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مها محمد سامى ابراهيم الحلوانى

كلية الألسن-جامعة عين شمس

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أستاذ الأدب الإنجليزي

كلية الألسن-جامعة عين شمس

Ain Shams University
Faculty of Al-Asun
English Department

Narrative Approaches
to
Leslie Silko's Ceremony (1977), Almanac of the Dead (1991)
&
Ann Beattie's Falling in Place (1980), The Doctor's House (2002)

A Ph.D. Thesis

By
Maha Mohamed Samy Ibrahim El-Halawany

Under the Supervision of
Prof. Fawzia Shafik El-Sadr
Professor of English Literature
Faculty of Arts
Ain Shams University

Prof. Salwa Rashad Amin
Professor of English Literature
Faculty of Al-Asun
Ain Shams University

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Displacement, alienation, suppression, and a sense of loss are general feelings experienced by the American nation with all its various ethnic groups since the beginning of the 1960s. The Sixties marked a crucial shift in the American history in the wake of the Second World War announcing the birth of a new turbulent America. Gerhard Hoffmann has described the Sixties as “our most explosive decade” (34). It is a post-war reaction to all the war’s irrationalities and destructive consequences. The Sixties turned against what was conceived as the general mood and dominant notes of the Fifties or, as it is widely known historically as, the era of “modernity.” Modernity, within the historical context, is the period following the Middle Ages and preceding the Sixties: “It is about order: about rationality and rationalization, creating order out of chaos” (Smith). Rationality, coherence, and reason- the inheritance of humanism- are the major characteristics of the general mood prevailing during the age of modernity. They serve to justify and explain all of the American social structures and institutions.

With the Sixties, a new birth of radical, political, social, and cultural movements came to existence and whose watchword was liberation from intellectual, social, and sexual restraints. It was a spirit of deconstruction that prevailed; a deconstruction of a long-seated spirit of stability in all forms and areas of life. Defining deconstruction, Rodolphe Gasche states that it “amounts to the epistemological gesture of falsifying the pretensions to truth and completeness of all totalizing principles...It is knowledge about the mechanics of knowledge” (qtd. in Currie 46). Deconstruction is the spirit of “postmodernism” which is the most important product of the

Sixties. Postmodernism developed as a reaction against modernism. Ian Gregson explains postmodernism's origin, birth and break away from modernism as in the following:

There were historical and social changes which caused radical shifts in cultural perceptions and therefore caused the break away from: the end of empire; ... the highly increasing importance of popular culture; the enormous expansion of secondary and further education. Key economic and social changes are associated with postmodernism which have been identified with 'late capitalism,' especially the shift from economic structures based on heavy industry to those based on technology. The impact of the technological media, especially television, on social experience and cultural perception is also a crucial postmodern phenomenon. (1-2)

Like the Sixties, postmodernism is diverse: "it extends into the culture at large, it defines the theories that explain the condition of the lifeworld and the arts, and it is responsible for the innovative power of the creative arts" (Hoffmann 13). Postmodernism is a really complex term referring to a set of ideas and a theory that appears in a wide variety of disciplines or areas of study such as art, sociology, technology, economy, politics, history and literature. Though postmodernism evolves out of the specific condition of the Sixties, it reaches beyond the Sixties and becomes the signum of a whole era and its social and cultural trends.

Within the historical context, the adjective postmodern describes the period which follows modernity. One of the first to coin the term "postmodernity" was the British historian Toynbee who characterized it as a period of social upheaval and

change. Quoting Toynbee words on modernity and postmodernity, Jens Pollheide writes:

Toynbee characterized the previous modern period as middle-class bourgeois era marked by social stability, rationalism, and progress [...]. The postmodern age, by contrast, is a Time of Troubles marked by the collapse of rationalism and the ethos of the Enlightenment. (7)

Postmodernity is generally used to describe the present socio-cultural, economic, educational and political state of postmodernism. Postmodernity is a condition or state of being postmodern and it is mainly concerned with changes to institutions and conditions, that is to say that, postmodernism is the cultural, intellectual, aesthetic and artistic phenomenon.. However, postmodernity mostly concentrate on socio-cultural and political outworkings in society.

