

LABELING CONTEMPORARY LITERARY THEORY: ATTITUDES OF DEPRESSIVENESS AND HAPPINESS

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Abstract

Life and death of any theory depends largely upon the people who uphold and propagate them in their writings and voices, though there could be long time-difference between the advocates of the theory and its birth. A critic might be defining tragedy in the Aristotelian tradition of poetics yet he may belong to the times of postmodernism. Thus, Aristotle's poetics survives through that critic. The current essay discusses the life and death of ideas keeping in view the rise and fall of literary movements and theories in the specific backdrop of the recent debates on the death of postmodernism. It attempts to elaborate that human existence and their efforts to define and interpret life and pieces of arts solely stand upon two major attitudes towards life i.e. depressiveness and happiness, which in fact spring from the single river bed of 'life'. An idea dies with a new idea to replace it. In the backdrop of the researches by Knapp & Michaels, Vermeulen&Akker, Kirby, Raoul Eshlman, Ihab Hassan and Terry Eagleton, we argue that variations and expansions in critical theories like modernism, postmodernism, metamodernism, digimodernism, post-postmodernism, hypermodernism and performatism are in fact the shades of two basic attitudes towards life and its interpretations.

Key Words: Depressiveness, Happiness, Postmodernism, Performatism, Literary theory, Hypermodernism

'Nature abhors vacuum', says James Joyce in *Ulysses*; and, this could also be said about the nature of human beings particularly those who are related to the task of criticizing the criticism on life. A lot is being written about the demise of postmodernism, though researchers like Irmtraud Huber (p. 21) are ready as well as reluctant to break away from the schizophrenic chains of postmodernism. Linda Hutcheon's (p. 165-6) challenge for the readers to label the current literary theory and trends is a clear-cut announcement of the death of postmodernism. However, the next label(s) seem to represent an attitude that seems 'depressiveness' in nature rather than that of 'happiness'. Hypermodernism is a label given by Lipovetsky (p. 35) that defines the current literary practices as somewhere between desire and pain of meaninglessness. Digimodernism is another proposed replacement of postmodernism by Kirby (p. 4) that defines the reliance on technology to

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such an extent that the writer is superseded and amnesiac with no sense of the past or future. Automodernism by Robert Samuels (p. 219) is another attempt to denote the automation of human culture and practices like man being the cog in machine. Bourriaud's (p. 12) label of altermodernism seems to reclaim modernism with a sense of other implied within the human consciousness due to loss of center and scientific temporariness. Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker (p. 1) label this age as metamodernism that has 'modern enthusiasm and a postmodern irony'. Among these new labels, performatism of Raoul Eshelman (p. 3) seems to be the one who sees belief, authoriality, theism and mimesis in the current literary works which project 'happiness' attitude of life.

A piece of writing or art or discourse not only gets influenced by the already existing ideas but also defines and influences those ideas. Likewise, a critic, in the task of explaining and interpreting the texts (Knapp & Michaels, p. 723) is also involved in defining the course of ideas, literary trends, styles and attitudes. *Preface to Lyrical Ballads* of the late 18th century set up a style of expressing 'spontaneous overflow of powerful emotions collected in tranquility' (p. 1) in simple language with rustic characters. Words in the poems, novels, and essays in the writings of Wordsworth, Jane Austen, Charles Lamb, the Brontes, and Dickens etc. changed rapidly and soon the language and ideas of Pope were neo-classics to be read in very leisure times with utmost concentration and propounding vocabulary. Thus a critic does not just interpret what already exists; it envisages what and how it should be. Aristotle also delved into the same strategy of being the critic when he postulated that the best form of literature is that of tragedy which brings about catharsis to the readers or viewers. T. S. Eliot also traces the importance of tradition in the individual talent in order to redefine how literature should be and what it might be. Thus the tradition of interpreting and defining the courses of texts continues. Knapp and Michaels (p. 723) seem to question the very existence of theory at all, as if theory is no more required. However, theory in any form or shape continues. Now we have come up to a state of syllogizing the end of postmodernism and labeling these times with new terms like hypermodernism, altermodernism, digimodernism, performatism, metamodernism, automodernism, post-

postmodernism and so on. The list of labels seems to continue till most of the critics agree upon the use of a single term.

