

## **The Literature of Exhausted Possibility: The Entanglement of Postmodern Fiction**

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### **Abstract:**

Postmodern literature, fiction in particular, is, according to Barth (1984), a literature of *exhausted possibility* due to its entangled thematic and technical approach which defies the conventional modern fictional form. It reflects *the zeitgeist* or the spirit of postmodernism which is regarded as a reevaluation of the modern enterprise; an enterprise that embodies universality and coherence. The present research paper attempts to address the recurrent thematic element that postmodern fiction revolves around: that of the presence of the historiographic element in postmodern fiction which reflects in itself the evaluation of past history; such a fictional preoccupation reflects the major postmodern philosophers' and thinkers' concerns, such as those of Lyotard and Baudrillard, on the impossibility for the existence of a universal coherent history. This criterion is one amongst other criteria that justify the exhaustion of postmodern fiction.

**Keywords:** John Barth, Postmodern Fiction, Postmodernism, Post-historicism, Historiographic Metafiction, Jean Baudrillard, Fredric Jameson, Jean-François Lyotard

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## Introduction

Postmodernism is essentially that movement which grew out of a reaction against modernism, the roots of which find their impetus in the revolutionary Age of Enlightenment. It was first coined and used in the 1870s with different connotations, and its usage differed from a field into the other. It was first used in the art field by the English painter John Watkins Chapman for the ascription of any form of art that went beyond the conventional impressionism. At a similar accordance, Cuddon (1999) postulates that post-modernism is a controversial term that started to reach its peak in the 1950s, and is ascribed to anything revolutionary to modernist tendencies. Postmodernism is more of an attitude than a historical period that started to emerge right after the Second World War, by the time of the Berlin Wall was erected. It came with the disillusionment to the modern enterprise which promised positivism, progress, and a general emancipation to the horrors and digression of human values to the detriment of economic, political, and geographical enlargement by the colonial rule. The major events that stressed the turning point against modernism are the Holocaust and the atomic bombings of the 40s.

The characteristics of postmodernism tend to be disintegrative to the modern structuralism, adopting an after structuralism, or what is known as post-structuralism; *deconstructivism*, thinkers of such a stream of conductive thoughts are: Baudrillard, Jameson, Lyotard, Habermas, and Derrida to name some. It is viewed as a solid historical and cultural reaction to the shortcomings of modernity, i.e., the Enlightenment enterprise, the death of the previous held options of a given structural uniformity.

This uniformity or what is termed as *Universality*, is rejected by postmodernists and is clearly reflected in the relevant postmodern literature. The criteria of such literature will be clarified in this article from the historicity of the emergence of postmodernism as a stream of thought to its reflection in literature, mostly fiction, along with the prominent elements that form its *exhaustion*.

## Postmodernism

Any philosophical or literary movement tends to be either a reaction against the one which precedes it or an extension and an exaggeration of it. Postmodernism, a tendency which started to emerge by the late twentieth-century, from 1970s, is regarded to be both a transitional period and a self-critical evaluation of not only the transition in itself but mostly of the modernist enterprise of its yesteryears. The latter actually lasted for more than two centuries harking back to the Enlightenment project. Postmodern thinkers, such as Lyotard, Habermas, and Jameson to name some of the most prominent ones, tend to have a sceptical attitude to anything that belongs to the past. Lyotard's definition of anything postmodern in his: *The Postmodern Condition, A Report on Knowledge* (1984), as "incredulity towards metanarratives" (p. xxiv). All of the past knowledge that was held as being *The* truth; absolute fixed narratives, came to be reacted upon, displaying a distrust to past narratives.

Postmodernism is essentially that movement which came as a reaction against modernism. The latter was influenced by the Enlightenment project and rejected tradition while it championed reason and science. Postmodernists, henceforth, ignore and reject the modernist belief that the

contemporary Man could reach an understanding of the world through rational reasoning. In this respect, Klages (2011) pontificates that:

Modernity is fundamentally about order: about rationality and rationalization, creating more order out of chaos. The assumption is that creating more rationality is conducive to creating more order, and that the more ordered a society is, the better it will function (the more rationally it will function). (para. 12)

