

ESSAY

On Classification of Postmodern

BY IFTAKHAR IQBAL

THOUGH secularism, industrialization, urbanization, nationalism, liberalism, scientific socialism, democracy etc. are generally perceived as the symptoms of modern, they are not necessarily the last word of it. The most important thing about modern is that it is a comprehensive process of power. In the Western Europe, the renaissance, mercantilism, arrival of the Europeans in the 'dark' and 'savage' continents of Africa and Asia and modern-all processes started almost simultaneously. The project of modern became attractive and inevitable keeping intimate consonance with the process in which renaissance spread, capitalism flourished, the Europeans turned political.

The term modern started appearing in the West's intellectual front in the early 16th century (in a poem by Dunbar around 1520 AD; in another poem addressing the British Queen). This is not a coincidence that the modern state just coming out of the womb of middle ages also increasingly got involved in the use of military technology.

In Europe (by the year 1500 AD) especially the new power changed significantly the power of the state, and the old, medieval structure were replaced by the foundation of the modern state.

At the same time, modern came as an intellectual dress-up to legalize the post-middle age empowerment process. Gradually it was made a popular import item for the colonies. But without consolidating power bases modern would not be an official agenda. Thus the historical modern age in South Asia starts right after the victory of the British over the locals in 1757 AD. Meanwhile as those materials and abstract phenomenon, issuing from industrial and technological revolution that nourished modern could not have stand firm without having hold or halt the economic management of the non-Western world. As a result, for the first time in history, the (ethnocentric) narrative of knowledge evolved. Power was joined to knowledge and at the same time the power of knowledge was fixed to the knowledge of power. The fullest and vivid account in this regard has been made by Edward Said in his book *Orientalism*.

That is, though knowledge, power and modern started their journey quite separately, soon became interdependent with the growth and globalization of capital. The process of pure learning that has been constant since the Socratic Greek thinkers to Ancient Asian and the Muslims, came to a tragic end with the hurly-burly of European expansion. Aristotle took knowledge to be nothing more or less than knowledge. In the 7th Century when Prophet Muhammad (SAS) symbolically suggested to go to China to acquire knowledge meant this precisely. Muslim scholars, during the speediest era of expansion, went everywhere from Andalusia to India with the military but did not seem to serve the economic interest of Medina, Baghdad, Cairo or Damascus with an economic strategy. But this pace of unmixed learning was frustrated by the intellectual agents of enlightenment. At a time when colonization process started getting impetus, Francis Bacon propounded that 'knowledge is power'. Robert Young pointed it clearly when he said that, 'All Western knowledge is a form of colonial discourse.' It is worth mentioning that when during the late 1700 AD the English were singing 'Rule Britannia Rule the Waves', Macaulay was talking about Indians of duality: Indian in skin, English in thought. Around the same time Rudyard Kipling was asking the English parents to sent in their most brilliant sons of Africa to humanize the 'half devils and half child'.

More open confession came from Marlow's hero, Dr Faustus: I will have them (spirit) fly to India for gold

Ransack the Ocean for Oriental pearl

Interestingly the discourse of desire also evolved around this time. An example can be drawn from the verses of Tennyson:

I will take some savage woman
She shall rear my dusky race

Here as Marlow was sure of the situation in which his power could collect Indian gold or oriental pearl, Tennyson was also sure about his power to make dark savage women his choice.

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Now on the question of classification of postmodern it may be pertinent to ask if postmodern is (1) a subtler face of the potentiality of the modern or (2) a conscious anti-modern discourse. The writer of the topic thinks that both the questions can be answered in the affirmative provided that they are presented in two different paradigms. One is Western, another is Oriental.

Before and until and Second World War the concept of modern was nourished both in art and literature and socio-economic sphere and postmodern came to be noticed as early as 1950s. In 1956 Arnold Toynbee referred to 'Our Post-modern age of Western history.' And still now the debate of postmodern is going on with added dimension of globalization. We will now briefly focus on the cultural, technological, creative and

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theoretical expressions of Western Postmodern.

Recently a picture of a model presented by AFP was published in a Daily in Dhaka. In the picture, a youthful woman was, taking her head little back, posing her expanded breast before the reader's eyes. Over it there was a colourful bra. Underneath, these words: A model shows off results of a pumped off inflatable bikini top by Cole of California Inc recently in Los Angeles. Adapting a technology first used in pump athletic sneakers, the new suit allows a woman to inflate her bikini bra larger than normal.

