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RESEARCH ARTICLE

SELF, GOD AND WORLD : A POSTMODERN PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

This paper tries to evaluate the Postmodern thought with special focus on the key concepts like 'self', 'God' and 'World' and 'values' by the key postmodernist thinkers of this novel Philosophy. It tries to reflect on the system of philosophies in West that aspired to foreground the existence of man in some fixed universal and objective truths. The truth has always been founded upon some metaphysical rational ideal and the quest of human struggle has been to attain such a truth. Such human aspiration has seriously been questioned by postmodernist thinkers to bring forth a paradigm shift. This paper gives a glimpse into the remarkable shift of thought.

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Introduction:-

The locus standi of postmodernism is generally figured out in contradistinction to methodological assumptions, epistemological presuppositions, onto-cosmological predilections and axiological orientations of eighteenth century European Enlightenment. Postmodernists are radically opposed to modernist or Enlightenment beliefs and notions of truth, reason and objectivity. They question totalistic ideologies of both universal progress and universal emancipation. They question all epistemological and methodological frameworks aiming at complete or total explanation or understanding of the universe including man. They question all philosophical grand - narratives or metanarratives. For postmodernists, there are no ultimate grounds of explanation, no ultimate foundations on which to raise metaphysical, ideological or theological systems. There are no objective accounts of values, truth and history. World - views and value Systems are culturally rooted. They are justifiable by recourse to cultural criteria and assumptions as well. They are mutually incomparable, incommensurable and untranslatable. The cultures and interpretations we are confronting across the globe, are too numerous and too diverse not to generate skeptical and agnostic attitudes and responses among us. The legitimating or grounding or totalizing manipulations of modernist reason are too feeble not to entice us back into the pluralistic wonderland of language - games no longer nostalgic about legitimation or in need of justification. Our World is radically characterized by instability and indeterminateness. Factually, Postmodernists have been deeply suspicious of all so called rationalist, transcendentalist, Universalist, eternalists knowledge-claims. All knowledge is contextual or situational. Any trans-contextual or trans- situational knowledge-claim is pretentious and impossible of achievement and even formulation. This epistemic or what may be called hermeneutic contextualism is radically elaborated in the writings of Jacques Derrida whose key principle of interpretation is most succinctly and tellingly formulated as 'there is nothing outside the text'. The meaning of any text or statement or proposition is condemned to remain indeterminate in view of the utter unavailability of any metatextual or transtextual or extratextual reference point by recourse to which we could determine the meaning of any text under consideration. In view of the absence of such a reference point, any text anytime anywhere and anyhow is amenable to multiple interpretations. No interpretation can arrogate to itself any privileged position of revealing a core or basic or central meaning of a text. The very quest for a correct

