Chapter One

Postmodernism and Feminism
Postmodernism is an elusive theory. Although much has been written about it, there remains no consensus about its tenets. This is mainly because what constitutes postmodernism differs from theorist to theorist. In this context Patricia Waugh writes, “Is it possible any longer to define postmodernism?”¹ For Richard Rorty the fluidity of the term ‘postmodernism’ has rendered it useless for any purpose. He has “given up on the attempt to find something common to Michael Graves’ buildings, Pynchon’s and Rushdie’s novels, Ashberry’s poems, various sorts of popular music, and the writings of Heidegger and Derrida.”² For Ihab Hassan the difficulty of postmodernism arises from a certain semantic instability. There is no clear consensus about its meaning among scholars. “Thus some critics mean by postmodernism what others call avant-gardism…, while still others would call the same phenomenon simply modernism.”³ For Andreas Huyssen the difficulty is due to “the amorphous and politically volatile nature of postmodernism [which] makes the phenomenon itself remarkably elusive, and the definition of its boundaries exceedingly difficult, if not per se impossible.”⁴ The elusiveness of this term is humorously described by Hebdige; for him it can be used for any of the following:

The decor of a room, the design of a building, the diagesis...of a film, the construction of a record, or a ‘scratch’ video, a television commercial, or an arts documentary or the ‘intertextual relations between them, the layout of a page in a

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fashion magazine or critical journal, an anti-teleological...tendency within epistemology... the attack on the ‘metaphysics of presence’..., a general attenuation of feeling,..., the ‘predicament’ of reflexivity, a group of rhetorical tropes, a proliferation of surfaces, a new phase in commodity fetishism, a fascination for images, codes and styles, a process, political or existential fragmentation and/or crisis, the ‘de-centering’ of the subject, an ‘incredulity towards metanarratives’, the replacement of unitary power axes by a plurality of power/discourse formations, the ‘implosion’ of meaning; the collapse of cultural hierarchies, the dread engendered by the threat of nuclear self destruction, the decline of the university, the functioning and effects of the new miniaturised technologies, brought societal and economic shifts into a ‘media’, ‘consumer’ or ‘multinational’ phase ....

But having said that, a start has to be made somewhere. So beginning from the first basic problem, i.e. exploring postmodernism, one finds

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that there is no consensus about who is the originator of the term ‘postmodernism’. Charles Jencks in an article traced the origin to the British artist John Watkins Chapman, who had used the term back in 1870s and to Rudolf Pannwitz who had used it in 1917. But Ihab Hassan traces its origin to Frederico de Onis who had used it in his *Antologia de la Poesia Espanolae Hispanoamericana* in 1934. Others have spotted the use of the term in a variety of authors, such as Bernard Smith, Dudley Fitts, Charles Olson, Randall Jarrell, Leslie Fiedler and Harry Levin. For Michael Koehler the term originated in the 1940s in the writings of Arnold Toynbee, who used the term for assigning to it the entire period from 1875 onwards. But all the above mentioned writers had used the term variously, all coining it in different contexts and for different purposes. Koehler believes that it was Irving Howe, who in his 1959 essay “Mass Society and Post-Modern Fiction” was the first writer to use the term “postmodern fiction” for denoting the literature of a specific period. However, it was only due to the persistent use of the term by Ihab Hassan that gave it a huge currency.
Although the etymology of the word is not still clear to us, but one can say with assurance that the term “postmodernism” had entered the critical, artistic and literal scene in the 1950s. It was only in the 1960s however that postmodernism significantly began to be perceived. Initially postmodernism was used as a mere periodization, post “modern” i.e. designating the period after modernism, but as time passed, it began to be used in a much wider sense. It did not only refer to the art, literature, or culture, but also to the post 1960s society, as well as to the general human condition. At this stage postmodernism became a pervasive phenomenon to be felt in society, in philosophy and in literature and arts. It was not to rest there, the emergence of postmodernism in society, philosophy and arts was to spread and influence even more, ultimately permeating all the other fields i.e. political and even science studies.

There are three possible approaches of understanding postmodernism - as a socio-economic phenomenon, as a philosophical phenomenon and as a literal phenomenon.

Socio-economic Scenario
For some, especially for Fredric Jameson, postmodernism has roots in social factors of “late capitalism”, i.e. aggressive capitalism of post 1950s, which in his view has influenced and shaped life in general in western societies as well as their culture, art, literature and ideology.

