What is Postmodernism? | Meaning, Features & Examples

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The concept of postmodernism need to be understood in two senses:

1. A term referring to time frame or a historical timeline spelt as post-modernism which meaning is after modernism; and
2. A theory or a broader concept in art and literature, a movement spelt as postmodernism—without hyphen, referring to a larger discussion and debate.

Postmodernism is one of the disputed concepts for many critics and scholars. For some, it is the extension to modernist ideas and thoughts; for others, it has radical elements and counter ideas to modernism and hence break from it. In terms of time frame, postmodernism is considered the period after the Second World War i.e. 1945 onwards. As modernism affected all walks of human life, postmodernism is no exception to it. Moreover, postmodernism is seen as an inevitable condition strongly occupying almost all fields of our life—social, cultural, economic, politics, architecture, sculpture, painting, television, arts and literature, etc. The term postmodernism is used for the first time by Arnold Toynbee, a historian, “in 1947 to describe the fourth and final phase of western history” (Das, 196), or “in 1939 in his A Study of History Vol. I’ (Krishnaswami et al. 18). Thus it may vary in time frame or when the term first used, but it has become an ideology, a branch of study from 1960s. The most discussed three exponents of postmodernism are Jürgen Habermass, a German philosopher; Jean Francois Lyotard and Jean Baudrillard, both French theorists. Habermass’s paper Modernity- an Incomplete Project published in 1980 bears postmodernism as the continuation of modernism or enlightenment. The idea of continuation is countered by Lyotard in his essay Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism? published in 1982. Next Baudrillard’s book Simulations (1981) is important in the discussion of postmodernism. His concepts of simulacra, simulation and hyperreality are significant in understanding postmodernism. He provides the example of (simulacra, simulation and hyperreality), the Disneyland and Gulf War. What we see in Disneyland, the characters, scenes, places, story, etc. does not exist in real but in virtual. It is not reality. “The Gulf war did not take place” is a bold statement made by Baudrillard. According to him, it is shown us through media and TV, the hyperreal spaces which did not guarantee the reality—thus a hyperreality is created.

Postmodernism is a wider project encompassing various features and elements similar to and also distinct from modernism. According to M.H. Abrams:

“The term postmodernism is often applied to the literature and art after World War II (1939-45) when the effects on Western morale of the first war were greatly exacerbated by the experience of
Nazi totalitarianism and mass extermination, the threat of total destruction by the atomic bomb, the progressive devastation of the natural environment, and the ominous fact of overpopulation.” (168).

It is the representation of human and nature’s destruction with no solution. We can clearly see it in the literature of Jorge Luis Borges, Samuel Beckett, Vladimir Nabokov, Thomas Pynchon, Roland Barthes, etc. More holistic view of the term, we have in Baldick:

“In this sense, promoted by Jean Baudrillard and other commentators, postmodernity is said to be a culture of fragmentary sensations, eclectic nostalgia, disposable simulacra (a system of signs underlying signs), and promiscuous superficiality, in which the traditionally valued qualities of depth, coherence, meaning, originality, and authenticity are evacuated or dissolved amid the random swirl of empty signals.” (266).

It is clear that postmodernism is a break from traditionally valued system, everything has become unreal or hyperreal. Many theorists used the term to denote a negative or passive sense, most of the times, against the human good. It connotes the loss of valuable qualities essential for better human life. Further, we have a more simplified view about postmodernism by Tim Woods:

“Nonetheless, despite this attempt at a simplified explication, there is a variety of competing definitions of postmodernism. It is a term used roughly since the 1960s about cultural forms that display certain characteristics, among which are:

1. The undercutting of an all-encompassing rationality;
2. An incredulity towards metanarratives and a challenge to totalizing discourses, which is a suspicion of any discursive attempts to offer a global or universalist account of existence;
3. A rejection of modernism.” (10).

