

Lyotard's Postmodernism And Othering

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Abstract

Lyotard's postmodernism points towards a new politics of mini-narratives, the mini-narratives of Others, instead of a single metanarrative, thereby positively acknowledging individual or group differences while doing justice to them. Lyotard calls for fracturing history into a plurality of infinite narratives and genres so that different voices and possibilities to address them could emerge. The events of Othering occurring in history should be read as signs, although with no finality. The reading should always be open and plural, accepting the event's uniqueness. If this is not the case, reading and understanding those events in terms of singular metanarratives would invariably silence the voice of the Others and would never be heard and addressed. As opposed to restricting redress to mere norms or empirical and statistical descriptions, which might smother the Other's voice, Lyotard's notion is ethical as it endeavours to open up genres to find new ways to phrase and express the Other's voice.

Keywords: Othering, Postmodernism, Metanarrative, Mininarratives, Plurality.

Introduction

Othering occurs when a particular person or group considered as Other is excluded or silenced. Othering forbids someone from articulating about the just by killing them or by forbidding them to be heard. Othering in a society does not respect differences or allow them to speak for themselves. Yiannis Gabriel explains Othering as a process of casting a group, an individual or an object into the role of the Other and establishing one's own identity through opposition to and, frequently, vilification of this Other.... It denies the Other those characteristics of the 'Same', reason, dignity, love, pride,

heroism, nobility and ultimately any entitlement to human rights (Gabriel). Any discourse of othering has its basis in the tendency to totalise things and explain disparate ideas by referring to a single universal concept, which Lyotard refers to as a metanarrative. History testifies, however, that reducing diverse things to a single totalising metanarrative leads to political totalitarianism as the discourse of Othering is embedded in it. A single overarching metanarrative with its universalising tendency cannot do justice to individual local problems, particularly the problems of the Others in a society who are not in the mainstream, who are marginalised and whose issues remain unaddressed. They are ignored or glossed over if considered in terms of a single universal metanarrative. Lyotard argues that all kinds of discourse in society -- social, psychological, political, economic, and even scientific discourse employ narrative to present their ideas. These different narratives constitute different discourses that make up society's knowledge. They are based on different sets of rules so that any statement or narrative in a particular discourse draws legitimacy from a given set of rules. Lyotard calls these different discourses 'Language Games', which he has borrowed from Wittgenstein, the Austrian philosopher. Lyotard makes three observations about Language Games: First, the rules of language games are the object of the contract between the players and, therefore, a human construct. Second, every utterance is a move in the language game, and third, if there are no rules, there is no game. That is, the social bond in society is composed of language moves. According to Lyotard, the very structure of society is made up of statements made in it and the rules that decide whether a particular move is legitimate. Different games have different rules, and different societies have different kinds of politics. As subjects, we exist within these different series of language games whose different rules constitute them as who they are. That is, the organisation of knowledge in society determines the ideas and aspirations of the people in society. It determines their self-image. This organisation of knowledge or different language games in society is related to each other.

According to Lyotard, metanarratives determine the organisation of narratives and language games. In fact, Lyotard's basis for modernity is a specific type of metanarrative organisation. Different areas of knowledge find their legitimacy in metanarratives. Within the framework of metanarratives only, different knowledge systems are brought together to achieve a goal as an answer to all humanity's problems.

Absolute knowledge and universal emancipation are the goals all modern society's institutions strive to achieve.

However, Lyotard observes that the project of modernity has been liquidated with the advent of certain conditions. The metanarratives have been destroyed, and there remains no unifying identity for the subject or society. The individuals have instead become the sites where conflicting social and moral codes intersect, and the social bond is disrupted. As such, the issue of Othering at social and individual levels has become more complex in its manifestations. This fragmentation of society entails two responses. One response aims to avert the disintegration of modern society by striving to reach a consensus between different language games through negotiation. The other response argues that the best way to cope with the contemporary situation is to increase the fragmentation of language games so that problems at micro levels can also be addressed, thereby preventing othering discourses in society. Lyotard maintains that the response of reaching a consensus cannot be attained, and since language games indicate identity, Lyotard argues, their fragmentation will denote a more open and plural society. As such, the main threat to society, according to Lyotard, is the reduction of knowledge to a single system (of consensus) despite the differences that permeate it.

Universal consensus, as mentioned earlier, can no longer be possible, according to him. Therefore, it is necessary to arrive at an idea where justice is not linked to consensus or a universal idea, but to the differences from each other and their individual little narratives -- the little narratives of the Others. Lyotard looks at the possibility in which a language move has the potential to break the rules of the existing game so that a new potential game containing the power to destabilise the capacity of the existing language games for explanation needs to be developed.

Reconciling different language games to reach a consensus is impossible, according to Lyotard because an abyss separates different language games. Only a transcendental illusion, as conceived by Hegel, can totalise them into unity or consensus. Lyotard links this idea of philosophical totality, the illusion, as conceived by Hegel, to be able to explain everything in a single grand narrative, with totalitarianism, political terror and all the correlates of Othering associated with it. Political systems like Nazism or Stalin's Soviet communism and various dictatorial regimes in recent human history testify to the fact that there was a tendency to explain the world totally, and any idea or

group that did not fit into these systems was either excluded, suppressed or annihilated. Lyotard's concept of postmodernism, in this context, theorises the possibility of art and various cultural expressions that shatter traditional ways of narration and representation. While traditional ways seem incapable to cognise the world at the margins, to vouch for the issues of the suppressed Others, as they exist in a degraded and forgotten state, Postmodern art, according to Lyotard, breaks the traditional rules of representation and upsets the categories that readers or viewers are used to. Lyotard's Postmodernism, in fact, wages war on totality. It contains the potential to challenge and disrupt the established language games that invisibilise Others. Lyotard's ideas give art a potential role to represent the unrepresentable.