Postmodern as a philosophical term originated in a critique of and a reaction to the values of modernity, the most important of which is a questioning of modern epistemology or of what knowledge is and whether it can be defined, acquired and possessed. Postmodern designates an attitude of critique of traditional values and ideologies. Deconstruction is its spirit questioning all stable values and concepts. Consequently, the postmodern theory “is not attempting to develop unified theories and norms, but is characterized by appreciating a plurality or heterogeneity of explanatory schemes” (Pollheide 9). The world is seen as a much more complex and uncertain place. Postmodern theory starts from the assumption that that truth is not always and generally valid, no longer fixed or determined. All truth within a postmodern context is “relative” to one’s viewpoint or stance.

One of the most important postmodern principles is the denial of reality; postmodernism suggests that there is no ultimate reality behind things: we see mostly what we want to see. Postmodern thought puts everything into question and interrogates philosophies, strategies and worldviews: “It is a mood rather than a strict discipline” representing the complexity of real life (Smith). It is an attempt to draw a picture of the turbulent contradictory versions of the world. This can be realized through its rejection of boundaries as well as its focus on a destructured and decentered humanity. The concepts of disorder and fragmentation, which were previously seen as negative qualities by modernists, are seen as an acceptable representation of reality by postmodernists. It is an acceptance of the chaos. Also postmodern thought accepts ambiguity and simultaneity as an integral part of the complex patterning of reality.

Such deconstructed view of reality leads to the disappearance of old certainties. In the past, gender roles, ethnic differences, social class differences are all clear cut and people generally confronted to societal expectations. But with postmodernism old distinctions are blurring. Postmodernism brings a politics of diversity especially with the rise of the voice of the minority groups, e.g. feminist, Black, and ethnic movements, that were silenced before during previous eras. Such diversity brings to postmodernism ex-centric perspectives and pluralities of thought that greatly contributed in the development of the identity politics of postmodernism that, though had its roots in the 1960s, was crystallized in the late Seventies and Eighties.

So, before the Eighties the general trend in contemporary criticism assert that the postmodern is disqualified from political involvement because of its narcissistic and ironic appropriation of existing images and stories. However with the late Seventies, a political view of postmodernism started to flourish and several critical studies on the dual nature of postmodernism both as an aesthetic movement and as a political philosophy emerged. Amy J. Elias argues: “Postmodernism is debated as a social phenomenon, as an aesthetic, as an epistemology, and as a political philosophy [...]” (3). In short, societies have been changing a great deal in terms of social, economic, political and cultural dimensions during the postmodern period.

On the literary level, postmodernism denotes “a literary theory and practice that criticizes and overcomes both traditional narrative forms, interpretations and methods of analysis as well as their modern counterparts” (Pollheide 8). So, while literary modernism is assumed to share a methodological unity, postmodernism is characterized by “diversity.” The term postmodern literature is used to describe certain tendencies in post-Second World War literature. It is both a continuation of the experimentation championed by writers of the modernist period (featured, for example, by fragmentation, paradox, questionable narrators, etc.) and a reaction mainly against the basic ideas of humanism inherited by modernism represented, for instance, in stable and totalized narrative structures, authenticity as well as linear narrative movement in space and time implicit in modernist literature.

