

ESSAY

# Postmodernism: Intrusion or inevitability?

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Buzz word though it is, postmodernism is not bereft of epistemological substance. In literature it crept in on easy terms, in social science it has faced hurdles. The Derridian onslaught on structuralism through the concept of de-centring, difference or deconstruction earned it linguistic acceptance in the early 1960s. In social science it took off in the 1970s. However, Derrida's polemic in this regard cut across both literature and social science.

Social science from the very beginning set out to replicate methodological approaches of natural science, particularly techniques like empirical observation, verification or generalization. The Enlightenment in Europe, which advocated the notion of universal reason (thus viewing society through a single lens), also inspired social scientists to a large extent. As a result, building theory on society became an important agenda in social science. Marxian theory was quite wide in its scope as it included most institutions (economy, culture and politics) to explain their relationship, how they determine social change, including culture and politics. Within Marxism Gramsci accorded special importance to culture to understanding the perpetuation of and change in capitalism. After the First World War Marxian predictions of revolution in the capitalist countries of West Europe did not come to pass. Distrust devel-

oped about the effectiveness of Marxian theory. Further attempts at grand theory surfaced in configuring society as a system drawing analogy with structured organic beings, composed of different organs with defined relationships, where the totality defines the logic and a part in itself does not carry any meaning.

In the late 1970s a major assault came from Jean Francois Lyotard through a commissioned study of the French Quebec government on the status of knowledge in contemporary society, it comprised arguments and nomenclature that became weapons of a strong arsenal encrypted in concepts like language game (a la Wittgenstein), meta-narrative and others. Infusing a high dose of relativeness, it compared knowledge accounts with narrative. The latter primarily means a body of reflections related to different levels of human existence, starting from intimate relations to scientific conjectures. Out of an imperative accounting of life and cosmos takes place, myths abound. Modernism is the most recent narrative of contemporary life. Each narrative is based on its own principles, furnishes analyses as well as justification. Think of different religions and how each builds a narrative to explain mundane events. While each narrative presumes to certify the validity of other narratives, it becomes a meta-narrative. Besides, it is more cosmological in its analyses, tries to



Michel Foucault

fathom everything. The presence of different analytical paradigms in social science could not discard such theses of narrative, where the same phenomenon is interpreted in different ways just by changing the point of vision. Just think of the relationship between labour and capital. In the eyes of the conflict school, it is exploitation, while to functional-

ism it is mutual existence!

Jean Baudrillard introduced the notion of simulacra or hyper reality. How do capitalism and contemporary society survive? By creating hyper reality catered through media and other means. Sordid reality is camouflaged by hyper reality, Disneyland is created to establish things the other way round, to show how rational contemporary society is (which actually it is not)! Baudrillard claims that modern man cannot distinguish actual reality from hyper reality: it takes the latter as actual! Such an initiative primarily comes from the maneuvering of signs. Think of the significance of brands in contemporary life, of how they keep consumers spellbound, making them flip from one brand to another.

Michel Foucault's writings are a strong jolt to a conventional understanding of knowledge making. His notion of power or genealogy (derived from Nietzsche) puts into question the enterprise of disinterested knowledge that social science boasts of. Does knowledge come in so-called objective manner or does the power structure of a given society determine in the last instance its acceptability or validity? Dwell on recent polemics on the property rights of women, weigh the theological arguments. Do they listen to 'reason' and what they call atheism? Matters will be finally decided by the magnitude of mobilization of contending parties and semiotic maneuvering --- how to inter-

pret divine knowledge, posing a counter religious authority to validate 'modern' interpretation. Then where is the function of universal reason? Why does reason fail to penetrate the mind of the orthodox? Why does the meta-narrative of modernity fail before power conflict? If so, how then can you defend the project of modernity?

It means you cannot do science in contemporary society, which is informed by resurrected religion and the effect of power play. Actually the lack of a single paradigm has characterized social science since its inception, materialistic interpretation had to compete with interpretative understanding.

Although Fredric Jameson linked post modernism with Marxism through the Lacanian notion of the unconscious, calling it cultural logic of late capitalism, he finally admitted that what is around is really different from what we generally know by way of modern society. He coined the term pastiche to designate cultural creations. Most postmodernists dealt with contemporary capitalism and the logic of commodity to understand different issues related to post modernism. A slide from high culture to popular culture is justified by its commodity logic rather than aesthetics. But without aesthetics where does one find emotion?