interpretation of any text is misplaced and by the very nature of the case, can never be successfully accomplished. It is simply impossible to fix or determine the meaning of any text through any interpretative strategy whatsoever. Derrida would say that we can never discover or arrive at a stable signified on which to ground meaning. A text has the potential of emanating numberless meanings. Any text is amenable to chaotic play of interpretations, readings and meanings. Any text is perennially characterized by uncertainty, uncontrollability and hyperdynamicity in view of its inherent and ineliminable polysemicity. Even the intention of the so-called author of a text can signify only one of the possible meanings. Once a text is worked out or accomplished, it gets independent of the author. The signs that make up the text play infinitely against each other to defeat any possibility of a stable meaning. For Derrida, meaning entails endless signification. A postmodernist like Derrida would point out that there is always the possibility of disrupting the fixity or rigidity of meaning, alternative meanings, as if, are always hovering over our semantic smugness or hermeneutical complacency. For Derrida, texts cannot be tied to any single source of meaning. There are infinite possible contexts of interpretation leading to what Derrida describes as 'dissemination' or infinite proliferation or multiplication of meanings. The possibility of infinite recontextualisations and reinterpretation cannot be ruled out at any point of time. That reality or essence of God can never be vouchsafed to human reason is one of the commonplaces of philosophical romanticists, mystics, poets, hermeneuticists, methodologists and analysts. We can at best, know what God is like only by knowing what he is not like. We can attain to some possible clue as to what God is only by denying or negating those attributes to Him that belong to things within our spatial and temporal or material parameters of experience. The apophatical mystical philosophers such as Pseudo-Dionysius and others point out that we understand what God is by knowing what He is not. The foremost Vedanta philosopher Sankara also held that we can never positively clinch as to what God is, we can only negatively describe as to what Brahman is not. The Mu'tazilites were negative theologians as well. They have elaborately brought out as to what God is not. For example, for Mu'tazilites, God is not a body, nor an object nor volume or weight, nor form etc. He is not comprised of parts, divisions, limbs etc. He is indescribable or beyond description. Heidegger and Derrida, following Kant, bring out an antimetaphysical or non-conceptual account of philosophy. We cannot approach God theologically or metaphysically. However, an apophatical or non-metaphysical or non-theological account of God is possible. Such a God can be revealed to us though we cannot say anything definitively about Him. For Heidegger and Derrida like mystical thinkers of all times, our espousal of God does not essentially belong to the order of cognitive determination. God is not available by recourse to theological conceptualization or metaphysical speculation or dialectical argumentation. In classical philosophy and theology, man has almost universally been invested with a transcendental and eternal soul or atman. Even the modern western philosophy started the Cartesian cogito. The rational subject was deemed to be both the source of knowledge and source of values. The classical philosophical theologies had assigned to 'Self' or 'Soul' moral responsibility and were deemed eschatologically accountable. However, this account of human subject has been powerfully challenged by postmodernists. After Hegel, Marx and Freud, Heidegger has provided a devastating critique of the time-honored concept of human subject. For Heidegger, man is not a 'transcendental cogito' or a metalinguistic, metasocial, metacultural and metapolitical entity. Man is rather a 'Dasein' or 'being-unto-world'. He is irreducibly situated. More importantly man belongs to the language he speaks. In fact, language speaks man more than man speaks language. Derrida goes further. The self or subject is 'inscribed' in and a function of language, for one can only be a self at all through speaking and this means one's speech will have to conform to language as a system of differences. The postmodern intellectual is doubly disillusioned. He is disillusioned with the modernist who is skeptical of theological metanarratives, totalitarian and totalizing grand narratives. He is radically skeptical of grandiloquent modernist ontologies, cosmologies, axiologies and epistemologies. He is also most radically skeptical of ideologies such as Humanism, Liberalism and Socialism. He is deeply disillusioned with the Enlightenment European vision of transforming the world in the name of rational progress. The postmodern intellectual is categorically clear that our quest for knowledge, truth, meaning, value, reality etc. is groundless and foundationless. In view of the same, our age-old search for an integrated world-view and value-system is impossible of realization. The postmodern human order is characterized by existential despair, epistemological skepticism, moral nihilism and theo-ontological agnosticism. The modernist thinkers brushed with scientific findings underlined that truth is correspondence of propositions with reality or with world as it is. For postmodernists, there is not one, single, independently real world. There are no facts. There are only interpretations. There is no universal, eternal, substantial one and the only world to which our propositions do correspond to for the attainment of truth. The world is in fact, multiculturally, multiformulationally and multiparadiagmatically experienced, approached and negotiated. The apparently one and the only world has inspired countless descriptions and interpretations and numberless stories and narratives. Beauty really lies in the eyes of the beholder. We are as much in the World as the world is in us. Our presuppositions, postulates, values, beliefs and attitudes orientate us to a specific interpretation of the world. In fact our understanding or interpretation of the world can be additive, subtractive, multiplicative and divisive. It never

does offer us an exact, accurate and correct account of the world. All our philosophical interpretations such as idealism, materialism, monism, dualism, pluralism, Positivism etc. are incorrigibly distorting the splendor of the world. The postmodernists are acutely conscious of the paradoxical nature of human condition of our world situation and of our linguistic formulations. Any position entails a counter – position, any definition entails a counterdefinition, any argument entails counterargument and any formulation entails a counter-formulation. All discourses are mutually reinforcing and mutually parasitical. Theism entails atheism, idealism entails materialism, realism is parasitical on antirealism, ontology reinforces epistemology, axiology inspires metaphysics etc. Man is really caught in a multi-complex rather in paradoxical situation. For example the postmodern discourse is itself parasitical on modernist discourse.