Based on these views, we can list some salient features of Postmodernism:

1. **Nothing is Real**: we live in the world of simulations (images or carbon copies) where nothing is real. Everything is propelled by consumerism and capitalism. In this market, signs and images float around us and people are not purchasing the objects but these signs and images. These simulations came to us through media and TV. According to Baudrillard, a hyperreality is generated in the world through this popular mediums of internet and TV. The popular Hollywood movie *The Matrix* (1990) is based on Baudrillard’s concept of simulation and hyperreality.

2. **No Faith in Tradition**: the scientific advancement has shaken the faith on tradition and dissolved into new patterns. Postmodernists think that nothing is absolute, fix or real for modern technology has made everything relative. No one is interested in following traditions. Even truth has been considered relative phenomenon.
3. **Intertextuality:** a far more crucial feature of postmodern literature that a text is the web of smaller texts or elements. Intertextuality means a work or text (of literature) includes or refers to other work or text and meaning can be shaped through this connection. E.g. Jorge Luis Borges’ story *Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote*, Kathy Acker’s novel *Don Quixote: Which was a Dream*; both have references to Miguel de Cervantes’ Spanish novel *Don Quixote* (1605, published in English in 1612).

4. **Pastiche:** its meaning is to combine or paste different elements together. In postmodern literature, we find old styles, genres, narratives, etc. combined without any hesitation. Multiplicity is a recurrent element in postmodernity. E.g. Umberto Eco, William S. Burroughs, Margaret Atwood, Robert Coover, etc. combined the multiple genres.

5. **Fragmentation and Chaos:** this feature is similar to modernism, the literature depicts the sensibilities of people, the complex nature, behaviour and transactions of the people. Fragmentation is seen in construction of plot, setting, characters, story, even in language structures and grammar, etc. For postmodernists, the world is full of chaos and the same is reflected in literature.

6. **Resistance to Grand and Meta-Narratives:** Lyotard was of the opinion that grand and metanarratives have declined in the new ways and forms. Individuality has got more space and attention than any external object or belief. Hence people do not trust on grand narratives like epics, its heroes, their actions, etc. Even they reject the belief of religion. Let’s see the words of Krishnaswami et al.:

   “Fifthly, in postmodernism there are no epics, noble heroes, grand narratives that elevate our thoughts and passions, because ‘all our heroes are dying like flies’; self-help and one’s own resources are to be trusted and not any external belief, not even religion; that is why there are more ‘self-help’ books on how to win and how to empower oneself on the bookshelves in our railway stations; postmodernists are living in railway stations, constantly on the move. It is a ceaseless dissatisfied movement.” (19-20).

7. **Pessimism and Negativity:** this is a persistent feature of postmodernism. We have seen that we are surrounded by hyperreality and unreal images, the reality is replaced by signs and images created by media, TV and internet. Many of the postmodern critics, writers and poets show their pessimism and negativity towards postmodernism:

   “Postmodernists are by and large pessimists, many of them haunted by lost Marxist revolutionary hopes, and the beliefs and the art they inspire are often negative rather than constructive. Mass affluence is not good, because when people have what they basically need,
advertising and marketing move into the gap to synthesize and define our (materialist) values for us, and those who do not need are the more easily forgotten. Marketing thus precedence over production.” (Butler, 114-15).

Butler has emphasised the fact that how our lives are filled with propaganda of advertising and marketing replacing the real in our life. Thus, these are some of the major characteristics of postmodernity and postmodernism.

**Some Famous Examples of Postmodern Literature:**

1. Thomas Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow* (1973), a novel extensive in length, complex plot, vast number of characters, shows the aftermath and development after the Second World War in Germany and Europe at large. It refers to the emerging technology.
3. Joseph Heller’s *Catch-22* (1961), a novel depicting events and scenes through the eyes of different characters, a split third person narrative technique is used to tell the story.
5. William S. Burroughs’ *Naked Lunch* (1959), an American novel with loosely connected chapters and narration.
6. Margaret Atwood’s *The Blind Assassin* (2000), a novel with present day narration covering the past events.
Work Cited:


