



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

Hundred Years of High Modernism: Ruminations in Retrospect and Prospect

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Abstract

That literary-historical periods and their nomenclature are more of retrospective conception that we form about past events than being absolute facts, is expressly visible with categories like 'renaissance', 'classicism', 'romanticism', 'modernism' and 'postmodernism'. However, "We cannot not periodize" (29) is the first of the four maxims about modernity given by Friedric Jameson in his 2006 book *A Singular Modernity: Essay on the Ontology of the Present*. 'Modern', 'modernity', 'modernization' and 'modernism', along with their socio-politico-cultural dimensions are temporally problematic and slippery since it is problematic to define 'now-ness'. Yet, setting a date and positing a beginning is inevitable, as argues Jameson. The paper assesses modernism as an ontological and epistemological framework, how it has been treated and is being treated and parallelly at its Indian counter-framework .

Key Words: High Modernism, Enlightenment, modernity, Make it New, *Punarnavata*

*What might have been and what has been
Point to one end, which is always present
[Eliot, *Burnt Norton*]*

The mind that created the lines given above – a mind equally observant of "Time present and time past" – was not separate from the man who gave the "time's most accurate data" in his typescript of *He Do the Police in Different Voices*¹, submitted to Pound by the end of 1921 (later known as *The Waste Land*).

¹A dedicated website can be found on the Web for exploring different voices on the text by the URL <http://hedothepolice.org/>

"Ulysses is going to make my place famous," wrote Sylvia Beach to James Joyce when she was publishing his novel - a challenging novel, written over seven years in three cities depicting the events of a single day in Dublin. And it did. On 2 February 1922, Beach published the first book edition of *Ulysses*, just in time for Joyce's 40th birthday. Eliot, writing in 1923, believed *Ulysses* was "the most important expression which the present age has found".

While every great work of literature is a commentary on its 'present', a group of writer-thinkers around the second decade of the twentieth century striving to reflect the horrors of the Great War and the subsequent socio-culturally "unreal city" were highly influenced by Henri Bergson's *l'aduree*². Eliot's "Tradition and Individual Talent" and *The Waste Land*, Joyce's epiphanies in *Portrait* and *Ulysses*, Woolf's "Modern Fiction", the stream of consciousness in *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*, Kafka's *The Trial*, Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* (also translated as *Remembrance of Things Past*) and half a dozen other works – all published during the early 1920s – had already reflected heightened concern with time, specifically the 'present' time, through avant-garde techniques. By the time Pound employed the phrase 'Make it New' in 1928 (interestingly borrowed from a bathtub-inscription of a Chinese king), a tradition of *modernus* and *novus* had already been established. Thus, modernism, while breaking away from the tradition, cannot but acknowledge a tradition, especially when looked in retrospect after hundred years. (In many ways, it rather laments the breakaway: one might recall the historical-cultural connotations in Eliot's "heap of broken images".)

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Though the roots of the twentieth century European modernism can be traced back to the mid-nineteenth century, and they only solidified with the *fin de siècle*, 'High Modernism' refers to a radical break in the Western aesthetic sensibility – what Bradbury and McFarlane would call the third category of displacement in cultural seismology leading to "cataclysmic upheavals of culture... that seem to topple even the most solid and substantial of our beliefs and assumptions" (19) – a result of 'enlightened' humanism, technological expansiveness, and the emergence of new political, economic and the social forms of organization.

² Incidentally, both Einstein and Bergson met on April 6, 1922, at the *Paris Société Française de Philosophie* for Einstein's lecture on Relativity and debated about the nature of time. The proceedings can be accessed at <https://www.themarginalian.org/2015/12/09/the-physicist-and-the-philosopher-einstein-bergson-jimena-canales/>

For Habib, the ideals of the Enlightenment, embodied in the various institutions of the capitalist world, and its ideologies of rational, scientific advance, material and moral progress, individualism, and the economic and cultural centrality of Europe, had culminated in a catastrophe on many levels, economic, political, and moral. The consequent psychological and material devastation led thinkers in all domains to question both the heritage of the Enlightenment and the very foundations of Western civilization. Long-held assumptions – concerning reason, historical progress, and the moral autonomy of human beings – were plunged into crisis. (189)

However, in this apparent anarchy and disorientation was emerging consciously or unconsciously a new state of what is today called ‘modernity’. Considering the etymology of the term, the prevailing conventional moods of expression in arts could not accord with the ‘nowness’ of the contemporary society. Therefore, modernist literature reflected and adopted Ezra Pound’s ‘Make it New’ with a view to changing the aesthetic order in such a way as would echo the fragmented state of contemporary society and would be ‘deliberately difficult’, rendering complexity and shock to the readers through newer techniques, modes of narration, allusions and free verse. Peeping into the interior of the character through techniques like stream of consciousness and interior monologue rather than focusing on the exterior objects is another remarkable feature of modernist literature, especially prose. These and other experimentations in various art forms including literature gave rise to ‘Avant Garde’ cult.