Modernism rejected the objectivity of simple realism in literature. Also, there is an emphasis on the rejection of elaborate formal aesthetic and writing:

Modernism begins with the move away from a belief in a world of ideas or substances which may be objectively known in themselves, to the apprehension of a world which can be truly known and experienced only through individual consciousness. (Connor 107)

Postmodernism follows most of these ideas rejecting elaborate writing and favors self-consciousness, fragmentation, discontinuity and ambiguity. Nevertheless, though both modernism and postmodernism favor fragmentation, they differ in their view of such fragmentation. Modernism presents fragmentation as something tragic, something to be lamented as loss. Modernist works generally try to uphold the idea that works of art can provide the unity, coherence, and meaning which have been lost in most of modern life. Postmodernism, in contrast, does not lament the idea of fragmentation or incoherence, but rather celebrates that “The world is meaningless? Let’s not pretend that art can make meaning then, let’s just play with nonsense” (Smith).

Also, postmodernism does not respect boundaries. In modern times, gender roles, ethnic differences, social class differences were all clear cut and people conformed to societal expectations. But with postmodernism old distinctions are blurring. Postmodernism puts old certainties into question and radically interrogates philosophies, strategies and world views. The main task of postmodern literature is to question “the concepts of reality, identity and totalizing artistic form” (Hoffmann 33). Instead of the modernist quest for meaning in a

chaotic world, the postmodern author eschews, often playfully, the possibility of meaning.

In its early stage, roughly the period of the 1960s and early 1970s, literary postmodernism was highly self-reflexive and experimental. The assertion in postmodernism was that literature is its own reality, that fictional systems are indeed “textual,” and that they should operate in accord with their own aesthetic values and internal ordering patterns. As symbol systems, postmodern fictions need not address any reality other than their internal consistency. They need not correspond to the world of external reality nor comment upon that world if they do not see the necessity or relevance of such a perspective. Thus, postmodernism had established an aesthetic for non-mimetic literature. The desire of the postmodernists was to make literature a pure art form in being free from society-determined contexts of meaning and responsive only to the creative powers of the artist in determining both meaning and form.

However, with the rise of the various counter-cultural movements in the 1960s that re-introduced into history silent groups defined by differences of race, gender, sexual preferences, ethnicity, native status, class, a plurality of perspectives was introduced to literary postmodernism and which culminated in a new politics of postmodernism from the late Seventies onward. On the new politics of postmodern art, Linda Hutcheon writes:

Postmodern art is more complex and more problematic than extreme late modernist auto-representation might suggest, with its view that there is no presence, no external truth which verifies or unifies, that there is only self-reference....

Postmodern art is not so much ambiguous as it is doubled and contradictory. There is rethinking of the modernist tendency to move away from representation by both installing it materially and subverting it. In the visual arts, as in literature, there has been a rethinking of the sign/referent relation in the face of the realization of the limits of self-reflexivity's separation from social practice. (*Poetics* 119-20)

Thus, postmodern literature from late 1970s onward both develops and extends the self-reflexive style of the Sixties and reintroduces the representational tradition of realism but in a new ironic form. On the paradoxical nature of postmodernism, Hutcheon warns against a nihilistic understanding of literary postmodernism stating that “criticism does not necessarily imply destruction, and postmodern critique, in particular, is a paradoxical and questioning beast” (*Poetics* 57). Hans Bertens also asserts the political dimension of literary postmodernism: “It has created new artistic possibilities, and it has opened up new fields of intellectual and, either implicitly or explicitly, moral and political inquiry” (13).

Postmodern fiction is considered the area to experiment with this contradictory nature of literary postmodernism, bringing in aspects of history, sociology, and other theories into discussion. One of the key tenets of postmodern literature is the problematizing of realism as an initial feature of the novel. It is certain that realism has ceased to be important for modernist literature and early self-reflexive postmodernism, but while they abandoned realism to pursue experimental explorations, postmodernist literature of the Eighties is characterized by a problematizing of both realism and self-reflexive writing: “In postmodern fiction, too, the documentary impulse of realism

meets the problematizing of reference seen in earlier self-reflexive modernism. Postmodern narrative is filtered through the history of both” (Hutcheon, *Politics* 29).

