Postmodernism/Poststructuralism: A Theoretical Perspective

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Theoretical underpinnings of research are highly significant for the academic value of that study. Qualitative studies are increasingly using poststructural constructs as theoretical frames. This paper will briefly discuss postmodernism and poststructuralism, together with the aspects where poststructuralism has a relevance with Islamic philosophy, highlighting the points of convergence.

Introduction

In a world of multiple causes and effects, looking for black and white is turning a blind eye to limitless shades and colours created at diverse intersections. Any particular phenomenon is shaped by historical and cultural specifications interacting in a complex way. Putting these into neat categories across sharp divisions hampers the possibilities of knowledge that can be formulated at limitless points and interstices. Traditional Western philosophical thought was constructed around dualities and dichotomies that imposed "homogeneity and identity upon the heterogeneity of material" (BenHabib: 1992: 208). Post-structural epistemology involves attention to diversity, plurality and relations of power. It offers possibilities by opening spaces for voice/s, and provides a framework to position the 'subjects'. According to Gaby Weiner, two aims of post-structuralism are:

"It seeks to deconstruct, to analyse the operations of difference and the way in which meanings are made to work. [Second,] It also offers the possibility for the production of a counter discourse (or reverse discourse) which challenges meaning and power" (Weiner: 1994:101).

Poststructuralism is generally defined as a variant of postmodernism or as "a subset of a broader range of theoretical, cultural, and social tendencies which constitute postmodern discourse" (Best and Kellner: 1991:25). This requires a brief discussion of postmodernism along with poststructuralism. The two terms are often used loosely and interchangeably (Sarup: 1988: 118), which adds to the confusion and ambiguity surrounding the terms, but it also signifies their essence. Generally, postmodernism is associated with art, architecture and culture, and post-structuralism with literary theory, philosophy and history – but the shared standpoint is a rejection of metanarratives linked with specific notions of self, subject, and knowledge.

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Postmodernism

In any discussion of postmodernism, the argument inevitably focuses on modernism. Understanding and reading of any 'post-' concept or situation requires an investigation of the pre-post phenomenon. The post- of the modern equally has been problematic. According to Habermas the term modern expresses a 'transition from the old to the new' (1985:3). By pre-fixing it with post- it becomes a self contradiction (Bordo:1992). This problematises post-modernism with relation to modernism[1].

Postmodernism is explained and theorised in multiple ways which has a conceptual relevance to its rejection of absolutes, and a critique of the "tendency of definitions to conceal as much as they reveal and to maim and obfuscate while pretending to clarify and straighten up" (Bauman: 1997: 165). It is explained as a falling apart of 'unified world-views of religion and metaphysics' (Habermas: 1985: 9), a break with modern politics (Said: 1978) and nation-states (Ahmed: 1992), and a continuation/extension of modernism (Baudlard: 1985). On the other hand, it is critiqued as non-historical and located in an eternal now (Eagleton: 1991), irrational, relativist, nihilistic (Gellner: 1992), and many more. The differences are within and across postmodernisms and the critiques; and they emphasise ambiguity, fragmentation and hybridity emphasising that the term is "itself a *site* of continuing controversy and reflection" (Slater: 1994:87).

The half-hearted efforts to categorise post-modernism probably reflect the discomfort of operating outside categories. One critique of postmodernism is directed at the **notion of 'other'**. From a postmodern perspective, 'other' implies recognition of plurality and fragmentation, perceived as 'political saturation' by Rosie Braidotti (1992). She argues that the postmodern subject is "a subject in process, organised by a will to know and a desire to speak" (1992: 183). This is an acknowledgement of the authenticity of other voices, but is seen by critics as depriving them from "access to more universal sources of power by ghettoising them within an opaque otherness" (Harvey: 1990: 117), leading to 'loss of voice'. However, seeing post-modernism as merely relativistic is fixing it in a frame which would be contrary to a post-modern perspective. I prefer to see it with Ali Rattansi as decentering, de-essentialising and shifting, offering possibilities for restructuring and redefining the frame itself to suit the research aims; a post-modern frame which attempts to highlight and destabilise the overlapping and cross-cutting binaries "always potentially unstable and held in place by networks of power and knowledge, discursive structures and

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[1] For an interesting discussion of this debate see chapter one in Stronach, Ian and MacLure Maggie: 1997: Educational research undone: the postmodern embrace. Buckingham: Open University Press.

strategies" (1994: 47). According to Ali Rattansi (1994), the strength of postmodernism is that boundaries cannot be drawn, as the argument informing this frame is "exposing the relative arbitrariness of boundary formation in social and intellectual configurations, and an interrogation of the policing of these borders by the disciplinary apparatus of power/ knowledge" (1994: 22). It draws into focus new forms of division, hybridisation, fusion, fracturing and recomposition, and a redrawing of boundaries.

