

Postmodernist Literature and Reader Response Criticism

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المستخلص :

تطورت نظرية ما بعد الحداثة في منتصف إلى أواخر القرن ٢٠ كحركة ثقافية وفكرية كان لها تأثير عميق على الأدب والفن والعمارة والفلسفة. تشير عبارة ما بعد الحداثة إلى الانتقال من الفترة الحديثة إلى فترة ما بعد الحداثة و تتمثل في رفض فكرة أنه يمكن أن يكون هناك لغة أو سردا أو نظرية ما يمكن من خلالها ربط كل الأشياء أو تمثيلها أو شرحها وترفض أيضا فكرة الحقيقة المطلقة. ما بعد الحداثة هي سيرة ذاتية ، تفسير لحياتنا في المجتمعات المتقدمة ، مرتبطة بأزمة هوية تاريخية. تنظر ما بعد الحداثة إلى التجربة الإنسانية على أنها غير مستقرة ومجزأة وغير محددة.

تتعامل نظرية ما بعد الحداثة مع طبقات مختلفة من المعنى حيث لا يتعلق الأمر بالوضوح والبساطة مثل الحداثة بل يرتبط بالتعددية. يمكن أن تتميز روايات ما بعد الحداثة بالتهجين ، والنسبية ، والمحاكاة الساخرة ، وتشمل أيضا ما وراء الخيال ، والتناص ، وما وراء الخيال التاريخي ، والروايات غير الخطية. يعتقد أن نصوص ما بعد الحداثة تتميز بمزيج من الأوقات والثقافات واللغات والحقائق والخيال والحاضر والماضي. وينبثق من نظرية ما بعد الحداثة نقد إستجابة القارئ الذي يحتفى بدور القارئ في فهم النص.

Abstract

Postmodernism developed in the mid to late 20th century as a cultural and intellectual movement that has had a profound impact on literature, art, architecture and philosophy. The phrase post modernity denotes the transition from the modern period to the postmodern one. Any idea that there could be a meta-language, meta-narrative, or meta-theory through which all things can be related, represented, or explained is attacked by postmodern social theorists. Postmodernism is an autobiography, an interpretation of our lives in developed societies, linked to an epochal crisis of identity. Postmodernism views the human experience as unstable,

fragmentary and indeterminate. Postmodernism embraces different layers of meaning. It is not about clarity and simplicity as modernism. It is associated with pluralism. Postmodern fiction can be characterized by encircling fragments, hybridity, relativism, play, parody, pastiche, and an ironic or anti-ideological stance,. It also encompasses Metafiction, Intertextuality, Historiographic Metafiction, Temporal distortion fragmentation and nonlinear narratives. It is believed that post-modern texts are marked by the mixture of times, cultures, languages, real facts and fiction, the present and the past. If postmodernism discusses the death of the author, Reader Response Criticism celebrates the readers' analysis.

Keywords:

[Postmodernism, Reader Response Criticism, Irony, Intertextuality, Pastiche, Historiographic Metafiction, Temporal distortion fragmentation, nonlinear narratives]

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It is crucial to present an overview of the advent of the postmodernist cultural expression in contemporary society and explain the main characteristics of postmodernism. Postmodernism developed in the mid to late 20th century as a cultural and intellectual movement that has had a profound impact on literature, art, architecture and philosophy. Jean Baudrillard, Jean-François Lyotard, Jacques Derrida, Ihab Hassan and Michel Foucault are the most significant early postmodernists. The phrase postmodernity denotes the transition from the modern period to the postmodern one. The modern era was one of social growth and stability. In his book, *In the Postmodern condition*, The French philosopher Jean-

Francois Lyotard claims that postmodernism is a response to modernism's flaws. Modernism might be seen to have failed for a variety of reasons. "Simplifying to the extreme, I define postmodern as incredulity toward metanarratives" (Lyotard 3). Any idea that there could be a meta-language, meta-narrative, or meta-theory through which all things can be related, represented, or explained is attacked by postmodern social theorists like Foucault and Lyotard who argue that such narratives are oppressive and limiting, and that they ignore the diversity and complexity of human experience. Grenz indicates that:

The term post-modernism may first have been coined in the 1930s to refer to a major historical transition already underway and the designation for certain developments in Arts. But postmodernism did not gain widespread attention until the 1970s. " (Grenz 2)

