

Postmodernism and Post Structuralism: A Literary Dichotomy

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Abstract

This article entitled 'Postmodern and Post Structuralism: A Literary Dichotomy' has fairly attempted to compare and contrast between the most discussed and comprehensive notions of postmodernism and post structuralism in a possible precise form. In addition, the study focuses on dichotomies of these trends against their respective pre-forms, 'modernism' and 'structuralism' as well. Their tendencies in literary creation and theory have been briefly discussed. The study method it has availed is essentially the qualitative research design which is concerned with establishing answers to 'why' and 'how' of the study in question. The writing is based on the views on the foreign writers, scholars and critics in different published materials or the online resources. The views forwarded by the aforementioned personalities have been duly considered and cited in both types of citations-direct as well as paraphrased versions. This study has followed the comparison and contrast as its theory. After the discussion or analysis, the findings have been deducted that these two terms are confusing especially for the beginners because there are certain similarities as well as dissimilarities between them in specific cases. The study is expected to be helpful for both the teacher and students of literature especially in the field pedagogy or the individuals who are not directly related to pedagogical issue.

Keywords: dichotomy, literary theory, postmodernism, post structuralism

Introduction

Background

Literature can be perceived differently depending on the context, sense and application. It is viewed as a discipline when one looks it from the broader cognitive aspect whereas it is viewed as a subject when it is looked through the pedagogical or teaching point of view. Likewise, it is purely a register as other registers such as art, book-keeping, cinema, music or sports when looked through the technical terms used solely in this particular field or the realm.

Undoubtedly, literature is used for "discovering a new world, a world so different from our own that it seems a place of dream and magic" (Long, 1989, p. 1-2). The journey through the modern newer literary world cannot be expected more pleasant and smoother unless and until one is thoroughly familiar with the literary dichotomous terms that is, postmodern and

post structuralism. The pleasant feeling of journey lies not in the observation of superficial aspect (sense) of the text but entering the core part of the notion. In order to acquire a clear insight into the nature of literary language, it is necessary to grasp the two-fold distinction (i.e. dichotomy) of these two much resembling but confused terms. One needs to know this literary dichotomy not because s/he can make a right choice between the two opposite terms, but because the total understanding of the literary text becomes possible only when s/he is well equipped with the existence of both of them.

In literary studies the two terms 'Postmodernism' and 'Post Structuralism' are constantly recurring items especially in the field of literary criticism or critical approach. They are much confusing to the average learners. The possible reason for such confusion is that "postmodern is sometimes used in place of or interchangeably with post structural" (Abrams, 2002, p. 238). Of course, these two movements began roughly at the same time and share most of the views commonly. Emergence somehow at the similar timeline and also sharing certain points in common can be the other cause of confusion. In this regard, Krishnaswamy, Varghese and Mishra (2004) hold the opinion that "these two terms are partners in the paradigm and there is bound to be overlap between two" (p. 28). Now the question rises whether these terms are interchangeable and used synonymously. Have they got the convergent tendencies towards life and the world? How do they look like in the viewers' eyes or perceivers' minds, from the closer observation?

Basing on the issue of postmodernism, Cuddon (1998) defines, "postmodernism is the reaction against the modernism" (p. 690). By this it is inferred that postmodernism is founded against the literary trends and traditions of the modernism. Thus, it is a general term used to denote the changes, developments and tendencies which have taken place against the modernism. Katie (2001) states, "postmodernism was coined in the 1960s to denote current literary movement which is a progression from modernism" (p. 311). On the other hand the term, "Post structuralism or deconstruction is virtually synonymous" (Guerin, Labo, Morgan, Reesman & Willingham 2004, p. 340). Post structuralism emerges out from the structuralism as the reaction against the certainties of structuralism. In order to provide a convenient description of post structuralism, it is more relevant to mention Tyson (2010) who refers to as "language is dynamic, ambiguous and unstable continually disseminating possible meaning" (p. 258). Obviously it is harshly contrary to Saussurian concept of meaning in which meaning was supposed to be fixed and stable. Seldon, Widdowson and Brooker (2005) maintain the view that "post structuralism begins as the counter movement even in Saussure's 'Linguistic Theory' that is linguistic sign" (p. 154). This statement sums up that the term post structuralism stands in opposition to Saussure's concept of fixity in structure and meaning.

Regarding the issues of the postmodernism and post structuralism they are newer concepts in comparison with other concepts such as modernism, structuralism or naturalism.

