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LYOTARD'S *THE POSTMODERN CONDITION*: ISSUES OF KNOWLEDGE AND LEGITIMACY

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Abstract

The experience of postmodernism is both abstract and concrete. The human condition today is postmodernized, hence the postmodern condition. Lyotard's 'The Postmodern Condition' covers a detailed discussion on philosophy, politics, and aesthetics, and experiment with a wide variety of styles. His philosophy exhibits many of the major themes common to post-structuralist and postmodernist thought. He calls into question the powers of reason, asserts the importance of non-rational forces such as sensations and emotions, rejects humanism and the traditional philosophical notion of the human being as the central subject of knowledge, champions heterogeneity and difference, and suggests that the understanding of society in terms of "progress" has been made obsolete by the scientific, technological, political and cultural changes of the late twentieth century. He deals with these common themes in a highly original way, and his work exceeds many popular conceptions of postmodernism in its depth, imagination, and rigor. His thought remains pivotal in contemporary debates surrounding philosophy, politics, social theory, cultural studies, art and aesthetics. This article tries to examine his views towards postmodern knowledge and how it is different from the narrative mode of knowledge, and how postmodern knowledge has the problem of legitimacy.

Keywords: Narratives, metanarratives, knowledge, postmodernity, legitimization.

Introduction

Jean François Lyotard was born in Vincennes, France on 10 August 1924. His father, Jean-Pierre Lyotard, was a sales representative. He got his school level education at Paris Lycees Buffon and Louis le Grand. During his school period he wanted to be a Dominican monk. His interest for the career of life was frequently changed. Some moments he would think to be a painter, in other moment he would feel to be a novelist or a historian. But, ultimately, he studied literature and philosophy and became a guiding philosopher of his time. The publication of *The Postmodern Condition* brought his worldwide popularity as a thinker and philosopher. He worked as a visiting professor in various universities; the University of California, the University of Minnesota. At the same time he gave many lectures, especially during the 1980s and 90s in France and outside.

The term postmodernism came into a mode of discourse with the philosophical insight developed by Lyotard. The term 'postmodernism' first entered the philosophical lexicon in 1979 with the publication of *The Postmodern Condition* by Jean François Lyotard. In the recent time, the buzz-word, 'postmodernism' has become a catchphrase in the recent academia. It has influenced all the disciplines of art and literature, social and political affairs, eastern and western understanding, theory and practice of life, and the matter of discourse in the criticism. Although Charles Jencks, an American architect had declared the beginning of postmodernism from the beginning of seventies, there is not a clear and dividing line of modernism and postmodernism. There are both views about postmodernism: it is a continuation of modernism and breakthrough of modernism. There is some sense of truth in both the ideas. Postmodernism started with the sunset of modernism and it automatically initiated a new trend somehow different from modernist thinking. In a sense, postmodernism is a continuation of the previously established values and

principles of life but slightly in a different way. Therefore, understanding the idea of modernism is essential for understanding the inventiveness of postmodernism.

Modern and Postmodern

Modernism refers to newness in general sense. It is the change from the past and from the tradition. The notion of modernism got inception from the renaissance period onward or from the fourteenth and fifteenth century onward. The exact date of modernist arrival cannot be determined. It is the change in social affairs, human sense and realization. Modernism, in its specific form, refers to certain doctrine or the style which "included the changing social and political conditions due to urbanization and industrialization, the decline of traditional authority, the rise of liberal, democratic and socialist ideas, the changes in world view due to the influence of modern science and scientific approach" (Mautner 396). Modernism started with the onset of industrialization and urbanization in the developmental and scientific lead.