One of the earliest critics to develop a definition of American literary postmodernism is Ihab Hassan. He defines Postmodernism as an "autobiography, an interpretation of our lives in developed societies, linked to an epochal crisis of identity," (Hassan, 2003 202). The majority of postmodernists dispute the notion that we have a fixed self. People are made up of a variety of experiences that evolve throughout time. They disagree with the notion that culture can bring people together. They contend that fractured identities result from cultural variety. Postmodernism views the human experience as unstable, fragmentary and indeterminate. The term 'fragmentation' refers to the breakdown of shared norms and values,

which causes people to adopt identities and lifestyles that are more individualized and intricate. Our identities may consist of numerous fragments, some of which we may have chosen, and others we may have been born with. The fact that we are able to make a variety of choices makes today's society much more dynamic, rapid-changing, and fluid. That can be one of the reasons that makes the postmodern society less stable. Calinescu clarifies that

the concept of postmodern literature is defined by an overwhelming sense of diversity: Over the years a corpus of postmodern writing (or, more accurately, writing that is often referred to as postmodern) has thus emerged. I should add, however, that there is nothing rigid or fixed about this corpus, and that in fact, it is wide open to revisions, exclusions, inclusions, and even fundamental challenges. . . I see it simply as the product of a historical hypothetical perspective from which certain questions about the nature of contemporary writing can be asked (Calinescu 296)

Postmodernists believe that human psychology is socially determined and that the existence of humankind depends on cooperation rather than conquest. Life is based on reciprocal relations. This doctrine relates the idea of multiculturalism to that of post-modernism. Postmodernists shift the focus from the self to the society as a whole affecting one's attitude and behaviour. It is a theory beyond Utopianism. In other words it is concerned with Dystopia. Grenz indicates that

[i]n the postmodern world, people are no longer convinced that knowledge is inherently good..... Postmodernism replaces the optimism of the last century with a gnawing pessimism. Gone is the belief that every day, in every way, we are getting better and better. Members of the emerging generation are no longer confident that humanity will be able to solve the world's great problems or even that their economic situation will surpass that of their parents. (Grenz 7)

People begin to doubt modernist optimism and the claims of objective reality and knowledge as a result of the world wars. The Postmodernist Baudrillard believes that “[w]e live in a world where there is more and more information and less and less meaning”. (Baudrillard 79)

Postmodernism embraces different layers of meaning. It is not about clarity and simplicity as modernism. It is associated with pluralism. Adopting plurality comes easily when the notion that an absolute truth that can be attained is rejected. The French philosopher, Michel Foucault demonstrates that there are multiple truths that are particular to each person, rather than a single universal truth. Gone is the belief in optimism. Gone is the belief in the absolute truth. Grenz makes it clear that

[p]ostmodern philosophers applied the theories of the literary deconstructions to the world as a whole. Just as a text will be

read differently by each reader, they said, so reality will be "read" differently by each knowing self that encounters it. This means that there is no one meaning of the world, no transcendent center to reality as a whole.(Grenz 6)

Grenze's understanding of postmodernism relates it to one of the most important critical theories that I will discuss in details, which is reader response in which each reader gives his own understanding and interpretation of the text.

Postmodern fiction can be characterized by encircling "fragments, hybridity, relativism, play, parody, pastiche, an ironic, anti-ideological stance, an ethos bordering on kitsch and camp" (Hassan,2001 2). It also encompasses Metafiction, Intertextuality, Historiographic Metafiction, Temporal distortion fragmentation and nonlinear narratives. It is believed that "[p]ost-modern texts are marked by the mixture of times, cultures, languages, real facts and fiction, the present and the past." (Fedosova 79). The narrative technique in the novels under study follows a non-linear narrative which means that events are out of their chronological order. The novels keep going back and forth in time through Flashbacks, flash-forwards and memories.

Metafiction which essentially entails writing about writing in an effort to make the reader aware of its fictionality and, occasionally, the author's presence, is something that many postmodern authors employ in their writing. Pastiche refers to the process of combining or "pasting" together several pieces, which is

related to postmodern intertextuality. Many postmodern authors blend, or "paste," aspects of earlier genres and styles of literature to create a new narrative voice or to critique the writing of their contemporaries in postmodernist literature

Postmodernism embraces historical and political issues. The term 'historiographic metafiction' describes works of fiction based on actual historical events, or in other words fictionalizes actual historical events or figures. This integration gives the text a sense of authority that fiction typically lacks by giving them the weight of verifiability. "Linda Hutcheon coined the term 'Historiographic Metafiction' to refer to fictionalize actual historical events or figures." (Sharma and Chaudhary 196). For Hutcheon,

History is not made obsolete: it is, however, being rethought – as a human construct. And in arguing that history does not exist except as text, it does not stupidly and 'gleefully' deny that the past existed, but only that its accessibility to us now is entirely conditioned by textuality. We cannot know the past except through its texts: its documents, its evidence, even its eye-witness accounts are texts (Hutcheon 16).

