

## Modern and Modernity: An Assessment

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### ABSTRACT

The word modern is more connotative than denotative. Different ideological positions have explored the origin and value of the attributive term. The word has wide currency in the study of literature and culture. The present study focusses on the different implications in the use on the words modern and modernity in relation to the ideological interpretations. It explores the Marxist, the capitalist, the post-colonial, the philosophical and the sociological meanings and their relevance in the study of literature. It argues that the common aspects in all these formations of modernity are the spirit of equality and emancipation, and not advancement or progress. The critical modernity helps to position ourselves in the debate about the features of the modern and modernity.

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### 1. Introduction

The word 'modern' is widely used in the study of literature. The meaning and implications of the word have changed historically. The advent of postmodernism has redefined modernity which has also influenced the sense in which modern is understood in the context of study of literature, arts and aesthetics. In the study of Indian literature, 'modern' is debated in relation to colonization, and formations of modernity in the society and culture. The fact that modernity affected different peoples in India differently because of the highly compartmentalized living due to the hierarchical nature of caste system and also the fact that the technology, urbanization and colonial education reached different regions in India at different periods of time have contributed greatly to the debate on modernity and the modern in literatures in different languages and regions. The present paper explores the contesting ideas of modern and modernity to arrive at the general understanding of these two inter related concepts.

The paper argues that, 'modern' can be understood in relation to the form, content as well as the function of modernity in a particular context such as literature. That is, the paper holds that modernity is an ideology which defines the modern. Therefore, a work of literature like drama or a play, which is called modern responds to the political ideology of modernity. Modernity is a concept with political implications, and the modern works of literature narrativize a specific form of modernity determined by the ideology which interprets modernity.

The terms modern, and modernity have been used frequently in the discussion of literature. In the periodization of literature, for example, 'modern literature' refers to different periods in the literature of different languages and cultures. The idea of modern in English literary history suggests a different time frame from the one in history of Indian literature. The reasons for this difference may be located in the ideological implications of 'modern'. The meaning of the word modern is defined by modernity itself. Modernity writes itself in relation to the historical and cultural contexts in which it occurs.

The word acquires significance as a consequence of Enlightenment, and especially with the emergence of Industrial capitalism in Europe. Tracing the changes in the sense of modern, Raymond Williams says that "A conventional contrast between ancient and modern was established before the Renaissance; .... Modern in this comparative and historical sense was common from 1C16. Modernism, modernist and modernity followed, in C17 and C18; the majority of pre-C19 uses were unfavourable, when the context was comparative ... but through C19 and very markedly in C20 there was a strong movement the other way, until modern became virtually equivalent to IMPROVED (q.v.) or satisfactory or efficient. Modernism and modernist have become more specialized, to particular tendencies, notably to the experimental art and writing of c.1890-c.1940, which allows a subsequent distinction between the modernist and the (newly) modern." (Keywords, OUP NewYork,1983. 208). This shows that 'modern' was regarded with suspicion until 18<sup>th</sup> century. The 'progress' achieved through science and technology in 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century brings about the positive connotations such as 'improved' or 'developed'.

Further, the implications of the term modern get associated with development and progress in relation to the existing social practices and aesthetic categories such as literature. The history of literature written during the period of modernity considers modern as an ever-shifting boundary in relation to the past practices. Peter Childs quotes Raymond Williams and notes that "...modern English is distinguished from Middle English; and the modern period in literature is considered to be from the sixteenth century on, although it is sometimes used to describe twentieth-century writing. More generally, 'modern' has been frequently used to refer to the avant-garde, though since World War II this sense has been embraced by the term 'contemporary' while 'modern' has shifted from meaning 'now' to 'just now' (Williams 1989)" (Childs,13)

Commenting on the meaning of modernity, Simon Malpas notes the contentious shades of meaning in the usage of the term modernity are in the arena of discussion because of the

advent of the postmodern. (Malpas, 11) He traces the conceptions of modernity on subjectivity, history and political resistance, since, as he says the most influential thinker on modernity, Habermas identifies these three as the defining formations of modernity. (Malpas, 54) Different ideological positions that emerged out of modernity have either eulogised the subject, history and the political system or criticised them. These accounts of modernity help us to look critically at the idea of modern and its sweeping claim that it stands for positive improvement or development over the past. (Malpas, 45)

The major proponent of modernity is the industrial-capitalist ideology. The capitalist view of modernity narrates the progress and increase of wealth and greater freedom to choose as the consequences of modernity which has emerged after the Industrial Revolution. There seems to be a uncritical faith in the value of the modern in the capitalist society, though being critical of everything is one of the foundational principles in the very emergence and existence of modernity. Capitalism sees modernity as a continuous and developmental project. Various narratives of capitalism spread the belief in the positive effects of modernity. In other words, the capitalist formations of modernity believes in the meaning and value of subjectivity, history and evolution of the political system.