The 1960s saw a sort of transition from what can be said as the modern period to the postmodern period in western societies. Western societies saw the growth and spread of communication and information technology, multiculturalism, consumerism, globalization, mass media, pluralism, niche culture, and new awareness around gender and sexuality. For many, such changes were thought to have led to the state or condition of postmodernism. Fredric Jameson is the most powerful critic who espouses the view that the social and historical changes in the western culture are responsible for bringing about postmodernism. For him artistic productions and philosophical developments are historically induced or determined. In his influential essay “Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism” written in 1984 he stated that the late capitalist mode of production was responsible for leading to the experience of postmodern skepticism.
towards metanarratives. Jameson has established postmodernism to be historically grounded.

Before moving further, an important distinction has to be made between the words ‘postmodern’ and ‘postmodernity’ on the one hand and ‘postmodernist’ and ‘postmodernism’ on the other hand. The former words are “used as a broad cultural – historical category designating the culture [especially that of the post 1950s or 1960s] or the world that we inhabit, which is responsible for postmodernism and, reciprocally, shaped by it.”\(^6\) Whereas the later words ‘postmodernist’ and ‘postmodernism’ are used “primarily as (meta)theoretical, (meta)critical or (meta)aesthetic categories (...), largely defined by epistemological considerations.”\(^7\) Therefore these terms are mutually interdependent, one influencing the other and vice versa. In this connection theorists generally assert that there is “a mimetic relation of

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the forms of postmodernist fiction to advanced late capitalist societies.”

Philosophical Background

It was the philosophical debates during the 1960s that provided the greatest impetus for postmodernism. It was the writings of Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida and Jean François Lyotard that led to postmodernism. It started with the never before seen rigorous skepticism towards the Enlightenment and modernist notions of reason, autonomous rational subject and foundational truth. This skepticism led to the repudiation of the notion of progress, unity of self and rationalistic subject, rationalism, positivism, autonomy of art, justice in politics, validity in history and authenticity and objectivity of science.

Enlightenment philosophy had established trust in man’s reason as an adequate vehicle for dealing with all human problems and also for achieving justice and dispelling prejudice. Hence human beings with their reason could free themselves from influences of tradition, passions, prejudices, feelings, likings and “arrive at objective, true

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knowledge of the way things are in the world. And, along with the progress of rational inquiry would come the improvement of human life.”

It was Friedrich Nietzsche who was the first person to thoroughly criticize the Enlightenment idea of rational subject and foundational truth. In *The Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche decried the “dangerous old conceptual fiction that posited a pure will-less, painless, timeless knowing subject” and espoused that “There is only a perspectival knowing.” For him human beings have little reason and that too is subordinate to desires, prejudices and contingencies, they do not interpret the world as it is but as their needs and power urges want them to interpret it and what has been established as truth is nothing but “the will to be master over the multiplicity of sensations – to classify phenomena into definite categories.”

According to Woods:

Postmodernism pits reasons in the plural—fragmented and incommensurable—against the universality of modernism and

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11 Quoted in Patricia Waugh, “Postmodernism”, p.300.
the long standing concept of the human self as a subject with a single, unified reason. The subject is the space demarcated by the ‘I’, understood as a sense of identity, a selfhood which is coherent, stable, rational and unified. Based upon this sense of individuality ... it is believed that people posses agency and can use their capabilities to alter, shape and change the world in which they live. Postmodern theory is suspicious of the notion of humans possessing an undivided and coherent self which acts as the standard of rationality, and guarantees all knowledge claims irrespective of time and place. It no longer believes that reasoning subjects act as vehicles for historically progressive Change.¹²

The anti-Enlightenment discourses were always present, Dostoevsky’s novel Notes From Underground can be cited as an example. The novel “challenges everything from Kantian and utilitarian ethics to scientific socialism and gender-blind universalism, in terms

remarkably prescient of much postmodern thought,”\textsuperscript{13} but these thoughts received new impetus by the horrors of the holocaust and the rise of totalitarianism and fascism. Even in the forties and fifties, the skepticism of rationality and progress was already voiced by philosophers such as Hannah Arendt, Michael Oakeshott, Karl Popper, Isaiah Berlin. And whatever was left of Enlightenment and modernism was ousted by Derrida’s onslaught on the very concept of foundational truth, so that certainty in the matters of truth, epistemology, language and meaning was replaced by pervasive doubt. In this connection Patricia Waugh writes:

By the 1970s,…objects of knowledge [became] not so much entities on which language reflects as artifacts actually constructed through and within language. By 1979, when Lyotard published his influential book, new and burgeoning forms of epistemological and cultural relativism were already well out of their infancies. Truth, Knowledge, Self and Value were no longer to be regarded as foundational categories, but as rhetorical constructions masking relations of power and

\textsuperscript{13} Patricia Waugh, “Postmodernism”, p. 291.
strategies of oppression and marginalization. In the modern condition, philosophy had claimed the position of privileged metanarrative, claimed to be the discourse which might discover that final vocabulary which would ground the very conditions of knowledge. Postmodernists now claimed to have cut away this final ground in recognising there were only ever vocabularies to invent.  