However, whatever comes next, the tradition of the whole process of criticism seems to remain within the bounds of the two major attitudes towards life i.e. depressiveness and happiness. The attitude of the critic, thus, is important as it uplifts or degrades the standards and status of works of art of particular themes, styles and ideologies. Knap and Michaels (p. 723) have placed great value on intention in order to do away even with the very need of theory. Their contention is that the need for theory is a mistake as the practice of finding intended meanings live inside the text and by theorizing it means to go outside the text as these are not separable (Knapp & Michaels, p. 742). Yet the need for critical theory has manifested itself in two distinct ways. One is to attempt to find meanings from the text through methodological way. The other is to understand and admit the inability of the theory to arrive at correct interpretation. Yet in all these dwindling situations, the relevance of theory survives and still attempts are being made to come up with new theories for the interpretation of texts. Thus, postmodernism is being followed by new terms and methods of interpretations. One interesting hallmark of these critical theories is that these are based on some philosophy and philosophical attitude. These seem to manifest attitudes towards life i.e. either depressiveness or happiness. Absurdism can be served here as an example, a literary movement in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, through the works of Sartre and Camus (Milne, p. 2). Absurdism is a literary movement but literary movements and literary criticism are also interlinked. Movement defines the philosophy behind literary writings on which writers build up their stories, essays and poetry. Literary criticism is the way of understanding literary texts and literary theory is a way of conducting literary criticism moving outside and inside the selected texts. My primary argument here is that a literary theory also advocates a peculiar literary movement or set of themes which are presented as the standards of ideal literary writings, the way critics from Aristotle to Eliot have done.

However, movement and theory meet somewhere while discussing their philosophical platforms. Romanticism is a philosophy yet *Preface to Lyrical Ballads* advocates particular style and themes of writing poetry

by setting up standards for ideal verses. Does this also tell us how to interpret a text? Any literary piece of writing which is close to the ideal would be regarded better and more appealing than that of other pieces of writings as romanticism favours the idea of not following the strict poetic forms and focusses on expression of passions and feelings. Thus a piece of poetry would be interpreted as, conveying particular feelings or not. Romanticism both as literary criticism and theory is also discussed in the popular book of Habib titled *A History of Literary Criticism and Theory from Plato to Present*. Hegelian concept of difference among the three forms of beauty is also discussed in detail there as part of romantic criticism (Habib, p. 403). Likewise, a piece of writing following a particular tradition is better for Elliot than the one which does not. Hence literary criticism and movements keep on meeting on crossroads of themes and styles. While establishing the way of understanding a piece of writing, the critic is involved in conveying, propagating and favoring a particular philosophy which is based on his attitude towards life. Like a creative writer, he also has something concrete to support or convey to the readers yet normally in essay form, a genre well suited for discussions. The attitude is also thus involved in meaning making of the world of art and literature.

The words depressiveness and happiness in relation with attitude and their usage here need to be defined clearly. Depressiveness is used in the sense of the critics and writers that propagate that there is no hopeful future of human practices and that all discussions and philosophies would be revolving around the painful circles remaining in the peripheries. The center has completely disappeared from the lives of the people and text. All that survives is haphazard disheveled world of meaningless meanings stimulating nothing but heaps of discussions. The attitude of happiness is correlated to the state of having specific defined center in which life and human activities move in the orderly fashion for defined goals and their achievements. A set theistic beliefs is shared in the texts that gives hope to the readers and their consequent actions. The point that we want to make here is that depressiveness and happiness are reigning attitudes found in the background of all these critical theories and movements. Even their methodologies of finding meanings are also based on these attitudes. The relationship between the attitudes and literary theory can also be ascertained by the statement of Dutton (p. 23)

in which, talking about postmodernism, he says, uses the phrase that postmodernism is 'a general cultural mood and style in art'. Governed by particular cultural mood, postmodernism also imparts that mood to its readers. Postmodernism rests on the themes of indeterminacy, fragmentation, decanonization, depthlessness, irony and so on (Hassan, pp. 1-2) which are closely related to the attitude of depression and inability to find the true meanings. All these themes of postmodernism are also human state of being depressed and unhappy. Depressiveness abounds in the themes and is thus conveyed to the readers. It is to a vast extent that all texts, through the application of deconstruction, are interpreted in the same perspective. There is then irony in the very blossoming of rose.

