

POSTMODERNISM: AN UNFINISHED DEBATE

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Despite the seemingly growing return to the more familiar and traditional lines in literature in the last few years, Postmodernism, as a well-established practice, still continues to dominate much of the literary scene today. Demolishing the old conception of the literary meaning, Postmodernism puts the emphasis on the self-reflexive character of fiction and turns away from the external reality. Moreover, it continues to launch a critique of the entire literary tradition. Consequently, in the last few years there appeared a fierce critical battle between two schools of theoreticians and practitioners of fiction; namely, the proponents of the "determinate meaning" and the advocates of the "indeterminate meaning". So far, the adherents of the second camp seem to have established the sovereignty of Postmodernism both in fiction and in criticism.

The word "Postmodernism" was applied to the increasingly different fiction that came into existence after the 1960's. Critics like Ihab Hassan, Robert Scholes, Leslie Fiedler, Susan Sontag, Robert Alter, among many others, pointed out that there has been a reversal of the dominant literary directions, the foundations of the Western Literature have been shaken, and all the concepts of the past have been questioned. Literature has become more decentered, indeterminate and totally self-conscious. These views center on one main issue, that is "we have passed beyond a literature of reference (to God and/or the observable world)" (Wolf 7). In this respect, much of contemporary fiction has been variously described as self-reflexive, self-conscious, narcissistic, auto-referential, and purely fictional. It has been called by such names as "metafiction", "surfiction", and "fabulation". In this essay I shall be using the term "metafiction" with regards to the Postmodernist fiction. This is the "kind of fiction that tries to explore the possibilities of fiction, the kind of fiction that challenges the tradition that governs it" (Federman, *Surfiction* 7).

Metafiction is a mode of fiction outside the tradition, and concerns itself with specific conventions of the novel in order to

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display the process of its construction. As Patricia Waugh states, "metafiction is a mode of writing within a broader cultural movement often referred to as postmodernism" (21). Metafiction, then, especially draws attention to its fictionality. It is fiction that "both in style and theme, investigates fiction" (Gardner 86). It asserts that all literary texts are fictional constructions because fiction now is about fiction which has its own commentary on its textual identity. It "includes within itself a commentary on its own narrative and/or linguistic identity" (Hutcheon 1). In order to draw attention to the process of construction and fictionality, metafiction deliberately frustrates the reader's conventional expectations. Thus, the reader is expected to be aware of the meanings that arise not from plot, characterization, or the story itself, but from the verbal relationships in the writing. Therefore, the metacommentary in this fiction conveys the message that this is only a play constructed by the fictive referents of language which do not always correspond to the known objects of the empirical reality. So, the contexts are shifted from everyday reality towards fantasy. This process is called "recontextualization", and it occurs "when language is used aesthetically" and especially "playfully" (Waugh 36). In such a process, novels are constructed on the principle of fictional illusion. In other words, the basic principle is to create a fiction and comment upon the creation of that fiction. For example, John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* poses as a historical novel written in the Victorian style until chapter 13 where it suddenly turns into a narrative manipulation on the theory of novel from a postmodernist perspective. So, the narrator turns to the reader and states:

This story I am telling is all imagination. These characters I create never existed outside of my own mind. If I have pretended until now to know my characters' mind and innermost thoughts, it is because I am writing in (just as I have assumed some of the vocabulary and voice of) a convention universally accepted at the time of my story: that the novelist stands next to God. He may not know all, yet he tries to pretend that he does. But I live in an age of Alain Robbe-Grillet and Roland Barthes; if this is a novel, it cannot be a novel in the modern sense of the word. (86)

This is a characteristic frame-break glossed in to expose the gap between fiction and reality. Such intermissions function to defamiliarize the traditional structures. Moreover, they help deconstruct the mimetic illusion. They are concerned with the text's own structure generating a self-conscious awareness, within the text, of the status of discourse, and account for the very fictionality of the text.

