Appendix – I

Postmodernist elements in the novel *The Crying of Lot 49* by Thomas Pynchon: An analysis

Thomas Pynchon’s novel *The Crying of Lot 49* is one of the earliest writings in what is generally considered to be postmodern literature. The novel has a strange and convoluted style of narrative that is purported to confuse the reader. The narrative builds on already existing body of popular fiction, television stories, films and plays and therefore falls in the category of metafiction. Pynchon makes the narrative deliberately complex and difficult and the reader is left wondering about the identity of characters (subjects) and time – space reference. The world of objective social reality is converted into fictional reality and the characters struggle with memory to establish their identities. The loss of a unitary subject consciousness, the paradox of retaining historical memory in the wake of a passionate desire to discard unpleasant events, the fragmentation of the narrative and the characters reflect to some extent, elements of the postmodern in the novel.

The novel was published in the year 1966 which is significant for the study undertaken here since the emergence of postmodern tendencies in cultural representation has been traced to the 60’s decade in Europe and America. It was a time when war torn economies in the west were struggling to recover from the huge economic losses they had incurred. The youth of the generation of 60’s were completely disillusioned with conflicting political ideologies of their times and were in search of credible alternatives for their future. However, such alternatives were nowhere in sight in the capitalist west that had already moved quite far ahead in a direction that would render such alternatives impossible. Therefore the youth,
possibly out of frustration, began to indulge in excessive bodily pleasures, drugs and psychedelic music. These were promoted as compensation for the loss of identity and selfhood that had become the hallmarks of post-war European and American societies. Entertainment that would excite both physical and mental desires came to define youth cultures in these societies. A deep obsession with one’s self further alienated the self from the objective world of reality and forced the conscious ego to take an inward turn towards the unconscious. The self-reflective mode of the paranoid / schizoid self is seen in the way the protagonist of the novel who is programmatically named Oedipa Maas, struggles to discover her own subject identity as she roams through the metropolitan mess of San Francisco bay area. Her investigative journey into a fictional secret postal delivery company called Trystero later takes her deeper into a political intrigue and conspiracy. Oedipa undertakes the mission of finding out the truth about the existence of Trystero only after she inherits the rights to the huge estate of her ex-boyfriend Pierce Iverarity as co-executor.

The novel explores the idea of the struggle of humanity in a world of diminishing alternatives. It is characterized as typically postmodern because it mixes various themes and motifs picked from a wide range of subjects from literary genres to natural sciences and psychoanalysis. Carrying within it the dominant theological motif of apocalypse, the novel presents a dark satirical humour on the psychologically drained post-war western civilization. It is the picture of a civilization that is choking under the surplus waste of matter and information of its own making. The heroine of the novel is on a soul searching journey that will give her an understanding of herself and the world she belongs to. In the process, she investigates into the future of the
American Dream that lies hidden in the many layers of technological progress that America has achieved.

The familiar themes in any literature characterized as postmodern are playfulness, irony, pastiche, schizoprenia and dark humour. The characters in Pynchon’s novel are playfully named Stanley Koteks, Mike Fallopian, Dr. Hilarious and Mucho Mass. The mixing of genres and themes of science fiction, detective fiction and pop culture in the novel to create a pot-puree of sorts is what Jameson refers to as pastiche. Further, paranoia is a recurring theme that occurs throughout the novel. In a world that is too familiar to offer anything new, paranoia is a condition of the self that imagines that something beyond the ordinary is still possible. The narrative in many places of the novel betrays such paranoia:

“Behind the initials was a metaphor, a delirium tremens, a trembling unfurrowing of the mind’s ploughshare. The saint whose water can light lamps, the clairvoyant whose lapse in recall is the breath of God, the true paranoid for whom all is organized in spheres of joyful or threatening about the central pulse of himself, the dreamer whose puns probe ancient foetid shafts and tunnels of truth all act in the same special relevance to the word, or whatever it is the word is there, buffering, to protect us from” (Pynchon 89).