Hutcheon, in her book *The Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*, contends that this type of literature disproves the conventional or rational ways of separating reality from fiction in the past. It rejects the idea that history is the only source of truth claims by challenging the basis of this claim in historiography and arguing that both history and fiction are

discourses, human creations, and signifying systems that get their primary claims to reality from this identity. “Historiographic metafiction clearly acknowledges that it is a complex institutional and discursive network of élite, official, mass, popular cultures that postmodernism operates in” (Hutcheon 21). Thus, “historiographic metafiction”, allows individuals to “engage in the practical discussion about the past in a way that acknowledges the inaccuracy and violence of the historical "objective" of the past without leaving the individual in a totally puzzled and isolated present.” (Guzman 69)

Another fundamental key to understanding postmodernism is temporal distortion, fragmentation and nonlinear narratives. In this kind of narrative, events are created and narrated out of chronological order. They might contain subplots that are parallel to the main plot. This narrative technique depends mostly on flashbacks, flash-forwards and memories. Postmodern writers make use of Intertextuality, which is one of the defining features of postmodernism. Sharma and Chaudhary in their writings illustrate that,

Since postmodernism represents a decentered concept of the universe in which individual works are not isolated creations, much of the focus in the study of postmodern literature is on Intertextuality: the relationship between one text (a novel for example) and another or one text within the interwoven fabric of literary history...

Intertextuality in postmodern literature can be a reference or parallel to another literary work, an extended discussion of a work, or the adoption of a style.”
(Sharma and Chaudhary 194)

The acknowledgement of previous literary works is a key component of postmodernism. The influence of other texts on the meanings of texts is called intertextuality. It occurs when an author borrows and changes a previous text, or when a reader refers to one text while reading another. This can occur through quotations, allusion and translation. Gardner explains that,

Intertextuality is antenarrative since instead of a homogeneous narrative, each text is theorized as a network of fragments that refer to still other narrative texts. ...And each line of utterance in a textual system opens up dialogue with texts of other times and places. As such, the intertextual network is ante narrative in its dynamic, unfinished and embedded qualities
(Gardner 36)

Postmodern fiction uses black and dark humour as one strategy for addressing the dismal complications of contemporary existence. Black humour is a sort of comedy that typically deals with subjects that are taboo, like for example, too unpleasant, depressing, or embarrassing to discuss. Irony or black humor is one of the distinctive features of post-modernism. Ihab Hassan, one of the most prominent postmodern critics indicates that:

In absence of a cardinal principle or paradigm, we turn to play, interplay, dialogue, polylogue, allegory, self-reflection—in short, to irony. This irony assumes indeterminacy, multivalence; it aspires to clarity, the clarity of demystification, the pure light of absence...Irony, perspectivism, reflexiveness: these express the ineluctable recreations of mind in search of a truth that continually eludes it, leaving it with only an ironic access or excess of self-consciousness. (Hassan,1986 506)

In Webster's Student's Companion, irony is defined as "[t]he use of words that mean the opposite of what one really intends to convey, something completely different from the literal meaning, being the direct opposite of one's thoughts, as in 'this is a fine state of affairs when in fact things have gone wrong.'" (Webster 306). Irony demonstrates a result that is totally different to what was expected:

Irony has become one of the most oft-cited defining characteristics of postmodernism. It has, in fact, been taken up as a central facet of reactions to postmodernism, to the extent that subsequent movements have been labelled 'post ironic' by Tore Rye Andersen who states that "the showdown with irony still forms one of the fundamental projects of the new generation of authors" (Matthias 44)

A particular agreement between the ironist and the recipient is necessary for irony. Both parties must come to an understanding of the universe that is mutually different from what is 'obvious. Irony is frequently based on a shared context between (at least) two persons. "This leaves one with the idea that ironic content is relative, dependent upon the mindset, context, background, mood, and so on, of the interpreter" (Matthias 46). D.C. Meucke asserts that "we cannot see a situation as ironic unless we believe there are those who do not" (Meucke 100). Colebrook declares that "our very historical context is ironic because today nothing really means what it says. We live in a world of quotation, pastiche, simulation and cynicism: a general and all-encompassing irony" (Colebrook 1). Postmodernists believe that "[t]he great thing about irony is that it splits things apart, gets us up above them so we can see the flaws and the hypocrisies and duplicities" (McCaffery 147).

