

Possibilities and Limitations: The Political and Ethical Horizons of Postmodernism

Ms. Hema Sen

M.A. English, M.Phil

Assistant Professor, Mata Sundri College

University of Delhi

Abstract

This paper is aimed at delineating the problematics of postmodernism both as a theoretical as well as political stance by focussing on its refusal to acknowledge and assume any foundational ethical categories. It does this by drawing a contrast between some ideas of Jacques Derrida and some of those of Emmanuel Levinas. This refusal which does not allow one to assume stable categories of the self and the other is a product of postmodernism's focus on freeplay and difference. While the ethical drive of postmodernism is towards an acknowledgement of the other, it is my contention that by refusing any kind of categorisation, it deprives itself of the tools to do so.

Keywords: Postmodernism, Nietzsche, Levinas, Ethics, Other, Deconstruction, Political

The gradual turn towards postmodernism has been discussed in relation to a variety of social and theoretical phenomena such as architecture, literature and philosophy. This makes it difficult to delineate its many aspects and express all its themes in a coherent fashion. The 'postmodern problematic' (White, 1991) can be used as a background to provide an understanding of postmodern ethico-political concerns. This problematic can be seen in terms of four primary traits. Firstly there is a strong suspicion of foundationalist metanarratives of modern scientific and political projects. Second, an awareness of the dangers of rationalization. Lastly there is an availability of new informational technologies and a spurt in the growth of social movements. The ambiguity that is implied in the term postmodernism and its emphasis on ambivalence, multiplicity and paradox point to the fact that contemporary social reality can be characterised in these terms and cannot be understood through familiar cognitive and social structures.

The ethical ideas of postmodernism are based upon a number of other characteristics. Postmodernists invoke a Nietzschean critique of human morality and an affirmation of 'freeplay'. There is a scepticism regarding metanarratives such as progress and teleology, metaphysics of presence and ontology. This results in a tendency to negate any positive formulation of ethics in contemporary discourse. Secondly, postmodernism defines ethics in terms of sensitivity to 'otherness' and 'difference'. The deconstruction of metanarratives is thought to lead to the 'other' who is ordinarily suppressed. The assumption here is that marginalization in discourse also leads to suppression through violence in social reality. This