture since the grand metanarratives no longer have validity, since there is a plurality of truths, since writers on postmodernity frequently emphasize the fragmentation of modern culture.

Because of the blind mood of the cultural imitation and mimicry there can be fragmentation in the linguistic system of great a modernist. The styles of great modernist can be mocked. What would happen if one no longer believes in the existence of normal Language, of ordinary speech, of linguistic norm? Jameson says:

Perhaps, the immense fragmentation and privatization of modern literature and its explosion into a host distinct private styles and mannerism foreshadows deeper and more general tendencies in social life as whole". (Kaplan, 1988)

It could be supposed that in the great modern styles society has itself begun to fragment. Each group can come to speak a curious private language of its own. Each profession can develop its private code or idiolect. What will happen in such cultural diversity if the very possibility of any linguistic norm in terms of which one could ridicule idiosyncratic styles vanish? Then we will have nothing but stylistic diversity and heterogeneity. Local narratives will take the place of Grandnarratives. The distinction between 'high' and 'low' culture will also disappears. Because of the blasphemous commercialization, because of the consumer society of late capitalism the distinction between low and high culture implodes. We have reached such a stage in social and economical development where there is the culture of commodity. The aura of art is not seen. Storey says:

What has changed is that the text and practices of high culture have become intermixed with the texts and practices of popular culture, to the point where the line between high art

and increasingly difficult to draw' . . . postmodernism is the culture of pastiche . . . (Storey, op. cit: 166 -167).

There are other cultural features like simulation, hyperrealism, kitsch, etc. These sorts of cultural features can be seen anywhere in the world. Because of the culture of commodity, local culture takes the place of universal culture, universal culture takes the place of local culture. Likewise, Lyotard saying echoes, 'Eclecticism is the degree zero of contemporary culture: one listens to reggae, watches a western, . . . local cuisine for dinner, . . . 'retro' clothes in Hong Kong; knowledge is matter for TV games. It is easy to find a public for eclectic works. (Hassan, 1983, p.75) So, that sorts of cultural features can be seen anywhere in the world. Because of the culture of commodity, local culture takes place of universal culture, and on the other hand, universal culture takes place of local culture.

As the postmodern mood tends to value the local over the universal, and popular over elite culture or high art, so finally I would like to talk about the economical benefit that there is economical benefit in cultural fragmentation. Localism and eclecticism, now that new mode of production makes

possible the exploitation of capitalistic markets. It may then be seen as creating the apparent diversity of postmodern particularize, where they were creating market through planned styles, modes and fashion. Plurality means a wider range of choices and a wider range of choices means market segmentation. Fragmented market means more diversity in business. It also foreshadows a greater benefit for capitalism. Because of the postmodern concept of mininarratives, and because of the fragmented culture, capitalism would be sustained and would get new dimension and potentiality. There can be no doubt that there is now a wider range of choices. While we will speak of mass culture or popular culture in the plural, then the celebration of diversity may simply overlook the underlying capitalist logic behind the fostering of diversity. Where capitalism once benefited from economies of market it then may benefited from economies of scope in diversities.

In concluding remark I like to draw that we must preserve some sort of standard thereby people will be able to look for a set of truth-claims and by which we can explain the corruption of all rationalism. And by such standard we will be able to distinguish between mininarratives and rationalism of the modern

projects. Therefore, the unmasking of grandnarratives will make sense.

Mininarratives will provide a basis for the actions of specific groups in particular local circumstances. We can aim at a series of mininarratives which will be provisional, contingent, temporary, instrumental and relative. Instead of any totalitarian projects there can be minidiscourses, local explanations, fragmented ideas according to locality of the different regions and societies of the world.



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