To sum up, "[p]ostmodern texts are marked by the mixture of times, cultures, languages, real facts and fiction, the present and the past." (Fedosova 79). According to Ihab Hassan, "[i]ndeterminacy often follows from fragmentation. The postmodernist only disconnects; fragments are all he pretends to trust. His ultimate opprobrium is "totalization"-any synthesis whatever, social, epistemic, even poetic." (Hassan,1986 505). Postmodern stories "contain fragments of memory overwhelmed by situated occurrences that do not settle into the coherence of meaningful journey or bureaucratic order. The teller struggles to gain sovereignty over his or her own experience. (Gardner 28). Hassan quotes Jean-Francois Lyotard, " Let us wage a war on totality; let us be witnesses to the unrepresentable; let us activate the

differences and save the honor of the name. "The age demands differences, shifting signifiers, and even atoms dissolve into elusive sub particles, a mere mathematical whisper" (Hassan,1986 505). Postmodernism is closely related to or examines the nature of the literary text, meaning, author, and reader. These beliefs of the postmodernists take us to the next focal term in this study as one of its main traits, which is reader response.

If postmodernism discusses the death of the author, Reader Response Criticism celebrates the readers' analysis. It is an approach that emerged in the 1960s and 1970s as a reaction against the dominant formalist and New Critical approaches to literary analysis. "The long history of the Theory of literature, from Plato to the present, records certain well-known shifts of emphasis." (Rosenblatt 1). Ronald Barthes explains his concept of the writerly and readerly as follows, "[t]he writerly text is ourselves writing, before the infinite play of the world(the world as function) is traversed, intersected, stopped, plasticized by some singular system (Ideology, Genus, Criticism) Which reduces the plurality of entrances, the opening of networks, the infinity of languages." (Barthes 5).

The main idea behind reader response criticism is that the meaning is not inherent in a text but is instead constructed by the reader. Critics of literature used to focus on the text itself, their perspective expanded to include the author, neglecting the reader or the audience and putting them in the shadow. "The reader was left to play the role of invisible eavesdropper." (Rosenblatt 2). In 1960, reader response theory came into existence to counterpart the

prevailing stream of literary focus which is the text. Critics of this theory argued that, although the text is important, it has no meaning unless it is being read. "A text, once it leaves its author's hand, is simply paper and ink until a reader evokes from it a literary work." (Rosenblatt ix). The reader becomes a meaning-maker.

Instead of focusing solely on the literary text, reader response critics focus on the reader who is the most important element in the process of reading. He is the one who gives life and meaning to the text, without him literature is merely written words. Text is impossible to exist without a reader. Through the reader's interpretation, the text completes its meaning. "A reading process is never innocent or clear-cut; on the contrary, it is a product of the reader's individualistic traits, encounters, culture and above all history as well as imagination." (Sadek 452).

A text could have various interpretations according to the culture, level, race, age, sex and experience of the reader. Sipe explains "[h]ow culture, race and ethnicity... both enable and constrain the response to literature, and thus shape literary understanding." (Sipe 241). These factors influence the reader's response to the text. A written text is "not an object which stands by itself, and never offers the same face to each reader in each period." (Selden 51). Through the reader's experience, passion and beliefs, the text can be scrutinized. What he agrees on or disagrees with gives the text a whole new interpretation. Reading is a totally personal experience. In other words, "The fact that different readers can be differently affected by the "reality" of a particular text is ample evidence of the degree to which literary texts

transform reading into a creative process that is far above mere perception of what is written. “ (Mathson n.p.).

Readers' elevation, transformation and enlightenment are considered responses to the texts as well. The reader is not passive. He interprets and constructs texts. Park believes that to become aware of “perspectives and interpretative lenses other than one’s own: and seeing oneself, other people and the world differently.” (Park 194) is one of reader response theory’s achievements. He also states that

[r]eading and responding to literature critically involves paying close attention to the written text and its language; grappling with difficult issues and questions surfaced by the text; forming connections between and among texts; becoming aware of perspectives and interpretive lenses other than one’s own: and seeing oneself, other people, and the world differently. (Park 194)

However, one of the criticisms of reader response criticism is that it can be too subjective and can ignore the author’s intention and the historical and cultural context in which a text was produced.