

**Uncertainty of Theme in the Postmodernist Fiction:
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Abstract

The current paper is titled Uncertainty of theme in the postmodernist fiction: The case of Pynchon's *Entropy*. It aims at clarifying how features of postmodernist text have an impact on theme production. Language is alienated as it does not refer to the conscious world. However, it refers to unconscious world which is characterized by cryptic and it does not make a sense of the world. The scope of the study throws light on the features of postmodernism to show how psychological factors are employed in the text and the functions of its stylistic features. It is hypothesized that damage in man's psyche has influenced postmodernist short story. The paper consists of four sections; the first section discusses the term *Postmodernism* as a concept. It explores how postmodernism views history and culture. The second section discusses the psychic elements employed in the short story to project man's psyche under the pressure of conflicting great powers. The third sheds light on the stylistic features, writers have used at variance with the ones used in realist and modernist texts to gain particular needs. The conclusion recapitulates the finding of three sections. Finally, the paper provides recommendations for further researches.

Keywords: Postmodernism; Uncertainty; Entropy; disorder: Instability.

**لاثبوتية الموضوع في الأدب القصصي لحركة ما بعد الحداثة: دراسة
على القصة القصيرة لبنجن الانتروبيا
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المخلص:

يلقي البحث الضوء على القصة القصيرة النتروبيا للكاتب ثوماس بنجن. البحث يتناول توضيح خصائص النص لحركة ما بعد الحداثة التي بدورها أثرت على نتاج الموضوعي للنص. حيث أصبحت اللغة في حالة غرابة لا تشير إلى عالم الإدراك بل تشير إلى عالم الإدراك أو اللاوعي الذي يوصف بكتاب هذه الحركة كعالم مبهم لا يمكن فهمة. مدى البحث يلقي الضوء على الخصائص النفسية الوظائف الأسلوبية لنصوص هذه الحركة. فرضية البحث أن انهيار النفس البشرية اثر على نتاج القصة القصيرة لحركة ما بعد الحداثة. البحث يتضمن أربعة مباحث: المبحث الأول يستكشف وجهة نظر الحركة تجاه التاريخ والثقافة. المبحث الثاني يناقش العناصر النفسية للإنسان تحت ضغط القوى العظمى المتصارعة. أما المبحث الثالث فيلقي الضوء على الخصائص الأسلوبية التي تميز نص ما بعد الحداثة عن النصوص الأخرى كالنص التقليدي و نص حركة الحداثة. أما المبحث الرابع فيتناول خاتمة البحث ويقدم توصيات لبحوث أخرى.

الكلمات المفتاحية: ما بعد الحداثة، عدم اليقين، عدم القدرة، الاضطراب، عدم الاستقرار.

1.1.1 Concept of Postmodernism :

Postmodernism is a movement in the western literature, art and other modes of thinking, after WWII. In which a radical change occurred in all kinds of art including literary traditions and conventions. It is a revolt against realist and modernist movements celebrating the advent of new form of writings which carry weird and peculiar contradictions; in which the world is viewed from new angle otherwise from realist and the ideology set up by modernist movement. Thornborrow and Shan state "... it continues to challenge cultural forms and push back the limits of how we represent the world"(172:1998). The morphological make up of the term is a stem consisting of two affixes: *Post* means *after*, *ism* deals with a movement rather a historical period of time. One of the prominent post-modernist work, the research is undertaking is Pynchon's short story " *The Entropy*" in which characters experience new modes of life characterized as weird from traditional and ideological point of view. The following extract from Pynchon's *Entropy* shows this fact: "*Hermetically sealed**, *it was a tiny enclave* of regularity in the city's chaos, alien to the vagaries of the weather, of national politics, of any civil disorder*" (p:3).

It shows that how life has become as a small anarchic place by giving an image of a gloomy atmosphere spoiled by politics leading to social disorder. It is noticed that man adopts other forms of thinking leading him/her to create their own path in the dark, inclined from reality on the ground, that creates an ideology shaping the way toward a cultural form recognized by social institutions. Fredric Jameson argues "... a perpetual change that obliterate traditions of the kind which all earlier social formations have had in one way or another to preserve"(2008: 554). It is not invitation to blindness; however, in which man may discover what has been known as cryptic and vague, and changing play of sign system or words. Eagleton (1996) theorizes that Postmodernism is a style of thought is described as suspicious of classical notion of the truth, reason, identity and objectivity. For them, the world is conceptualized from non- traditional perspective. The way of thinking shows that man has become vulgar and in loss without a point of reference described in literature as unstable, indeterminate and heavily depending on skepticism about objectivity and identity and culture. Life is viewed as illusion and meaningless. Bradbury refers to the kind of fiction as different from realist and modernist ones. He clarifies " breaking down the borders of the fictional, merging the genres of fact and fantasy, become a dominant theme of much sixties writing" (1992: 203). Everything in life is product of deception and skepticism that is created mess and the contradiction man is living at. Kramsch argues" the vagaries of life may give a person multiple social identities that all get played out alternately on the complex framing and reframings of daily encounter" (1998: 83). The research undertakes Pynchon's short story