Defining postmodernism entails searching for an essence of postmodernism. However, any search for a core or essence of postmodernism goes against the radically anti-essentialist stance of postmodernism. In view of the same, postmodernism at its critical and methodological best, does not take sides in philosophy, theology, literary criticism, culture, social sciences or historiography. Take, for example, ‘God exists - God does not exist’ debate. Postmodernism as a methodological program is neither theistic antitheistic. It neither supports nor opposes either theism or atheism. It does not say as to whether God exists or does not exist. It only says that theism is methodologically speaking as vulnerable as atheism. A deconstructive critique of theism is as warranted as a deconstructive critique of atheism.

Man has been perennially trying to maximize his happiness and minimize his pain. He wants to engage in endeavors that are as pleasant and painless as possible. He wants to engage in a business that is devoid of loss and full of profit. He wants to be powerful or all powerful. He wants to give up all that leads to weakness, deficiency and limitation. He wants to appropriate grace and honour and avoid all that violates grace or is humiliating. He wants to appropriate all values and abandon all disvalues. However, we need to have absolute values with a view to appropriating all that is good and avoiding all that is evil. Postmodernists warn us that there are no absolute values and no absolute disvalues. All values are Conditional, contextual, situational and relative. Postmodern philosophers deem our quest for ultimate and absolute grounds or principles to be hopelessly groundless. We can never have metacontextual grounds with a view to proving our beliefs and values. The world is already culturally, historically and ideologically interpreted for us. Furthermore, the world is also, axiologically speaking value-neutral. The world is not only epistemologically unreliable and metaphysically contingent; it is corroded by value-neutrality as well. Postmodernists advocate that all cultural paradigms, language-games and conceptual frameworks are mutually incommensurable. In view of this paradigmatic incommensurability, we are condemned to live in a pluralistic, multicultural, Multi-philosophical, multi-theological, multi-ideological and multi-versional world.

The Modern Age was founded upon the ancient Greek idea that the world makes sense. It also rests on secularized versions of Christianity and its notions of human unity and equality and its denial of state control of conscience. More immediately, the Modern Age takes many ideas from eighteenth century Enlightenment which stressed belief in the value and power of reason. Faith in science and the idea of applying reason and science to subdue nature, in order to make of earth a Utopia, a place of peace and plenty. The enlightenment idea of history is the story of progress over irrational ‘customs’, ‘superstitions’, religious and oppressive politics of the past. This view of history as a unified story with a bright conclusion was a secularized version of the Christian account.

Postmodernism may be said to be a powerful critique or repudiation of the central characteristics of the Modern Age. It challenges or denies outright the principal truths of western civilization, especially those of Enlightenment. These ‘truths’ insofar as they present a coherent view of the human condition or of history, are known as “meta-narratives” that render meaning to individual lives as part of larger wholes. Thus, the Biblical account of humanity as expelled from paradise and destined to find redemption in faith is meta-narrative.

The postmodernist label has been attached to a number of German and French philosophers. Amongst nineteenth century philosophers Nietzsche is deemed to be the originator of the postmodernist turn. For Nietzsche there are no facts, there are only interpretations. Truths are illusions of which one has forgotten that this is what they are. Statements cannot be true in virtue of a correspondence with reality since conceptualization and language impose a structure on what we experience which in itself, reality does not have. Heidegger’s contribution to the rise of postmodernism is his vigorous rejection of metaphysics as the attempt to provide grounds or foundations for our basic practices, discourses and beliefs.

Lyotard, defines postmodernism to be as 'incredulity towards metanarratives. Derrida attempts a deconstruction of western metaphysics of presence discovering self-contradictions in the metaphysical discourse of various metaphysical philosophers. Foucault, following Nietzsche, tries to bring out intimate relationship between knowledge and power. Ronald Barthes declares the 'death of the author', which is a rhetorical way of asserting the independence of the text. In this postmodernist scenario there are no absolutes or fixed points, so that the universe we live in is 'decentred'. The anti-theoretical stand of postmodernists is essentially a theoretical stand. Postmodernists contradict themselves by relinquishing truth-claims in their own writings.

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