

Encapsulating Modernism and Beyond: Negotiations Adorning Counter-negotiations

Abhilash Kaushik

PhD Research Scholar

Department of English, Cotton University, Guwahati, Assam

Orcid ID: **0000-0003-3956-3188**

Merry Baruah Bora

Associate Professor

Department of English, Cotton University, Guwahati, Assam

Orcid ID: **0000-0002-2181-6346**

Abstract

Modernism, both as a literary and a theoretical movement, has heralded numerous permutations and combinations in the post-war scenario. It has ushered in debates and counter-debates in its attempt to legitimise its stream of thoughts. Not fully comprehending the inherent intricacies, different critics and writers came up with their own theoretical arguments to posit “post-modernism” in the literary scenario. One striking feature that haunts us, the readers basically, is the fact of accommodating the various view-points in the academic praxis. In a nutshell, modernism appears to be a hot-cake of debate in terms of a flurry of ideas pouring in relentlessly. Howbeit, the contestations, if we dig deeper, open up not only key deliberations, but also, contextualise or rather re-contextualise as multifarious entities. There is no denying that a tug of war has taken place in the post-modern period with the advent of different ideas put forward by different critics, albeit unseen, thereby inviting critical attention to stabilise the “hermeneutics of suspicion,” to quote Paul Ricoeur. Different key proponents of modernism have turned this movement upside-down with ground-breaking remarks. The paper scrutinises the various essential debates within modernism in the present-day era by drawing on certain schematic thoughts and notable thinkers. In this way, it buckles up certain theoretical frameworks which render modernism a significant movement, without a second thought, a riveting one. The paper also argues that modernism, thus, gives way to post-modernism which is an amalgamation of thoughts, to be precise, more than the outcome of literary tenets.

Keywords: *counter-debates, debates, literary movement, modernism, theory*



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The literary scenario, after the two World Wars, has seen the world turn into a whirlpool with no end to come out from. As if, it was a time when all the so-called literary geniuses of the world were making their presence felt in terms of coming up with their own ideas and thoughts which not only countered the old and established, but also posed serious challenges to the emerging groups as attempts were made to usher in a different, an unseen phase in the literary world. If we consider the period after modernism as a reaction against the preceding modernism, then a certain group of people might really be offended because post-modernism can also be argued to be a continuation of the earlier modernism. To substantiate, the immortal phrase by Ezra Pound, “Make it New” could very well be said to have laid the premise. The definition of post-modernism by Peter Berry is really significant considering the context, “Postmodernism is a label given to a time period in which the abrupt influx of technology and ever-increasing cultural multiplicity must be met with new methods of representation. The postmodernist employs it with a tone of exhilaration and liberation” (84).

Modernism, precisely, can be said to be the amalgamation of numerous ideas and thoughts inextricably intertwined as we try and comprehend its basic tenets. There are numerous theories in the broader whole of modern theory to make use of. The modernist movement itself witnessed various contradictions even in its earliest phases. A lot of modernist movements actually translated into innovations and the new arrangements, the avant-garde experiments that modernism looked at, resulted in several of the aesthetic movements like Vorticism, Futurism, Dadaism etc. In this regard, what becomes of paramount importance is the fact that all these theoretical ideas never really allow the phase after modernism to be singular in nature. Post-modernism, actually, therefore, continues to stress the notion of a plural history, pastiche, to be precise. There are different modes of representations available within the same framework. The British critic, Steven Conner argues that there were manifold developments marking the advent of something previously unseen which took both the literary and the human world by storm,

They were developing on different fronts: Daniel Bell and Jean Baudrillard were offering new accounts of consumer society, Jean Francois Lyotard was formulating his views about the waning of meta narratives, Charles Jenks was issuing his powerful manifestoes on behalf of architectural postmodernism and Ihab Hassan was characterizing a new sensibility in post-war writing (2).

The French sociologist, Jean Baudrillard, although a Marxist believing in social structures, but he also can be studied to be an anti-foundationalist as evident in his famous pronouncement, “the world is surrounded by a network of commodification. We live in a world of communication.” Considering the phase after modernism, what then can be said is that the period is rooted in a grand technological universe. We are irretrievably and irreversibly connected to the cultural boom of technology. If we believe in the Foucauldian world, then, there is a constant surveillance going on and we are always under the scanner. Baudrillard, echoing Foucault, says that we have moved away from the world of person to person communication and have come to networks. Baudrillard, postulating the theory of simulation, argues that everything moves away from the physical matrix to an electronic matrix which we call simulacra. It is basically about signs, models, codes associated with the visual world. There are numerous signs and significations going around and people are getting caught in the web. Baudrillard states,

you never consume the object in itself (in its use value), you are always manipulating objects (in the broadest sense) as signs which distinguish you either by affiliating you to your own group taken as an ideal reference or making you off from your group by reference to a group of higher status (9).