In literature and art, it is "widely used to identify new and distinctive features in the subjects, forms, concepts and styles of literature and other arts in the early decades of twentieth century" (Abrams 175). It relates to the change in the life style too. Modernism is not only on the science and life but also it is felt in the art and literature. It is "a tendency and the movement in the creative and the performing arts, the beginning of which can be traced to the mid nineteenth century" (Mautner 396). Modernism in art and literature appears in two specific ways. First is an attempt to look beneath the surface at the level of reality. This trend justifies that the things that are easily seen may not be the reality. In this sense, the inquiry and the question on the reality is a trend of literary modernism. Freudian approach as the psychological essence different from the physical one is the mode of going into the surface. The existential search of Sartre and the case of the essentiality of Nietzsche are other examples of modernist inquiry of reality. This modernist leaning appears in the mode of literary analysis theorizing it as modernism in literature and criticism.

The second aspect of modernism is the introduction of new values of life. It rejects the traditional values and norms. In literature, it tries to generate new style and generation of the similar mode of creation of meaning. The realist and modernist style is introduced from the avant-garde style in art. Avant-Garde (a French military metaphor 'advance guard') "is a small self-conscious group of artists and authors who deliberately undertake to 'make it new'" (Abrams 176). These people have found themselves alienated from the established order both in form and style of their expression. This style of avant-gardism is also found both in art and literature. This style tries to defy and challenge the established conventions. The writings of Ezra Pound, Franz Kafka, T. S. Eliot and James Joyce are some of the remarkable creations of modernist reality and challenge of previous norms.

Is Postmodernism continuation or breakdown from modernism? It is the central discourse of postmodernism. It is what the newness both in form and content. Following the characteristic of showing the reality of life in modernism gets changed into more specific cases of the uncertainties, restlessness, social and cultural identities into the content level. To some extent, it is a continuity of the modernism in the mode of presenting reality but in a different way. Similarly, the change in style of writing and depicting the mode of expression, postmodernism has enhanced the uniqueness in style and deconstruction of the established forms and style. The contemporary cultural trend is postmodern because, as the term preoccupies the meaning, it denotes to the "fragmentation and promiscuous trivialization of values, symbols, images" (483) and in the arts postmodernism "denotes a break with, or a continuation of modernism" (484) as it tries to locate and identify the absurdity in the artistic rhythm.

Postmodernism has become an abstract notion at the level of thought and understanding. At the same time, it has become a concrete notion for the seemingly strange nature of human affairs and their post-modern attachment. It raises the issues of social and rational realm having with philosophical base as "plural, fluid and open" it is "loose, flexible and contingent" (Snipp-Walmsley 405). As a movement developed after the Second World War, it reflects the condition "when the effects on western morale of the

first war were greatly exacerbated by the experience of Nazi totalitarianism and the mass extermination, the threat of total destruction by the atomic bomb, the progressive devastation of the natural environment and the ominous fact of overpopulation" (Abrams 176) in literature and art. As the diverse attempt to break away the modernist forms, postmodernism tries "to overthrow the elitism of modernist 'high art' by recourse for models to the 'mass culture'" (176) in the media and art. The postmodern writers blend literary genres to a diverse way of writing, mix the cultural and stylistic levels of writing and combine the serious and playful expressions as the postmodern violation of modernism. Some of the postmodernist writers are Jorge L. Borges, Samuel Beckett, Vladimir Nabokov, Roland Barthes and others.

Covering all the scope of academia, postmodernism, as the theoretical realization, includes the change and newness in art, music, media, social and cultural affairs, education, science and literature. Everywhere, it works with the experiment in thought and experience. In literature and art, it "has parallels with the movement known as post-structuralism in linguistics" (177) and absurd expression, nothingness and a number of other concepts and ideologies. Formally, a French philosopher, Jean François Lyotard, started the idea of postmodern from the publication of *The Postmodern Condition*.

The Postmodern Condition, Postmodern Derivation and Issues of Knowledge

Postmodern, as a new lexicon, came into existence with the publication of *The Postmodern Condition (La Condition Postmoderne)* by Jean François Lyotard in 1979. He was a French poststructuralist thinker. Making an inquiry on the language use, he has come across an experimental mode in language game in combination with the science and technology that he has named as postmodern. His writings, especially *The Postmodern Condition*, have presented his ideas directly related with the recently felt condition of life, such as, philosophy, politics, aesthetics and science and technology.