It is important to note that fiction's self-awareness and recognition of textual identity inevitably lead it to a mode of pure verbal construction. Thus, the novels are no longer written in

accordance with what Linda Hutcheon calls a "mimesis of product" but with a "mimesis of process". In other words, in the novelistic universe, reflection of "life" cannot be reduced only to a *product* level, and the *process* be ignored. The major creative function of the novels, or their construction (process) is another mimetic act. Therefore, the object of imitation now is this *process*. In mimesis of process, the reader is made aware of the actual construction of the fiction itself.

Texts self-consciously draw attention to their process of becoming. In this respect, metafiction reworks the mimetic issue by thematizing its own fiction making process. Such a process is shared by reader and writer in the creation of the fictional universe. They create an autonomous fictional world and do not hesitate to announce it as pure fiction, not a pretentious claim to outside reality. Thus, instead of passively imitating empirical reality, metafiction mirrors its own process by turning towards its own fictive referents, and reflects vital human imagination. It also accepts that novelistic reality is always fictive. It is a created illusion. Therefore, it is a great challenge for the writer who can freely investigate the infinite number of the possibilities of narrative construction, and also for the reader who can now actively participate in this process.

Most postmodernist writing demands an active participation from the reader in the process of writing. However, the reader may have one difficulty. He can no longer identify the products being imitated; such as, characters and actions; because, there is no similarity to those in the familiar world. The conventions for those are not acknowledged in the text. Instead, the text disrupts the conventions and the traditional literary codes leaving an uncertainty in the narrative. Take for example Raymond Federman's *Double or Nothing* where the narrative does not follow any pattern or use punctuation, where all the familiar elements of a novel have been turned upside down, all the conventions disrupted and the characters are mere voices in the discourse; where the narrative itself is discontinuous and playful. Inevitably such a fiction destroys the normal habits of the reader's perception and disorients him. Here, the reader is deliberately asked to decode this chaotic amalgam of words and sentences, establish new codes, and work himself into the narrative structure. In other words, there is a deliberate demand from the text to the reader to participate in the process. He has to follow the chaotic form and share in the visual disorder. The typographic play on different types of print and blank spaces may confuse the act of reading. However, this lets the reader contribute to the importance of the text. Since each page is a separate frame as Ronald Sukenick puts it, it requires to be filled in by the reader. David Lodge in *The Modes of Modern Writing* anticipates these problems:

The difficulty, for the reader of post-modernist writing is not so much a matter of obscurity (which might be cleared up) as of uncertainty, which is endemic, and manifests itself on the level of narrative rather than style. (226)

The reader's difficulty in decoding the postmodernist fiction arises from the fact that postmodernism advocates a relativity of ideas which are presented in such an intricate and disrupted manner that they bring along an incoherency of information. The fictional universe is characterized by an anticipated openness, by the defamiliarization of the traditional literary codes, and by a multiplicity of meanings in the text creating an inevitable uncertainty. The reader, then, by participating in this process of recontextualization, is turned into a writer, because, the act of interpretation and codification is incorporated into the text for the reader.

What is distinguishing about such fiction is its dynamic self-consciousness in which the author both involves and skeptifies the reader. As Charles Newman in *The Post-Modernist Aura* argues, the importance of the postmodernist fiction lies in the question of the problematic relationship between the writer and the reader (41). The narrator of a self-conscious fiction deliberately warns the reader that this is a story he is telling and the aesthetic creation of this story is more important than the story itself. Thus, the story as the product is gradually disregarded, and the process of telling this story is emphasized. The fictive referents of language become the objects of imitation. The major concern is the way the language is processed to tell a tale. Newman calls this as internalization of fiction. He points out the impulse for the self-referentiality of postmodernist fiction:

Fiction has become a vehicle for the disparate voices of the intellect and verbal innovation rather than a story-telling machine. It has come to rely upon its own linguistic awareness of itself, rather than plot or character development, to produce its momentum. (96)