The socialist ideological narratives of modernity, Malpas explains, regard modernity as a transformational agency which continuously sweeps away the value and stability of institutions which begins with industrial capitalist society. He sums up the ideas of Marshall Berman on modernity. According to Berman, we can observe three phases in the formation of modernity: the first two are related to the Europe and American continents, while the third, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, modernity becomes a global phenomenon. Modernity uproots the fixed nature of human relationships and every institution of power in all the societies it has an access. According to Berman the period of modern, which begins with industrialization in Europe and North America. brings in the transformations in every aspect of human life and facilitates the oppressive power of the institutions. (Malpas, 46-48)

Homi K. Bhabha represents the most complex and significant critique of modernity from the postcolonial perspective. The emergence modernity and the expansionist ideology of imperialism are dealt with by many Foucauldian thinkers. Rationalization plays an important role in the institutionalization of power, though the source of power and power relationships are irrational. Modernity helps to justify the modern, transformed power relationships by appropriating the enlightenment knowledges and investing these knowledges in the agencies of power such as the state, nation or the empire. As Fanon has argued, the colony is disciplined and civilized by the colonizer who is deemed to be modern. Bhabha re appraises the arguments of Foucault and Fanon on the one hand and reconsiders the poststructuralist critique of meaning on the other.

In Location of culture, Bhabha elaborates on the changing formulations of modernity in the colonial context. In the concluding essay, "Race', time and the revision of modernity" he points out to "a postcolonial 'enunciative' present ... beyond

Foucault's reading of the task of modernity as providing an ontology of the present". (Bhabha, 238) He provides "a form of the writing of cultural difference in the midst of modernity that is inimical to binary boundaries: whether these be between past and present, inside and outside, subject and object, signifier and signified. This spatial-time of cultural difference - with its postcolonial genealogy - erases the Occidental 'culture of common sense'...." (Bhabha 238). The ideological implications of colonial modernity, in the colonial context is not only in establishing its relevance to the colony's present, but in negating the contemporary culture as an irrelevant past. The temporal difference signified by the binaries of the past/present are erased.

As a result, the modern is rendered as a spatial attribute signifying the colonizer's geography and establishing the need accommodate his modern culture in the cultural space of the orient. The culture of the colonial present is marked as 'primitive' and provides a space for the hybrid culture in the colony. It may be noted that, in the colonial context 'modern' loses its temporal denotation and represents a power relationship between the binaries of colonized/colonizer. The colonial space is narrativized in such a way that the modern colonizer and the primitive colonized inhabit it simultaneously in the same period of time, which leads to the reformulation of the modern and its revisions.

Therefore, "Modernity as a sign of the present emerges in that process of splitting, that lag, that gives the practice of everyday life its consistency as being contemporary. It is because the present has the value of a 'sign' that modernity is iterative, a continual questioning of the condition of existence...." (Bhabha, 242) Further, he says that the colonial presence becomes inevitable for the narrative of the modern. "Without the postcolonial time-lag the discourse of modernity cannot, I believe, be written; with the projective past it can be inscribed as a historical narrative of alterity that explores forms of social antagonism and contradiction that are not yet properly represented, political identities in the process of being formed, cultural enunciations in the act of hybridity in the process of translating and transvaluing cultural differences." (Bhabha, 245) Thus, repetitions, revisions of modernity are inscribed in to the culture of the colony.

The power relationship creates a further divide among the colonized people like India. The pre-colonial power relationship of caste hierarchy, for example gets further complicated by the emergence of colonial modernity.

The hegemonic upper caste ideology having better access to the modern knowledge and amenable to change, grows more oppressive since the capitalist-imperial ideology of the colonizer feels it safe to use the upper caste as an intermediary of its power. Further, the native upper caste, in order to become an agency of modernity represents itself as the genuine voice of all the colonial people. The colonizer is blind hooded prides in the partial knowledge and the upper caste develops awe and respect towards the colonizer vis a vis the modern knowledge represented by him. The defining the colony the colonizer defines himself too and delimits his knowledge, which is ironically a move away from the modernity

which has helped him to legitimize his power over the colony. By implication, the irrational power relationship in the colony leads to the dehumanization of both. The hegemonic nature of imperial colonial modernity is contested by the multiple modernities which also emerge because of colonialism. These variants of modernity, emerging in the different forms of native culture including literature and theatre challenge the dominant discourses such as the state, religion or caste. In short, colonial modernity cannot completely repress the other because the legitimacy of the colonial presence depends upon the existence of the other- the powerless. This gives the sections of the marginalized natives at least a presence, though excluded from the centres of power. In short, colonial modernity is not singular, it leads to multiple narratives of the modern.