This stance announces the **end of metanarratives**. Discussing postmodern distrust of metanarratives, Sarup sees it as signaling "a crisis in a narrative's legitimising function, its ability to compel consensus' (1988: 132). Grand narratives are critiqued for association with a political programme and for being oppressive in intentions. The situatedness of narratives and an **emphasis on culture as a social force** has significance for analysing education and its socio-economic dimensions. A postmodern perspective gives 'importance to cultural analysis in social theory' (Blake: 1996: 62) and "forces us to recognise the significance of cultural representations for understanding influences and responses to education" (Skeggs: 1991: 261).

A post-modern perspective is an ontological and epistemological shift from the rational 'I' to **a constructed and situated 'I'**. There occurs a "noticeable shift in sensibility, practices, and discourse formations which distinguishes a post-modern set of assumptions, experiences, and propositions from that of a preceding period" (Huyssen: 1998: 181). The epistemological break is marked with the death of 'the subject', posing challenges to 'the classical episteme of representation' (BenHabib: 1992: 205). It critiques the tradition of thought that imposed homogeneity and identity upon the heterogeneity of matter, and challenges 'transcendental guarantees of truth':

> "It is precisely at the legislative frontier between what can be presented and what cannot that the postmodernism operation is being staged – not in order to transcend representation, but in order to expose that system of power that authorises certain representations while blocking, prohibiting or invalidating others" (Owens: 1985).

A presumed 'epistemological ambivalence' of postmodernism (Boyne and Rattansi: 1990: 36) at times makes some thinkers – feminists, educationists and others – cautious of its relevance for a cause or programme (Braidotti: 1991; Lovibond: 1990; Skeggs: 1991). The same makes it a target for relativism: a relativism which "entails moral .... [and] cognitive nihilism" (Gellner: 1992: 71). The post-modern point is to

highlight that definitions and analyses are always partial (Lather: 1991: 59), and meaning needs to be constructed situationally. Bauman sees "a genuine emancipatory chance in postmodernity, the chance of laying down arms, suspending border skirmishes waged to keep the stranger away, taking apart the daily erected mini-Berlin Walls meant to maintain distance and to separate" (1997: 33). The smaller localised 'visions' acknowledge plurality and hybridity, and deconstruct 'larger vision/s'; as Braidotti clearly makes the point:

> "The only way to find a larger vision is to be somewhere in particular" (1991: 272).

A significant premise of postmodernism is this challenge to the notion of knowing subject and the issue of voicing. It un-fixes the knowing self and recognises it as shifting and multiple constructed, interwoven in a play of power/knowledge:

> "A self does not amount to much but no self is an island; each exists in a fabric of relations that is now more complex and mobile than ever before. Young or old, man or woman, rich or poor, a person is always located at 'nodal points' of specific communication circuits, however tiny these may be. Or better: one is always located at a post through which various kinds of messages pass. No one, not even the least privileged among us, is ever entirely powerless over the messages that traverse and position him at the post of sender, addressee, or referent" (Lyotard: 1984: 15).

Post-structuralism

Post-structuralism derives from the philosophical tradition of structuralism, but with suggestions of 'continuity' as well as 'contradictions' between the two (Sarup: 1988: 4). Both offer a critique of human subject and progressive history, doubt the possibility of general laws, emphasise impossibility of being objective, and critique the structure of binary oppositions (Sarup: 1988: 43). Human reality is defined as "a construction, as a product of signifying activities which are both culturally specific and generally unconscious" (Bid: 2). But the differences are there.

While "sharing with the structuralism a dismissal of the concept of the autonomous subject, poststructuralism stressed the dimensions of history, politics, and everyday life in the contemporary world ..... and attacked the scientific pretensions of structuralism which attempted to create a scientific basis for the study of culture" (Best and Kellner: 1991: 20). The argument furthered is that ""meaning is produced not in a stable,

referential relation between subject and object, but within the infinite, intertextual interplay of signifiers" a production of signification that resists structural constraints (Best and Kellner: 1991: 21; Sarup: 1988: 3). It is here that poststructuralism moves away from structuralism, and overlaps with postmodernism can be identified. One fundamental premise shared by poststructural/post-modern analyses is that "subjects are constituted in and through discourses, which provide 'speaking' positions, subject-positions, identities and identifications; and that ... discourses clearly have institutional locations" (Rattansi: 1994: 37).