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FICTION

# Bhadra . . . . .

NIAZ ZAMAN

In this month of Bhadra tal fruits are ripe in the trees,

Komola went out with a plate in her hands. She took her plate, she took a box, she took a quilt on her head,

She wandered around looking for her dear merchant.

Komolar Baromashi

Everyone says the weather is changing. Ma agrees. She says in Bhadra the sun would be very hot and everyone would put their clothes and kanthas and pillows out in the sun. Then the rain would start falling and everyone would rush out to bring the clothes in from the rain. But this Bhadra it has been raining as if it is Ashar or Sravan.

Bappy helped Baba and Ali Chacha to cut the jute which was growing at Khejurtala. Because of the pain in Baba's legs, Ali Chacha and Bappy had to do much of the work of retting the jute. Ali Chacha's son, Rahimuddin, who will give his exam with Bappy next year, also helped. I know that jute is an important crop, but I don't like the smell of jute. Most of the jute has been sold, but Ma kept a little to make shikas. She showed me how to braid the jute and has promised to show me how to make shikas.

Syed Barir Amma sent Piplu to call Ma a few days ago when the rains had finally stopped. Ma said she had asked me to go along, but that morning, Baba had a little fever but not too much for you to worry. Ma says that happens when people get old. One day they are well and then it rains too much or is too hot or they have eaten something they shouldn't have and bas things go wrong.

So I stayed behind while Ma went. She went immediately after milking the cow and giving the milk to Bappy to take to the market. Baba was still sleeping he had not been able to sleep well last night. Ma and I had to fan him and put wet patti on his head for the fever to come down. By fajr time the fever broke and he slept though he kept coughing now and then. Ma burned some garlic in mustard oil and rubbed his chest with the oil and garlic and that must have helped because after that he slept soundly.

When Ma left, he was still asleep. Ma reminded me to look after him while she was away. She needn't have. I know that I have to look after him after all, he is your father. And I would have looked after my father too if he weren't well.

When he woke up, he asked for Ma. He was a little upset that Ma had gone out. So I explained how Syed Barir Amma had sent Piplu early in the morning to call Ma and insisted that Ma was needed for a few hours only. If it hadn't been for Piplu coming and telling her that it was very important, she wouldn't have gone. Also Baba had no fever now. All he had to do was eat and rest and get well. When I asked him if he would like to have some hot milk with kholi, he said no. He wanted to have tea and moori with chillies and onions. It was good that Ma had made a little moori a few days ago to sell in the market and had kept some for us. So I made him some jhal moori and tea. But first I gave him some water because Ma said when people have fever they must have a lot of water. Baba had just a sip of water but he enjoyed the hot tea.

I made half a cup of tea for myself as well. I did not drink tea before I got married, and, at the beginning when I used to have a little tea with you, I didn't like it at all. But now when someone has tea, I have some as well. I think of how you enjoyed having tea with milk and a lot of gur.

For lunch Baba asked for begun pura and bhat. As Ma had not come back, I cooked the rice and dal and then took out the long sticks from the chula and let the begun roast in the ashes. Baba and Bappy ate together after which Bappy left for his coaching. Baba lay down on his bed, and I fanned him until he fell asleep.

When he woke up it was after asr, but Ma had still not come back. I was getting worried because when Ma goes to Syed Bari she usually comes back before asr.

When she came back, it was almost time for magrib. She was carrying two bundles, one wrapped in a sari, the other in a torn gamchha. She put the bundles down and

went to see how Baba was. Baba was still sleeping but, as she entered, he woke up.

"Have you eaten properly?" she asked. He nodded and blessed me. "She's not just a daughter-in-law. She's a daughter."

Ma was quiet for a few minutes. Shiuli was their daughter but Shiuli did not live at home with us. Ma had wanted Shiuli to leave Dhaka and come back home. Shiuli had

but only for a few days and then she had got married to Nasir Bhai. And though Nasir Bhai had gone back to Malaysia, she could not stay with her parents. All daughters had to get married and Shiuli was married and living in her in-laws' place as I was in mine. Daughters could not live with their parents forever. They had to leave.

Baba sniffed. "What have you brought? Smells like taler pitha."

"It is taler pitha," Ma said. "Syed Barir Amma asked me to help make some taler pitha the tal pulp had been taken out the day before and hung up for all the bitterness to drip. So I helped make about six or seven and she gave me one to bring home."