Entropy; which is a patent reference to the society which has experienced a sense of agony due to the process of denaturing and dehumanizing projecting the society on the verge of collapse. The title of the story classifies as weird, and eccentric. It is a term used in classical thermodynamics and communication theory. Hill defines it "... as a measure of information.... A situation is equivalent to an uncertainty associated with the nature of situation" (2002: 213). It means that if there is a particular situation its measure of information leading to uncertainty. Pynchon' *Entropy* gives us a picture of chaotic world in the sixties' century celebrated with advance in technology, associated with the emergence of Great powers. That led writers to adopt new style correspond with the subject- matters reflecting the state of the age. The following extract compares rising temperature of a system with the increase of man suffering due to political conflicts:

But for three days now, despite the changeful weather, the mercury had stayed at 37 degrees Fahrenheit. Leery at omens* of apocalypse*, Callisto shifted beneath the covers. His fingers pressed the bird more firmly, as if needing some pulsing or suffering assurance of an early break in the temperature.(p:15)*

Fate of man is measured same as life time of the matter. Man become as an object belonging to a system, and he will die by the state of equilibrium of *Entropy* which stands for the negative energy of the political system which is described metaphorically as heat might lead to annihilation of humanistic values. Thus, man's state resembles physical system gets heats from surroundings then moves toward equilibrium.

1.1.2 Postmodernism and Culture:

Postmodernism does not distinguish between high culture and low culture as it is in modernism. Thornborrow and Shan argue " It continues to challenge cultural forms and push back the limits of how we represent the world" (1998: 173). It believes in deconstruction and indeterminacy in which no culture has central position or marginal. Eagleton states "postmodernism is a style of culture which reflects something of this epochal change..., pluristic art which blurs the boundaries between 'high' and 'popular' culture,.. " (1996:1). In this movement, a theory insists on the absence of absolute boundaries and relativity of truth; nevertheless, there is a revolution from within toward modes of thinking, inclining towards central culture from one hand; and possibility rather than probability on the other hand. The main idea of the short story is that the world man experiences now is not natural and directionless. Bradbury argues " one way to explore the aggressive, denaturing and cybernetic landscape that had become the face of sixties America was to seek" (1992:219). Postmodernism has come to free the restrictions imposed by culture and society to set man free from the themes of center and margin embodied in

the realist and modernist texts. The story itself shows no high or low classes in the formulation of its characters. Then it has come up with new modes of style simulating the complexities of the world and the systems governs it. In the other words, that mode of style is a backlash to man who is being vulnerable to the hazards of everyday life. Thus, the deconstruction of the measures of humanitarian values pushes the writers to pave the way toward man to discover what is behind the cryptic, obscure and uncertain.

1.1.3 Concept of History:

In reaction to the outer world, new theories emerged to tackle society issues and man. Postmodernism has undertaken new tools to analyze historical events, considered as nontraditional in realist sense. It believes in decentralizing of everything even authorities. It gives right to everybody to view history from his own perspective. Readers should be in process of refocusing to reach to idea of infinity of readings to indoctrinate the notion of no marginal and no central culture. History is utilized to be fiction to erase the line between functionality and reality. Bradbury states " The writing of history, journalistic reporting of events,..., is itself an enterprise in constructing a fictional narratives.." (1992: 202). History is treated as fiction, and their interpretation requires the same tools. Tyson argues".. history text that can be interpreted the same way literary critics interpret literary text,.. " (2006: 286). History tackles events happened in the past; however, literature represents human experiences in certain spacio-temporal coordinates. Eagleton argues " One vein of postmodernism views history as matter of constant mutability,...exhilaratingly multiple open-ended" (1996:46). They do not follow the traditional historians who believe in objective analysis. For them, Individual, social and cultural identities are treated same as historical events and text. there are on stable facts depending on any historical accounts, every event must go through the process of interpretation. Thus postmodernists views past as eccentric and ambiguous, requires subjective measures rather than objective ones. Bradbury states" the task of exploring the history of the times demanded more complex and radical vision" (1992: 219). Pynchon's *Entropy* in 1960 considered as an onset of Postmodernist fiction which reflects the sense of collapse in the historical and logical visions. Man is treated same as inanimate object on level of his identity, culture and history in which there is no difference between man's history and history of matter. Pynchon's short story resembles how man's history results heat burns humanistic values same as matter interaction results energy running toward Entropy. Thus viewing history of Postmodernist movement resembles the history of the physical system. The movement incarnates the subject- matter of literary productions occurred in an age celebrated with changes in social, cultural, and political levels post second World War.