Contesting claims of modernity emerge because of the colonial context compelled by the expansionist modernity. Because of its inherently political implications, modernity stands critically challenged by opposing ideologies. Simon Malpas summarizes the most general characteristics among the different formations of modernity and the modern which emerge in the different periods. Lyotard uses the concept of grand narratives to bring together all knowledges under the aspirations of human progress, development and emancipation. The suppositions and frameworks behind all the grand narratives connote the ideological strength of modernity. The grand narratives foster specific power relationships and subjugate the components of their structures by attributing specificity, clarity, hierarchical meaning, value and authenticity. When the marginalised 'components' of the structure break free from the narrativized meanings and these micronarratives stand on their own without a logical fixity of meaning, the grand narrative of modernity loses its value. This heralds the beginning of the postmodern. The critique of the grand narratives helps to understand the flux and the course of modernity. It again helps to seek emancipation from the oppressive tendencies of modernity.

Malpas compares the views of Lyotard on modernity and the critical modernity with the views of Habermas. Lyotard believes that the modernity has paved way to the postmodernity. The grand narratives of Reason, rationality and subjectivity stand challenged by the postmodern condition. In such a 'condition', self, history and political resistance (the three significant formulations within modernity) are replaced by fluid identities, discontinuities and unattainable freedom. Malpas explains that Lyotardian view that the society has moved away from modernity, from the fixities of meaning and valuable action is not acceptable to Habermas. (Malpas,36-45) Therefore, Malpas notes the relevance of Habermas to the discussion of modernity and its continuity in the 21st century, Malpas explains that according to Habermas modernity is still an unfinished project. He quotes Jurgen Habermas' essay "Modernity: An Unfinished Project (1989) and *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* in the discussion of modernity and postmodernity. (Malpas,51-56) "Habermas locates this specific "discourse of modernity" at the beginning of the nineteenth century in the self-reflexive turns taken by the philosophers, scientists and artists as they began to question the relationships between their disciplines and the revolutionary historical changes occurring at that time." (Malpas, 52)

Malpas says, Habermas "follows Berman's notion of modernity as a period of continual transformation..." He quotes from "Modernity: An Unfinished Project" and highlight the character of modernity in shaping the modern subjectivity and emancipatory idealism that began in the nineteenth century modernity. "In so far as the world -views have disintegrated and their traditional problems have been separated off under the perspective of truth, normative rightness and authenticity of beauty, and can now be treated as questions of knowledge, justice, or taste respectively, these arises in the modern period a differentiation of the value sphere of science and knowledge, of morality and of art." (Habermas,1996:45)" (Malpas, 52)

The passage illustrates the importance of continuity of the enlightenment idealism triggered by the American War of Independence and the French Revolution. The ideals of rational truth, morality and beauty envisaged by the discourse of modernity attain significance in relation to the theocentric power hierarchy in the premodern ages which modernity changed. Similarly, the idea of subject construction promoted by modernity is key to Habermas' evaluation of modernity. In addition to this Habermas holds that reality and rationality are historically determined. Malpas says that Habermas recognizes the work of Hegel in this regard. And thirdly, according to Malpas, Habermas the philosopher emphasizes the political nature inherent to modernity. Modernity believes in the ability of the subject to transform the oppressive power structures. Habermas holds Karl Marx as one other key thinkers of modernity since Marx advocates historical change in human condition brought about by scientific and material causes. Malpas says that according to Habermas, " ...the discourse of modernity is not simply a theoretical analysis of the times, but also seeks to provide a practical means of intervening in the continually changing material world so as to emancipate people or groups from the difficulties to which they are exposed by development."(Malpas:55)

Modernity, therefore, has different formulations and relevance inheres an emancipatory ideology as well as the oppressive ideologies too. The project of modernity continues since both of these still have not lost their significance, and the material conditions of life still change and are changed by these ideologies.

The discussion has shown that all the thinkers mentioned locate modern and modernity in relation to Enlightenment ideals and the historical events that have enacted these ideals. The thinkers like Lyotard, and Habermas locate the modern in the historical happenings after the anti-colonial American war of Independence, the emancipatory ideals of French revolution, and the great philosophical changes which follow them. Secondly, they are critical of the capitalist appropriation of the modern. They are critical of the modern and maintain the high idealism of equality, emancipation and critical rationality in all the contexts, including their own.

Therefore, being critical of modernity is useful to examine the transformation and social action against unjust equations of power. It helps to rethink the need for rationality and scientific thinking to challenge the widely accepted and popular notions

regarding the positive claims of modernity. Moreover, the above reading of modernity is helpful to understand the dominance of the modern agencies of power, and rethink the value invested irrationally in the modern institutions. Then, it is

helpful to locate modernity and narratives in the colonial contexts.

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