Many renowned and eminent authors and critics have much discussed on these said concepts but no one has ever drawn the demarcation line and also fusion between them. This study mainly prospects to bring out the conspicuous differential line and blurring or overlapping domain of the issues. In other words, these two notions are convergent in many respects but at the same time they are widely divergent from one another. Not only from the aspect of sense relation but also from the formal (morphological) structure, these two terms appeared to be very much similar. They constantly go crisscross to each other's realm. The discussion of comparison and contrast done herein can be helpful for the beginners of the modern literary course.

The Objectives

The objectives of this study are:

- i. To compare and contrast between the two notions (or aspects) postmodernism and post structuralism, and their distinctive characteristics from their prior forms modernism as well as structuralism,
- ii. To analyze their tendencies applied especially in the field of literary theory/criticism, and
- iii. To discuss which one is narrower to and which one is broader in terms of life and world

Research Methodology

In order to meet the set objectives, the study has availed the qualitative method specifically related to the design of compare-contrast which may attempt to gain a deeper understanding of the issues or the phenomena because it is a reliable research design for gathering non-numerical data. The article has been developed through the comparison-contrast pattern which involves the discussion in terms of the characteristic features of these respective notions. Moreover, this type of study refers to the meanings, concepts, definitions, or characteristics. Comparison and contrast pattern has evaluated two things one against another. By that, it has intended to describe not only the characteristics of the two things, theories, concepts, or approaches, but also to offer some assessment or analysis, as part of the thesis' angle and supporting evidence. The two buzzing words are compared initially against their own pre-forms (i.e. modernism versus postmodernism, and structuralism versus post structuralism), then after that these two terms are compared and contrasted focusing on their characteristic features. After the two-level comparisons, a brief discussion is offered in terms of their respective fields and ranges. The necessary data were based primarily on library consultation and empirical insights as well. Then obtained data were analyzed, described, and explained on the line of point by point framework.

Results and Discussion

Similarities Between Postmodernism and Post Structuralism or Deconstructionism

As linguists hold the opinion there is no possibility to find absolute synonym or antonym of the lexicons in a language. If the two words are antonyms, there is sense relation between them. It is better to have a brief discussion on the dichotomous terms that is to say, postmodernism and post structuralism hereinafter.

Post Structuralism or Deconstructionism

By the 1970, the basic tenets of 'structuralism' were questioned by post structuralists and deconstructionism emerged as a serious challenge to other system of thought. Deconstruction emphasizes open endedness, undecidability and the careful attention to the problem involved in arriving at an idea of what is real through its representation. It too, is text-based but the notion of text is different. The 'world' and 'word' are not treated as conceptual oppositions as two different entities privileging the world over word. Tyson (2010) opines, "The world is infinite text that is, an infinite chain of signifiers always in play" (p. 257). The concept can be best explained with quotation of Jacques Derrida, "there is nothing outside the text, and the text is the gas". In other words, all experiences and feelings are expressed and presented only through the text and it is impossible to draw a firm line between reality and representation; in additions the text or language is not structured and it is more like a 'living organism' that decomposes. It is always in a state of flux with no final meaning possible. The stress is on the irreducibility of meaning and on the fact that there is nothing outside the text/language or no ultimate appeal to the lived experience. Thus, a deconstructive reading attempts to bring out the logic of the text language as opposed to the logic of its author's claim. It will tease out the text's implied presupposition and the contradiction to them. Likewise, let us have a look at the next counterpart concept of the post structuralism

Regarding the rivalry between structuralism and post structuralism, it is evident that post structuralism was grown out or even say germinated from the same ground of the structuralism. Certain individuals commonly associated with the post structuralism—Foucault, Baudrillard or even Barthes—began as structuralists and moved in the course of thought in a poststructuralist direction. In this way these terms have created a dichotomous relation within themselves. So, let us consider the key points that lie between them as below:

Structuralism:

1. Structuralists tend to not doubt the existence of "reality," that is some material, human, or social-economic substratum that lies beneath the "ideas."