It might be easily understood that it is neither this woman, nor the mystery her feminine beauty nor even her Venetian breast, what is important is the Cole of California Company and its new product. Here human becomes the doll of capital. In the context of flow of capital and consumerism, this serves as the sign of postmodern, an inevitable continuation of modern. Only difference is that when in modern time human dignity and environmental unconsciousness was not expressed so remarkably in such advertisements and other related images, postmoderns make no room for any normative projection as such.

In this sector, postmodern is connected with post-industrial state of things. Throughout the colonial age, the European industrialization was kept alive by the raw materials collected from the colonies. Heavy industry like steel, railway, chemical, shipping, textile etc had their tremendous growth. Britain, France, the US reached this stage of industrialisation during the First World War. Around the Second World War, other West European countries and Japan reached this stage. But now, as Francis Fukuyama (1992) observes, this traditional industrial establishment has been obsolete long ago and has now become a part of Western history. Many names have been given to the contemporary situation in the West: 'High Mass Consumption,' 'Technological Era,' 'Information Age,' 'Post-industrial Society,' etc. In other words, the modern of heavy industrialization has been replaced by postmodern of 'Information Super Highway' 'Silicon Valley', 'Soap Opera' 'Theme Park' 'Electric Orchard' etc. A computer scientist Berry Sherman comments:

It is very difficult to see any dignity in shoveling smelly chemicals; working in hospital laundries, or perhaps repetitively tightening four bolts on the same sub component on an assembly line.

Now the question is who will feed those who are living in a virtual technopia (technological utopia) and who meet sweat only in the tennis court and

golf lawn. The answer may easily come from multinational companies. They are investing in the developing countries where there is congenial atmosphere in which labour is cheap and abundant and natural resources are in stock. According to New Internationalist magazine, more than 80% of the world's labour force are the inhabitants of the poverty-stricken third world. The governments of the developing countries find it a great pride in having offer of FDI or EPZs. Various projects are carried out which is nothing less than modern. Questions are never raised if we are making 'our' present out of 'their' past, or going through 'our' industrialization out of 'their' post-industrialization, or if we are getting modern out of 'their' postmodern, wearing their worn cloths washed by the detergent of globalization? And that is not a small deal!

Here there are two parties or contexts. One involves those immigrant writers from former colonies now settled mainly in Britain, France, Germany, and the USA. They are talented. They, though hailing from the land of 'Others' as formulated by Orientalism, depict this 'other' and 'otherness' and the human environment of the 'other' in a new setting of colour and odour. As the Orient was made to be meant as a shadowy, foggy, mysterious phenomenon during the early mod-

ern times, these postmodern immigrant writers also present those narrative to the Western reader in a vivid and sophisticated mode of literary genre and devote their genius to sustain the Western world of imagination. Salman Rushdie is Indian. The Orient he brought to Europe is vivid, colourful, spontaneous, picturesque and magical. V S Naipaul comes from the Caribbean. He depicts Islam in such succulence that the narration sometimes seems strange to the Muslims themselves. Ben Okri comes from Africa and he has brought about African magic reality. All of them remind us of a kind of entertainment. As amid steel furniture, natural fibres of wood brings peace for eyes, a re-presentation of non-European expression and society soothes the mind of the Western postmodern in an age of monotonous media and electronic images. By writing Satanic Verses, Rushdie proved himself as a creative clown at the court/darbar of postmodern. The rest are termed by some as 'creative tourist' guide for the Western postmoderners'.

The incentive that is coming for the second party could be easily understood. The cosmic tension, alienation, frustration, 'thing fall apart/centre can not hold' all types of symptom of modern are coming in full swing in the postmodern writings. But the slightest urge for tradition or past that were present in the final stage of modernity has completely disappeared from the imaginative process of the postmodern writers. This condition is termed as 'nostalgia deco' (deconstruction of nostalgia), 'post culture', or 'the logic of late capitalism' 'disconnectedness' etc. With some exceptions the Western world of indigenous creativity is undergoing this trend. In Bengali, Syed Monjurul Islam and Bratya Raisu in one of their novels made an experiment of this kind.

Theoretical debate over postmodern is perceived by this writer as a semantic absurdity. In Bengali language, some scholars are trying hard to import the discourse of postmodern. They are translating some works of postmodern theoreticians. To the present writer, it seems that though the theoretical debate has added new dimensions in the culture of knowledge, in the final analysis most postmodern theoreticians have failed to come out of the in-built ethnocentric knowledge/power nexus. Michel Foucault admitted that the Science had been so arranged on the floor of learning in Europe that the non-Europe would be bound to accept it. 'They appeared when man constituted himself in western culture as

both that which must be conceived of and that which is to be known.'