2.1.1 Postmodernist Psyche :

Postmodernist writings envisages the sense of anxiety and psychological instability. what has been experienced from the World War II till now is a decline in man psyche; therefore author's writings reflect a kind of disorder in the psychic features. Bradbury states that "depression was inflicted the society by the horrible blood bath of WWII" (1992:205). Therefore, fiction of the age projects the crises and anxieties prevailing the world. That creates an impact on man's cognitive process; there is quite difference between how man views life before and how he views life in post war era. Inspired by Freudian famous saying "... the literary work as analogous to a dream, and author's disturbance as a patient's neurosis" (2008: 52). Postmodernist writers attribute the process of literary writings as product of the unconscious which is defined by Webster's Dictionary as "the sum of all thoughts, memories, impulses, ... which the individual is not conscious but which influence the emotions and behavior". Psychoanalytically, there are two theories argue the process of unconscious formulation, first Freudian theory in which unconscious is formed as a result to family conflict experienced by child in early stages of his life. Tyson comments on Freudian theory is that " The unconscious comes into being when we are very young through the repression" (2006: 12). This theory is classified as traditional, concrete and can be applied on any kind of writings; however, postmodernist writings are subjected heavily by the abstract psychoanalytical theory of Jaques Lacan who views the formulation of unconscious from different angle. Tyson states that " Lacan's work is rather abstract, often ambiguous, and almost always difficult to understand" (2006: 13). Lacan attributes the formulation of the unconscious as product of the lost object of desire as *objet petit*. Pynchon's *Entropy* gives an insight about the sort of postmodernist writings showing that the literary product of the age envisages the sense of anxiety and psychological instability. The extract clarifies how anxiety of man's psyche having a great effect on his language production:

Tell a girl: 'I love you.' No trouble with two thirds of that, it's a closed circuit. Just you and she. But that nasty f o u r - l e t t e r w o r d i n t h e m i d d l e , that's the one you have to look out for. Ambiguity. Redundance. Irrelevance, even. Leakage. All this is noise. Noise screws up your signal, makes for disorganization in the circuit. (p:9)*

The extract shows that language used in the text does not make sense in traditional sense, however, it reflects the unconscious described by Lacan as complex and difficult to understand. What has been experienced from WWII is deterioration in man psyche; therefore authors' works are related to disorder as a reaction to the atmosphere of depression caused by the conflicting authorities; that yields mass anxiety disorder as one of the prime feature of postmodern man. *Entropy* reflects practices, problems and

traumas of people because of war. Postmodernism has come up with certain strategies to conceptualize the world from different perspective. Eagleton comments " it sees the world as contingent ungrounded, diverse, indeterminate, a set of disunified culture" that means the way of conceptualizing the world heavily depending on scepticism about everything truth, identity and history. For instance, a writer attempts to describe something not related to what he wants to convey. The title of Pynchon's *Entropy* does not match with logical criteria to tackle a social issue; however it is a physical term; in the other words man identity is dissolved in the mechanical or materialistic system, and heat produced by *it* means man's long for what he has lost as innocence and humanity. In chaotic situations, authorities feel that they will lose hegemony, therefore they suggest new modes of living and art in attempt to penetrate or indoctrinate their ideology within society. Commenting on Zizak, Nigel & Lodge state that "The true locus of fantasy that sustain the ideology edifice" (2008: 697). That means what is painful or in difficult situation might be envisaged to people as less effective. For postmodernism, man psyche is manifested through language which does not mirror the outer world anymore; however, it refers to itself. Jane flax argues "all our knowledge, even our empirical knowledge, is made up of what language supplies itself" (1990: 5) it is an invitation to explore human psyche through textual world. The nature of language of the movement has broken up the traditional conventions; there is no place for central culture and history; nothing is described due to facts on the ground. Nigel & Lodge state " Meta- narratives are now no longer needed" (2008: 411). If *Entropy* is read in traditional way, it will make no sense because there is no a theory of knowledge on which we can view the world. Lacan attributes the literary writing to a mental disease called *aphasia* ; for him " Aphasia is caused purely anatomical lesions in the cerebral apparatus... center for these linguistic functions produce language deficiencies" (2008:187). The notion of the relationship between the referent and object has become vulnerable. So Lacan wants referent (signifier) connects the object (signified) in the unconscious not the one we refer to in the outer world. The term *Aphasia* is not clinically referring to damage in the area responsible for linguistic functions; however, it refers to the how unconscious is structured, also there is no binary relationship between signifier and signified. Thus there is no connection between text and outer world. Text refers to the inner side of postmodern man which is characterized as dark and having contradictory wishes toward the past. In the other words, language is seen from nontraditional way that corresponds with Lacanian psychoanalysis who refers to meaning as product of chain of signifier; which opposes Saussurian theory. Palmer illustrates " linguistic sign consists of a signified and a signifier; ..., both linked by a psychological 'associative' bond" (1981: 24).