The complexity of the narrative here, as one can see, is the product of a deeply self-reflexive mind that has moved beyond the world of objective material reality into regions of the unconscious where faith, irrationality and fear of the unknown reign supreme. The characters are often engaged in an introspection of the present and refer to history very casually in the course of their conversations. The following passages from the novel serve well to demonstrate this fact:
“It turned out Fallopian was doing a history of private mail delivery in the US, attempting to link the civil war to the postal reform movement that had begun around 1845. He found it beyond simple coincidence that in of all years 1861 the federal government should have set out on a vigorous suppression of those independent mail routes still surviving the various acts of ’45,’47,’51 and ’55. Acts all designed to drive any private competition into financial ruin” (Pynchon 35).

What one reads above is the answer to a question asked by the protagonist Oedipa about the contents of a book with reference to a mailing company. Casual references to historical events in the conversation here demonstrate the fact that postmodern writers play a ‘touch and go’ game with serious political and social issues. This serves as evidence to show that postmodernists adopt an ahistorical approach to such issues. In the apparently apolitical scheme of postmodern writers, history becomes another story, yet another metanarrative that needs to be parodied and dumped in the wastebasket that accumulates the dead past.

The novel also serves as a testament to the dominant mood of McCarthyism that held sway in America in the 50’s. McCarthyism was actively supported by neoconservatives who always saw Marxism as the most potent threat not only to Protestantism but also to entrepreneurship and capitalism. However, by the late 60’s this mood was giving way to a neo-liberal approach that advocated greater acceptance of the contradictions of capitalism. Nonetheless, the year 1966 in which Pynchon’s novel was published is significant in many ways. It was the year when the Manila summit discussed “America’s increasing involvement in Vietnam” (O’Donnell 1). There was growing discontent and massive demonstrations were held all round the world against the Vietnam War. It was also a time when the cold war was at its peak. However, it is difficult to make interconnections between these crucial historical facts and the fictional narrative that turns all history into myth and directs it into the virtual
fortunes of the protagonist. The novel’s purposeful design is to defy the possibility of logical connections between time, place, action and the human subject. Patrick O’Donnell rightly points out that it would be wrong to connect fiction and history by “comparing the novel – in its moment of production – to the selected peculiarities of its cultural milieu” (1). In fact the novel focuses largely on the failure of communication and the inability of language to create meaningful social texts. O’Donnell’s suggestion about the fallibility of interconnections “whether it be in writing and reading literary works, or in articulating ourselves – our identities – as historical beings,” (1) can be understood as another important feature of postmodernism.

Pynchon’s novel is a perfect example of postmodern fiction mainly because it develops a strategy to counter history with illusions of the present and future. The novel argues that human beings are driven by a desire to “see the connections between the events of our own lives and the larger, external events of that unfolding story we call ‘History’” (1). However, the need to see significant patterns as interconnected “in text, life and history,” (1) becomes “an activity of the paranoid,” who is always poised delicately between senselessness and logical interconnections. Paranoia is the external manifestation of a splintered subjectivity. It represents the schizoid self that is torn between different contextual settings of bodily pleasure, commodity fetishism and commercial dealings that determine the culture of late capitalism. Pynchon’s themes can be understood only when one places him in contextual relations with his readers. It is important to note that he was trying to address a post-war generation of young Americans weary of war. It was a generation that had just emerged from the McCarthy era and was about to “embark upon a long nightmare of presidential assassinations, social conflict and the Vietnam war” (2).
The fears and anxieties of that generation of young Americans can be seen in the paranoid behavior of Oedipa Maas whose quest for identity ends as a futile exercise. At the end of the novel she is seen waiting hopelessly at an auction of lot 49 – an auction of collector’s stamps. Oedipa’s journey through the contemporary underground world of southern California leads her into a different enquiry altogether. She begins to enquire into the historicity of events that she imagines are connected to her life through her dubious inheritance. As a result, she plays the role of a detective trying to discover herself. The physical journey becomes a metaphorical quest for self identity resembling in many ways the quest for the legendary Holy Grail. However, the quest for a non-existent spiritual identity in a world suffused with material goods is bound to be self-defeating. Therefore, one can suggest that Oedipa’s search was always already determined to end as a meaningless exercise.