But even after confessing this, he failed to admit that the Imperial Europe had done injustice to the non-Europe. Edward Said though partly inspired by Foucault attacked him for his 'singular lack of interest in the force of effective resistance to power'. However it is not very easy to come out of the dominant social structure of power. For example, when Noam Chomsky was doing high postmodern linguistics, the capitalist media and academia was highly of him but when he came to talk about the injustice inherent in the global political economy and dishonesty of media, he was out of grace. But the instance of Chomsky at the same time also denotes that anyone coming out of the absurd paradigm of western postmodern automatically slips into the non-Western postmodern. There is no other viable alternative.

The oriental or non-Western postmodern see modern in great doubt and tend to deny the whole project of modern. The reason rests in the very basic character of modern. In other words, there are two broad reasons.

Modernization has not been carried out in the non-Western lands in the same fashion as it has been in Europe. As a result global equity could

not be established. Moreover the myth of modern continues to flow in the non-Western world in some sort in the post-colonial global instrumentality.

Non-West were in most cases made to lose the memory of their traditional social paradigm and ethnic ontology of life. As a result of this gap, Western or (Westernity of) modern and in that case postmodern seem to the Non-West as foggy, irrational and a difficult phenomenon. Naturally they do not find it easy to subscribe to them.

A considerable debate regarding this has been made in the West Bengal. One was a book of criticism edited by Virendra Chakravarty. Now we shall see why the phenomenon of non-Western postmodern is different and when did the latter postmodern start to operate. We will however be confined within Bengal.

During the Battle of Plassey in 1757, Sirajuddowla did not get any strategic support from his fellow countrymen due to the absence of 'nationalism'. But when the weight of colonial power and challenge began to fall upon the masses, they began to respond. Throughout the British rule the neo-urban 'educated bhadralok (gentleman)' consciously kept themselves aloof from the storm of resistance that subalterns, the simple hearted bearers of the traditions and folklore, initiated. Besides, the Asiatic Society (1784), Permanent Settlement (1793), Calcutta University (1837) and other similar institutions created species of Indian who could easily make their place in the official circle as ideological children of Macaulay. A strange flow of indifference was spread among these neo-urban of Calcutta who never noticed how the indigo cultivators lived, how the peasants were doing under the Permanent Settlement. It seemed that the interest of 'modern' intellectuals, clerks, proto-bureaucrats, permanent settlement-invented zamindars (land lords), and their children were mingled together by an 'invisible' mechanism. All paid offering to the god of modern but they could not notice that the offerings were sailing to Britannia before their modernized eyes.

But there is proof that some, though very few in numbers, realized it. One of them was Raja Rammohun Roy. An observation on him by Sri Atul Chandra Gupta made in one of his essays written in 1325 (1918/19 AD) amply illustrates Rammohun's view:

.....He (Rammohun) wanted to plant in Asia the arts and science of Modern Europe where through the water and sunlight of our own mind the tree of knowledge will find new buds and

branches, new flowers and fruits; the beauty and prosperity of civilization would increase. But the English education that started was not what Rammohun Roy had wanted. Its aim is not to plant the European tree of knowledge in this country, but to bring some flowers, fruits, leaves and show them before the people of this land. And the decorative elements are to be borrowed regularly. Because the flowers and leaves of knowledge gets staled and faded in a single night. (translation mine) (Sabuj Patra 1325, 5th year, vol. 2)

In fact, sitting in Calcutta, when Bengali creative writers were singing the same song of post-War Western frustration, or telling the story of pan-atheism and negation or creating verses of sexual and surreal flight or talking about Chilka lake, and when under the banner of 'Rupashi Bengal' (Beautiful Bengal) Wordsworth's song of forests were replayed in the Bengali verses, then in far, very far from Calcutta, homely rendezvous were taking place among the peasants where the Puthi of 'Manasha Mongol' or 'Yousuf Julekha' were being recited. After working so hard in the lands and farms under the control of the colonial administrative agents, the peasants were having all the warmth of their joys and sorrows that come down from the earth that surrounds them. These third party who during the overwhelming modernization project saved Bengali heart from getting dried up were in fact the first Oriental postmodern. In this context, it can be said that in the capacity in which Govinda Chandra Dev, Jasimuddin, Farrugh Ahmed, Syed Ali Ashraf are, due to their affiliation with raw traditional sentiments, thought to be short of modern or unmodern by the modern critics, they are postmodern. During the 1980s and 1990s this trend has largely been revived in Bangladesh and West Bengal. And now some are coming little more advanced in assuming that the difference between the poets of the 1930s and Rabindranath Tagore is not of some deep philosophy as much they are of style and genre the difference is not revolutionary. Their mutual relations are similar to the relations between Shelley, Keats, Byron in one hand and Eliot, Pound, Auden on the other. All of them are modern. The first school initiated it, the second school brought completion to the project. Their creative enterprises are tuned in the same tone.