This notion of constructing/re-constructing subjectivity offers promises of un-fixing boundaries and shifting positions, affecting the margins and the centres (Hooks: 1991). It encourages us to "take the risk of reconstructing subjectivities' to transform cultures and cultural practices (Bordo: 1992: 164). Bordo argues that:

> "poststructuralism has encouraged recognition of the fact that prevailing configurations of power, no matter how dominant, are never seamless but are always spawning new forms of subjectivity, new contexts for resistance to and transformation of existing relations. .... [and] to recognise ' body' as "not only materially acculturated (e.g., as it conforms to social norms and habitual practices of "femininity" and "masculinity"), but it is also mediated by language: by metaphors ....., and semantical grids (e.g., binary oppositions such as male/female, inner/outer) that organise and animate our perception and experience" (Bid: 167).

Qualitative paradigms and interpretivism "rely on the interactional, adaptive and judgmental abilities of the human inquirer" (Greene: 1994: 538). The argument offered for the relevance of **'human as instrument'**, particularly for researching social phenomenon, maintains that to guard against social biases, objectivity implying neutrality and detachment, is not possible (Guba and Lincoln: 1985). It holds that by making explicit all the subjectivities, contextual conditions, and constraints, the research for situated truths and lived realities can be facilitated.

Poststructuralism provides a methodological tool not only to locate the subject in the discourse but to analyse the discourse formative practices as well. A post-structural framework emphasises discourses and texts, that produce and are produced by social institutions. Language gains an importance as constitutive of reality and subjectivity even while the meaning shifts and reformulates in a situated interplay of discourses and subjectivities. Foucault developed discourse as an analytical tool to illuminate how struggle over meaning is saturated with **power and**

knowledge. He re-conceptualised power as a network of strategic relationships, and knowledge became a metaphorical domain:

> "once knowledge can be analysed in terms of region, domain, implantation, displacement, transposition, one is able to capture the process by which knowledge functions as a form of power and disseminates the effects of power" (Foucault: 1977).

Meaning shifts with the 'form' and 'effects' of power as diverse social, cultural, political, institutional and other factors interact. This interplay problematises the notions of 'self' and 'truth'. This view of meaning rejects universal totality, whole truths and complete answers. The emphasis is on the particular and the situated, with an acknowledgement of complexity, diversity, plurality and fragmentation. Post-structuralism argued against the fixed oppositions which restrict understanding of a complex, multifaceted world with diverse cultures and historical specifications. It is relevant as a methodological tool, with sufficient sensitivity and flexibility, to analyse the complexities and inter-relationships of a situation and its power dimensions.

An analysis guided by poststructuralism implies recognition of deversity and plurality, producing spaces for inter-discursivity. It acknowledges a need for critical exploration of similarities and differences, providing spaces for a multiplicity of voices which can enhance perception and understanding, and subsequently enrich theorising. However, there are multiple issues interfering with this opening up of spaces for silenced voices. The questions are, as Said sees them:

> "Who writes? For whom is the writing being done? In what circumstances? These, it seems to me, are the questions whose answers provide us with the ingredients making for a politics of interpretation" (1985: 135).

One requirement of the interpretive paradigm and post-structural approach is to make explicit the discursive positioning of those involved in knowledge-construction and interpretation. A post-structural approach aims at developing a voice among those who have been historically silenced and/or marginalised, providing opportunities to speak, to question, and to explore:

> "Voice as a form of protest is directed both outward at the social construction of meaning making and the structures that reinforce those meanings, and inward at the way the individual takes part in the production of certain constrained beliefs, roles and practices" (Giltin and Russell: 1994: 186).

And there is also the demand that:

> "You have to pass through certain rules of accreditation, you must learn the rules, you must speak the language, you must master the idiom and you must accept the authorities of the field .... To which you want to contribute" (Said: 1985: 141).

How far is it possible to achieve this end of allowing voices to be heard, is a complex issue where reporting, analysis, interpretation and many other factors are involved. Another dimension to the issue in a Muslim context is Islamic philosophical thought, as post-structuralism is essentially a Western theoretical construct; and this is discussed in the next section.

Islam and post-modern/post-structural perspective

From a post-modern/post-structural perspective, the subject and the social are constantly under construction and transformation, with invariably shifting boundaries. Does this decentring and de-essentialising frame fit an Islamic perspective? Or is postmodernism a Western/non-Islamic project? Considering a similar question regarding modernism –"Is it a Western project?", Anthony Giddens' answer was a cryptical 'Yes' (Giddens: 1990: 175); and this brings the debate back to historically prescribed East/West dichotomy.

