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## Islamic Philosophy and the Challenge of Post Modernism: A Sociological Perspective

Shaikh, Salman Ahmed

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# **Islamic Philosophy and the Challenge** **of Post Modernism**

**Salman Ahmed Shaikh**

**MS (Szabist)**

**[salmanahmed\\_hyd@hotmail.com](mailto:salmanahmed_hyd@hotmail.com)**

**[www.islamiceconomics.viviti.com](http://www.islamiceconomics.viviti.com)**

## **Introduction**

Postmodernism refers to a cultural, intellectual, and artistic state lacking a clear central hierarchy or organizing principle. It embodies extreme complexity, contradiction, ambiguity and diversity. It is a reaction to modernism, but it is not a different ideology from modernism in every sense. It is critical of few ideas of modernism and it proposes emancipation from oppression manifested in culture, language, laws, customs, religion etc. Eclecticism and freedom of expression, in reaction to the rigidity and aesthetic limitations of modernism, are the hallmarks of the postmodern thought.

Deconstruction is a term which is used to denote the application of postmodern ideas of criticism, or theory, to a "text" or "artifact". A deconstruction is meant to undermine the frame of reference and assumptions that underpin the text. Postmodernism philosophy is also critical of Enlightenment universals. Postmodernism philosophy asserts truth doesn't exist in any objective sense but is created rather than discovered." The postmodernists have given a new secular trinity of tolerance–diversity–choice.

Postmodernism supports a "a new kind of superficiality" or "depthlessness", in which models which once explained people and things in terms of an "inside" and an "outside" (such as hermeneutics, the dialectic, Freudian repression, etc have been rejected.

Post Modernism ideas appear to have been conducive to, and strongly associated with, the feminist movement, racial equality movements, gay rights movements and even the peace movement, as well as various hybrids of these in the current anti-globalization movement.

The infrastructure that supported Post modernism includes the ubiquity of mass media and mass production, the unification into national economies of all aspects of production, the rise of global economic arrangements, and shift from manufacturing to service economies. By literary critic Fredric Jameson and the geographer David Harvey it was described as consumerism or, in a Marxian framework as late capitalism: namely a context where manufacturing, distribution and dissemination have become exceptionally inexpensive, but social connection and community have become more expensive. Other thinkers assert that post modernity is the natural reaction to mass broadcasting and a society conditioned to mass production and mass politics. Artifacts of post modernity include the dominance of television and popular culture, the wide accessibility of information and mass telecommunications.

Closely related with Post Modernism, the consumerism philosophy asserts that in consumer culture, a consumer should constantly focus on “trivial”, “ephemeral”, “superficial” and “essentially worthless” activities and goals, instead of significant, everlasting and invaluable divine ends. This explains why hedonism and gratification become important in modern consumerism.

### **Thinkers of Post Modernism Philosophy**

Michel Foucault asserts that "Language is oppression". He says that language was developed to allow only those who spoke the language not to be oppressed. All other people that don't speak the language would then be oppressed. He is also critical of all types of systems and institutions including the institution of family. He is in favor of sexual freedom and permitting homosexuality and Incest.

Jean-François Lyotard opposed universality and generality. Francis Fukuyama argues in his book "The End of History" that we have achieved a divide and independence from past and history. Tofler thinks of Post Modernism as a 'Future Shock'. Fraam argues against consumerism and late capitalism in "The sane Society". Marcuse in "*One Dimensional Man*" is very pessimistic about the future of the secular society after it has even though achieved remarkable milestones in science.

### **Criticism on Post Modernism**

Criticisms of the Post Modernism can broadly be classified into following categories:

1. Criticisms from people who criticize Modernism besides Post Modernity.
2. Criticisms from supporters of Modernism.
3. Criticism from within Post Modernity.
4. Criticism from those who believe that Post Modernity is a passing, and not a growing, phase in social organization.

### **Critics of Modernism and Post Modernism**

Many philosophical movements reject both Modernity and Post Modernity as useful. Some of these are associated with cultural and religious conservatism. They view Post Modernism as an allied movement to Secularism. Post Modernity is seen as a rejection of basic spiritual or natural truths, and the emphasis on material and physical pleasure is explicitly a rejection of inner balance and spirituality. Here, religious conservatives mainly include non-Islamic thinkers as Muslims scholars are yet to focus on Post Modernity and its impacts.

However, this criticism sometimes result not merely from a faith in traditional authority but rather from a reasonable belief in the disjunction that objective knowledge must be either obtainable in all domains, or obtainable in no domain. Then from the fact that such domains as physics and chemistry are not seriously taken to be subjective or relative in any meaningful sense by most of Post Modernity; it follows that ethics, politics, and the good life in general are not relative or subjective either. This view has been mentioned by Allan Bloom.