Ma opened the smaller bundle to reveal the taler pitha, all golden like ripe tal. "Would you like to eat some now?" Baba nodded and I brought a knife for Ma to slice the

home and I could not stay out for so many hours. But I would take care not to dirty the kantha. After all, I had made other kanthas for her with her old saris and everyone had admired them. That is why she had called me, she said. 'But you must come and show the women how to stitch fine kanthas. Every woman stitches kanthas but they are not as fine as yours.'

"I told her that the thick markin cloth would not allow us to take the small stitches I take in my kanthas."

"That is all right," she said, 'these kanthas will have more nakshas and just one border. An artist who has helped to design kanthas for Kumudini and Aarong will come next Monday. You must come also because the women who stitch kanthas will also be there.' After that she gave me the clothes and pitha."

The saris were very nice but, Ma said, if I wanted, I could take them to make a kantha for you.

You had left the kantha we used behind for me and did not want to take your old kantha to foreign. Ma said she was sure that you would like a nicely stitched kantha of fine saris like the one Syed Barir Amma had given her.

When we got married, Amma had given me a kantha which she and I had stitched together. We had placed a bati upside down on the kantha and I had drawn circles in such a way that the whole field of the kantha seemed

## Ma says in the past women would pull out the coloured thread from sari borders and use it to stitch leaves and flowers and borders.

pitha. I sat down beside them and slowly ate my slice of pitha and thought about you. I don't suppose there is anything like taler pitha where you are.

Baba really enjoyed the taler pitha. "What a wonderful tree the tal is! One can have taler sash when the tal fruit is green and make pitha out of its pulp when it ripens in Bhadra. And of course when there is no date palm juice, there is taler rosh which one can make into palm sugar or drink as it is. But, very early in the morning, before it turns into tari. Taler misri is also made from the juice, and is good to suck on if one has a cough. And there is nothing quite as strong as the trunk of the tal if one wants to make a hut."

"And of course, the tal leaf pankha which we need when the weather is like this," Ma said, fanning Baba.

Bappy came in just then. "If you are talking about all the things made from the tal, don't forget Maulana Bhasani's tupi. I don't know if anyone else ever wore that cap, but that was what Maulana Bhasani wore. Maybe it kept his head cool." He flung down his khatas and held out his hand for a slice of the pitha.

Ma then opened the larger bundle she had brought back from Syed Bari. There were a lungi and panjabi for Baba and two saris one light blue and the other light green for Ma and me.

"You were gone a long time, Khokoner Ma," said Baba. "Just for two pieces of old clothes and the taler pitha . . . ."

[Excerpt up to here.]

"No, no," Ma said. "Syed Barir Amma wanted me to prepare six kanthas out of new markin cloth the type which is almost like a thick kora sari. She asked me to make them of three layers two new markin pieces on top and old cloth inside. She is a member of some mahila samity, which helps poor women by giving them work which they can do to earn a little money. She said that nowadays kanthas are in great demand abroad and if women could make them they could earn good money. She wanted me to prepare the kanthas so that some woman artist could draw the nakshas on them. These kanthas would then be given to women who can sew. She wanted the women to come to her place and sew because she said that otherwise the kanthas would become dirty. She asked if I could come and show the women how to do some phors. She also wanted me to go to her place to stitch a kantha. But I said that I had no one to help at

to be a garden of flowers. Amma and I had then stitched the flowers with red and green thread.

I went to sleep thinking that you were not here to share the pitha with us. One can make pitha any time, but taler pitha can only be made in Bhadra.

So now I am making a kantha for you. Ma helped me tear the sari into long pieces and then sew them together so that the kantha would be broad enough. Ma also gave me another old sari of hers that had become so worn with wear that she was ashamed to wear it. We put her old sari inside the layers of Syed Barir Amma's sari so, in a way, the kantha that I am making for you is like Ma's anchal.

It is a nice big kantha char hath by panch hath, four arm-lengths by five arm-lengths. I drew some flowers to embroider and got Bappy to draw a plane in one corner. The plane is the same size as the flowers but it doesn't really matter.

Ma says in the past women would pull out the coloured thread from sari borders and use it to stitch leaves and flowers and borders. But she got me some lachha yarn from the market which most women now use to embroider kanthas.