Modernism had different implications across this eco-politically charged divide and involved myriad factors, which are beyond the scope of the present discussion. A relevant aspect here is that in the East, particularly among Muslims, modernism was regarded with a wariness. It was welcome because polito-historically it coincided with the end of colonialism, and the establishment of Muslim states[2]. Economically, it offered possibilities of progress and development. But, ideologically its secularism implied a move away from religion and challenged the socio-cultural fabric, and that was perceived as a threat by Muslims. There have been influential modernist figures among Muslims like Sir Syed Ahmed Khan (Malik: 1980), Syed Jamal-ud-Din Afghani (Keddie: 1972) and Mohd Abduh (Badawi: 1978; Kedourie: 1966), but, in general, it was a love-hate relationship: identifying with some aspects of modernity and disavowing others (Ahmed: 1992: 29-31). With postmodernism again the 'predicament' is:

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[2] For further details Esposito, John L and Voll, John O: 1996: Islam and democracy. New York: Oxford University Press; Ruthven, Malise: 1991: Islam in the world. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books; and Schimmel, Annemarie: 1992: Islam: an introduction. Albany: State University of New York Press.

"How can the Muslims retain their central Islamic features ..... in the face of the contrary philosophy of the post-modern age", and

"How does a religious civilisation like Islam, which relies on a defined code of behaviour, and traditions based on a holy book, cope in an age which self-consciously puts aside the past and exults in diversity" (Ahmed: 1992: 5).

Discussing the question, Ahmed makes the argument that inspite of the postmodern spirit of pluralism and a heightened scepticism of traditional orthodoxy, religious revivalism can be understood as "both cause and effect of postmodernism" (1992: 13[3]). Modernism was understood in the Muslim world as distancing and alienating people from religion. The Islamic revival in the 1970s which challenged the modern nation-states, historically coincided with postmodernism. Inspite of philosophical differences, there exist points of convergence.

Accommodating the notion of revealed knowledge and a coherent system of values in Islam with the post-modern rejection of metanarratives is problematic. But I agree with Akbar Ahmed that "postmodernism also promises hope, understanding and toleration – and this is where it connects with Islam" (Ahmed: 1992: x). The spirit of inquiry, drive for self-knowledge, celebration of diversity, and emphasis on tolerance and understanding, are essential caveats of Islam, which connect with post-modern 'toleration'. In Islam, this tolerance and understanding extends even to religions:

"There shall be no compulsion in religion" (the Quran: 2: 256); and

"Your religion for you and mine for me" (the Quran: 109: 6)

There is another dimension of relevance. Early Hadith methodology required to 'record faithfully' and establish *isnad* (authenticity) through a chain of reliable transmitters and making these sources of 'transmission' explicit (Mernissi: 1991: 35). This required to clarify the positioning of the 'narrator' and transmitter/s of *hadith/s* and of the researcher/collector, and emphasised making explicit as to who transmitted and who verified it, to confirm the validity and reliability of investigations (Azami: 1977: 58-67). Traditionally, the authenticity of a *hadith* was established through an analysis of the positioning and the subjectivities of the participants, the collectors and the transmitters, as well as the process of research and collection. Theoretically, it was a qualitative approach, which put value on

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[3] See also Bauman, Zygmung: 1997: <u>Postmodernity and its discontents</u>. Cambridge: Polity.

the participants, their subjectivities and positioning, ignoring the mere numbers of the transmitters or verifications.

This has a pertinence for post-structuralist epistemology which negates 'episteme of representation' and emphasises that the subject is created in the conflux of multiple influences and contextual forces. Islam encourages *ijtihad*[4] (innovative judgement) *shura* (consultation), and *ijma* (consensus), and thus acknowledges the value of opinions and perspectives. Ahmed quotes a dialogue between the Prophets and Muadh ibn Jabal, a judge on his way to Yemen. The designated judge was advised to decide a problem according to the Quran, but if guidance was not there, then according to the *Sunnah*, and if not there either, then to use his own judgement (Ahmed: 1992: 120). This acknowledgement of a plurality of perspectives provides a space within an Islamic context where a poststructural frame gains relevance.

At one level, distances between the dominant Islamic philosophy of knowledge and truth and corresponding poststructuralist notions seem tremendous. But if we move from the 'revealed'[5] to the 'acquired' and 'constructed' knowledge, recognising epistemological difference between the two, and understand post-structuralism as problematising (not rejecting as such) universals and truths (Weiner: 1994: 99), some theoretical contradictions can be resolved.

With the increasing use of qualitative methodology in research, and because of a general concern with the issues of 'self' and 'identity' these theoretical debates are drawing more and more attention. No explanation is final but each adds to the development of theory, pointing to further possibilities and venues.

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[4] Maududi (Maududi, Sayyid Abula'la: 1980: The Islamic law and constitution; translated and edited by Khurshid Ahmad. Lahore: Islamic Publications. Pakistan. Pp. 72-92) explains the notion of *ijtihad* in Islam. Although he considers it from the perspective of Islamic law and constitution with reference to Pakistan, but the discussion is also useful for an understanding of this concept in general.

[5] Here I am referring to that content of revealed knowledge where compliance is demanded and which pertains mostly to faith.

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