Consequently, there was a dire need for the novel to discover this paradoxical nature of postmodern philosophy with all its multiplicity and heterogeneity through deconstructing secure narrative traditions and patterns that are incapable to encompass all the new relations created in the world not for the sake of destroying such traditions but for their re-employment to satisfy the narrative requirements. Traditional narrative techniques are incapable of integrating all the new relations created in the American community. It is impossible for our consciousness to organize all the information which assails it because it lacks adequate tools that could catch up with the quick tempo of the modern American community with its diversity. As a reaction, the Sixties America introduced the postmodernist fiction which joins the rebellion against the Fifties and late modernism by turning against the long-seated concepts of reality and totalizing artistic form, and by developing its own imagined alternatives.

Taking after the literary movement of postmodernism, postmodernist fiction participated in the dialectic of deconstruction. It was the deconstruction of “traditional loyalties, ties and associations” as well as “the willingness to experiment, rethink, and redefine” that characterizes the revolutionary aspect of postmodern art in general and postmodern fiction in particular (Hoffmann 33). The American postmodern fiction is an “attempt to cope with the accumulated dubieties, insecurities, vagaries and skepticisms of the post-Sixties” reflecting uncertainty about how reality can be

known or assimilated by mind or text. It realizes this by “creating a montage confusion of discourses and realms, of presence and absence, by producing a field of intersections where expiring and evolving ideas and strategies meet” (Hoffmann 15, 16). In short, postmodern fiction confirms both the liberating and the deconstructive drives in culture by “a decomposition of its own traditional logic of cohesion and integration” (Hoffmann 33).

In its attempt to explore the outside reality with its multiplicity and diversity, postmodern fiction, in the first hand, aims to unmask the contradictions and instabilities that are inherent in different areas of the American community. Its initiative step is the deconstruction of the binary opposition between “order” and “disorder” that was originally established by modern societies so that they can assert the superiority of order. In an online article entitled “What is the Definition of Postmodernism?” Gary Smith argues that because modernity is about the pursuit of ever-increasing levels of order, modern societies constantly are against anything and everything labeled as “disorder,” which might disrupt order. In American culture, this disorder becomes “the Other” defined in relation to other binary opposition. Thus anything non-white, non male, non-heterosexual, etc. becomes part of “disorder,” and has to be eliminated from the ordered rational society. Postmodern literature comes to bring into focus the “other.” From 1960 onward, American fiction cast aside many canonical limits and became a carnival of bustling diversity. This fact coincided with the Civil Rights Movement that gave a voice to marginalized and oppressed social groups and “created a new sense of American diversity and pluralism that have brought into

question older conceptions of America's identity" (Molho and Wood 11).

Linda Hutcheon also emphasizes the role which ex-centric perspectives and pluralities of thought have had on postmodern fiction. She links the plurality of perspectives present within postmodern fiction with the development of politics of postmodernism from 1980 onward: "The local, the regional, the non-totalizing are reasserted as the center becomes fiction-necessary, desired, but a fiction nonetheless" (58). As absolutes and univocal narratives have been destabilized in the process of postmodernism, the fringe elements of modern society are able to position themselves within the multi-vocal discourse of society. This is, in fact, very relevant to our study which is, as the title shows, a comparative study between the universal and the local, the central and the peripheral, in short, between mainstream/Euro-American fiction and indigenous/Native American fiction as represented by Ann Beattie and Leslie Marmon Silko respectively.

The study puts the (White) Euro-American and Native American fiction of the post-Sixties face to face, with special reference to the aforementioned authors, exploring their seemingly similar, though inherently different, responses to the disillusion and frustration that have dominated the American community. Seemingly unconnected and radically disparate as they may be in all sorts of ways, writers between the 1960 and 1990 America actually shared a common ground: their estrangement from America gives them issues, problems, values and often techniques that connect them as fellow members of a literary generation that have lived the experience of the fall of the American Dream and the beginning of the