We would like to end the discussion with a doubt by Jibanananda Das who happened to be the most a genius of poets of the 1930s. He wrote in one of his unpublished prose works: 'My poems might have shown some consciousness about society and history, has wanted to have further entrance into greater consciousness. But has it got that perception or wisdom (gyandrishti) which could lead society to new avenues?' (translation mine).

It may be the case that the furtherance of the unbleomed wisdom of Jibanananda Das has taken place or is taking place through them who are giving life to the post-modern perception. They are addressing themselves as post-modern and this is not unnatural.

Though in talking about non-Western postmodern we have taken up mainly Bengal and Bangladesh, and selected the area of creative expression, it might be mentioned that a movement in this trend is being visible in sectors including politics and social thoughts in various non-Western, mostly in Muslim, countries. An explanation as to this could be that the Muslim societies were mostly exposed to the onslaught of modern and the reaction has been severe. At the same time there is another group of scholars who having some initial observation of the trend would tend to equate this postmodern with 'fundamentalism'. It might be left to further analysis if this Oriental postmodern is necessarily a pure religious project or it involves other things including the memory of historical deprivation, contemporary cultural domination, and a wide ranging dissatisfaction over failure of the modern nation-states to bring about social and economic justice.

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POEM

Durga Puja

BY SUDEEP SEN

today/man will triumph over gods
T Khair, 'My India Diary IV'

1
Through the swirling fumes of the scented incense, the arati echoes as the priest hums, and the Chandipaat chants in a scriptural rhyme.

From the bamboo pedestal she stares through her painted pupils, frescoed and tinselled, the three-eyed pratima of the Goddess Durga --

resplendent, statuesque, armed with ten hands on her roaring chariot, her glazed clay demeanour, poised, even after the mythic bloody war.

Every year after the monsoons diminish, she comes partly to perform heriot high from her Himalayan palace sculpted in fresh snow and the open sky.

to the earth where she once belonged, her home with the voice of her parents and people, reminiscing the quadrangle of her playful days.

Today, and for the next four days, we worship and rejoice at her presence and her victory over Ashoor, the demon,

half-emerging from the deceptive black buffalo, as she spears his green body crimson in a cathartic end to the Crusades.

These five days are hers, exclusively hers, even her children -- Saraswati, Lakshmi, Ganesh, and Kartik -- fade in her presence.

For five days we spark and light, sing and dance, laugh and cheer, untutored, uninhibited, unlike the rest of the year.

The dashami came even before we realised the barone was graced. After the mid-afternoon rites, the procession began --

Durga's face totally effaced, red and white with sindoor and sandesh, or perhaps it is the residual stains of the fervent worship;

her body weary, her coat of arms mutilated, often dismembered, as she sits on open lories, while the young men and women

dance the continuous drum beats, possessed -- and Durga, bewildered, now one of the multitude -- a rare frozen moment when the gods look human.

Though it may seem today that men will triumph over the goddess, that her immersion at the ghats with mortal hands seem real,

it is, like some myths, only an illusion of victory and sadness, as she mingles, melting with the great siltling Ganga,

her soft clay body browning the greenish-blue bhasbaan waters, the damp stripping her flesh bare, as we hear the receding din of the last offerings.

see the muted wick's faint glimmer of the floating earthen lamps, and the moonlight's occasional flicker on the damp strewn petals.

as she wades her way upstream miraculously through the cantilever of debris, dirt, sewage and homage of many unknown towns and villages.

back, to the pristine snow-crowned peaks, where triad incarnate Shiva welcomes her home in an unusual dance of life;

while we, on the earth, await her return the following year, perhaps to celebrate, perhaps to pray, perhaps to forget

the life around, but perhaps to believe that really, without fear, the life force still lives, that the celestial cycles still exist

just as Durga visits, once every year, ceaselessly, just as, at the close of every season, she whispers from the heavens.

"Akhone aami aashhi" -- that I'll return once again -- Shahsti, Shaptami, Shtami, Nobami, Dasbami ... Shashti, Shaptami, Ashtami, Nobami, Dasbami.