Post Structuralism

1. Poststructuralists, on the other hand, do doubt the existence of reality, or at the very least they emphasize the extent to which the widely understood difference between "ideas" and "reality" is one constructed through discourse. In other words, if there is a reality, it may have no bearing on our sense of "truth"

- at all.
2. They tend to emphasize the coherence of a system as that which allows for meaning to be constructed.
 3. Similarly, structuralists tend to focus on how systems set limits to what can be thought, said, meant.
 4. Structuralists have a tendency to be reductive; in other words, they tend to reduce many complicated phenomenon to a few key elements that they argue “explains everything.”
 5. Structuralists are reductive because they are often trying to find their own version of “Universal truths.” They are searching for “universal structures” that bind all humans together at some level (Chomsky)--or at the very least, some basic structures that all members of a given society (or possibly multiple societies) have in common (Levi-Strauss).
 6. They are radically anti-humanist; in other words, they tend to suggest the power of systems to structure our thought, world-view, sense of self, etc. Nearly all power is handed over to the system, to the point of being rather determinist.
2. They tend to emphasize the incoherence of the systems of discourse, or at very least the tensions and ambiguities created by the existence of multiple systems.
 3. Poststructuralists, on the other hand, will generally tend to focus on polysemy that is the plurality of meaning and, indeed, the tendency for meanings to mushroom out of control.
 4. Poststructuralists too will be reductive in their own way, but they try to keep in focus the differences that are being ignored in carrying out the reduction. These differences, they suggest, create cracks or fissures in the system that can be utilized to challenge or even destroy the systems at work.
 5. Poststructuralists have given up the search for “Universal truths.” Whereas structuralists look for things that bind us together, poststructuralists tend to focus on that which makes us different. In their minds, this emphasizes the malleability of human kind—a kind of revival of the existentialist “existence precedes essence” just in a new guise.
 6. Poststructuralists are not humanists, exactly, since they also focus on the ways that language and discourse structures thought; however, they do tend to try to restore some small amount of power or creativity to the subject. While they recognize the power of systems of thought and action to set out the limits of the playing field, they want to retain some small degree of spontaneity, or at least unpredictability, for individuals moving within the playing field.

7. In short, structuralists focus on the monolithic structure that is the systems of meaning and how it functions.

7. Poststructuralists focus more on the reader/speaker who is operating within the structure.

(Whisnant, 2012)

Postmodernism

Postmodern was coined in the 1960s to describe a current literary movement. Like modernism, postmodernism challenges literary traditions and conventions but more radically. Postmodernism or postmodern theory is also currently very popularly used as synonymous for post structuralism to describe a reactionary intellectual movement. Since this movement values many principles illustrated by postmodern writings because both can be seen to represent an ideological shift in the late twentieth century western culture, the extension of meaning is to be understood e. g. the idea that 'reality' is constructed by language and that no objective truth exists. More often though, it applied to cultural condition prevailing in the more advanced capitalist society since the 1960s, characterized by super abundance of disconnected images and styles-most noticeably in TV, advertising, commercial design and pop video.

In this way, the sense promoted by Jean Baudrillard (1983) and other commentators (i.e. Kellner, 1987; Hagerty, 2004; Abbinnett, 2008), is that the post modernity is said to be the culture of fragmentary sensations, eclectic nostalgia, disposable simulacra and promiscuous superficiality in which the traditional valued qualities of depth, coherence, meaning, originality and authenticity are evacuated or dissolved amid the random swirl of empty signal. In literature some postmodernist reflections are noticeable such as anti-traditional novels (i. e. plot-less, low standard protagonist, naïve, powerless), concrete poems, absurd dramas, eclectic approach, aleatory writing, parody, pastiche, magic realism and science fiction and horror stories. Krishnasamy et al. (2004) maintain that in postmodernism there are no epics, noble heroes grand narratives that elevates our thoughts and passions because all our heroes are dying like flies" (p. 19). From this discussion, it is obviously inferred that there exists the dichotomous relationship even between the 'modernisms' versus 'postmodernism'. So, before having discussed on the divergent aspects between post structuralism and postmodernism, it will be safe to have brief discourse on the discrepancy between modernisms versus postmodernism. Following are the points which help to make distinction between modernism and postmodernism:

Modernism

1. Modernism claims fixed meaning.
2. It emphasizes on sophisticated, elite and

Postmodernism

1. Postmodernism believes the meaning is at the flux.
2. It emphasizes on anti-elite, lower level and

formal expression.

3. It prefers aesthetic beauty and uniqueness.

4. It believes in the presence of center.

5. It requires coherence and unity in the discourse

6. It prefers the grand narrative.

7. Modernism favors the monoculture, discipline, caste and individualism

diffusion of ego.