Dwelling on the twin concepts of “hyper-reality” and “simulation,” Baudrillard posits himself as the high priest of the period after modernism focusing on the “false world” where the people, at present, live in. The emotions and the inner thoughts of an individual are all getting codified in this materialistic world making us the victim of a state which Baudrillard terms as “hyper reality.” It is the state where the distinction between reality and the world collapses and comes to null. As an example, there is nothing better than Baudrillard’s famous remark that the Gulf War did not take place (1991). It can be said that truth, in the hyperreal world, is founded upon representation more than fact. Hyperreal, then, becomes a state where we live in, it is something way more than real. It is the image that dominates in hyper reality. Baudrillard says hyper reality becomes an important theory where everything is dominated by a code. In his own words, “A simulacrum is a copy of a copy, so far removed from its original, that it can stand on its own and even replace the original. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal.... substituting the signs of the real for the real” (12).

It becomes vividly evident that there is a network of three components that Baudrillard based his theory on: 1) Simulation 2) Implosion and 3) Representation. Baudrillard remarks, “We leave history to enter simulations- this is by no means a despairing hypothesis” (33).

Best known for his *The Postmodern Condition: A report on Knowledge* (1979), the French philosopher, Jean-Francois Lyotard counter-argues the various propositions by Baudrillard by defining the period after modernism as “incredulity towards metanarratives” (24). He argues that this particular period is characteristically suspicious of the grand-narrative. It gives ways to smaller histories. He is of the view that the text is considered as a kind of illusion which again marks the death of any kind of absolute reality. What we have around is individual reality. The arguments by Lyotard in a way challenge all the propositions about meta-narrative. He argues that in the post-modern world, there is a great cynicism about the grand narratives of enlightenment, therefore, what is being understood or recognised as grand truths, are no longer relevant to the world of post-modernity.

What then can be concluded is that certain claims like comprehensibility, truthfulness, rightness, absolute reality etc. surely come under the radar of suspicion. Lyotard opines that “the grand narrative has lost its credibility” (37). The main focus of Lyotard, then, could well be said to be the condition of post-modern, the contemporary post-modern. One of the ways in which we challenge or rather this post-modern period challenges the older notions of the world, of the community, of social reality is very apparent in the kind of pronouncements Lyotard makes. The period after modernism as such or its discourse is now being recognised as a new kind of flatness and the discourse actually rejects the older formal feature of modernism. It also begins to look at how the idea of grand or meta narrative is no longer viable and instead one is looking at the very little histories. These little histories also therefore, admit or announce the arrival of the plural, the possibility of a more democratic plural world that was perhaps unavailable to modernists who continue to look for a certain kind of idealism, elitism, high modernism that did not accommodate various other brands of movement. Thus, in the broader whole of post-modernism, there is a stress on the notion of a plural history which again gets evidenced by the availability of different modes of representations within the same framework.

Bringing in yet another new notion of arguments, the American left Marxist critic, Fredric Jameson, emerged to the scene with his magnum opus, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of*

Late Capitalism. Jameson's critique of post-modernism comes from a left perspective and he begins by arguing that post-modernism ought to be thought of as a very "apologetic," a very "inadequate discourse" of the last stage of the third stage of Capitalism. This posits Jameson as one of the central thinkers of the post-modern movement. As Richard Shusterman has rightly said, "Jameson is one of the most influential and interesting analysts of postmodernism— an analyst who refuses the simpler roles of advocacy apologist or polemical opponent" (254).

Jameson argues that in the period after the heyday of modernism, people are removed from the economic system. Unlike early capitalism where people were involved in the economics of society and in high capitalism, where the capitalists completely removed themselves from the working class, the people of the post-modern period completely removed themselves from the economic system (this view is purely Marxist though). In other words, what can be said is that the people of the post-modern period are not bothered by the economic system. A very important comment in relation to the Marxist inclination of Jameson was made by the great theorist, Terry Eagleton in the following manner,

Jameson's work, notoriously, has never really taken the pressure or worked its way through the subversive challenges of Althusserian Marxism; on the contrary, Jameson is a self-declared Hegelian Marxist or historicist, a lineage which for Louis Althusser is dismally unproductive (13).

It can, without any reluctance, be concluded from the arguments by Jameson that there is a great flattening of the very economic scale in post-modernism, in the post-modern society, in the post-modern ways of human living in general. It is absolutely a no brainer to comprehend the fact that capitalism is no longer a single entity. There are people with different sources of income and ways of living. The general society tends to indicate that some people can be said to be very rich while some have been somehow subsumed by the economy.

