

Modernism to postmodernism: The Humanist Controversy : An Analysis

SUSHOBHONA PAL

Assistant Professor

Department of Philosophy, Shri Shikshayatan College, Kolkata (W.B.) India

ABSTRACT

Modernity arose in the early fourteenth century as a denial to the supremacy of the church. It brought with it the belief in reason and rational thinking together with a denial of superstitions. It proclaimed science as the new gateway and divinity took a back seat. Modernity in its later phase brought colonization and together with it the associated evils. Modernity gave way to postmodernism which celebrated the emancipation of the self. Freedom became the new cry and emotion was given equal importance among other things. Yet postmodernism constructed man as a social being with limitations. The freedom of man, which was the original premise of modernism was curtailed with societal norms. This is the humanist controversy. This paper attempts to give an analysis of this crisis faced by postmodernism.

Key Words : Modernism, Postmodernism, Humanist controversy

INTRODUCTION

The word “modernity” has been derived from the latin term “*modernus*” which implies something more improved. Modernist states are generally considered to be the western countries. The term ‘modernity’ is generally used to differentiate the pre-Christian pagan Europe from post-Christian Europe. Modernity is divided into two broad phases: i) The early phase – This is from the beginning of the Renaissance to the 16th Century. This period was marked by an emphasis on secularization of Christianity. It suggests a spirit of medieval Europe where man was being eclipsed by the authority of the Church, religion, theology etc. The early phase of modernity was also marked by a spirit of humanism trying to negotiate with the ancient world. ii) The second or the later phase of modernity starts from the 17th century. It is the age of scientific technologies and revolutions beginning with the birth of Newtonian Physics. Science became the new password and Europe claimed ‘The world is in my pocket.’ This phase also saw the birth of Cartesian Philosophy which proclaimed the ‘I.’ So although humanism continues it was now linked up with science and negotiations with the ancient world became redundant. This age of Enlightenment replaced the divine certainty

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with the certainty of reason and the necessity of authority. As a result, the west, i.e. Europe, universalized modernity for the rest of the world through colonization. This universalized notion of modernity includes faith in reason, the sciences, progress in history and civilization and there was no question of looking back.

Section 1 : The impact of Modernity:

The notion of modernity opens a world of chaos, uncertainties, ambiguities. Modernity is associated with credence on rationalism and science replacing blind faith in ghosts and other superstitions. The pre-modern world was marked by divine certainty. It was a pre-destined world with the Aristotelian notion of the static universe. But in the new world man becomes a moving atom drifting away from the sheltered canopy of divine certainty into a world of chaos. The single greatest threat the church faced from the apostolic days was modernity. The Modernist views society as a metanarrative or grand explanation. Anthony Giddens accuses such a view of being too deterministic since it supports an evolutionary view of history, ignoring that which refuses to conform to their views^[1]. Karl Marx is viewed as an economic determinist, explaining societal structure by means of classes, class of haves and have – nots, class struggle. The single most significant impact of modernity is secularism and dismantling the supremacy of the church.

The notion of modernity also opens a notion of certitude, that of scientific certainty, which is the hallmark of modernity. But the way modernity was universalized was an uncomfortable question. In universalizing modernity, Europe did not accommodate the voice of dissent and disagreement. Modernity became oppressive and authoritarian snubbing out the voice of the protest. So, critics call modernism a kind of black hole where you are lured into and swallowed up. There are generally three different responses to modernity.

i) The romantic response: This was a cultural movement, a critique of science and technology. “Going back to nature” was their call, thus emphasizing the triumph of human spirit.

ii) The Marxian response: The Marxist wanted to accept modernity but with a qualification. They pointed out that the march of modernity has been associated with the brutal exploitation of man by man. So, if modernity is to be meaningful it must be associated with the birth of a new social order.

iii) The Post-modern response: This is a very challenging response which emerged in the late 80’s. It was a vehement rejection of European modernity as an oppressive, exploitative concept, which in the name of reason destroys human freedom and imprisons the individual. Post modernism is the product of a skeptical age, an age marked by radical doubt. It lays emphasis on self-emancipation and indeterminism.