The women who will be making kanthas for the samity will not be using this yarn but Korean thread. Ma says the colours of Korean thread are bright and the yarn is shiny but she thinks that kanthas stitched with Korean thread might not be as washable as kanthas stitched with lachha yarn. So I am making your kantha with lachha yarn. But the yarn Ma got me is red, blue, yellow and green ketketa lal, dark blue, bright yellow and dark green. I took out the thread from the borders of the saris Ma brought so now I have many more colours to embroider the kantha with light green, purple, mauve, pink, light blue. I will combine the colours when I do the embroidery. I hope the kantha will look nice.

But it will take a long time maybe two months if I can stitch a little every day. If someone comes home at that time or if your Mama goes, I will send the kantha to you.

I will write your name on top so everyone will know it is yours. I will get Bappy to write your name in both Bangla and English. I can write, but his writing is much better than mine.

Today is the twentieth of Bhadra. I don't always remember to say the date but you can understand that I do not say everything on the same day.

Ma goes once a week to Syed Bari. Baba has got used to her being away for four to five hours a day. I give him his afternoon meal if Ma hasn't come by that time which she usually doesn't. He takes a nap after his meal and Ma is usually back by the time he wakes up.

Ma is teaching the women who come to Syed Bari how to make nice kanthas. The samity wants kanthas with different types of borders and a lot of nakshas.

The artist woman also comes once a week. She asks Ma the names of the different borders she knows. She also makes her do all the different phors she knows in a small kantha. So Ma has made bakhya, pati phor, dal phor, chatai, beki, anarasi which the artist woman says is also called ghar hashia. She also makes different pars for her chok par, anaj, motor, taabiz par and a lot more. Sometimes she shows a drawing or a photograph of a par and asks Ma the name of the par and asks her if she can do it. Ma doesn't know the names of many of the phors or the pars nor do the other women who come.

Ma has also learned a new phor which the artist woman showed her bhorat phor. You will not be interested in knowing how the phor is made but it is very interesting. A flower petal looks just like a real flower if it is embroidered in bhorat. The artist woman said that for a long time people were not making nice kanthas and a bideshi woman, who had made a promise to Hazrat Isa that she would never get married but would spend her life praying, taught some women how to do bhorat. Many of the kanthas that are being sold in Dhaka have a lot of nakshas done in bhorat.

Ma says the artist woman showed her and the other women at Syed Bari a picture of a kantha that she says was embroidered at Narail. There are flowers and trees and, in the centre, a small space with a house, a cycle, a steamer, a hurricane lantern, earrings. Also the name of the person for whom the kantha was made and his address: Shri Sajan Meya, Village Kumar Kanda, Post Lohagoda, Zila Joshohar, Thana Laksipasa. Nowadays Laksipasa is not in Joshohar, but in Narail. In the kantha it is written "Joshohar," because at that time Narail was not a zila, the artist woman said. She also said that Laksipasa was never a thana, but perhaps people of Laksipasa wanted it to be a thana so Sajan Meya's mother wrote that. The artist woman said it was one of the most beautiful kanthas she had ever seen. The other beautiful kantha she had seen was in a museum near Kolkata, made by Manadasundari for her father Barada Kanta Basu. Though the kantha is now in Kolkata, it was also made not far from Narail, in a place called Jangalbadhal, on the road from Jessore to Khulna.

The artist woman thinks that when the women who come to Syed Bari have enough practice they too will be able to embroider beautiful kanthas like these. She said that kanthas from Jessore, Faridpur, and Khulna were to be found in many foreign museums. She had been to Markin Juktarashtra and seen these pieces on display. Nowadays, she said, they are also on display at our jadughar in Dhaka. New kanthas are hung up like pictures in offices.

Ma asked her whether people no longer use kanthas in Dhaka the way we do. To wrap ourselves when we sleep. "Yes, yes," she said, "but the kanthas done with a lot of embroidery are called nakshi kanthas and no one uses them to sleep on."

Well, I am trying to make you a nakshi kantha. But I haven't seen the picture and I do not know what this beautiful kantha was like. But in the centre of your kantha I will also draw some pictures a char chala ghar, some trees, a pond with ducks, and cows grazing beside it. The plane is there still, also the flowers. I cannot draw very well but I will ask Bappy to copy these pictures from his Bangla book.

I hope you will like my kantha. Ma has shown me how to do bhorat, so some of the nakshas I will make in bhorat. I hope you will like it.

Professor Niaz Zaman is an academic, writer and critic. The above is an excerpt from her forthcoming novella, 'The Baromashi Tapes'