Plainly put, the period beyond the golden days of the influence of the modernist movement and its ramifications to a great extent is nothing but the third stage of capitalism where we are not perturbed by the economics of it. It is not polarising us and Jameson opines that this is not the truth. He is of the view that the post-modern condition is a logic that runs on late capitalism. He argues that everything in the post-modern, (including post-modernity) works as a force-field in which different kinds of cultural impulses must make their way. This is the new kind of flatness as Jameson understands and stresses on which is very superficial as we do not know how

the rich and the poor are getting more and divided. Moreover, it is also a very safe statement to state that the people in the societies are also ignorant of the economy. We just remain on the surface of an economy which is very “Marxist” in nature. Jameson remarks,

It is safest to grasp the concept of the postmodern as an attempt to think the present historically in an age that has forgotten how to think historically in the first place. In that case it either ‘expresses’ some deeper irrepressible historical impulse (in however distorted a fashion) or effectively ‘represses’ and diverts it, depending on the side of the ambiguity you happen to favor. (36)

Echoing Jameson, in the period after modernism, people have become the product of social media. The loss of a unique and separate individual identity pervades and it engulfs the whole environment. There is also the loss of memory, to be precise. We all live in the “here” and “now.” Talking about texts, it can be said that there is the presence of fragmentation, as evidenced by non-linear plots, the presence of various kinds of narrators which are absolutely unreliable. All these, if not anything else, clearly showcase the on-going process of obliterating differences. In short, a sort of collage has been made so that no individuality remains in the picture. Jameson argues that this very fragmentation is basically swarmed by a culture of global capitalism as there is the replication of the chain of global capitalism. We, in this period of the so called global world, try to obliterate differences. This is basically a counter to the main principle of the period after modernism as such, because post-modernism, in general, is supposed to accommodate differences, embrace plurality and attract diversity. This argument, then, uncovers the philosophical side of Jameson if a critical analysis is being done. Shusterman writes:

Though he [Jameson] is neither as flashy nor as chic as Baudrillard, he is usually much deeper, and while he may lack of the philosophical range and narrative grace of [Jean- Francoise] Lyotard and [Richard] Rorty, he often more than makes up for it by his dogged concentration on the concept of postmodernity and by his greater attention to the materialist base and socio-economic context which shapes not only postmodern art and experience but postmodern theory as well (22).

Jameson also argues that in relation to fragmentation, there is an attempt to make a collage so that no unique personality remains. We, the post-modern human beings, become blurred within this very collage. Therefore, Jameson believes, in this period, what we need is a cure for this very fragmentation. However, how to attain this cure is still a process undergo and is a work in progress. This fragmentation is basically enveloped by a culture of global capitalism. In this regard, one notable argument by Jameson comes to the forefront where he says that people in the

post-modern period replicate the chain of global flows through fast foods, global stores, theme pubs, shopping malls, social media etc. and therefore, every form is under the clutch of this very materialistic culture. This very understanding can well be summed up in the words by Mark Krupnick, “The Marxist aesthetician Frederic Jameson has continued to seek a comprehensive, ‘totalizing’ understanding of culture at a time when post-Marxists and post-structuralists have been arguing against the possibility and desirability of master narratives and master codes” (28).

What is really striking in relation to the importance of the period after the influence of modernism is that this particular period allows us to experience various representations which make us realise that the post-modern culture is one of democratic pluralism and allows various small discourses to exist and co-exist in a simultaneous manner. In order to combat the modernist anxiety, as Jameson says, the post-modern begins to be guided by the late capitalism logic, the logic being to go with the people, to flow with the wave. In a nutshell, to sum up the three exponents being discussed above to some extent, it can be said that Fredric Jameson has been very critical of post-modernism unlike Jean Francois Lyotard who sees in post-modernism, a new liberating movement. Jean Baudrillard remains the torch-bearer with his master stroke on the notion of “hyper reality.”

All told, what then can be said that is that modernism, both as a theoretical movement and a cultural phenomenon, can also be said to be adorned with certain demarcations in order to label it in a proper manner. Anything and everything which adorned the scene in the early twentieth century can never really be considered “modern,” to be precise. This very need of a classified demarcation of what can actually be termed as modern easily got transpired to the period after modernism as well. In this regard, the aspect of sensibility, a previously unseen sensation of sort, is of tremendous importance. Needless to say, the backup of numerous theoretical ideas and critical theorists in this regard is equally significant. “To be modern is to be aware of the contemporary scenario as changed by the growth of knowledge, a sensitive perception of the world in the present state of knowledge” (Ray 171).

