

Book review

Butler, C. (2002). *Postmodernism: a very short introduction*. Oxford University Press. 142 pp.

Eyasu Alefe , email: eyasualefe77@gmail.com

Department of History and Heritage Management, Faculty of Social Sciences, Bahir Dar University, Bahir Dar Ethiopia.

Book Review History: Received: 24 October, 2024; Accepted: 10 December, 2024

DOI:10.20372/ejss.v10i2.1936

According to Christopher Butler (1940-2020), a Professor of English language and literature at Oxford University, the period after the end of the Second World War has been characterized by the steady decline of metanarratives like Kantianism, Hegelianism, Marxism, Christianity and even science. He argues that the credibility of these Metanarratives and their common creeds such as ‘history is progressive; knowledge can liberate human beings and all knowledge has a secret unity,’ become dubious thenceforth. This is largely because of the rise of a distinct and different way of viewing the world called Postmodernism, i.e. the incredulity of grand/metanarratives.

Butler’s book, *Postmodernism: A very short introduction* (2002) is a scholarly work written by a skillful academician. The book has five chapters and comprises twenty-one illustrations that portray postmodernist art, architecture, literature, film among others. His book begins with a brief account of the minimalist artistic work of Carl Andre, i.e. *Equivalent VIII* (1966) that is kept at Tate Gallery, London. He remarks that such artwork of Andre is a typical style of postmodernist art because it has an elementary design, easy to repeat it and above all, lack of aesthetic qualities of the modernist art. He also states that such minimalist tradition of the postmodernist art still continues until the dawn of the twenty-first century. In this regard, Butler takes the artwork of Martin Creed that makes him the winner of the Turner Prize in 2001 as a best example

All the same, Butler considers the postmodernist period as predominance of academic works over artistic one. In connection to this, he claims that the credit for the theoretical inspiration of postmodernism goes to the French intellectuals such as Louis Althusser, Roland Barthes, Jacques

Derrida and Michael Foucault. He argues that by the late 1960s and early 1970s, the idea of postmodernism had diffused into England, Germany and the United States. In the meantime, the philosophical thought of postmodernism metamorphosed itself from the ethical and individualist existentialism to skeptical and anti-humanist attitude. Butler acknowledges that both the deconstructive and poststructuralist theory have been used by scholars to disseminate the newly evolved views of postmodernism.

Butler strongly argues that postmodernism in its own right is not a theory. Rather, it is an abstract and skeptical type of discourse that draws its general thoughts from art, philosophy, literature, linguistics, history, sociology and the like. Hence, he contends that postmodernist works are typically less unified, less masterful, more playful, less inclined to hold narratives together, highly emphasize the way of our contextual understanding rather than the pleasure of artistic impressiveness as well as more resistant to a single interpretation of phenomenon. Based on this premise, Butler aptly labeled the postmodernists as the ‘members of a loosely constituted and quarrelsome political party’ who do not share even a particular principle in common.

According to Butler, postmodernists distrusted most information as merely manipulative image-making narratives of those in power than the development of knowledge. He cited ‘orientalism’ (the work of another postmodernist scholar named Edward Said) to explain how the western scholars have made a great effort to impose the pro-western grand narratives thereby being able to keep the domineering position of the west over the rest. In relation to this, he contends that the basic tenet of postmodernism is ‘skepticism’ of totalitarian narratives so that the arguments of scientists and historians are to be conceived as no more than quasi-narratives.

Butler’s book also explains the relationship between power and discourse in the postmodernist era. He describes discourse as ‘historically evolved set of interlocking and mutually supporting statements which are used to define and describe a subject matter’. He claims that some powerful social groups used discourses to express and assert their authority over weak social groups, i.e. judges over prisoners, physicians over patients, psychiatrists over the mentally ill and so on. He also believes that discourse has been used to subordinate, exclude or marginalize individuals by tagging them as witches, homosexuals, communists, anarchists, terrorists and the like.

Moreover, Butler tries to clarify how such misuse of discourse to abuse the weak section of the society has been criticized by postmodernist scholars like Michael Foucault. Accordingly, Foucault condemned discourses as merely vital tools of powerful social groups to undermine and control the weaker ones. Due to this fact, he adopts the victim position and analyzes power from the bottom (marginalized) side. In short, for postmodernists, discourses should not be exclusive devices of powerful individuals to control the impoverished social group.

What is more, Butler clearly shows how postmodernist cultures affect every aspect of human life in the contemporary world through literature, art, music, architecture, politics, philosophy, film and the like. He argues that postmodernist art gives great attention to the hitherto undermined forms and identities as well as more emphasis to the political significance of the work rather than its visual beauty. In connection to this, he identifies that pastiche, parody, irony, paranoia, comic and fantasy as the typical features postmodernist art.

Likewise, he argues that postmodernist literature strictly contrasts with modernist literature and its principal style involves the ontological elusiveness about the incongruous nature of the world projected by the text. In short, as Butler explains in his book, the typical mode of postmodernist literature is the blending of history and fiction so that it displays itself open to all illusory artifices, deceitful tales and multiple interpretations. Butler's book also reveals the pluralist and relativist culture of postmodernism. He argues that most postmodernist analysts openly attack the existing undisputable authority and legitimacy of philosophy, grand narratives and universal truth. Due to this fact, he criticizes them as 'nihilists' who have been troubled by vanished Marxist 'avant-garde' hopes. He also asserts that the belief and arts inspired by postmodernists are destructive rather than constructive.

In general, Butler's book offers a concise but informative introduction about the very complex and elusive issue. Hence, the book is very helpful especially for those general readers who are eager to acquire a preliminary knowledge about the multi-perspective concept of postmodernism.