Section 2 Humanism and The Humanist Controversy :

Humanists believe that this life is the only life we have, that the universe is a natural phenomenon with no supernatural side and it is possible to live ethical and fulfilling lives based on reason and humanity. This attitude is called humanism. The humanists make their ethical decisions based on reason, empathy and a concern for human beings and other sentient animals. Human beings can act to give happiness to themselves and others at large.

Humanism is of course not synonymous with modernity, but rather the way modernity as a phenomena is viewed and interpreted.

Modernity gave rise to the humanist controversy. Modernity proclaimed the birth of the human spirit, it gave emphasis on humanism but later led to the birth of a society which became socially, economically, culturally, extremely oppressive. In a sense it violated humanism, the human spirit. Therefore, the original premise of modernity was violated by modernity itself. The world saw a transition from Anglo-American liberal humanism to continental anti-humanism. Ofcourse, post-modernism was not rejecting man but was rejecting the Cartesian self and, in that sense, it was a rejection of Humanism. Three key notions of liberal humanism have been challenged by the new anti-humanism. They are i) sovereignty of the subject; ii) Transparency of language and iii) rationalism.

Erich Fromm states: ‘Humanism—in simplest terms, the belief in the unity of the human race and man’s potential to perfect himself by his own efforts’^[2]. Fromm pointed out that humanism was a reaction to religious fanaticism in the Renaissance; extremenationalism and economic enslavement; and the threat that man would become prisoner of his own circumstances^[3]. He further writes: “socialist Humanism of Karl Marx was the first to declare that theory cannot be separated from practice, knowledge from action, spiritual aims from the social system^[4]”.

This has led to post – modernism which tells us there is no right or wrong, no objective truth, nothing in black and white. It presumably appears to be modest, self – effacing, kind, gentle and compassionate in discourse.

Section 3 Post Modernism:

For Terry Eagleton, postmodernism is a style of thought which is suspicious of classical notions of truth, reason, identity, and objectivity, of the idea of universal progress or emancipation, of single frameworks, grand narratives or ultimate grounds of explanation. Against these Enlightenment norms, it sees the world as contingent, ungrounded, diverse, unstable, indeterminate, a set of disunified cultures or interpretations which breed a degree of scepticism about the objectivity of truth, history, and norms, the givenness of natures and the coherence of identities. Eagleton goes on to analyze the historical conditions contributing to the rise of postmodernism^[5]. For Jean-Francois Lyotard post-modernity refers to a shift away from attempts to ground epistemology and from faith in humanly engineered progress. The condition of post-modernity is distinguished by an evaporating of the “grand narrative”- the overarching “story line” by means of which we are placed in history as beings having a definite past and a predictable future. The post-modern outlook sees a plurality of heterogeneous claims to knowledge, in which science does not have a privileged place^[6].

Post modernism is the result of several developments made by philosophers, scientists, intellectuals which have taken place in the 20th century, all contributing to the development of the attitude that there is nothing sacrosanct about certainty. Jean Francois Lyotard has pointed out that postmodernism is the idea that we should have incredulity toward meta-narratives. Metanarratives are types of grand stories that intend to tell us ‘how things are’. Marxism, Christianity are meta-narratives. In fact, Lyotard says the goal of postmodernism is legitimizing social and political institutions and practices, laws, ethics, ways of thinking^[4].

Post modernism believes that everything comes down to power. It thinks all social orders are sustained by power. Power is any kind of influence and not force over other people. Power relations guide us in our interaction and speech with others. Without power relations there would be no rules on how to speak to others. This kind of usage of the concept of power has subjected the post modernists to criticism because it is read as a threat to free society.