For the postmodernism, Reality have become set of images in which there is no center at all. So the literary works are product of unconscious and set of signifiers, meaning is distilled from them as a result of two processes metonymy and metaphor. Lacal states "The creative spark of metaphor does not spring from the conjunction" of two images, the hidden signifier then remaining present through its (metonymic) relation to the rest of the chain" (2008:194). The theory throws light on the complexity of man psyche of the age that meets the needs of its reader who has already experienced the sense of loss. Meaning is not being seen on the ground; however, it is existed in the network of signifiers. Therefore fantasy has become one of the priority to quest for truth Lyotard comments on the age is that " the realization of fantasy to seize reality...: let us wage a war on totality; ..; let us activate the differences to save the honor of the name" (Lodge & Nigel, 1988: 420). Lyotard discusses the trauma inflicted the society after Great War and ruling class's attempt by setting up Postmodernist movement to impose hegemony on people.

Thus, uncertainty is a product of unconscious which reflects the need for what has been lost in the other words, man attempts to look for what has lost object since the separation from the mother in early stages. That sense of loss formulates the unconscious which is structured as language characterized as vague and difficulty to understand. Tyson comments on Lacanian theory states " The unconscious is structured like a language.... The key ingredient is lost or lack" (2006: 30). Fredric Jameson associates the postmodernist process of writing with the term '*Schizophrenia*' which means that there is no rapport between what is said with the outer reality or the sensible context. They may coincides with the idea is that using language has become problematic, leading to forget the past and give hazy look to the future. Writers have resorted to a sort of style characterized as weird and does not make sense of the world we used to live because they view language not as a means of communication with the outer world ; however, for them , it has become as an instrument of alienation. Fredric Jameson argues "..., Schizophrenic experience is an experience of isolated, disconnected, discontinuous material signifier which fail to link up into coherent sequence" (2008: 549). *Entropy* is a patent example sheds light on how human characteristics have decayed or vanished; in which man has become a part of cybernetic system. In scientific sense, *Entropy* shows how heat resulted from work done propagate and never comes back to its earlier state. However *Heat* may stand for human agony form WWII. ; and the process of transformation heat into work again is never been done. The story tackles the sense of depression and frustration due to the collapse in the psychology of western community, that synchronizes with the occurrence of sophisticated technology.

3.1.1. Characteristics of Postmodernist Text:

Generally, Postmodernist text does not only shed light on social regulated issues; however, it tries to explore the complexity of man psyche; that is reflected on the literary production. According to the traditional notion of language is that there is an arbitrary relationship between what refers to the external world and what is referred to. Palmer defines the term reference as "Reference deals with the relationship between linguistic elements, words, sentences, etc. , and non- linguistic world of experience" (1981: 29). So the notion of viewing language has taken new route in which the world refers to itself not by language. There is no any interest in the content of language because the way the text is structured showing that a text of the kind refers to itself not to the external world. Thornborrow & Shan state "Postmodernism, however, treats language as if instead of referring to a 'real world' independent of language, language in fact only referred to itself- as if it is the only reality" (1998: 174). Postmodernist text is concerned with how language is presented as an entity referring to itself rather than to outside world. In this section, the research throws light on prominent postmodernist features of Pynchon's *Entropy* which is considered as a good instance incarnated those features:

3.1.2. Loss of narrative end:

In ordinary sense, every story has an end toward misery or happiness, however, there is no end to the story told. It is a new strategy adopted by writer to express their philosophy and the way they conceptualize life; therefore they have come up with new concept Metafiction. In dictionary of stylistics Wales defines it as "It describes a fiction which self-consciously exposes the very artificiality of the novel and its conventions" (1989: 293). Thornborrow & Shan state "postmodernist novel have tended to abandon conventional narrative closure" (1998:175). Pynchon tries to show there is no an end to people suffering. In scientific sense, unless there is work done, there is heat generated and leaves us with question does the work stop? And does the process reversed in a sense heat become work again? Bradbury says ".chronological development, claim to authority and authorship, had become exhausted.." (1992:201). The following extract from the end of the story clarifies that there is no traditional end in it:

He found himself, in short, restating Gibbs' prediction in social terms, and envisioned a heatdeath for his culture in which ideas, like heat-energy, would no longer be transferred, since each point in it would ultimately have the same quantity of energy; and intellectual motion would, accordingly, cease (p:7)*

.It means the heat from the system symbolizing the negativity and consumption would lead man to endless suffering.

3.1.3. Parody and Pastiche:

Pynchon's style contains pastiche; he uses a scientific subject to tackle man's issue in a world celebrates the idea deconstruction of identity, culture

and traditional norm. Bradbury says " they use parody as a tone of voice to create an independent world" (1992:234). The following extract from the story shows scientific register inferring to social issue. "*Redundance. Irrelevance, even. Leakage. All this is noise. Noise screws* up your signal, makes for disorganization in the circuit.*" (P. 9).

Postmodernist writers mimic other text in order to mock them or for the sake of humor. That may be attributed to the idea of consumption.

3.1.4. The collapse of cultural hierarchy:

There is no difference among the characters of the story. No place for social classes in the story. In the other words, there is no consideration taken toward the cultural traditions and social status. Thornborrow & Shan state "It juxtaposes 'popular culture' and 'high culture', without any sense that one has more value than the other,.. " (1998: 177). In the story, a lot of people come to the third floor apartment – the setting of the story- however, nothing is mentioned about their social status or cultural background. Inspired from that noise of music which might stand for political forces creating an anarchic atmosphere. That has made all values and tradition dissolved including *the cultural values*.

Meat ball shuffled around " well , now, Saul , " he muttered , " you ' resort of , I don't know, expecting a lot from people . I mean , you know. What it is , most of the things we say , I guess , are mostly noise . " (p:9)*

In this extract, nobody has more social value than the other; under the effect of the circumstances they live at, their speech are nonsense, signifying nothing.

3.1.5 Self- Referentiality:

language refers to itself. Text has certain features making it distinct from other kinds of text. Readers of such a text face difficulties to distill meaning from it. Thornborrow & Shan state "Writerly text,, make the reader works harder to produce meanings from a range of different possibilities, undermining the naturalness of the text" (1998: 149). The title of the novel is characterized as weird. It talks about something and it refers to something else hard to find connection between them. Thermodynamic processes resembles man's stages of living in chaotic situation. The following speech from Pynchon's *Entropy* shows the fact:

"Well sure," Meatball said, trying to be helpful, "you were using different words. By 'human being' you meant something that you can look at like it was a computer. It helps you think better on the job or something. But Miriam meant something entirely—" "The hell with it." (p:9)

The text looks different from ordinary text. On one hand, Its construction heavily depends on a criterion of ignoring the rapport with outside world. On the other hand, its structure suggests many readings to extract meaning

out of it. These features can be viewed under the umbrella of deconstruction theory by Derrida in which language does not refer to outer world. Tyson comments ".. ambiguous domain of complex experience in which ideologies program us without being aware of them" (2003: 249). According to the postmodernist writers, language is gas no meaning is unstable or reliable in which every reading generates new meaning. Thus, Postmodernist theme is a product of communication tool as complex, vague leading to uncertainty.

4.1 Conclusion:

The study has some findings. Postmodernism is a movement that is resulted from attenuation of man's position in the universe because of conflicting great forces during WWII. On the light of that, politics play very significant role to manipulate linguistic choices concerning certain values and beliefs to achieve certain ideology. In Pynchon' story, man has become as an object as if he were part of a physical system. The heat produced from that system might kill him and the humanistic values inside him. The psyche of Postmodernist man has been subjected to that change. Complexities of the world are reflected in literary text. It shows the collapse in man's psyche. The new style is adopted to incarnate these complexities. That proves postmodernist theme as a product of vague world in which language is not a tool of communication with the outside world; however it refers to itself. Thus, the theme of the age is characterized as unstable, ambiguous and uncertain. Further researches can be conducted by tackling more than one postmodernist short story or novel.

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