



A STUDY OF ITALO CALVINO'S *IF ON A WINTER'S NIGHT A TRAVELLER* AS POST MODERN TEXT

SUMIT GHAYAL

Assistant Professor

Dept. of English

Central University of Karnataka Kalburgi

(KR) INDIA

ABSTRACT

In the realm of arts and literature we have encountered with some major movements that has changed the scenario and the definition on every possible time. It is an evolving process that continues and dislocates itself from the earlier one. The movements like Dadaism, Surrealism, Cubism and Expressionism had dominated this realm. Postmodernism has emerged, in recent past, as the ideology that tends to subvert its predecessor that is Modernism. The present topic of my study is The Postmodern Approach and Literature with Reference to Italo Calvino's Novel, 'If on a Winter's Night A Traveller'. In this study I will shed light upon what exactly postmodern means with the literary text by postmodernist Italo Calvino.

Keywords – Modernity, Modern Text, Modernism, Expressionism, Postmodernism, intertextuality

INTRODUCTION

In order to explain Postmodernism, it is necessary to know what exactly Modernism is. In his essay '**Modernity – an incomplete project**', Jurgen Habermas, a German theorist, notes that-

Modern period begins with the Enlightenment, that period about one hundred years, from mid seventeenth century to mid eighteenth century, when a new faith arose in the power of reason to improve human society. In Britain the

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term the age of reason was used to designate the same period. The enlightenment project is the fostering of this belief that a break with tradition, blind habit and slavish obedience to religious precepts and prohibitions coupled with the application of reason and logic by the disinterested individual can bring about a solution to the problems of society. This outlook is what Habermas means by modernity.

We can stress the roots of modernity in French revolution. This came up with the motto of 'liberty, equality and fraternity'. The flowers of evil (1857) by Charles Baudelaire, a volume of French poetry, which dealt with the subjects like decadence and eroticism, can be cited as the early example of literary modernism.

The movement, Modernism, had dominated the arts and culture of the first half of the twentieth century. Modernism had brought down the structure of pre twentieth century practice in music, painting, literature and architecture. The artistic movements like Dadaism, Surrealism, Cubism and Expressionism had prospered. French intellectuals such as Marcel Proust, Stephane Mallarme, Andre Gide- the Germans like Franz Kafka, Bertolt Brecht and T.S.Eliot , James Joyce, Ezra Pound and Virginia Woolf from Britain had composed their respected literary works in this fashion. Omniscient external narration, fixed narrative points and clear moral positions are some of its characteristics of literary modernism.

Here, again I would refer to Jurgen Habermas, who has constantly defended modernity, for him , post- structuralist thinkers the 1970s , such as Jaques Derrida, Michel Foucault, represented a specific repudiation of this kind of enlightenment modernity. They attacked the ideas of reason, clarity, truth, and progress. Thereby, for Habermas, they were detached from the quest for justice. Jurgen Habermas has identified them as **Neo-Conservatives**.

I have tried, of course by the help of theoretical books, to stress the roots of Postmodernism. The earliest use of the term Postmodernism dates back to the 1930s by Federico de Onis as a definition of a 'conservative reflux within modernism itself'. One of the first uses of the term in the English speaking world was in the late 1940s, as a definition for a style of architecture and mentioned in several references over the years. But the term has got its base as a theory in late 1970s and early 1980s. The postmodern condition: a report on knowledge by Jean Francois Lyotard helped it to make it concrete as a theory. In the introduction of his book, '**The postmodern condition: a Report on Knowledge**'. Lyotard clarifies his objectives –

The object of this study is the condition of knowledge in the most highly developed societies. I have decided to use the word postmodern to describe that condition. The word is currently in use on the American continent among sociologist and critics; it designates the state of our culture following the

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transformations which, since the end of the nineteenth century, have altered the game rules for science, literature and the arts. The present study will place these transformations in the context of the crisis of narratives. Further he notes that, 'simplifying to the extreme, I define postmodern as incredulity towards metanarratives. This incredulity is undoubtedly a product of progress in the sciences: but the progress in turn presupposes it.