Postmodernism, is most often than not, attributed to the term *alienation*; facing a turn down upon the notion of the world and human operations. Man is alienated due to the exile of the world's modern cultures, and the *westernization* of societies. Man has become dehumanized due to the materialistic and capitalistic systems, leading him to a state of disillusionment in relation to the ideas and notions of existence. Individualism has thereafter played a major role in alienating and dehumanizing Man. It originated from the utilitarian character of the spirit of modernity. Postmodernism is the new *zeitgeist* or *l'esprit du siècle* representing a *post-historical* reaction against the uniformity and fundamentalism of modernism. It came as a counter-reaction to the structural view of human history progress, the basis of which is built upon a hyper-sceptical distrust of the past, and anything reported about it as being linear and integrative. The postmodern *zeitgeist* could be understood by its extent of measuring and evaluating the authenticity along with the legitimacy of the past historical records.

### **Historiographic Metafiction: The Entanglement of Postmodern Fiction**

The postmodern sceptical attitude towards the past is what could sum up this transitional period. This scepticism veiled upon most fields, at least the philosophical, literary, and artistic ones. Most apparent this scepticism appears is when it comes to the literature of the age - in particular novelistic productions - as *a literature of resistance* that favors the implementation of historiography within a fictional account. That is to say the fabulation upon factual elements being implemented into and within a fictional account that leads to a multifold/multi-interpretative comprehension, enabling the readers to make up their own finality through the open-closure endings. One could almost think of the literature of the time as being *vulgarised* and *democratized* for there is no clear-edged finality/interpretation, an allusion to the state of loss and plurality of the time. The aim of postmodernist thinkers is, either consciously or unconsciously, an endeavour of reconstructing history with a sustainable authenticity away from the grand narratives that have overtaken on the world's reportedness of *The* truth.

Postmodern literature is that literature which started to emerge by the end of the Second World War - by the erection of the Berlin Wall - characterized by the disillusionment with regard to the enthusiasm of the previous modern enterprise that failed into securing peace and justice. It reflects the malaise of the chaos that the world witnessed due to the Western aspired-domination of the world.

It tends to be ascribed to *historiographic metafiction*; an expression coined by the Canadian academic: Hutcheon, (1988) refers to the constant concern of postmodern fiction in reflecting and

revisiting history, and mainly the reportedness of history in an attempt to evaluate its authenticity and validation through fictional accounts. There exists a plethora of postmodern practitioners of historiographic metafiction. Amongst the most prominent British novelists whose works not only revise, but question and inquire the validity along with the authenticity of knowledge, history, and anything that belongs to the past; we have Julian Barnes and Graham Swift.

Postmodern fiction, for Hutcheon, is ironically contradictory since it converges and relates both the fictitious element with the factual *historiographic* mode of narration, and the meeting point of both represents *the poetics* of postmodernism. The concern with historiography is also displayed in postmodern women fiction with the works of Winterson *The Passion* (1987), Barker *Regeneration Trilogy* (1991), Kennedy *Day* (2007), and Smith *Autumn* (2016). Postmodern fiction is, therefore, and most often than not, history-related thematically in the sense where it takes factual history to implement it with the fictional element, a criterion which renders postmodern fiction as being *a literature of resistance*. The latter addresses a genre which encapsulates both history reportedness and fictional creativity, or rather imagination, through the use of unconventional fictional techniques such as pastiche, intertextuality, temporal disorder, fragmentation, paranoia, and open-ending closures of narratives, all of which tend to give it a form of experimental literature (Sim, 2001, pp. 121-133).

### The Exhaustion of Postmodern Fiction

Lewis appoints to postmodern literature as “the work of virtually any writer from an ethnic minority [deemed to be postmodern] by virtue of their *hybrid* status in a displaced, *globalized* society” (as cited in Sim, 2001, p. 111). Accordingly, postmodern literature is a literature which is galvanised by the extent of its experimental nature both technically and thematically, a literature that serves a new socio-historical context. It is that of the disillusionment from the outcome of hypermodernity which resulted in racial, ethnic, and religious wars/terror. Several commentators who contributed to the definition as well as to the accurate period within which postmodernism started to emerge, such as Barth, De Villo Sloan, and Bradbury with Ruland, all of whom worked on positioning the roots of the emergence of such a movement.