14 Patricia Waugh, “Postmodernism”, p. 292.

Literary Scene

As there is no consensus about other issues regarding postmodernism in general, there is similarly a good deal of uncertainty regarding which literary works can be designated as postmodern. The same work can be for some modernist, for some avant-gardist and yet for some postmodernist. But still the past few decades have seen emergence of a variety of aesthetic practices which one can with some assurance label as postmodernist.
Parody, i.e. “ironic quotation, pastiche, appropriation, or intertextuality”\textsuperscript{15} is central to postmodernism. Postmodern parody has not to be confused with what notion it carried in the eighteenth century, i.e. it was then only a form of burlesque. Its present-day use has many different forms and aims. It can range from playful irony and witty subversion to serious questioning.

For Fredric Jameson the postmodern parody serves no function. He refuses to call it parody and feels that it is rather pastiche with which postmodern art is concerned. For him it is:

the imitation of a peculiar mask, speech in a dead language;
but it is a neutral practice of such mimicry, without any of parody’s ulterior motives, amputated of the satirical impulse, devoid of laughter and of any conviction.\textsuperscript{16}

And among the others, who do not approve of postmodern parody, believe that it is inevitable and apt in a contemporary culture which is oversaturated with all kinds of representation. Yet for others it


is “the only form of critique remaining in a world in which there can only be a perspectival seeing.” But for Linda Hutcheon its delving in stores of past images is not pointless; it has a function and that function is to highlight and ask questions about the politics of representation. It is concerned with issues like which representations get legitimized? What makes them to get legitimized? (And thus exposing the power politics behind them). What are its ramifications? And also what are the powers and limitations of representations in any form? The engagement with representations also brings such issues like how present representations are influenced by past ones, and if there is continuity or difference between representations of past and present “what ideological consequences derive from [it].” Parody de-naturalizes the past representations and exposes them as cultural and not as natural or normal.

It also provides a critique of such notions as originality and uniqueness, whether that of an author or that of a work, foregrounding how essentially the same things get repeated and imitated and

17 Patricia Waugh, “Postmodernism”, p. 290.
18 Linda Hutcheon, The Politics of Postmodernism, p.89.
connected with the aesthetic past. It points out that writers draw their writing from a vast dictionary. And finally it points to “the impossibility of finding any totalizing model to resolve the resulting postmodern contradictions.”\(^{19}\) Parody disrupts the tendency to find unity, or to master the material or to find closure.

Another important feature of postmodern literary works is mixing of opposites or breaking down of boundaries between genres, literal and theoretical, high and popular art, past and present, linguistic and pictorial, and fiction and reality.

The mixing of fictional with the worldly or historical results in a highly paradoxical novel, Linda Hutcheon termed this genre as ‘historiographic metafiction.’ In such postmodern works narrative representation is both fictional and real involving a medley of actual historical and sociopolitical events along with fiction, parody and self-reflexivity. This mixing of the opposites (here fictive and real) may not seem to some a totally new artistic trend, but what is new is that in such novels there is foregrounding of “the self-consciousness of the

\(^{19}\) Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism*, p.91.
fictionality, the lack of the familiar pretence of transparency, and the calling into question of the factual grounding of history-writing.”20 This mixing of opposites results in provoking the reader to de-naturalize the stereotyped assumptions and conventions, to ask questions about how we make meaning, how we authenticate certain representations and practices, and shows that postmodern art is not only committed to artistic experiments such as excessive self-reflexivity and parody, but it also does not avoid to comment and question about the real world, about the real issues whether of gender discrimination or that of how we grant value in culture.

Postmodern art is paradoxical and raises many contradictions, but it does not resolve any of them. There is no attempt at ordering, at systematizing information or facts, at conveying a single explanation, at providing meaning or giving a cause and effect explanation, at providing material chronologically, and finding closure. This leads to what Peter Brooker has called “a mood or condition of radical

indeterminacy,”21 and a complete rejection of grand narratives underlying the representations of the world. This makes postmodernism a highly anti-totalizing artistic practice.

Perhaps the most important feature of postmodern art is the process of problemitizing numerous notions that were until the emergence of postmodernism and poststructuralist debates taken for granted. Today we cannot help looking at terms like meaning, reality, truth, subjectivity, representation, gender, historiography and narrative with a sense of suspicion and questioning.