The depressiveness of the situation is that the new labels for literary theory and movement also contain such attitude where hope and happiness fear to tread. Each mentionable label after postmodernism is briefly discussed here in order to develop their relationship with the attitude to life that they convey through their theories. In order to justify my stance, we would discuss briefly some of the major labels given in the 'after' condition of postmodernism. The first one in the alphabetical order is Altermodernism by Nicholas Bourriaud (p. 12) who, in his manifesto, claims to propagate a 'synthesis between modernism and postcolonialism'. But this synthesis is even weirder for it propagates a global perception of otherness which is further alienation from the concepts of identity and ideology crisis at local level as in postmodernism. As the world has expanded its horizons with new developments, the societies of the world have evolved themselves into tiny islands of their own where the concept of otherness and the perception to be without the center is even far greater than it used to be in postmodernism. Hopelessness and unhappiness for man is even greater here. The feeling of being divided at the global scale and being in the constant flux of temporariness like nomads is all that would possess our altermodern hero. It might also imply that another generation of writers following altermodernism would be involved in a meaning making activity where the center would always be missing. Should it? Does it?

Next in the orderly list of labels trying to replace postmodernism is Automodernism by Robert Samuels. It is closely related to the

scientific automation of human mind, heart and activities that human beings are reduced to the state of being mechanical all the time and deviance from mechanics of routine life is subject to non-existence of that individual on this planet. Samuels argues that automodernism is 'libertarian backlash against the postmodern welfare state' (p. 4). He also argues that the contemporary man is driven and distracted through media, virtual realities and games which have put his ability of reasoning aside (p. 127). Primarily, the concept of Samuels is based on the assumption that every new movement and theory must be the antithesis of the previous one. In this case if postmodernism is progressive, automodernism is completely uncritical. It is a reaction against postmodernism. His automodernism argues about the human beings to be the part of virtual realities that have been replaced by the external physical realities and media has a great role to play in it. Interestingly, the extension of this concept is driven by the idea of popular postmodern Marxist Fredric Jameson. The criticism, eventually, thus lies towards capitalism that has engaged mankind into virtual realities making them unable to use social reasoning in their lives. This idea of man being the voluntary slave of automations presents a clear picture of depressiveness of man on this planet. As a Marxist, hope though may lie in the effort, the clutches of capitalism have become so strong that there does not seem to be any kind of hope in the social and individual realities as discussed by Samuels.

Alan Kirby, in his popular research essay on the death of postmodernism argues that postmodernism had held itself in the ironies where knowledge and meanings were suspended and evaded (p. 3). However, this concept is long gone and is being replaced by a phenomenon of post postmodernism or better to say Digimodernism. At the academic level, postmodernism has become a movement of the syllabus of students who are studying it as some movement and theory of the past. Kirby argues that the inflow of new technologies and gadgets has redefined the relationship among the writer, reader and the text. It is a culture of pseudo-modernism that has completely taken the world away by suspending him in the existing reality (p. 6). The use of internet, television and other technologically advanced gadgets now 'involve' the people and with just one click they are taken away from the place they are sitting in (p. 5). They are not in the room of gadgetry anymore. Kirby

uses the term 'silent autism' which drives the people throughout their lives by taking them into a state of unreal trance. His popular sentence at the end of essay says that 'Youclick, youpunchthekeys, youareinvolved, engulfed' (p. 6). The human being is no more. Likewise, there is neither author, nor text, nor time and place. There is just the reader who is everything. This kind of fragmentation of man is another way of taking him into depressiveness where things are sticking to the pieces rather than to whole. Reasoning and understanding of the world is through the specs of neurotic trance. Man is thus gripped by the digitalized world, totally disconnected from elements of earth.

Hypermodernism by Lipovetsky takes our attention to the absurdist school of thought with strangeness in the world and painful meaninglessness of human existence. Human beings are no more than voracious consumers involved in the fulfillment of hedonistic desires which in turn creates absurd emptiness in the individual and he is stuck between the desire and pain. He tries to be sovereign, a complete master of himself, yet he is governed by the overarching and overshadowing speedy changes in technology and everchanging perceptions of time and space. He is confused and unclear. This makes him ever more depressed. Lipovetsky is also thus presenting a reality quite worrisome and depressing which would even take the readers further into the fathoms of meaninglessness of life.