Christian writers tend to look at the postmodernist era as ideologically agnostic and replete with moral relativism or situation ethics. Josh McDowell & Bob Hostetler offer the following definition of postmodernism: "A worldview characterized by the belief that truth doesn't exist in any objective sense but is created rather than discovered. Truth is created by the specific culture and exists only in that culture. Therefore, any system or statement that tries to communicate truth is a power play. It is an effort to dominate other cultures."

One of America's premier Christian leaders, Dr. James Dobson, sees Post Modernism as a system of thought that negates moral certainty. He says that 'Post Modernism' refers to a philosophy or mindset that rejects the value of rational thought, denies the existence of moral and spiritual absolutes, and affirms the right and power of the individual to invent his or her own 'reality.' This way of thinking is incompatible with the Christian perspective because it denies the existence of a truth that is valid for all people at all times. In other words, it rejects the claims of the Gospel on principle, without even granting it a hearing."

Roslyn Wallach Bologh & Leonard Mell (1994) argue that the postmodern theory of language constitutes a form of nominalism that parallels the nominalism of speculative, monetarist capitalism and that postmodernism's understanding of language as a "play of power" corresponds to the political realism of contemporary international relations. This metatheory of postmodernism helps to undermine the development of any rational alternative to contemporary political economy and the current world disorder.

### **Criticism of Post Modernism by Pro-Modernists**

James Fowler argues that Post Modernity is characterized by the "loss of conviction", and Grenz concurs by saying that Post Modernity is a period of pessimism contrasting with modernity's optimism. Post Modernism is a counter enlightenment philosophy whereas modernism is a pro-enlightenment philosophy.

Jürgen Habermas argues that without both critical and rational traditions, society cannot value the individual, and that social structures will tend towards totalitarianism. He favors universalism as the fundamental requirement for any rational criticism, and to give it up is to nullify the liberalizing reforms of the previous two centuries.

### **Criticism of Post Modernism by Post Modernists**

David Foster Wallace argues that the trend towards more and more ironic and referential expression has reached a limit, and that a movement back towards "sincerity" is required. Few also propose that religion can not be ignored completely and hence religion is here to stay and must not be utterly discouraged and opposed. They propose that religion must be accepted as a stakeholder to keep the balance in a Post Modern society.

### **Critics of Post Modernism's Future and Lasting Impact**

Finally, there are critics of Post Modernism who believe that Post Modernity is a passing, and not a growing, phase in social organization. Bernard Smith (1998) argues that 'Post Modernism' is unlikely to survive as a general description of contemporary culture in 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### **Muslim Thinkers on Modernism and Post Post Modernism**

S. Irfan Habib (2000) in his article "Reconciling science with Islam in 19th century India" gave an account of two Muslim thinkers. He regarded Syed Ahmad as a re-constructionist who tried to reinterpret the Quran to assimilate modern scientific knowledge. He commented on Afghani as a pragmatist who stood for the cultivation of modern sciences, but did not approve of the aping of the West. He criticized the ulema for the strange divide they had created between Muslim science and European science.

## **Islamic Perspective on Post Modernism**

### **Critical Analysis of Consumerism**

Consumption may be viewed in two ways. The first is concerned with satisfying basic needs, and thus in this sense it can be regarded as “natural” and “legitimate”; although it is a mundane matter, not related to other-worldly activity. In the second perspective, consumption may be viewed as a matter of gratifying desires and wants through luxury and unnecessary services and goods, that is, consumerism. The first sense can be accepted within most religious boundaries, but the second form of consumption does not appear to have religious legitimacy nor to be ethically convincing, appearing far removed from religion’s serious, significant, profound and lasting messages.

WTO legalizes the western objective to dilate western supremacy over the third world countries. Even though some interpreted it as a clash of civilization or even clash of religions, but it is not true. After renaissance, religion in west has virtually lost its prominence especially in Western Europe and Scandinavia. More effectively put, it is a clash of classes i.e. rich and poor.

Developing countries are denied gains from comparative advantage in agriculture through export subsidies provided by developed countries to their comparatively inefficient agriculture sector. This creates unemployment and poverty in the developing economy. Eventually, a developing country will have to submit itself before the international financial institutions which are able to exert extraordinary influence in the developing economy. Therefore, the role of IMF, World Bank, WTO and the adaptation of Structural Adjustment Program and Free-Float exchange rate system are all interrelated in their objectives to dilate the supremacy of developed world over developing countries.

### **Challenge of Post Modernism: The Islamic Perspective**

History does not give us a regular pattern of human struggle towards a just and fair political, social and economic setup as described by Marx. Kant also did not tell when we

will be able to say that we are living in an enlightened age. These views of Marx and Kant were more relevant to Europe only. Muslim world provided a socially, economically and politically just system to the world for at least 50 years in the rule of Caliphates. In the period after caliphates too, Muslim world provided most things Kant asked for in an enlightened age.