What does post-modernity ordinarily refer to? Giddens points out that

Apart from the general sense of living through a period of marked disparity from the past, the term usually means one or more of the following: that we have discovered that nothing can be known with any certainty, since all pre-existing “foundations” of epistemology have been shown to be unreliable; that “history” is devoid of teleology and consequently no version of “progress” can plausibly be defended; and that a new social and political agenda has come into being with the increasing prominence of ecological concerns and perhaps of new social movements generally. Scarcely anyone today seems to identify post-modernity with what it was once widely accepted to mean—the replacement of capitalism by socialism. Pushing this transition away from centre stage, in fact, is one of the main factors that has prompted current discussions about the possible dissolution of modernity, given Marx’s totalising view of history^[8].

Skepticism developed in the early 80’s. Post modernism arose in the following context:

i) A critique of Enlightenment: The entire legacy of modernity and Enlightenment came to be designated as a metanarrative, a story of civilization, of progress, advancement whose authenticity was no longer believed as necessary. A critique of European rationality was unleashed by the German Philosopher Nietzsche by his deep skepticism, thus setting the foundation of post-modernism. ii) As a response to the traumatic events of the 20th century i.e. the holocaust, genocide, racism, which led to skepticism about the civilizing mission of Europe. Europe realizes that it is no longer the master of the world but several voices have come to play. iii) As a critique of Marxism. The collapse of the socialist states in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union proved that there was something wrong in the way Socialism was made operational. The philosophical ideals of Marxism, socialism failed. iv) As a critique of modernist culture in the sense that modernism eventually betrays its original radical spirit. Modernism no longer has any meaning because it symbolized the imprisonment of man instead of the emancipation of man. Therefore, Post-modernism focuses on two things i) Nothing is authentic about anything and ii) it stands on uncertainty and skepticism.

As to the debate on modernity and post modernism the following may be pointed out.

The debate between Habermas and Lyotard. Habermas has pointed out that modernity has ultimately travelled along a wrong track which has distorted its original premise. While Lyotard has pointed out that modernity is fraught with dangerous consequences.

- i) An alternative modernity is possible, which would be different from the liberal/capitalist understanding of modernity.
- ii) The post-modern critique of European modernity has its alleged ambiguities. It leads to various implications like: A) Post-modernism is a kind of neo – conservatism in its

celebration of identities. It becomes reactionary i.e. it encourages religious fundamentalism, obscurantism. B) Post-modernism is a kind of defiant radicalism that does not acknowledge any notion of centrality. It refuses to be defined by any single parameter. C) It is a deep skepticism that espouses indeterminism and absolute relativism. It has come to be associated with a historicity, plurality, micropolitics, difference as against the notions of universalism, foundationalism, metanarrative, macropolitics. D) Post-modernism has become associated with the notion of Text as distinct from Work. The Text implies open-ended interpretation. E.) Post-modernism raises the issue of universality of reason (Hegel) versus the moral autonomy (Kant).

Conclusion :

In conclusion it may be pointed out that post-modernism gives birth to the freedom of the self. It is a celebration of human emancipation. Post-modernists point out that the self needs to be defined in relation to others. I can understand myself only from a social point of view. We are what society makes us, no matter how free we feel in making our choices. Our choices themselves are due to the hand of social construction and background beliefs. This itself shows that the freedom of the self to express itself, considered as one of the basic freedoms, has to conform to the norms that society sets up. These societal norms dictate what can be said or even thought about. If one does not conform to it, he becomes an outcast, because at the end of the day societal norms encapsulate power relations. Power relations teach us how to express ourselves. So, the original premise i.e. self-emancipation is lost in the process because conforming to societal norms is itself based on restrictions. Humanism which instilled belief and faith in reason takes a back seat, since if reason allows one to think, to question, to criticize, the requirement of the day calls for a correct usage of terms allowed by power seats. If one digresses from this, one becomes socially outcast. Freedom in the sense of free speech has come to be reformed. The claim of post modernism in being humble, kind and empathetic becomes self-refuting. It is grossly intolerant to the basic freedom that it originally wanted to ensure. Human beings have a duty towards one another to overcome this humanist controversy in the postmodern era.

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