Vermeulen and Akker argue in the very first line of their popular paper *Notes on Metamodernism* that 'the postmodern years of plenty, pastiche and parataxis are over' (p. 1). Their argument is that metamodernism swings like pendulum between different states and feelings like 'hope and failure, modern desire and postmodern irony, purity and ambiguity' (p. 5) and so on. Hence, it is not a definite state. There is a constant tension between 'desire' and doubts (p. 6). Whenever, the pendulum sways towards one aspect, it comes back to its opposite and thus the cultural manifestations and social practices keep on moving from one feeling to another aspiring for the balance and yet there is no balance at all. There is a certain kind of romanticism in the oscillations of the pendulum, but this romance is not tension free. One sided extremity reigns all the time in the art works. It can be too much of the depressiveness at a time and too much of happiness. What fails this

approach to be comprehensive is its inability to encompass all. This departure from completeness is what makes art work biased and one sided. There is a peril of the writer for touching one extreme of life and negating the other one. Taking into consideration the question if romance exists in living up to one extreme, the classical romantics would completely agree that it is being on one extreme where thoughts and emotions are allowed to be wild and captivate human existence. Yet, one extreme is short lived in most of the cases of art. The desire for universality thus dies down and the produced art work hangs in the temporariness of extremity.

Performatism is a “transition from metaphysical pessimism to metaphysical optimism” (Eshleman, p. 7). Performatism offers certain characteristics to works that have ‘monism, double closure, authoriality, theism, mimesis, ethics of preparation and belief’ (p. 4). These terms signify that there is aspiration by the artists and writers to go for unity in specific definite clear narrative style with firm beliefs in whatever they are expressing. It is thus a concept of optimism that gives certain happiness and hope to the readers. Eshleman argues that the age of postmodernism is long gone and the new writers have started asserting themselves in their writings. The author is not dead anymore. There is no overarching irony in the writings. There is a unity of the plot in the narratives. The postmodern condition of being in doubt and abiding there forever with plurality of meanings and inability to arrive at a single definite meaning is long gone. Now the writer is clear and definite in his voice and themes that he selects. He is optimist and wants to convey something either for didactic purpose or for the sake of pleasure, yet there is not hysteria being created in the writings. Eshleman tends to see hope and happiness in the contemporary writings. His attitude is a unique attempt to define the condition after postmodernism as most of the other literary theorists and researchers have not been able to clearly dissociate themselves from the doubtful, painful, depressing and unclear strokes of postmodernism. There is an attitude of happiness being expressed and promoted here in the post-postmodern condition by Eshleman. Although the use of term Performatism and its specified characteristics may be disagreeable on scholastic and academic basis, our discussion is confined to the domain of propagation of attitudes towards life as found in literary theories after postmodernism.

The death of postmodernism is also being acknowledged and discussed by other writers like Nicoline Timmer, Christian Moraru, Mary K. Holland, and Irmtraud Huber. But these researchers are either unable to do away with postmodernism completely like Christian Moraru who argues that cosmodernism still 'rel(ies) copiously on postmodern techniques' (p. 316). It is a 'weak epochality' for him (p. 314). However, Timmer's arguments point out the contemporary novelist's desire for belief (p. 359) and sameness. Most of Timmer's arguments are similar to that of Eshleman except with the differences on the views of language. Irmtraud Huber also takes about existence of belief in the literature of post-postmodernism, yet, this belief is in a doubtful condition. So she regards it a 'doubtful optimism' (p. 222). Having doubt on the existence of belief does not promote a clearly well-defined sense of happiness among the readers. Thus there is not very much to offer in the domain of happiness by Huber. The overshadowing attitude is mostly that of depressiveness.

Literary theorists and critics, thus, not only evaluate and interpret literature but also define the course of literary themes and styles. In the past century, most of the literary theories have been engulfed by the attitude of depressiveness. It may also be ascribed to the socio-political conditions of the past. However, in the domain of happiness, there was not much to offer. In the beginning of new century, where efforts are being made to ascertain the end of postmodernism, still most of the replacing labels propagate the same depressive attitude except for the theorists like Raoul Eshelman and Nicoline Timmer. Words in isolation do not have effect unless arranged in specific context and order. Literature thus becomes extremely influential in shaping not just the thoughts of the readers but also their social and individual actions. It is yet to be explored that there might be other sources of catharsis and purgation than tragedy. A lot has been written on the power of tragedy and its influence on man since Aristotle. Yet, there can be a question if tragedy is to be considered the only option as the best form of literature. Does depressiveness still hold meanings for the majority of readers of literature? Should humanity be bound within the walled gates of tragedy and depressiveness? Perhaps, statistical data might suggest that readers of literature are decreasing in number and percentage. It is also up to the

contemporary critics and theorists to define and set up goals which might bring about romance, joy, hope, effort, vigour, serenity, valour, chivalry, romance, faith, explorations, realism, adventures, authoriality, and authority in literature. Interestingly, the drops of these characteristics can also be observed in the contemporary literature.

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