3. It rejects the aesthetic beauty and uniqueness in art.

4. It views absence of center.

5. It holds the opinion that the senses are fragmented.

6. It opposes the concept of grand narrative.

7. Postmodernism emphasizes on multi-cultures, disciplines, races and nations.

These two literary terms 'postmodernism' and 'post structuralism' do appear here as to be the two-fold distinction or technically termed as literary dichotomy. In this regard Tumbahang (2012) states, "literary dichotomies are there for not offering the readers to make a right choice between the two items but for the total understanding the literary expression" (p. 145). This literary dichotomy in fact shares some common characteristics which are given below in the point-wise way:

- a. Both '-isms' share the view of uncertainty of existence.
- b. They both provide the critique with the ideas of order and unity in language, art and subjectivity.
- c. Both reduplicate convictions and doubts over wholeness, autonomy, grand theories and narratives.
- d. These both ascertain the notion of relativity and oppose to reality.
- e. Both hold the belief that there is no absolute truth or reality.
- f. They believe that everything is fiction and politics, history, sociology, psychology or even science are fictions.
- g. Both the concepts i.e. post structuralism and postmodernism are the emergence of their respective pre-basic forms (i.e. structuralism and modernism)

Contrast Between Postmodernism and Post Structuralism

These two literary dichotomies or the two-fold distinction exhibit many features in common. However, they are different in some respects which are presented as follows:

Post structuralism is basically a language based theory or as Lane (2013) opines, "a hybrid discourse that usually incorporates deconstructive ideas into a wider field of enquiry"(p. 73) whereas postmodernism is way of looking at things, a condition of the mind and a way of life.

Post structuralism is mostly concerned with academic areas as in structuralist anthropology, structuralist linguistics, structuralist poetics, structuralist narratology and after all literary criticism. "Deconstructionalists look for the logical flaws and blind spots or aporias in textual arguments so that they can undermine the hierarchies which fix system of thinking and being into place" (ibid. p. 73). Unlike post structuralism, postmodernism is mostly inclined to politics and culture.

Post structuralism is a more rigorous working out of the possibilities, implications and shortcoming of structuralism that is to say, the meaning is fixed and final, and the author is the authentic person to derive the meaning of the text she or he writes. But postmodernism refers to changes, developments and tendencies that have taken place in literature, arts, music, architecture, philosophy and so on.

Post structuralism is related to recent theories of literary criticisms and intellectual inquiries in general but postmodernism is related to recent literary modes and outlook towards the life and the world.

Postmodernism and Its Recent Tendencies

Marxists argue that postmodernism is an ideology in which the global economic system finds its best expression through it. High consumption capitalism has shifted the consumers' interest from the traditional well established practices to the departmental stores, super markets and business malls.

Scientific as well as technological developments have displaced most of the traditional beliefs and questioned against certain established norms and values. Everything is relative and nothing is absolute, fixed and real and even everything is in the state of flux.

The ways of receiving knowledge have been shifted from the traditional photo fiction to video/TV/internet with the facilities of fast forward, backward, erase, or recreate mechanisms. Most of the episodes are briefs hence always free from the lengthy plots and events.

The world is viewed as the global village which has become more like a marketplace, a jamboree or carnival with no fixed rules or privileges for anyone. The modern authority, rigidity and seriousness have been subverted, questioned and mocked. This is the era where there are no epics, noble heroes, grand plot and grand narratives to the readers' attentions, thoughts and passions. There are now postmodern heroes who die like flies. They solely depend on their own means and resources bereft of any external force, power, belief or even any religious creed. Postmodernists are leading an unceasing life flowing perpetually dissatisfied movement.

Postmodernists seem to be living a life of ‘demand and supply’ that refers to money, constant displacement, virtual reality and somehow ‘win’ and ‘gain’ attitude. In the flood of advertisements (i.e. ads.) and exaggerated propaganda, people are offered a bewildering variety of choices. In the brand war today, there are many contestants not just limited to a fewer number. This means there is no brand loyalty in any aspect or field. Therefore, this age is rightly called as the age of ‘displacement’ that is, one thing displaces the other in no time.

Although this age, in which we are living, is proudly called as ‘Postmodern Age’, almost everyone is not getting the opportunity to live in this ‘win’ time simply because all people have no access to the postmodern materials and facilities. The irony is that a large section of world population is supposed to be living the only modern life or even pre-modern sober and under the strict codes and conducts.

Post Structuralism and its Tendencies in the Critical Theories

The salient features or tendencies of post structuralism are as follows:

The Primacy of Theory

The primacy of theory refers to the way that the traditional method of literary criticism was through setting the readymade theory against the text. If the text failed to go with the prescribed principles and rules, the text would be considered to be of no worth. To the contrary, post structuralists theorize their position and practice after the due consideration of the text. Previously, very limited texts i.e. poetry and drama, were taken into the account. But post structuralists, according to Abrams (2000) think, “this account is held to apply not only to verbal language but also psychosexual and socio-cultural signifying systems” (p. 239). The range of coverage also makes a fundamental difference between the structuralism and post structuralism. “A prominent aspect of post structural theories is that they are posed in opposition to inherited ways of thinking in all provinces of knowledge” (ibid. p. 239). This statement specifies that the post structuralist theory is not limited to any particular field of knowledge but to all spheres.