Lyotard has presented his initial and highly influential formulation of postmodernism in *The Postmodern Condition. It is a report on knowledge*. He has distinctively defined the postmodern as 'incredulity towards metanarratives'. These metanarratives are spoken or unspoken and understood as the stories about history and the goals of the human race that ground and legitimize knowledge and cultural practices. The metanarratives have most importance as the history by way of progressing towards social enlightenment and emancipation, and as knowledge by way of progressing towards totality. Modernity and postmodernity depart on the point that modernity is defined as the age of metanarrative legitimation, and postmodernity as the age in which metanarratives have become bankrupt. Through his theory of the end of metanarratives, Lyotard has developed his own version of what tends to be a consensus among theorists of the postmodern - postmodernity as an age of fragmentation and pluralism.

He has contributed many books and writings on the matter of philosophy. His first book, *Phenomenology*, published in 1954, gives a short introduction to an examination of phenomenology. Taking the ideas of Edmund Husserl, Lyotard has defined the notion of phenomenology in it, and he has given a critical view on the relationship between phenomenology and human sciences. His first ideas of postmodernism have come through this text where he has seen some positive notion of phenomenological study of the object, however, as he observes, phenomenology cannot really formulate the materialist worldview of the object in the way Marxism examines it in relation with its productive value. His second book *Discourse, Figure* (1971) brings the matters of psychoanalysis, structuralism art and literature together under discussion. The discourse includes the discussion on the writing pattern, especially on structuralist point of view. He observes that the structured texts and the abstract way of receiving the text have dominated the whole discourse of philosophy from the ancient period, but discourse contains both structured textuality and figural and space art. Putting cross arguments against structuralism, he presents the idea that structuralism ignores the different ways the texts can be interpreted. His sense of criticism on structuralist way of interpretation has led him to the poststructuralist thinker as post structuralism is a major thrust of postmodernism. His search of discourse in the text provides a way to poststructuralist activity; however other French structuralist philosophers; Roland Barthes and Levi Strauss were working

on the sagacity of structuralist activity to poststructuralist activity.

Postmodernism is not a sudden change and an immediate movement. Neither is it an organized way of revolt or reception. It is not bound within any geographical location, and it is not tied with any fixed ideological principles. It does not see the certainty, does not expect the center of meaning, and does not identify coherence and cohesion in the form and content. It is a long way and collective realization of the change in the lifestyle. It locates no meaning as center meaning, provides no principle as the only principle of life, no system in the system at all. All these experiences are not abrupt occurrences. They are the result of the long run background of the philosophical thoughts and realizations.

The terminology, 'postmodernism' came comparatively later days; however the dominant eighteenth century thinker, Immanuel Kant during the last two decades of the eighteenth century, realized the philosophical attitude. During the Copernican revolution, he wrote *Critique of Pure Reason* in 1787 and presupposed the idea that it is not possible to know the things in themselves and the objects of knowledge are conformed by faculties of representation of human mind. Kantian assumption of the uncertainty of the meaning of the objects or matters is the foundation of postmodern confusion of the truth, God, reality and center. Sartre's and Nietzsche's question of the loss of the meaningful existence of god and the inquiry of human existence, Derrida's assumption of the destruction of the center and the God are all based on Kantian negotiation of objective knowledge. There is a difference between the knowledge of objects and the knowledge about objects. Knowledge is always subjective rather than objective.

The relation between subject and object, hence the subjective knowledge and objective knowledge has been further explored with Hegel's publication of *The Phenomenology of Spirit* in 1807. He thinks that the relation between object and subject is all illusion, "neither the one nor the other is immediately present in certainty, but each is at the same time mediated" (Hegel 59). His negation of certainty in immediacy encourages the sense of deferred identity. The negation and negotiation of identity, therefore, began from Kantian and Hegelian presupposition of the difference between subjective knowledge and objective knowledge and the uncertainty of the true knowledge of the things.