Next, in his book, keeping in mind the onslaught of science and technology, Lyotard raises the question of the status of the knowledge which is akin to one that goes by the name 'the computerisation of society' (which) makes no claims of being original, or even true. The scenario of the computerisation of the most highly developed societies allows us to spotlight certain aspects of the transformation of knowledge and its effects on public power and civil institutions. Science develops- and no one will deny that it develops- by developing this question. And this question, as it develops, leads to the (following) question, that is to say metaquestion, the question of legitimacy : what is your , what is worth ?

I have referred to another critic, Leah Wain, he, in his essay, '**Postmodernism? Not representing postmodernism**' notes the following differences between the Modernism and Postmodernism-

.....postmodernism can be seen rather as a continuation in a certain manner of the project of modernism. For example, where modernism argues for fragmentation of narratives, postmodernism performs their dissemination. The postmodernism also elides any attempts to locate it historically. This is because postmodernism resists historicism and performs ahistorically. A Postmodern response to history is that it is a form of fiction or, at the very least, a narrative which has neither more nor less a claim to authoritative than any other competing narrative. Thus any historical anchorage, authority or legitimacy which may be claimed by a theoretical school, class or institution dissolves. The only point of reference to postmodernism, in the absence of anything else, is itself, as self-reference.

In his essay, more specifically a letter to his friend from Milan, Thomas E. Carroll, **Answer to the question, what is the Postmodern?** , Jean Francois Lyotard opens with a move which effectively turns the debate into struggle that one's opponents are the real Conservatives. He writes (its a polemic against German theorist, Jurgen Habermas): "from every direction we are being urged to put a end to experimentation". Jean francios lyotard his essay, notes the differences between modernism and postmodernism. I think it would be helpful to us what exactly he means by postmodernity (in literary arena).



What then is the postmodern?(....) everything that is received must be suspected, even if it is only a day old. What space does Cezanne challenge? The impressionists. What object do Picasso and Braque challenge? Cezanne's. What presupposition does Duchamp break with in 1912? The idea that one has to make painting- even a cubist painting (.....)The generations flash at by an astonishing rate. The work can become modern only if it is first postmodern. Thus understood, postmodernism is not modernism at its end, but in nascent state, and this state is recurrent.

He concludes his essay with following remarks:

The postmodern artist or writer is in the position of a philosopher: the text he writes or the work he creates is not in principle is governed by the pre-established rules and cannot be judged according to a determinant judgement, by the application of given categories to this text or work. Such rules and categories are what the work or text is investigating. The artist and the writer therefore work without rules and in order to establish the rules for what 'will have been made'.

Postmodernity thus deconstructs the basic aim of the enlightenment that is the idea of a unitary end of a history and of a subject.

I, now, move to the second part of this paper, which would help us to understand more exactly about postmodernism with the help of the novel, *If on a winter's night a traveller*, by an Italian postmodernist, Italo Calvino. This is very unusual novel, in form and content that I have come across. Just by the mention of its title my curiosity had kindled, soon I bought the novel and coincidentally the novel begins with the paragraph-

You are about to begin reading Italo Calvino's novel, If on a winter's night a Traveller.....With the book upside down, naturally.

Majority of books I have read by the various writers, they have talked to me but talked about their respected stories. This novel was very unusual and strange for me to read because the writer directly talked and addressed to me about his book.

Next, in this unnamed chapter, denoted with the number 1, he talks about various habits of reading. At point he consciously involves us by noting that how you might have, with difficulties, purchased this novel from a bookshop and returned home. But while he talks about all these things I constantly was thinking about where is the story called *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller*, for which I have purchased this book. It is enough, give me the

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story. Tell me the story. And I had flipped next page and my sight had caught the title I desired, If on a winter's night a traveller. I had consciously forgot what the writer has talked about and made the fuss about reading. I got myself involved into it, the beginning of the novel as follows:

The novel begins in a railway station, a locomotive huff, steam from a piston covers the opening of the chapter, (here I told myself, and now the novel would be like this; don't expect the story to come straight away into you. Read it as it comes. You have purchased it. Make it worth anyhow.)..... as far as the eye can see.