Lyotard theorises on the possibility of different ethics and politics in the wake of the postmodern destruction of metanarratives. His concern is the basis of justice in the face of the metanarrative collapse. Politics, according to Lyotard, is always active. It seeks to improve society in a just manner. However, he avers that one needs to know the distinction between fact and value. He argues that the politics that ignore this distinction and believe that values naturally spring from the truth, or a true state of affairs, can lead to totalitarianism and the consequent discourse of Othering. He observes that such politics can operate in two ways. The first way is by basing the value on truth. Lyotard explains that there is a conviction that there is a true being of society, and society will be just if it is brought in conformity with this true being. In this kind of politics, the society in question produces its own kind of justice based on the kind of truth it believes in. This truth, and its correlate, the just, is then handed down by the authority or the State to its citizens, thereby dictating how the people should think and live. A system is produced to which its people have to conform. Theocratic societies, which base their laws on the belief that it is based on the will of God or societies based on rigid ideologies that have a particular view of the world and control the lives of their people according to peculiar beliefs or ideologies, are the examples of societies that base their values on their own kind of truth. These societies are fundamentalist or totalitarian in nature. In such societies, the truth of justness is given in advance, and people must respect it or be punished. According to Lyotard, the second way of politics is where the values are not imposed or handed down by authority but inhabited by the people. Particularly in democratic models of societies where everyone is politically equal and votes in

elections, identify with such societies. Here, the just is identified with the will of the people. Any criticism of itself is dismissed as, for example, un-American or anti-Indian. The people in such societies assume themselves to be entitled to pass judgment on foreigners or to condemn those within the society who do not adhere to its ideals or laws. The Crusades and the Jehads in the Middle Ages, which were fought based on the social ideals of that particular society, are examples of such politics. The persecution of suspected communists in America in the 1950s is another example of this kind of politics. Instead of reducing just or ethics to the true or the truth discourse in society, Lyotard advocates that justice should not simply obey a given law or truth; it should be open to different language games or narratives in society and should not be reduced to a single metalanguage. To secure justice, people's heterogeneity in society should be recognised, and respect should be given to everyone's individuality. This can only mitigate against the reduction of differences to a single metanarrative and, therefore, Othering in society.

Lyotard's concept of "differend" illustrates the problem of Othering most eloquently. He explains 'differend' as the unstable state of language where something which one must be able to be put into phrases cannot yet be. Malpas quotes Lyotard: Differend is "a moment of silence, a stutter in the flow of language, where the right words will not come. It marks a point of suffering where an injustice cannot find a space to make itself heard, where an injury is silenced and becomes a wrong" (61). It occurs when one language or narrative imposes its rules and values on the Other and deprives it of its own way of expressing itself. What remains in the process is a feeling of wrong, of injustice. Saul Newman explains Lyotard's concept of "differend":

The differend is a conflict between two parties that cannot be adequately resolved because there is no judgement that can apply equally to both parties. When one tries to adopt a universal position of judgment above these parties in dispute – when one tries to make a judgement that would be universally applicable – one commits a wrong, an injustice, because one enforces certain rules upon a discourse that are not part of that discourse (47)

Lyotard dwells upon the moment of 'wrong' that occurs to the Other in the process of othering. He observes:

This is what wrong would be: a damage accompanied by the loss of the means to prove the damage. This is

the case if the victim is deprived of life, or of all his or her liberties, or of the freedom to make his or her ideas or opinions public, or simply the right to testify to the damage, or even more simply if the testifying phrase is itself deprived of authority ... In all of these cases, to the privation constituted by the damage there is added the impossibility of bringing it to the knowledge of others, and in particular to the knowledge of the tribunal (qtd. in Malpas 59).

Lyotard advocates that a thinker should uncover the moments of differend where something has been silenced and find ways so that the voice of the Other can be heard. A postmodern thinker should detect differends and find idioms to phrase them. This, however, should not be done by settling differend through a universal rule that applies to all the conflicting parties. Such a singular rule, according to Lyotard, is not available. What is necessary is to affirm the occurrence of differend and find new modes and ways to phrase the dispute. This is the role of the postmodern thinker, according to Lyotard.

Lyotard's postmodernism points towards a new politics of mini-narratives, including the mini-narratives of Others, instead of a single metanarrative, thereby positively acknowledging individual or group differences while doing justice to them. Lyotard calls for fracturing history into a plurality of infinite narratives and genres so that different voices and possibilities to address them could emerge. The events of Othering occurring in history should be read as signs, although with no finality. The reading should always be open and plural, accepting the event's uniqueness. If this is not the case, reading and understanding those events in terms of singular metanarratives would invariably silence the voice of the Others and would never be heard and addressed. As opposed to restricting redress to mere norms or empirical and statistical descriptions, which might smother the Other's voice, Lyotard's notion is ethical in endeavouring to open up genres to find new ways to phrase and express the Other's voice.

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