Modernism in Europe is a broad movement comprising a series of artistic movements between 1910 and 1930. Its major exponents are Marcel Proust, James Joyce, Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, William Faulkner, Virginia Woolf, Luigi Pirandello, and Franz Kafka among others. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* (1922), Joyce’s *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916), *Ulysses* (1922) and *Finnegans Wake* (1939), Woolf’s *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) and *To the Lighthouse* (1927) are epitomes of what is called ‘High Modernism’. “What underlies modernistic literary forms is an awareness that the definition of reality is complex and problematic.” (Habib 196) Habib also enumerates the features of the ‘high modernist’ works: 1) the affirmation of a continuity between the self and the world, which are viewed as shaping each other; (2) a perception of the complex roles of time, memory, and history in the mutual construction of self and world. Time is not conceived in a static model which separates past, present, and future as discrete elements in linear relation; rather, it is viewed as dynamic, with these elements influencing and changing one another; (3) a breakdown of any linear narrative structure: modernist poetry tends to be fragmented, creating its own internal “logic” of emotion, image, sound, symbol, and mood; (4) a self-consciousness regarding the process of literary composition. This embraces both an awareness of how one’s own work relates to the literary tradition as a whole, and also an ironic stance toward the content of one’s own work; (5) finally, and most importantly, an awareness of the problematic nature of language. Modernists display an aversion to so-called “literal” language which might presume a one-to-one correspondence between words and things; modernist poetry relies more on suggestion and allusion, aiming to construct alternative visions of reality.

Looking at High Modernism in retrospect, one finds that in the past hundred years, modernism has been treated in numerous ways by scholars, students and common readers. High modernist writers and texts have been (and are being) racialized, gendered, queered, classed, globalized, postcolonialized, popularized, silver-screened,

theatrized and much more. Some obvious questions while celebrating the centenary of high modernism would be: Where does modernism stand now? Or where do we stand vis-à-vis modernism? What is its current trajectory? What are we doing with modernism or the vice versa? The modernist 'grand narratives' gave way to postmodernist 'mini-narratives' in the second half of the twentieth century: Order, coherence, stability, rationality, objectivity and scientific truth gave way to postmodernist pessimism and poststructuralist "play" containing signifiers with no signifieds – surfaces without depth, that dominated the intellectual and cultural practices of the West for almost four decades, until postmodernism also began to falter as an intellectual-cultural system and remained merely a feckless, joyless play.

Having reached this far with modernism and its extension/reaction i.e. postmodernism, what one finds *now* is that (i) the twentieth century Enlightenment faith in rationality, progress, elitism and retrograde politics has certainly been destroyed for once and for all; rather it simply cannot sustain with the humongous transformation the world is witnessing today (ii) there has been a "sense of ending" already felt to the postmodern way of looking at things in the West by thinkers like Ihab Hasan, Linda Hutcheon, etc. (joined by Habermas, Jameson and Baudrillard among others) singing the demise of postmodernism and searching for a new label for the 'new modern' that our world is, and trying with terms like 'post-postmodernism', 'hyper-modernism' or 'neo-modernism'. In the sphere of Theory, this is echoed by a host of articles and books on 'The Death of Theory' or 'After Theory' (iii) the boundaries between most of the binary opposites that distinguished the modern world from the postmodern world are now found to be blurring. Ihab Hasan's chart schematized the difference between the two in his 1982 book *The Dismemberment of Orpheus* (viz. purpose vs. play, hierarchy vs. anarchy, distance vs. participation, presence vs. absence, centring vs. dispersal, product vs. performance, origin/cause vs. difference/trace, determinacy vs. indeterminacy, transcendence vs. immanence, etc.). A water-tight compartmentalization of this sort is no longer relevant. "We can see that most of the attributes in the right-hand column were already present in modernism... At every turn, the neat dichotomy between modernism and postmodernism is called into question." (Perloff 577)

The symptoms of modernity and modernization (leading towards modernism) have only magnified exponentially and irreversibly. In that case, located in the second decade of the twentieth century, how do we look at modernism and its practices today? First, the desire to 'make it new' still remains and shall perpetually stay, but the 'new' is now the new medium or mode of representation. As hyperreality replaces reality and we are grappling with emerging narratives of a 'meta-(uni)verse'³, visual texts are rapidly replacing verbal texts, kindles are replacing paper, publication industry (especially self-publication)⁴ is proliferating more than ever, experimentation in form is constantly felt through Instapoetry, ekphrastic poetry, tiny-tales and other categories of micro-fiction. Conventional humanities have been replaced by digital humanities to a great extent.