Postmodernism is concerned with representations of all kinds, whether visual, as in photography, or verbal, as in narration and historiography. Today’s world is saturated with representations like advertisements, soap operas, magazines, newspapers and literary works. Indeed, the world gets communicated through such representations making them a huge site for postmodernism. It problematizes representations, setting out to raise important questions about the ideologies working behind representations of all sorts.

Postmodernism analyses the representations as both propagator of and imbiber of ideologies. Its task is to de-naturalize them and pinpoint to the elements which are passed as natural and normal as human construct, as motivated and manufactured by interests of few powerful agencies or people. Postmodernism has made us aware about how representations privilege and legitimize certain ideologies, values or knowledge over others and how it cannot be politically innocent or neutral.

There is a common consensus that representations do not reflect reality but the process of stereotyping, naturalizing and conventionalizing to construct a certain value and meaning within a society which is in the interest of few people. Notions like truth, value, reality and man, are productions of representations, which are now no longer seen as self-present and self-justifying, and are exposed as interpretations, constructions or as fictions. Postmodernism has taught us that:

All representations have a politics;...[and the] issues like gender, class, race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation are now
part of the discourse of the visual arts, as they are of the literary ones…. there is no value-neutral, much less value-free, place from which to represent in any art form.  

Postmodern fiction is overtly concerned with the “narrative representation as a mode of knowledge and explanation,” and also with the “nature of narrative as a major human system of understanding—in fiction, but also in history, philosophy, anthropology, and so on.” There is an acute realization that narrative is not a transparent representation of the outer world, it cannot reflect reality. Narrative is derived from cultural conventions and unacknowledged ideological assumptions which designates what we have come to call as reality, and hence it is a man-made construct. It is the use of such conventions like emplotment, selection and closure that grants meaning. The narrative is blamed to be a mode of totalizing process. This process of control, of totalizing is what enables writers of history, theory and fiction to render their material coherent and unified, but these strategies are not innocent, they are linked to power, their aim is

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22 Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism*, p.44.
23 Ibid., p.51.
24 Ibid., p.47.
to master the material in their hands “even at the risk of doing violence to them.” 25 The narrative is a tool with which the theorist and the historian can employ their “own desire for mastery of a documentary repertoire.” 26 Fernand Braudel’s statement clearly points to this desire for mastery: “Everything must be recaptured and relocated in general framework of history, so that despite the difficulties, the fundamental paradoxes and contradictions, we may respect the unity of history which is also the unity of life.” 27 But now the desire is to expose this totalizing factor. Postmodern novels “structurally both install and subvert the teleology, closure, and causality of narrative, both historical and fictive.” 28 In this way they expose self-consciously the fictionalization and the manipulation of any material.

Doubting all narratives leads to the questions about historiography also. If narratives are unreliable, how can historiography be reliable, as this also uses the conventions common to narrative fiction. Hayden White points out “how historians suppress, repeat,

subordinate, highlight, and order”

In order to grant certain coherence and meaning to the past which it cannot know in any authentic, unitary and unrelativised way. This insight has led us to ask, “Which ‘facts’ make it into history? And whose facts?”

Facts can be interpreted differently, only the powerful, the influential have the power to register their interpretations and pass them as truth. The answers to these questions have made us further to realize that truth and interpretations are relative and they are influenced to a great extent by naturalized ideologies.

The result is that historiography is no longer considered as an objective recording, but it is considered as a construction by the historians who want to impose their own vision on history and “master it by names of some working (narrative/explanatory) model.”

This has not only led us to doubt historiography but also the so-called authentic records of the past - archives, photographs, film footages and eye witnesses. Their unreliability and textual nature is foregrounded.

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29 L Hutcheon, The Politics of Postmodernism, p.64.
30 Ibid., p. 68.
31 Ibid., p. 61.
From the above discussion of postmodernism, it follows that one can associate the term with “the dominant ‘mood’ of western late capitalism; as a legitimation crisis in western epistemologies and political structures; as a variety of aesthetic or cultural practices, or… as all those discourses which attempt to theorise late or post-modernity.”