Barth (1984) refers to postmodern literature as being a literature of ‘exhausted possibility’ or ‘the literature of exhaustion’ (p. 64) when addressing the definition of postmodern literature in terms of its entangled forms in contradistinction to the modern form, he claims that:

Our century is more than two-third done; it is dismaying to see so many of our writers following Dostoevsky, Tolstoy or Balzac, when the question seems to me to be how to succeed not even Joyce and Kafka, but those who *succeeded* Joyce and Kafka and are now in the evenings of their careers [and that] one of the modern things about these two writers is that in an age of ultimacies and “final solutions” - at least *felt* ultimacies, in everything from weaponry to theology, the celebrated dehumanization of society, and the history of the novel - their work in separate ways reflects and deals with ultimacy, both technically and thematically. (p. 67)

Accordingly, when Barth claims the exhaustion of postmodern literature he does not mean “anything so tired as the subject of physical, moral or intellectual decadence, only the used-upness of certain forms or the felt exhaustion of certain possibilities - by no means necessary a cause for despair” (p. 64). Barth mentions that postmodern literature which became exhausted by the 1990s is aligned with De Villo’s stance in his essay; *The Decline of American Postmodernism* (1987), where he sketches that: “postmodernism as a literary movement ... is now in its final phase of decadence” (as cited in Sim, 2011, p. 111). Bradbury and Ruland (1991) also suggest that postmodern literature is that writerly production of the period from the 1960s to the 1980s, and that anything that came after 1990 is to be under the category of ‘post-postmodernism’, or as *post-pomo*.

Since postmodernism is known for its hybrid criterion, pluralism and a culture of the *anything goes*, postmodern practitioners, regardless, tend to form “a unified movement for which a coherent theory could be formulated” (Sim, 2011, p. 112). On similar grounds; Aldridge (1983) describes postmodern fiction as a fiction where:

Virtually everything and everyone exists in such a radical state of distortion and aberration that there is no way of determining from which conditions in the real world they have been derived or from what standard of sanity they may be said to depart. The conventions of verisimilitude and sanity have been nullified. Characters inhabit a dimension of structureless being in which their behaviour becomes inexplicably arbitrary and unjudgeable because the fiction itself stands as a metaphor of a derangement that is seemingly without provocation and beyond measurement. (p. 65)

Assumingly, postmodern literature defies the structures of fictional narration on the one hand, and on the other, it tends to self-ascribe itself the authority of knowing more than what the official historiography has acknowledged the generations all along. It is a literature which revises the past in a condescending or mocking sense that unravels and shatters the authority of factual reportedness inviting the history readers, and the post-historical Man to an evaluation of the means that the construction of past history has been elaborated and disseminated, and is then uncertain and in defiance of universality. A literature which merges facticity with fiction is often straddled and torn between literature and paraliterature. It resists both fictional conventions as well as factual historiographic reportedness, defying the fundamental criteria of official history in its assumed function of critical counter-inspection of the past. Otherwise explained, historiographic metafiction tends to measure the extent of authenticity and truthfulness of the grand official history, hence the implementation of historical facticity with fictitious elements. Its structure, as well as its underlying themes unveil a self-conception of a self-ascribed epistemological superiority with regard to its imaginary/fictional element over historiography when condemning the latter as being *a virtual tantalization* of civilization’s history.

### **Historicising the Philosophical Entanglement of Post-historicism**

The post-historical period is characterized by the disillusionment inflicted by the World Wars. Jenkins (1997) suggests that our assumptions about history and the form in which modern historiography reported them are being suspected, i.e., “no longer so readily acceptable” (p. 6).

Postmodern reading of history is, accordingly, defined by the sceptical view it holds upon the reliability of what universal history discloses. In similar respects, Young (2004) defines postmodern historiography as the ‘European culture’s awareness that it is no longer the unquestioned and dominant centre of the world’ (p. 75).

The major post-historical thinkers ascribed to postmodern deconstructive approach upon history are; Jameson (1991) who dreads the end of, and replacement of culture by hyper-consumerism due to the post-industrial enterprise that has been inflicted upon the Western hyper-modernized societies, and that knowledge and culture are now replaced and dominated by mass-media. He further suggests that the narrated history of the previous modern “old certainties, aims and ideals ... are now insecure and debatable” (2009, p. 267). Lyotard (1984), on the other hand, defines postmodernism as “the incredulity towards metanarratives” (p. xxiv); that the end of universal history is here and now taking place. Baudrillard (1998), aligned with Lyotard’s position, theorized on the simulation of history, i.e. the inability of making sense of what is authentically defined as *The Truth* in contradistinction with what he conceives of as *Grand Narratives* being within the category of framed simulation, or monolithic block-representation of truth. Both Lyotard and Baudrillard share a dismantled view of history which rejects and opposes Hegel’s *Universal History*.