This sense of the variation in the subjective and objective knowledge and deferred sense of identity appears as the question under the individual identity and existence with Nietzsche and Kierkegaard. In relation with Marx's political and economic base of personality, Nietzsche and Kierkegaard enquired on the personal uniqueness in the modern politics of 'the public'. Marx sees the personal as public and focuses on the object value or the matter value even with the distinction of use-value and exchange-value. For him, a person experiences the reality of the thing. Knowing the reality of the thing is the realization or experiencing the things by human beings. The Marxist trend of looking the humans in relation to the productivity and commodity-based identity further strengthens the postmodern sense of de-realization. De-realization refers to the sense of identity as dissolved. With the publication of *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872), Nietzsche reveals the truth of the difference between reality and appearance. It is the point of postmodernist initiation of the uncertainty of the things what seem to be real apparently. With the depiction of Apollonian and Dionysian impulse of the modern society, Nietzsche examines the duality of nature through the art and literature. His concept of genealogical analysis in the mode of western metaphysics raises questions on the illusion of the sense of "I" for the projection of identity.

Nietzsche has incited the ideas on the matters of identity, metaphysics, science and culture and the condition of human beings that have given the gateway to the inception of postmodernism in philosophy. Heidegger supposes modern science and technology just as the means to accomplish the aspiration of modern metaphysics. For him, modern metaphysics regards being as the presence of being, just being for the sake of use. He examines the mode of western metaphysics in *Being and Time* (1962) that "the presence of being tends to disappear into the transparency of their usefulness as things ready to hand" (Heidegger 95). Things are things because of their usefulness, humans are humans, and beyond that, they are the manpower for utility. Marxist value oriented philosophy of modernism has transformed as the postmodern

value of being in the being's withdrawal. Heidegger perceives human beings as *Dasein*, not a consciousness; neither it was in the past, nor could at present, but yet to come. It is always within the inquiry of the uncertainty. The subject is not certain, but being is the certain. It is his question on the subject and the question of being and consciousness.

And so, postmodernism is not a sudden explosion of thought, but a gradual realization of change from certainty to uncertainty, center to de-center, realization to de-realization, objectivity to subjectivity in knowledge, singularity to duality, unitary to multiplicity, structure to de-structure, construction to deconstruction, and identity to loss of identity. In this sense, postmodernism is the continuation as well as breakdown from modernism.

Postmodern Knowledge and the Problem of Legitimacy

The Postmodern Condition makes an analysis on the status of knowledge with the questions in high-tech societies. Certain technical and technological advancements have taken place since the Second World War, the point of departure between modernism and postmodernism, which have had and are still having a radical effect on the status of knowledge in the world's most advanced areas. In Lyotard's term, *computerization* has a problem, one of *legitimation*. It is a question of both knowledge and power. Knowledge and power are simply two sides of the same question: who decides what knowledge is, and who knows what needs to be decided? The question of knowledge is now more than ever a question of government. With vast amounts of knowledge stored digitally in databases: who decides what knowledge is worth storing, what is legitimate knowledge, and who has access to these databases? Who will have access to them? Who will determine which channels or data are forbidden? The State? Or will the State simply be one user among others?