Which Postmodernism

Postmodernism has been described differently by different writers, it becomes very pertinent to ask ‘which postmodernism’ we are talking about. Brian McHale in his book *Postmodern Fiction* writes in this regard:

> there is John Barth’s postmodernism, the literature of replenishment; Charles Newman’s postmodernism, the literature of an inflationary economy; Jean-François Lyotard’s postmodernism, a general condition of knowledge in the contemporary informational regime; Ihab Hassan’s

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postmodernism, a stage on the road to the spiritual unification of human kind; and so on.\textsuperscript{33}

To this list Linda Hutcheon adds a few more important brands of postmodernism:

McHale’s postmodernism, with its ontological ‘dominant’ in reaction to the epistemological ‘dominant’ of modernism. … Fredric Jameson’s postmodernism, the cultural logic of late capitalism; Jean Baudrillard’s postmodernism, in which the simulacrum gloats over the body of the deceased referent; Kroker and Cooks (related) hyperreal dark side of postmodernism; Sloterdijk’s postmodernism, of cynicism or ‘enlightened false consciousness’; and Alan Wilde’s literary ‘middle grounds’ of the postmodern.\textsuperscript{34}

In this situation when a number of writers have their own respective brands of postmodernism, it becomes necessary to talk about them in more detail.

\textsuperscript{34} Linda Hutcheon, The Politics of Postmodernism, p.11.
Jean-François Lyotard, one of the most important theorists, defines postmodernism as “incredulity towards metanarratives.” By metanarratives he means all those absolute explanations which try to make sense of the world in concrete terms, for example, explanations offered by religion, science or by philosophers based on ‘foundational truth’. For Lyotard, metanarratives include:

- the progressive emancipation of reason and freedom,
- the progressive or catastrophic emancipation of labour ..., the enrichment of all humanity through the progress of capitalist technoscience and ... the salvation of creatures through the conversion of souls to the Christian narrative of martyred love.  

For Lyotard postmodernism cannot give overarching explanations of reality, as was given by the Enlightenment and the modernists. It has to contend with ‘petites histoires’ and encompass


instead of one grand theory, plural, micro, local and temporary explanations.

For another theorist of postmodernism, Jean Baudrillard, postmodernism is an era dominated by “simulation, implosion and hyperreality.”\(^{37}\) In this era the distinction between reality and illusion get blurred out and everything becomes simulacra. For Baudrillard simulacra is a state in which “a social sphere [is] so saturated by images and signs that a resultant crisis in representation has overtaken its capacity to insist on the real, on truth, and on meaning.”\(^{38}\) It is a state where “the image ‘bears no relation to any reality whatever.’”\(^{39}\) Similarly implosion is a state when there is a “collapse of signification as a set of discernible and discrete units of meaning.”\(^{40}\) TV, media, advertisements, digital world, computer simulation, Disneyland are the prime makers of hyperreality or simulacra.

Accordingly for Patricia Waugh, postmodernism can be understood as:

\(^{39}\) Ibid., p. 80.  
\(^{40}\) Tim Woods, *Beginning Postmodernism*, pp.4-5.
a gradual dissolution of the modern idea of separate autonomies of the spheres of art, science and morality or politics, and can be viewed as an increasingly pervasive aestheticisation of all spheres of knowledge and experience, from philosophy to politics and finally to science.\footnote{Patricia Waugh, “Postmodernism”, p.291.}

The intrusion of aestheticism – all pervasive uncertainty and relativism – in all branches of knowledge is the most fundamental transition brought about by postmodernism. Waugh analyses the effects of intrusion of aestheticism in the fields of literature, philosophy, politics and science. Aestheticism in literature entails that it has to give up the modernist claim for autonomy and impersonality, hence everything merges into one another, life into art and mass culture into high art and vice versa.

The consequences of involving aestheticism in politics are even more far-reaching. Postmodern understanding is that we cannot come out of our instruments of evaluation, judgment or interrogation; these instruments can be primarily language, rationality and self, which we
need in order to know the truth. When there remains no centre, no fundamental truth; then in politics also there can be no pure justice, because we can never understand what is justice or we can never reach to a consensus of what is justice, therefore in politics there can be no:

universal subject of emancipation; no pure procedural justice derived from a ‘view from nowhere’ and grounding the discourse of equality and individual rights; no universally acknowledged concept of the ‘good’ derived from the telos of history…. Politics therefore becomes ‘micropolitics’: the exercise at best of a situated rationality and a conversational practice grounded in the internal practices and claims of particular groups or communities. Claims to universality are to be regarded as strategies of exclusion and domination.42

The aftermath of postmodernism in the philosophical field was that philosophy had to give in its claim for authentic discourse, its claim for finding and establishing ‘truth’. Majority of philosophers, particularly Derrida and Lyotard followed Nietzsche in completing the

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42Patricia Waugh, “Postmodernism”, p.298.
critique of the Enlightenment epistemology or that of the idea of fundamental truth and of the rational subject and hence established philosophy as poetry or art. This brand of philosophy champions pervasive prespectivism, taking the lead from Nietzsche’s statement that “there is only a prespectival knowing.”\textsuperscript{43} Instead of classifying and validating knowledge they dismiss altogether all ‘totalities’ as unreliable and dangerous and all language games as equally inadequate. Yet there has been another strand of philosophy that although does criticize the idea of rationalist thought and the idea of freedom, but they do not forego the desire for justice and emancipation. This school of thought rejects the validity of single fundamental knowledge and espouses that all knowledge is relative and is modulated by cultural practices and beliefs, but nevertheless, believes that it is human need to invest in and establish some sort of fundamental truth for the sake of achieving justice.

