



## Understanding Contemporary Reality as Postmodernity, Liquid Modernity and Incomplete Modernity

### KEYWORDS

Postmodernity, Liquid Modernity, Project of Modernity

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### ABSTRACT

*The present social reality has been described and analysed as Post modernity, Liquid modernity and incomplete Modernity by various thinkers. Jean Francois Lyotard, Jean Baudrillard and Fredric Jameson have analysed it as Postmodernity, while Zigmunt Bauman has described it as Liquid Modernity whereas Jurgen Habermas has viewed it as Modernity whose project has not been complete as yet. The insights generated by these perspectives are of great help to understand various aspects of the contemporary reality better. Present paper is a humbel attempt in this direction.*

Present cultural, civilizational and historical context has been analysed, characterised and described divergently by various contemporary thinkers. Many of them have described it as postmodern, whereas some others have characterized it as liquid modern, and still others have contended that it can be analysed as modern only since the project of modernity is still incomplete. The view that contemporary reality is liquid modern will be discussed in the section II, and that it pertains to incomplete project of modernity will be delineated in the section III. The section I seeks to discuss the views of Lyotard, Baudrillard and Jameson, who have described contemporary reality as postmodern.

Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition Section I : A Report on Knowledge* is considered one of the most accepted and comprehensive accounts of postmodernity. In this work an effort has been made to understand the role, position and status of knowledge in contemporary culture and civilization. It is argued that as societies enter post-industrial age and cultures enter postmodern age, the status of knowledge undergoes a significant change in them. In contemporary world the economies are driven by knowledge. In such economies technological innovations and ability to access as well as manipulate ideas rapidly is an important means not only of making and enhancing profits, but of surviving itself. Knowledge is seen from a vantage point that is primarily commercial in nature. As a result we become consumers of knowledge that has been transformed into a commodity. Lyotard stresses that, "knowledge is and will be produced in order to be sold, it is and will be produced in order to be valorised in a new production -in both cases the goal is exchange" (1984, 4). This commercialised view of knowledge is for Lyotard a significant shift from the ways in which knowledge was conceived earlier, including modernity.

In order to bring out differences between modern forms of knowing and ways in which ideas are generated as well as communicated in postmodernity, Lyotard analyses knowledge into narratives i.e. the ways in which we try to make sense of the world through stories that we tell about it in order to tie together events and ideas to get coherence. This includes everything from science to gossip. Each form of narrative is grounded in a particular set of explicit or implicit rules -that differentiate good from bad, right from wrong, and/or truth from falsity- within a specific discourse. He classifies such set of rules as metanarratives and holds that they provide criteria that help to judge which set of ideas and statements are legitimate, true and ethical within a particular narrative. Along with metanarratives that legitimize individual statements and ideas, Lyotard puts forward concept of grandnarratives also. Grandnarratives are considered to be the governing principles of modernity. It is through their

analysis that he defines modernity and points out how it has given way to the postmodern condition. It is insisted that modernity's grandnarratives bring together various narratives and metanarratives that constitute a culture and present the idea of development of knowledge as a progress towards universal enlightenment and freedom. While producing systematic accounts of workings of the world, they seek to construct accounts of human progress. He identifies two main forms of grandnarratives : speculative and emancipatory. The speculative grandnarrative chalks the progress and development of knowledge towards a systematic truth and constructs a system which will help to make sense of our place in the universe. The grandnarrative of emancipation on the other hand sees the development of knowledge as enabling and empowering humans since it liberates them from mysticism and dogmas.

It is through the analysis of change and shift in role and status of metanarratives and grandnarratives that Lyotard seeks to clarify difference between modernity and postmodernity. He insists that in postmodernity status and nature of knowledge changes in a manner that shatters the conception of grandnarratives as claims of gradual march of humanity towards the discovery of systematic truth that would eventually be used for human emancipation. He argues that the project of modernity is not forgotten or forsaken, rather it is liquidated. The destruction of grandnarratives and the associated idea of gradual progress also gets reflected in the loss of status of metanarratives, prompting Lyotard to define postmodernity as incredulity towards metanarratives (1984, XXIV). This change means that the perspective which gave direction to progress of ideas -the criteria that systematised knowledge by differentiating right, legitimate and valid from wrong, illegitimate and invalid in various domains and discourses- do not have same respect now that they commanded as an integral part of modern grandnarratives. The sort of grandnarratives that used to organise knowledge, categorise its usefulness for humanity and direct it towards a goal have lost their power in postmodern world. In changed circumstances if anything remains as organizing principle, it is the criterion of efficiency and profit that is being propagated, forwarded and supported forcefully by the global market. Whereas grandnarratives sought to draw all knowledge into a single system, global market driven cultures are rather happy with fragmentation of knowledge in the form of different and specific domains of information as it gets translated into more profit. Thus all developments of knowledge are determined by the pragmatic logic of the market rather than overarching conceptions of human good. The criteria of universalism and emancipation have been replaced by the criterion of profit.