Decentering of the Subject

This is concerned with the denial of the domination of the subject that is human agent or the author’s mouth-piece. Traditionally this subject was considered to be the center supposing he/she was the originator of the meaning of the text. If the text had to be interpreted in that light of or focusing on the established center there would be the chances of misinterpretation because of the influence of the concept ‘center’. “In the view of many deconstructive critics, the subject or author or narrator of a text itself is a purely linguistic product,” (Abrams, 2000 p. 240). Paul de Man as quoted in Abrams states regarding the subject that “we rightfully reduce the subject to the status of a mere grammatical pronoun”. From this statement the inference is that the

traditional value of the subject is lost and thus, ranks it as one of the elements of an utterance (or sentence).

Reading, Texts and Writing

The indication of 'reading, texts and writing' is that the critics are set free when the author is decentered or deleted. When the critics are free from the pre-occupied concept of author, there remains only the impersonal process called 'Reading'. The reading engages no 'work' (since 'work' implies human marker) but the 'text' that is a structure of signifiers which should be regarded as the material for reading process. The direct meaning of this point is that a text does not mean as the author intends to. The author, according to post structuralists, is not a rightful person to issue the meaning of his/her text because the text can have multiplicity of meanings depending on the contexts and readers. Post structuralist period is best expressed by Roland Barthes' short essay entitled '*The Death of the Author*' (1968). In his essay he rejects the traditional view that "the author is the origin of the text, the source of its meaning and the only authority for interpretation" (Seldon et al. 2007, p.159). Barthes further declares that "the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the author" (Krishnaswamy et al. 2004 p. 41). They mean that whenever the reader starts reading the text, the writer has already died.

The Concept of Discourse

Traditionally the term discourse would suggest only the passages containing conversational exchanges by the characters in the literary works. As a result there emerged a critical trend called *Discourse Analysis* in the 1970s to address such conversational passages. In post structural criticism the term discourse covers a wide range and has become a very prominent issue supplementing the 'text' as the name for the verbal material which is the primary concern of literary criticism. The term discourse is no longer limited to the conversational passages like in the structuralism but it denotes all kinds of verbal significations just as the writing refers to all kinds of verbal structures. Seldon et al. (2005) have stated that "Every utterance is the site of a struggle: every word that is lunched into social space implies a dialogue therefore a contested interpretation" (p. 75). For Foucault, as stated in Seldon et al. (2005), discourse is always inseparable from power because discourse is the governing and ordering medium of every institution". Here, Foucault hints at the correlational meaning between the discourse and power.

The Conviction of Disguise or Mask

Post structuralist critics hold the conviction that the general surface meaning serves as only disguise or mask of the real meaning. They claim that no text means what it seems to say or what the writer intended to say. The real meaning cannot be said overtly because it is

suppressed by either psychic or ideology or discursive necessities. To unmask for the real meaning, it is the task of the both social and psychoanalytic critics to strip off the mask of the text. For instance, the famous Nepali epic fragment *Muna Madan* is not merely to say about an impoverished family and their struggle for livelihood. This is seen in the surface as a mask but when this disguise is uncovered, one can visualize the suppressed or deeper meaning as the solemn love, respect, true humanity and so on.

Conclusion

Postmodernism and post structuralism (Deconstruction) are comprehensive terms recurring in the literary field. Both the concepts share some specific similar views and overlap one another realms. First, they both create dichotomous concepts against each pre-basic form because they have arisen from the background of modernism and structuralism respectively. It is better to have ideas about their existing as well as pre-forms' distinctive features for the better understanding of their pedagogical and cognitive significances. Then, it is also equally important to have ideas of the dichotomous concept of these newer two buzzing words. At the first glance, they appear to be like identical terms and they put the maiden learners into trouble or more specifically in confusion. However, they are markedly distinct in a closer consideration. From a closer view, the domain of the postmodernism seems to be broader encapsulating the way of life, way of feeling and state of mind. Post structuralism especially focuses on the literary theory of the academic field. But, postmodernism is applicable to other disciplines as politics, economics, anthropology and so forth. In addition, post structuralism is limited to language based aspects especially literary theory and literary criticism. Thus, their tendencies are naturally different depending on the range of subject fields, concept areas, application tools and interpretative approaches.

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