³ As is well-known now, the term 'metaverse', recently popularized by the social media-giant Facebook, owes its coinage to a 1992 sci-fi novel *Snow Crash* by Neal Stephenson. In this regard, a 2011 dystopian sci-fi *Ready Player One* by Ernest Cline is also worth mentioning.

⁴ Kindle Unlimited (KU), Amazon's e-book subscription program, is estimated to represent about 14% of all ebook reads in the Amazon ecosystem, according to Author Earnings and 85 percent of these are produced by self-published authors

Second, human footprints are being felt more strongly than ever on the planet. Excessive anthropocentrism, once the Renaissance modern, is now making us anticipate an imminent disaster. If modernity is ‘an incomplete project’ that perpetually continues, it is imperative to have an ethical and eco-sensitive turn to our contemporary modernities, and thereby to our modernisms, based on a non-capitalist and non-instrumental conception of nature and of rationality itself. Re-discovering and re-evaluation of the past ought to be connected to its relevance in the present.

Third, the end of the twentieth century and the first two decades of the twenty-first century already saw the West attempting to return to and restore the good-old values like truth, beauty, order, coherence and proportion – both in poetry and literary theory. For instance, after a prolonged fascination for free verse (initially started as a technique to reflect the fragmented Western modern society), the New Formalism – a movement flourished in the 1990s with American poets like Charles Martin, Timothy Steele, Phillis Levin, Marilyn Hacker, Dana Gioia etc.⁵ – sought “to prove scientifically that metered poetry may act as a technique to concentrate and reinforce our uniquely human tendency to make sense of the world in terms of truth, beauty and goodness.” (Spears 550) Attempts have been made by American novelists, critics and thinkers to negotiate the pessimism, detachment and irony of postmodernism through what Masud Zavarzadeh would call ‘metamodernism’ – a term for contemporary modernity used to mediate the modernist and postmodernist attitudes by positing that faith, trust, dialogue and sincerity can work to transcend postmodern irony and detachment. They use all the three denotations of the Greek prefix ‘meta’ to define metamodernism as ‘with the modern’, ‘beyond modern’ and ‘between modern and postmodern’. Rational as the coinage may be, nevertheless, it only shows the helplessness of the twenty-first century in finding a label for its contemporary modernity.

Fourth, the conventional narrative of modernity (and therefore of modernism) i.e. the narrative of West vs. the rest, where modernization becomes synonymous to westernization, can certainly not stand the current global scenario. Our study of modernity and modernisms can no longer remain oblivious of indigenous or alternative modernisms, especially when the Western society is defying its own established paradigm of a homogenous modernity. “Modernity is a shared and transcultural phenomenon... what we have in Europe is only one kind of modernity... it does not have a singular essence... it’s crucial features can be disaggregated.” (Singh) Susan Friedman views modernism in relation with historical conditions of modernity in a particular location. Therefore, multiple modernisms may emerge from multiple modernities, some of which might overlap with each other; yet “Every modernity has its distinctive modernism.” (qtd in Desai 25). Avadhesh Kumar Singh, in his article “Modernity as Renewal Mechanism”, defines modernity as

“an ongoing process of questioning the regnant logic of the self, society and its institutions. Over a period of time, people find fissures in the existing logic and question its validity. This refutation leads to the construction of a new logic that replaces the prevailing logic, hitherto rendered ‘old’. The new logic

⁵Most of them were students of the New Critics like J C Ransom, Yvor Winters, Allen Tate etc.

becomes modern until such time that it is replaced by a newer logic. This is how the renewal mechanism of Indian civilization works... “ (248)

Singh thus proposes the term ‘*Punarnavata*’ (renewability) for Indian modernity in place of ‘*navyata*’ (newness) – a term taken from the title of a Hazariprasad Dwivedi novel. In this sense, Buddha, Bhakti poets, Vivekanand, Aurobindo, Gandhi, Tagore were all modern. In the same line, Indian literatures have their distinct modernisms, that becomes too wide a discussion to be accommodated here.

Conclusion

With the spatio-temporal multiplicity of modernism, global modernism as a critical paradigm that comparatively reads and discusses local/regional modernisms and their connections is a undoubtedly the direction forward. As a methodological framework, global modernism involves “the comparative study of modernist texts written in different global locations; more complexly, it can refer to intertextual or interdiscursive practices, and the investigation of global cross-cultural influences within individual modernist texts. It can mean studying the rise of translation in the modernist period, or the global reception – past and present – of modernist works.” (Cuddy-Keane 558) In whatever direction literature goes, one thing that would never become out of fashion is close reading and analysis of texts.

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