Commissioned to write a report on knowledge, science and technology in advanced capitalist society, as a political activist cum philosopher, Lyotard published *The Postmodern Condition* in 1979. It has brought a new mode in the world philosophy. His theory of postmodern is based on the idea of the change in societies, culture, knowledge and understanding due to the advancement in science and technology. Scientific knowledge "is a kind of discourse" (Lyotard 3) as it generates many options in life and living attitudes creating varieties of potentialities. The post-industrial societies have moved from modernity to postmodernity in their cultural value perception because of science and technology because "science and technology have had to do with language, phonology and theories of linguistics, problems of communication and cybernetics..." (3). The nature of knowledge is ever changing and recently it has been changed to the mode of productivity from the mode of modern aesthetics. It has been an assumption that "knowledge is and will be produced in order to be sold" (4) or production of knowledge for other production in the manner of goal exchanging. The materiality of the knowledge is a common feature of postmodern ideology. This commercialization of knowledge even engulfs the gap between developed and developing or underdeveloped societies. Even the case of learning has got changed in the mode of "circulating along the same lines as money instead of for its educational value or political (administrative, diplomatic, military) importance" (6). The trends of transformation of knowledge for material productivity and learning for monetary purpose are the basic norms of social values in the postmodern condition.

The means and modes of knowledge have instigated the transformation of knowledge and learning has been changed as the scientific knowledge. But, Lyotard regards that "scientific knowledge does not represent the totality of the knowledge" (7). This mode of knowledge, having some limitations, has some interest of "narration" for simplicity; however it is cumulative in the last few decades. The language of science, ethics and politics are interlinked for they represent the mode of knowledge. The dominant use of scientific and technological language with computerization has certainly helped to make the life easier, but there is "a noticeable decrease in productivity at laboratories and universities unable to protect themselves from its contamination" (8). This ineffective case of language and knowledge has endangered the scope of scientific knowledge and has created the problem of legitimation along with the case of "scientists'

demoralization"(8). The impact of science and technology and communication technology in the area of knowledge has resulted in the condition that knowledge and power have become two sides of a question with the problem of legitimacy on who has to decide. It is what the postmodern condition of knowledge in Lyotard's assumption.

Working as a structuralist, Lyotard has forecasted poststructuralist trend in the case of language use and its utility, however he has not seen language detached from the impact of science and technology. His theory of language and its meaning is based on the idea of language as a game with the impact of science in human understanding.

The publication of Lyotard's report on knowledge, *The Postmodern Condition* completed the picture. For Lyotard, postmodernism is heralded by a legitimation crisis in a grand or meta-narratives that had, thus far, provided the framework of human understanding. Rather than a futile and totalitarian consensus, Lyotard argued for spirit of dissensus, insisting on the equality and justice of the localized language games. (Snipp-Walmsley 407)

Seeing the problem of legitimation in case of the meaning of language, Lyotard supposes the language as a game having plurality and uncertainty in creation of meaning. He observes three things in language as a game:

The first is that their rules do not carry within themselves their own legitimation, but are the objects of contract, explicit or not between players. The second is that there are no rules, there is no game, that even an infinitesimal modification of one rule alters the nature of the game ... The third remark is suggested by what has just been said: every utterance should be thought of as a "move" in a game (Lyotard 10).

Metaphorically, Lyotard compares linguistic activity as a kind of a fight (in a game) having no certainty of clear meaning but having the potential to have frequent change in meaning because language is always at a move. Seeing the no legitimacy in the rules of language, he argues for the multiplicity of meaning and the meaning as ever changing, hence, a poststructuralist way of looking the meaning in the text.

Lyotard has seen postmodern situation in the social relation and social bonding. The organic unity of the society is violated by different factors such as materiality, technocentric value of life, individuality and freedom as "society does not form an integrated whole, but remains haunted by a principle of opposition" (13). It means, the totality of the society is destroyed, as Marxist ideology observes, by the economic base of the opposition and even the knowledge is divided as functional and critical knowledge with the duality of the society. Social bonding is not free from knowledge and language, "language games are the minimum relation required for society to exist" (15), and the society and its nature has the feature of a language game with oppositions.

He hypothesizes that "as societies advance into the postindustrial and postmodern age, communities alter both knowledge and culture at a speed dependent upon the level of technological development of particular countries" (Henry 680). The communication becomes more complex due to technological knowledge and scientific language. Indicating the change in social structure as material demand based structure, Lyotard assumes the problem of legitimacy in the language, knowledge and society with the problem of narratives, the problem of representation, the problem of "principled governed pre-established rules"(81), the problem of artistic judgement as per the rules.