In this argument, postmodernist fiction develops an aesthetics of anti-realism. The theoretical issues involved in creating fictions are put into the construction of those fictions, and as a result, the novels become self-conscious and self-referential. The problems of contemporary experience are questioned through a formal self-exploration, because the individual's knowledge of the world is mediated through language. In such texts, the author enters the text and calls into question the reality of his characters and his own reality. He shows that it is the language of the text that produces him as much as he produces language. As in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, the author admits his authorship but only to destroy the

illusion of reality he has created. Fowles admits that his characters cannot be free because they are written into his texts; however, they are to be constructed in the reader's imagination. The self-conscious author of this novel also admits that he is in his characters' "script" as much as they are in his.

Consequently, there are no restrictions against the self-reflexive tendency. It transforms any kind of experience and incorporates into its textual order. Raymond Federman argues that this fiction enhances the expressive techniques and opens new horizons:

And since writing means now filling a space (the pages), in those spaces where there is nothing to write, the fiction writer can, at any time, introduce material (quotations, pictures, diagrams, charts, designs, pieces of other discourse, doodles, etc.) totally unrelated to the story he is in the process of telling, or else he can simply leave those spaces blank because fiction is as much what is said as what is not said since what is said is not necessarily true and since what is said can always be said in another way. (12)

Thus, fiction can render almost everything in words or typographical symbols. Such absolute freedom actually depends on the new theory or meaning that Derrida formulated, in that there is no ready-made meaning expressed by means of language. Language itself creates meaning. In other words, there is no pre-existing meaning to be reproduced in fiction. This approach alters the traditional reality of fiction altogether. Metafiction destroys the conventions which justified the dependence of literature on the notion of empirical reality. Signs do not possess any prior meanings, meaning is attributed to them during the act of reading. Thus, the reader has to concentrate on the lexical meaning of words or word groups, and on the uses of typography. Federman's *The Voice in the Closet* reveals the function of such typography. The book is divided into two parts. The first part includes twenty square pages of its English version, and the second part its French version. Moreover, the shape of the pages picture the real closet in the wall. The voice is literally imprisoned within this paper square and confined to words and disturbed syntax. The page numbers are straight lines forming into box shapes within boxes as the pages proceed. In this way, Federman reveals the agonizing experience of a little boy who is locked up in a closet by his mother to be saved from the Nazi soldiers who have broken into the house to drag the family to the concentration camps. All the typographical devices and the chaotic syntax refer to the terror and confusion of the child. Therefore, the deformed utterances gain a credibility when the reader finally makes sense of the whole narrative intention and responds to it which is clearly demanded from him.

The principle of the apparent meaninglessness underlying

such texts can be explained by Derrida's term "différance" which implies a permanent postponement of meaning as an interplay of differences among signifying elements of signs that comprise a text. In accordance with Derridean rejection of the premises of Western Thought that assumed that meaning should be seen as a representation of an origin (Logos), metafiction similarly rejects the idea of a specific meaning as something that is behind the text, and replaces it with a game of differences among various versions of fictional reality. Consequently, fiction inevitably questions its own conditions of fictionality, and becomes a textual play of differences, and accepts its structures as a crucial part of the self-reflexive game. It deliberately displays its self-consciousness. Intertextuality is an inevitable part of this display demonstrating that it originates as a weaving of prior texts. As Derrida always asserts, it never attempts to explain what it says and never finishes meaning, because language always defers the closure of final meaning. Therefore, in metafiction one searches in vain for a pretextual meaning, or in other words, so-called "determinate meaning."

All this leaves us with a final question. Is Postmodernism and its underlying theory of Deconstruction just a new form of "literature pure" or is there a definite link between the texts and our technological age? In my opinion, the latter is true. It is our age that already generates plurality of meanings and their indeterminate nature with its rapid process of change in all aspects of life. After all, almost any meaning and principal assumption would inevitably become obsolete in such a process of rapid transformation and High Tech progress. In that respect, Postmodernism is the mirror of our age.

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