However, one clear difference has to be appreciated between Muslims and Islam. Most of the laws in Christianity were mainly developed by humans themselves like St. Paul. Therefore, when thinkers of 15th century and afterwards criticized the church and the clergy, their criticism was also on religion and it was justified as the Christianity and the Clergy were the one and the same thing.

This is not the case with Islam and Muslims. Islam was not invented or created by Muhammad (P.B.U.H). It was the message of God as was Christianity with the difference that the divinity of Christianity was obscured and later modified by Christians. Islam as a message of God remained pure. However, Muslims as all other human beings have not been and are not perfect in their acts and systems. But, the acts of Muslims can not said to be representative of what Islam is as Islam was not invented by Muslims.

Therefore, a distinction is to be made between the Muslims and Islam. Muslims may or maybe acting truly on Islam and hence their actions do not determine what Islam is. When we study the 'Pure Islam', we will find that there is not a single thing in Islam that is irrational or unjust. In the following lines, I will just give the brief highlights of Islamic teachings which may or may not be truly present or found in Muslim world as Islam is the word of God and not how Muslims act and lead their lives.

The Building Blocks of Islamic Philosophy and Teachings which are viewed as most controversial and misunderstood dare briefly summarized hereunder:

### **1. Islam gives the following right to women:**

a. Muslim women must educate themselves.



- b. Choose an occupation and earn their livelihood
- c. Own a property.
- d. Choose their husbands and right to separate from their husbands.
- e. Entitlement to 'Mehr' (wealth at the start of marriage), 'wirasat' (wealth at the death of husband, children or father).
- f. Islam does not make it obligatory on women to earn for their family. However, they can earn for the family and yet they are not obliged to spend their earnings on the family. However, men are obliged to spend their earnings on the family and they are made responsible for earning the livelihood for their children and wives.
- g. Mother must be respected three times more than the father.
- h. No man is allowed to have extra-marital relationships with other women.
- i. Adultery is a severe crime in Islam.

## **2. Islam gives following rights to non-Muslims:**

- a. Non-Muslims can worship at their worship places.
- b. No non-Muslim can be forcibly converted to Islam.
- c. Muslims believe in all Prophets sent by God including Moses and Christ.

## **3. Islam's concept of Jihad**

- a. Holy Quran says that Jihad can only be for the sake of eliminating injustice.

- b. It is not q fight against non-Muslims. It is fight against injustice.
- c. It can only be undertaken as a last resort to eliminating injustice.
- d. It can only be undertaken by the government and not by the community on its own.
- e. In all great battles of Badr, Uhud, Ihzab etc., Muslims in the leadership of Prophet Muhammad (P.B.U.H) fought a defensive war as the war was imposed on Muslims.
- f. Jihad can not be for the expansion of the state, against innocents, against non-combatants, against the contract of peace if it has been signed and it can not be sudden and unannounced. So, suicide bombing against civilians is unislamic.

#### **4. Islam concept of equality:**

- a. All men are equal. No white has superiority over a black.
- b. Only Piety and Righteousness are the attributes that will distinguish us before God.
- c. No rich has superiority over a poor.
- d. All men should have equal chance to earn their livelihood.
- e. Interest which results in concentration of wealth is prohibited.

#### **Responding to Post Modernism: The Islamic Perspective**

1. Knowledge was the main reason why Muslims fared so well in history for almost a millennium. Knowledge is the basis of progress. Greek philosophers regarded Knowledge as virtue. Similarly, the west also took lead from east with progress in

knowledge. By knowledge, I mean not only the knowledge of religion and its related fields, but also the knowledge in sciences including social and technical sciences.

2. Ijtihad was an important element in Islamic world in heydays. It kept Muslims updated and pace with the world. The decline in Muslim civilization resulted from refraining from Ijtihad later on.
3. Freedom of expression is necessary in Muslim societies to pave the way of Ijtihad. In revitalizing the process of Ijtihad, not only the Muslims scholars be given the chance to contribute, but the philosophers and experts of material sciences be given a chance to contribute in Ijtihad.
4. The institution of Family system is the basis of the social order in Muslim society. Muslims should not lose it at any cost.
5. Muslims should relate their philosophies with philosophies like Humanism, Liberalism, Democracy and show that they are in line with Islamic teachings and hence Islam is not opposed to liberty, human rights, women rights, minority rights etc.
6. The economic teachings of Islam in a period when late capitalism is weakening can provide an alternative system to the world economy.
7. Extremism as a matter of principle be avoided and non-violence should be the strategy in domestic and international politics.
8. West has made trade blocs to unite and gain from synergy. Muslims should also need to be on one platform so that if future gives them the opportunity to give a new system, they can offer the Revitalized and Restructured Islamic thought from one platform.

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