He has observed postmodernity also in terms of language: 'phonology and theories of linguistics, problems of communication and cybernetics, modern theories of algebra and informatics, computers and their languages, problems of translation and the search for areas of compatibility among computer languages, problems of information storage and data banks, telematics and the perfection of intelligent terminals, paradoxes. He has made three observations about language games. Firstly, the rules of language games do not signify legitimation, but are subject to a "contract" between "players" (interlocutors).

Secondly, no game is possible without the rules, and the game changes with the minute change in the rules. Thirdly, every utterance should be thought of as a "move" in a game.

His choice of language games is primarily political in motivation, and relates to the close links between knowledge and power. He examines political as well as epistemological aspects of knowledge (legitimation), and he sees the basic social bond as moves within language games. He sees the status of knowledge in postmodern societies with alternative views: society as a unitary whole or society as a binary division. He rejects both of these alternatives on the grounds that the choice seems difficult or arbitrary, and also rejects a third alternative that we might distinguish two kinds of equally legitimate knowledge, one based on the view of society as unitary and the other on the view of society as binary. It is what the postmodern mode of knowledge.

The status of knowledge has changed in postmodernity, so has the nature of the social bond, particularly as it is evident in society's institutions of knowledge. There exists distinction between two types of knowledges: "narrative" knowledge and "scientific" knowledge. Narrative knowledge is the kind of knowledge prevalent in "primitive" or "traditional" societies, and is based on storytelling, sometimes in the form of ritual, music and dance. Narrative knowledge has no recourse to legitimation - its legitimation is immediate within the narrative itself, in the "timelessness" of the narrative as an enduring tradition - it is told by people who once heard it to listeners who will one day tell it themselves. There is no question of questioning it. Indeed, he suggests that there is incommensurability between the questions of legitimation itself and the authority of narrative knowledge.

The question of legitimation always arises in scientific knowledge because it includes denotative statements. Scientific knowledge is legitimated only by certain scientific criteria such as, the repeatability of experiments. This narrative has usually taken the form of a heroic epic of some kind, with the scientist as a "hero of knowledge" who discovers scientific truths. The problem in the knowledge in the postmodern art and literature begins with the dominance of scientific knowledge over narrative knowledge. The pragmatics of scientific knowledge does not allow the recognition of narrative knowledge as legitimate, since it is not restricted to denotative statements. There is a danger in this dominance, since it follows from his view that reality cannot be captured within one genre of discourse or representation of events that science will miss aspects of events which narrative knowledge will capture. In other words, science has no any explanation in arguing to be a more legitimate form of knowledge than narrative.

Conclusion

Lyotard's issues in *The Postmodern Condition* cover a large range of topics in philosophy, politics, and aesthetics, and experiment with a wide variety of styles. His philosophy exhibits many of the major themes common to post-structuralist and postmodernist thought. He calls into question the powers of reason, asserts the importance of non-rational forces such as sensations and emotions, rejects humanism and the traditional philosophical notion of the human being as the central subject of knowledge, champions heterogeneity and difference, and suggests that the understanding of society in terms of "progress" has been made obsolete by the scientific, technological, political and cultural changes of the late twentieth century. He deals with these common themes in a highly original way, and his work exceeds many popular conceptions of postmodernism in its depth, imagination, and rigor. His thought remains pivotal in contemporary debates surrounding philosophy, politics, social theory, cultural studies, art and aesthetics.

Knowledge, in Lyotard's view, has become a commodity to be sold in postmodernity. It does not create the truth, the truth of knowledge; rather it is expected to possess the value as truth-value. It is because of automation and the problem of legitimation of knowledge. It is certain knowledge not to become the way for preparation of life but to be trained professionally. This performativity in scientific knowledge, certainly, creates the problem of legitimacy in knowledge even more in future.

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