The story is about a traveller (referred to as I) who is in search of somebody, whom he doesn't know, for exchanging a suitcase, which has been asked to him to exchange by some Authority. He is not sure that whether that person has got on the platform or left already. He puts himself into nearby restaurant, hears the ongoing conversation and at the same time he has a fear in his mind about undercover cops. Events happen in such ways that a cop comes into the restaurant and asks the traveller to skip as early as possible because the deal has been cancelled. The cop tells him to go to platform number six and get a train from there. The traveller is confused by the cop's approach and wondering he gets himself on platform number six. The train arrives at top speed and erases him from the cop's sight. Here the chapter ends, curiosity builds, what will happen next and found following lines:

You have now read about thirty pages.....identical to the pages you have read.

Next, He talks about the novels authenticity as we, too, start doubt about it. And following lines read: **here is page 31 again, page 32...and the comes next? Page 17 all over again , a third time! What kin of book the did sell to you?**

Then he talks about your anger (readers anger, to whom he addresses in second person) about book and makes you , the reader to go back to shop and ask the bookseller about it and exchange the copy. Where, the reader comes to know about the not only the copy but the novel itself is a faulty and the title of the real novel is '**Outside the Town of Malbork**' and on knowing that the reader moves to the shelf where the real book is resting. There, in the row of bookshelves, the reader confronts with another curious reader, Ludmilla. She, coincidentally is there to exchange the same novel. They promise to meet after completing the novel. You, the Reader comes at home, relaxes, remembers Ludmilla, starts reading novel titled 'Outside the town of Malbork'. The novel begins with the lines :

An odour of frying wafts at the opening of the page.....simmering oil.



The story has a Polish setting . You are intrigued in the characters and their mystery. You flip into next page and you get confronted with the lines :

The novel you are reading wants to present to you.....blank sheets.

You , the reader, again visit to the bookseller and ask him the mystery about the book. The bookseller then sends you to the publisher, the people who are responsible to this. The reader visits the publisher asks them the mystery about the novel. There he gets a new copy of the novel titled '**Leaning from the steep slope**' and again the Reader comes across the same problem. Mean while the author involves you in such a way that You, the Reader becomes the integral part of the novel. he makes you (the Reader) and Ludmilla solve this mystery. As the following lines in chapter four suggests :

You immediately realise that you are listening to something that has no possible connection with leaning from the steep slope or with outside the town of Malbork or even with if on a winter's night a traveller. You exchange a quick glance, You and Ludmilla, or, rather two glances: first questing then agreeing. Whatever it may be , this is a novel where, once you have got into it you want to go forward without stopping.

Till the end You, the Reader, is involved in the various titles such as **Without Fear of Wind or Vertigo, Looks Down in the Gathering Shadows, In the Network of Lines that Enlace, IN the Network of Lines that Intersect, Around an Empty Grave** etc. and it seems like the authorial conversation as if somebody is operating you and you getting succumbed to it. The reader moves around half of the world to solve the mystery and gets entangled in to it. The last chapter of the present novel reads :

Now you are man and wife, Reader and Reader. A great double bed receives your parallel readings. Ludmilla closes her book, turns off her light, puts her head back against the pillow, and says, "turn off your light, too. Aren't you tired of reading?" And you say, "Just a moment , I've almost finished If on a winter's night a traveller by Italo Calvino."

CONCLUSION:

I have noticed some of the major postmodern characteristics of this novel such as **its eclectic approach** and **notion of ending**. As Lyotard clears the meaning of eclectic approach in his essay '**what is postmodernism?**' :



Eclecticism is the degree zero of contemporary culture: you listen to reggae; you watch a western; you eat McDonalds at midday and local cuisine at night; you wear Paris perfume in Tokyo and dress retro in Hongkong; knowledge is the stuff of T.V game shows.

Such as above clarification of Lyotard, I have identified the title or the stories, those begin as a novel, has been set into various countries such as Italy, Poland and Japan . The novel intermingles with various genres such as **mystery, chivalric romance, erotic fiction and science fiction.**

The story, titled, ‘**What Story Down There Awaits Its Ends?**’ talks about the onslaught of science and technology and the existence of human being in relation to it. The stories begin craftily; it involves you into it and ends abruptly. The **notion of ending** and the possibilities of various ends is one of the characteristics of this novel and postmodern literature as well. The novel gives the newer experience of reading with its **intertextuality** while consciously reminding you that you are reading a fictional work.

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