Postmodern critique of epistemology not only invaded politics and philosophy but also the last epitome of Enlightenment and that of modernity, i.e. science. By now science had always remained

\textsuperscript{43} Friedrich Nietzsche, \textit{The Genealogy of Morals}, SIII, P.3.
untouched by questions about its methods and its objectivity, because it was understood as the most objective field of knowledge where it could have proofs about what it asserted. Although science has received value-oriented criticism going back to “Schiller’s indictment of Newtonian mechanics which had plunged the world into a value-shorn and ‘monotonous round of ends,’”\(^4^4\) and every now and then ethical questions about human cloning, or genetic engineering or nuclear research are asked, but science remained free from quarries about its epistemological foundations. Now postmodern critique has targeted the very epistemological groundings of science. Postmodern theorists and scientists like Lewis Wolpert, Richard Dawkins and Alan Sokal have pointed out that scientific knowledge is not created in a vacuum; it is equally influenced by ideological constructions and cultural practices. Scientific discourses use the same language (or language games) which are already contaminated by different ideologies. Postmodernism has aestheticised science too, that is, it has exposed science also as a form of fiction.

\(^4^4\) P Waugh, “Postmodernism”, p.303.
Postmodernism has replaced all the epistemological assertions so that it is now believed that there was and there is no knowing except aesthetic knowing. In the postmodern theory and practice there is the established consensus that “Knowledge is an art of invention and not a science of discovery.”

Linda Hutcheon writes about many postmodernisms generated by many theorists, and then she introduces her own brand. In her words it is “paradoxical postmodernism of complicity and critique, of reflexivity and historicity, that at once inscribes and subverts the conventions and ideologies of the dominant culture and social forces of the twentieth-century western world.” It is clear from the above statement that for Hutcheon the defining aspect of postmodernism is its being highly paradoxical or contradictory.

Its contradictory nature arises from many things. For one thing it is due to the very nature of postmodernism which takes the form of a self-undermining statement. It is as if inverted commas are put around whatever is being said, hence highlighting the duplicity, self-

consciousness and paradoxical nature of statements. Postmodernism is contradictory also because it is both complicitous and critical at the same time. It is complicitous with and critical of the conventions, cultural practices, social setups, ideologies and representations. It is complicitous with those values which nevertheless it still undermines, thus resulting in the simultaneous inscription and installing on one hand and subversion and denaturalization of values and ideologies on the other hand. The words of Anne Friedberg best describe this sort of contradictory nature of postmodernism. According to her postmodernism “was conservative politics, it was subversive politics, it was the return of tradition, it was the final revolt of tradition, it was the unmooring of patriarchy, it was the reassertion of patriarchy.”

Linda Hutcheon points out the complicity that is automatically inherent in the prominent postmodern philosophers of the twentieth century. She says:

Is there not a center to even the most decentered of [postmodern] theories? What is power to Faucault, writing to Derrida, or class to Marxism? Each of these theoretical perspectives can be argued to be deeply – and knowingly –

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implicated in the notion of center they attempt to subvert. It is this paradox that makes them postmodern.\textsuperscript{48}

Its contradictory nature is also due to its being both self-reflexive, i.e. having no touch with outer reality and belonging to the realm of parody and pastiched depthlessness, and also at the same time historically oriented, i.e. dealing with the matters of real life, belonging to the realm of history and socio-political happenings. This contradictory mixing of fictive and worldly is typical of postmodernism.