The general idea of something modern can easily be attributed to the kind of progress a particular society is seen to be making in terms of scientific advancements, technological developments and so on. But then, as a period in literary history, modernism has definitely left a legacy behind when it comes to evaluating its importance. It is not that we do not find any kind

of influence of modernism in the present day period of post-modernism because the off-shoots always make their presence felt in some way or the other. If one particular aspect has to be singled out in order to assess the importance of modernism, then of many other notable factors, it is knowledge which deservedly sits pretty at the top. An individual acquires a sense of being modern only when there is proper refinement within the self. "Modern means rationalist philosophies from early seventeenth century which were dedicated to establishing systematic, pragmatic knowledge of the natural world, which could be then applied for material exploitation of the Nature" (Wheale 7).

Modernism was a movement which dominated the arts and culture of the first half of the 20th century. It was that earthquake in the arts which brought down much of the structure of pre-twentieth century practice in music, painting, literature and architecture. One of the major epicenters of this earthquake seems to be Vienna, during the period of 1890 - 1910 but the effects were felt in France, Germany, Italy and eventually also in Britain in art movements like Cubism, Dadaism, Surrealism and Futurism. Its aftershocks are still being felt today, and many of the structures it toppled have never been rebuilt (Barry 81).

One of the significant aspects of the so-called connection between both modernism and post-modernism to the general idea of modernity is that these are basically answers to the change in trend, sheer responses to the then changing scenario. If on one side modernism somewhat provided with the assurance of an answer to every emerging question, post-modernism, very nonchalantly nullifies that very hope of answer as it never believed in any kind of single answer. It vehemently rejects the idea that there is any singular concept which can be applied to the universe. As a result of these principles of the period after modernism, there was a sheer collapse, a collapse of reason, a collapse of enlightenment rationality on which very firmly stood the preceding centuries. Thus, post-modernity stormed into the scene with its sense of history, the history of losing the stable and the rational world of the human beings with the coming of the wars.

Therefore, the numerous counter-cultural attacks in the 1950s and the 1960s in the aftermath of the holocaust, the second world war, the emergence of the Beat generation, the Civil riots of the 1960s, the protest against the Vietnam wars etc. can very rightly be considered to be the notable building blocks after the period of modernism. So, the narrative of progress that is challenged, emerges as one of the major ideas in the exercise of the period after the modernist

ideas and thoughts. In this regard, it also becomes imperative to state that the basic premise of the period after modernism basically rests on its failure. The moral, philosophical, scientific sort of challenges that arrived with the emergence of a more incredulous world also meant, at the same time, the emergence of conflicting micro narratives thereby indicating certain playful engagements with earlier ideas. Fredrick Mayer remarks in a very pertinent manner regarding the waning of so called reason in the period of modernism which was giving way to a new scenario. As he remarked,

It has been shown repeatedly that modern man relies upon science in the same way as medieval man looked upon theology. There is no magic, and there is no automatic solution through technological inventions. The scientific age has given us better tools, it has improved our communication, it has enhanced our control over Nature; but it does not promise automatic progress. On the contrary, it threatens us with automatic destruction if we are unable to control it. (615)

The period beyond the influence of modernism essentially, therefore, looks at the rejection of that world, a rejection of the world that would have been erected by eminent thinkers like Freud, Kant or Marx for that matter. Thus, what becomes also a statement in hindsight is that taking the philosophical and the ideological angles into consideration, modernism sort of failed to deliver its promises. This is where Lyotard again emerges who argued that the critics and thinkers of the period after modernism do not even follow the moderns per se. As evidenced by his arguments, Lyotard felt that that the moderns were always contained in the postmodern thereby very succinctly bringing into limelight the oppositions between the moderns and the period after it. The questioning of the phenomenon of the horizon of universalisation in the postmodern period thus finds a significant place. The general emancipations of any kind never find a place before the eyes of a so called postmodern man, instead, as Lyotard argues, the disappearance of the ideas of progress and freedom would surely explain a certain mode, tone and style which is specific to the period after modernism.

All these propositions again properly get validated by the very fact that the period after modernism well and truly allows different kinds of language games to be played within its realm. It can very rightly be said that the period after modernism teases words into meanings, it seeks alternatives. These again mark the advent of numerous mixtures and ways of bringing in certain kinds of alternatives in general just as the truth of science which again brings in the debate that science is also again subject to a lot of suspicion. Thus, the validation by the society comes in to

strengthen postmodernism, a validation supreme in its structure, nonchalant in its approach and vicious in its aura.

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