Pynchon’s emphasis in the novel is on the idea that any search for meaning in a world flooded with multiplicity of meanings is bound to be futile. However, is it not true that the question of essential meanings posed a serious problem even to the modernists? Didn’t the same question about the relation between art and truth trouble Friedrich Nietzsche who can well be considered a modern philosopher? One can conclude therefore, that the problems of meaning and representations of truth in art were raised earlier by the modernists. Why then, should the same questions be raised again by the postmodernists who claim to have replaced the modernists? The answers to these questions can be found in the thesis where the similarities and contradictions between the modernists and the postmodernists are clearly elaborated.

The search for quintessential meaning is a corollary to Oedipa’s search for identity. It is an almost equal need that substantiates the existence of individuals in a
world of confusing metaphors and complex signifiers. In the American context of consumerism, the metaphorical meaning of commodities can be understood only when they are consumed and wasted. In that sense, Oedipa’s predicament is no different from the modernist predicament that you find in T.S Eliot’s poem *The Lovesong of Alfred J. Prufrock*. The experience of capitalist modernity continues to haunt writers of literature in late capitalist postmodernity. Therefore, it is necessary to examine the characteristics of what is generally taken for granted as “postmodern” before pasting such a label on any piece of writing. Only when the term is problematized will one begin to notice the subtle differences between what is characterized as modern and what gets posted on to it to suggest a transition into something new. If the writings of poets like Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844-1889), the Irish novelist James Joyce (1882-1941), the Irish poet W.B. Yeats and the British feminist novelist Virginia Woolf (1882-1941) largely defined literary modernism; literary postmodernism is qualified mostly by a group of novelists hailing from North America. This list of postmodern writers includes Joseph Heller, Thomas Pynchon, Tim O’Brien and Kurt Vonnegut. They can be generally labeled as a group of young American writers who contributed to a category of post-war fiction.

The qualifying features of their writing are meta and micro fictional narratives, paradox, play, simulacra and the use of questionable narrators which serves as a deliberate ploy to undermine the presence of the authorial voice. Postmodernists are influenced by theorists like Jean Francois Lyotard, Jacques Derrida and Jean Baudrillard who gave important terms like, metanarratives, play and simulacra to literary theory. However, it is very important to understand the distinction between postmodern theory and postmodern literature since the two are not exactly the same. If on the one hand, any piece of writing, a television serial, film, sculpture or
architecture that goes in the name of “postmodern” justifies to a great extent the apparent condition of postmodernity; the theory of the postmodern interrogates issues of truth and legitimacy of language statements, issues of aesthetic representation in an age of mechanical reproduction of art and also the relevance of enlightenment thought and philosophy. In fact, two very important strands can be identified within postmodern theory: one is the question of legitimation of knowledge statements as emphasized by Lyotard and the other is the direction of western philosophy after Derrida.

These two significant issues are taken up and analyzed threadbare in the thesis to show that; in the context of late capitalism in western societies, philosophy takes a linguistic turn to transform the language of philosophy into a philosophy of language. Taking up questions of legitimation of knowledge statements raised so fervently by Lyotard; the study ventures into the history of western philosophy to trace the development of epistemology. Literary postmodernists may have highlighted problems of meaningful representation in the wake of fragmentation, the psychological condition of paranoia resulting from hopeless engagements in war and economic uncertainty emerging from a disjointed political economy using a metafictional mode. However, a theoretical examination of postmodernism reveals that the fragmented nature of the social, the experience of the hyperreal through simulation, the loss of unitary subject and the death of metaphysics are the logical outcome of the cultural contradiction of late capitalism. Such a conclusion need not be dismissed as the result of the logic of determinism because the basic function of theory is to explain every phenomenon. The research is an effort to establish a new theoretical domain that would allow some space for contradiction. Such a domain would keep open the possibility of critiquing any theory without prejudice. Examining
“postmodern” literature per se would perhaps remain a superficial effort at revealing the already visible formal aspects of accepted notions of the postmodern which was not the purpose of the thesis.