Apart from highlighting the paradoxical or ironic nature of postmodernism, Hutcheon stresses that the other basic characteristic of postmodernism is its political nature. The dominant trend in contemporary criticism is to dismiss any involvement of postmodernism with politics, for such theorists postmodern self-reflexivity, aestheticization and ironic commitment towards representations, or serious issues makes it disqualified from any political involvement. Linda Hutcheon challenges this view. For her it

is naïve to think of postmodernism as apolitical; she believes that it is inextricably interbound with politics. Postmodernism involves both complicity and critique and it is this oblique critique of domination, power, epistemology and reality that makes postmodernism political. This state of being both complicitous and at the same time involving critique is termed by Hutcheon as “complicitous critique”. It is this complicitous critique that gives postmodernism a political agenda, albeit not an overt one, but nevertheless of great significance. The complicitous critique aims

to de-naturalize some of the dominant features of our way of life; to point out that those entities that we unthinkably experience as ‘natural’ (they might even include capitalism, patriarchy, liberal humanism) are in fact ‘cultural’; made by us, not given to us.⁴⁹

Also its blatant, self-conscious involvement with such things as language - its possibilities, limits and construction, and history writing - its validity, construction, social and ideological manufacturing,

granting of meaning and values cannot be analyzed in a vacuum. One cannot avoid getting involved in ideologies about gender, religion, class, race and that makes its orientation highly politicized.

Modernism and Postmodernism

Some see postmodernism as a continuation of modernism, but if we study the characteristics of modernism we find in it more differences than similarities with postmodernism, so much so that for Ihab Hassan they are antithetical point by point. The most important difference is vis-à-vis the concept of autonomy. Autonomy was a key term in the theorization of modernism. Art was considered to be autonomous, cut off, a self enclosed entity, judged and governed by its own rules. Clive Bell had espoused for the absolute separation of life and art, and Eugene Jolas had declared that “The new artist of the world has recognized the autonomy of language.”\(^{50}\) The precursor for the modernist idea of autonomy is Immanuel Kant. For him:

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\text{Autonomy involves the capacity to act in accordance with self – determined principals rationally formulated and not driven}
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by irrational impulses from within or tyrannical pressures from without. To be autonomous is to transcend the phenomenality of material or historical determination and to give the law unto oneself in a space constituted by freedom.\textsuperscript{51}

Hence the implication of this theory for art or literature is that art is its own end, it creates its own universe, which is neither applicable nor subordinate nor interchangeable with separate spheres of other orders outside it, i.e. morality, philosophy, politics or science. Postmodernism does away with the concept of autonomy and fuses aestheticism into everything. Postmodern theorists recognized that the concept of autonomy of art was too naïve and gave credit to the complicity of all art with culture, the world and history. By dismissing autonomy, postmodernism also dismissed the privileged concept of art and the cultural hegemony of leisure class “anxious to defend its privileges against the tides of mass culture and political democratization.”\textsuperscript{52}

\textsuperscript{51} Patricia Waugh, “Postmodernism”, p. 295.
\textsuperscript{52} Ibid., p.295.
The argument brings us to the second major difference. We know that for modernism the conflation of high art and mass culture was an anathema, to the extent that “modernism defined itself through the exclusion of mass culture and was driven by its fear of contamination by the consumer culture.”\(^{53}\) Still many are hostile to the mixing of high and popular forms of art. For them it means “the destruction of all order or the intrinsic devaluation of all received ideas.”\(^{54}\) And for Jameson it results in “an increasing dehumanization of life.”\(^{55}\) But postmodernism typically includes elements like popular, local and ethnic culture. It undertakes to explore and challenge the ideological underpinnings of both mass culture – advertising, magazines as well as that of high culture. Mixing of high and popular art did away with the so-called elitist brand of modernism. Postmodernism shows no fear of commercialism and of lowering of standards by such mixing.

On the surface modernism matches with postmodernism; it uses parody and experimental artistic devices like non sequitur fragmented narration, but there is a major difference between the two. Modernism

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\(^{53}\) Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism*, p.27.

\(^{54}\) Ibid., p.28.

\(^{55}\) Ibid., p.28.
was committed to establish a “unified, though complex, underlying reality.” It sought “integration amid fragmentation.” It searched for wholeness, for center, it aimed to resolve, whereas “To the postmodernist mind, everything is empty at the center.” There is no underlying reality. It is characterized by incredulity towards metanarratives.

Modernism was much rooted in the ideas of objectivity, impersonality, originality, artistic autonomy, but in postmodernism writing cannot be objective, impersonal and original. In the words of Victor Burgin:

modernist pretensions to artistic independence have been further subverted by the demonstration of the necessarily ‘intertextual’ nature of the production of meaning; we can no longer unproblematically assume that ‘Art’ is somehow

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‘outside’ of the complex of other representational practices and institutions with which it is contemporary.\textsuperscript{59}

So in postmodernism writing cannot be original, it is drawn from pre-existing writing and this is stressed by the use of parody, pastiche and intertextuality. Similarly writing cannot be objective and impersonal, this is stressed by excessive self-reflexivity and also writing cannot be autonomous, art is considered to be inter-bound with society and culture.