Truth, for Baudrillard, Jameson, and Lyotard represents nothing but a sheer simulation (created representation) of authentic reality. Roland Barthes sketches that “the historian is not so much a collector of facts as a collector and relater of signifiers; that is to say, he organized them with the purpose of establishing positive meaning and filling the vacuum of pure, meaningless series” (as cited in Jenkins, 1997, p. 121). It is this ‘filling the vacuum’ that postmodern history thinkers react upon. Postmodern historiography would be represented as:

Instead of the traditional modern metanarrative prescriptiveness, postmodern narrative is more disjunctive, inhabited by the stories of those excluded by previous historical accounts, and more ‘heteroglossic’ awareness of the way that history can be found in a wider range of ‘types’ of sources. (Acheson & Ross, 2005, p. 7)

Other prominent thinkers whose critiques stand against the uniformity and universality of history are Michel Foucault and Walter Benjamin with their deconstructive heterotopic, or counter-utopic view upon history and its reportedness against the conventional *metanarrated* history. Both of them argue that the formalist form of historiography is irrelevant to the postmodern reading of history for it does not engage with minor histories; the oppressed voices, instead, it stresses “the movements of accumulation and slow saturation, the great silent, motionless bases that traditional history has covered with a thick layer of events” (as cited in Adshead-Lansdale, 1999, p.11). History is, from a post-historical perspective, regarded as a simulation of authentic historicity, the validation of which is rejected by many grand history philosophers who theorized against the conventional monolithic reportedness of truth, their works not only represent the rejection of monolithic historiography, but they also reflect the entangled spirit of postmodernism, contributing

either directly or indirectly into shaping and delineating its criteria, and paradoxically enough all of whom share a dystopian view about how the world's societies operate.

### **The Reader-response Theory: A Response to Modern Formalism**

Contemporary postmodern fiction is entangled and multidimensional, oscillating between the fictional and the factual. It is a fiction that could therefore serve as a historical record for those *minor histories* that the factual historiographic mode of reportedness failed to engage with.

The German literary theorist Jauss, (1984) shares this assertion of a multi-faceted version of history and the past, responding to the modern formalist approach which inverts the conventional formalist analysis of a text from a single biased view to a three-dimensional construction of view between: “the author and the work to the text and the reader” (as cited in Holub, 1984, p. xii). The theory represents a revolutionary approach to contemporary literary criticism, reflecting the postmodern spirit that denounces the validation of universality.

Indeed, Jauss's theory came as a reaction to the “social, intellectual, and literary developments in West Germany during the late 1960s” (p. xiii), a theory which revolves around the reader-response theory that emanates in the open-ending finality of narratives and opposes the limitations of literary analysis that belong to the conventional school of formalism. The latter tends to measure literature as serving itself only away from the historicity that surrounds its context. The aesthetics of reception, termed in German as *Rezeptionasthetik*, involves a major contribution of the reader when it comes to synthesizing the coherence and structure of a literary text.

Jauss, (1982) considers literature as a dialectical process of production and reception in that:

The relationship of work to work must now be brought into this interaction between work and mankind, and the historical coherence of works among themselves must be seen in the interrelations of production and reception. Put another way: literature and art obtain a history that has the character of a process when the succession of works is mediated not only through the producing object but also through the consuming subject. (p. 15)

Accordingly, Jauss views literature; and fiction in particular, from the perspective of the reader, that is for a text to fully form its completion, the reader is inevitably to be involved, and the finality of the narrative is therefore individualistic and differs from a contextually comprehension background into another.

### **Conclusion**

To conclude with, the literature of the postmodern transition reflects the philosophy as well as the ideologies of the postmodern *zeitgeist*, a *zeitgeist* which is entangled in its existing nature. Such literature is not only entangled, it is *exhausted* by *the realism effect* and its factual implication in what is termed as historiographic metafiction, it is also tormented by the unconventional techniques that shape the skeleton of post-modernist fiction. When it comes to the reception theory, it actually portrays the Barthesian stance on the inconsistency of a static mono-narration of history.

An invitation of the audience into the formation of the narrative is what one could relate to the democratization of literature. The democracy of the age has come to be pinned to the literature of the age.

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