However it is worthwhile to mention that modernism was on one hand characterized by a pessimistic view of the world and on the other hand believed in the possibility of bringing about social reform and radical change. In contrast postmodernism is cynical towards the ideas of progressivism and it is not pessimistic, its attitude is rather, “if one cannot prevent Rome burning then one might as well enjoy the fiddling that is left open to one.”\textsuperscript{60}

Postmodernism and Feminism


\textsuperscript{60} Jeremy Hawthorn, \textit{A Glossary of Contemporary Literary Theory}, p. 182.
Both postmodernism and feminist “perspectives have brought about a major shift in our ways of thinking about culture, knowledge, and art and also about the way in which the political impinges upon and infuses all of our thinking and acting, both public and private.”61 Also both are committed to denaturalize our thinking about all such things that have been taken for granted, such as language, reality, truth, self and patriarchy. This commitment to denaturalize leads to foregrounding the constructive nature of notions and to the exploration of their ideological import.

Both share problematization of representation and point out how “representation(s) …do not reflect society so much as grant meaning and value within a particular society.”62 The aim is to explore and question the ideologies, values, interests behind all cultural representations and show how they are influenced by power and gender politics. The problematization of representations ultimately leads to the interrogation of the ideology. As far as the representation of women in cultural practices is concerned, feminists explore how the dominant

62 Ibid., p. 8.
representations of women in mass media, visual arts and literature are mis-representations, how women themselves represent themselves, which systems of power legitimize some representations of women while neglecting others, how women are seen by men and how women are represented in patriarchal society, highlighting “masculinist underpinnings of the cultural practices that subtend those representations.”

Feminists share postmodern questioning about the notion of subjectivity. While postmodernism works to foreground the construction of the individual bourgeois subject, feminists foreground the construction of the gendered subject. Each assaults the “Enlightenment discourses which universalize white, Western, middle-class male experience.”

Femininity is constructed through cultural representations and patriarchal discourses as stable and opposed to masculinity or the construction ‘man’. Whereas in reality women are diverse and different from each other due to factors like nationality, class, age, race and

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sexuality. Thus subjectivity is not stable and autonomous, it is gendered subjectivity rooted in ideological, social and historical factors.

Given the similarities between postmodernism and feminism it is necessary to mention one significant difference due to which they must be kept apart no matter how related they are. And that difference is that feminism has an overt political agenda. Women writers want to change the practices in art but they know that these sexist practices can only be changed when the patriarchal social practices are changed. Whereas postmodernism is not political in the sense in which feminism is. Postmodernism is rendered politically ambiguous due to its practice of both complicity and critique, “It has no theory of positive action on a social level; all feminist positions do [have].”

Another equally important dissimilarity between the two lies in the nature of deconstructive impulse that both share. Postmodern deconstructive mode is nihilistic, it does not resolve anything. It simply rejects all notions of center and fundamental truth. The repercussions are that we are left with no way of knowing anything, no privileged

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position, so we cannot know what justice is and how to achieve it. Feministic deconstructive practice can be called ‘positive deconstruction’, in which cultural practices and binary oppositions are denaturalized in order to make a better society, and feminism cannot forego the concept of center or fundamental truth because their ideas are grounded in the idea that women were and are oppressed. They need to have justice; they need consensus and cannot discard all grand narratives. They have to adopt a metanarrative or universalizing approach to fight for and achieve basic human rights.

Plight of Postmodernism

Postmodernism became a dominant mode of interpretation in the mid-eighties and more than two decades after, it is not only difficult to theorize about it and about the complex web of questions it gives rise to, but the question of its current plight is also equally difficult to gauge. For some it never existed, so it does not matter for them whether it is living or dead. For some it has already died out much before the turn of new millennium. Lyotard declared (back in 1988) that postmodernism was an “old man’s occupation, rummaging in the
dustbin of finality to find remains,” and John Frow in 1990 used past tense in his essay “What was Postmodernism?” Similarly for people like Terry Eagleton and Christopher Norris postmodernism is not only finished, passé, exhausted, but it was an illusion, a failure.

However the existence of postmodernism simply cannot be denied not only because the term kept so many cultural and literary critics and writers engaged, and because of the tremendous vogue that it enjoyed, but also because it has been fully academized, internationalized and institutionalized. It has its anthologies, readers and canonized texts and its histories. So many new concepts have been poured out by postmodernism that it has its dictionaries also. It no longer only deals with American literature; articles and books can be found on all literatures - Francophone, African, Chinese, South Pacific and Latin. Hence, it cannot be ignored because it has dealt with almost everything in a comprehensive way.

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66 Quoted in Patricia Waugh, “Postmodernism”, p. 289.