Thus the significant feature of posmodernity highlighted by

Lyotard is that in its search for efficiency and profit global market has severed all contacts with emancipatory goals of modern grandnarratives. Another significant feature of postmodern society highlighted by another postmodern thinker -Jean Baudrillard- is that the recent developments in economic sphere and information technology have generated a loss of contact with reality.

Baudrillard argues that postmodern societies have moved away from being based on production of things towards being based on production of images of things. He calls these images or copies of things to be simulacra. He insists that in postmodern societies difference between real life and simulacrum has been reduced so much that it has become rather difficult to differentiate one from the other. Newspapers and news channels report goings on in T.V. serials as if they are real happenings in the real life as people care more for soap opera characters than their own neighbours. Baudrillard terms this state-of-affairs as hyperreality where simulation is considered more real than the real.

He argues that in postmodern society not only sign and object have become indistinguishable, rather the reality has been replaced by the simulation and the hyperreal. So much so that when one desires and purchases a commodity, one is not buying simply the object rather one is purchasing the signs, the images and the identities that are associated with it. We do not buy what we need or what satisfies our need, rather we buy brands, images and lifestyle identities. Need can be satisfied by an object but desire is not satisfied by any particular purchase as one always desires more. This according to Baudrillard is the moving forces of postmodern society.

In order to see how excess of desire is produced and manipulated, one has to remind oneself of the advertisements being replayed in Indian media that say No one can eat just one, or Don't be Santusht thoda aur wish karo... This way of producing and manipulating excess of desire exhibits how ubiquity of advertisements annihilates the reality and transforms reality as well as its appearance and image. In postmodernity, images and simulations become more immediate, more real, as also more seductive and desirable as instead of reflecting the contemporary reality, they produce it. Rather than being only a producer of simulations, contemporary society is their product also. And in this manner we move from reality to hyperreality.

It would be pertinent to note that hyperreality does not mean unreality. Rather it identifies a culture in which fantastical creations of media and information technologies have become more real than the realities of nature or spiritual realm. While discussing the example of Disneyland, Baudrillard argues that its function is to conceal the fact that in America real is no longer real. "Disneyland is present as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real, when in fact all of Los Angeles and the America surrounding it are no longer real, but of the order of the hyperreal and simulation" (1983, 25). Baudrillard argues that within American society there is no longer any access to reality but only a play of simulations forming the seductive code of hyperreality. Disneyland is a means to mask the fantastical nature of every-day life. In contemporary world almost everything pertains to fantasy, where as reality, truth, freedom etc. have in fact vanished from the postmodern everyday life. As a result only images of truth, freedom, reality etc. are being produced by media groups controlled by multinationals.

In introduction of Baudrillard's *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place* a significant moment that throws light on relation between reporting and hyperreality is narrated. The news channel CNN switched live to a group of reporters present in the Gulf to know what was happening. It was discovered that they themselves were watching CNN to find it out. This shows how news is generated by news, i.e. the source of news is the news itself. Thus news is producing the reality of

the war. It generates more advertisements for the channel. Baudrillard points out that "the media promotes the war, the war promotes the media, and advertising competes with the war ... it allows us to turn the world and the violence of the world into a consumable substance" (1995, 31). Various media channels compete with one another to get most quickly (sabse tez) the most spectacular pictures and stories. Baudrillard argues that ubiquity of advertisement in all the coverage turn the war into commodity. This coverage gives rise to rather too many commentaries, discussions, arguments and images which overshadow the truth and reality of the war. For the people who are rather hypnotised by the simulations that are being fed to them, a real understanding of what is happening becomes almost impossible and they discuss and live the hyperreal only. This according to Baudrillard is the most disturbing point -the hyperreal does not exist in the realm of good and evil as it is measured in terms of performativity. i.e. how well it works.

This almost coincides with what Lyotard has pointed out in the context of knowledge in postmodern condition. In postmodernity everything is measured in terms of performativity only. In search of efficiency and profit every thing ranging from personal life to war has been commodified. Frederic Jameson has described this as new depthlessness in which everything becomes a commodity, or just another interchangeable image to be purchased by the consumers (1991, 6). As an example and image of this new depthlessness, Jameson compares two paintings, one by modernist artist Vincent Van Gogh and other by the pop artist Andy Warhol. The first one titled *A pair of boots* depicts boots covered with dust and placed in the context of agricultural life of the peasant who presumably owns them. The latter, titled *Diamond dust shoes*, presents a collection of women's shoes floating freely in space, free from any social context. Jameson insists that Warhol's painting suggests the emergence of a new kind of flatness or depthlessness, a new kind of superficiality in the most literal sense, perhaps the supreme formal feature of all the postmodernisms.

Jameson argues that the experience of depthlessness of postmodernity is akin to schizophrenia in which the world cut off from all foundational contexts "comes before the subject with heightened intensity, bearing a mysterious charge of affect, here described in the negative terms of anxiety and loss of reality, but which one could just as well imagine in the positive terms of euphoria, a high, an intoxicatory or hallucinogenic intensity" (1991,278). Thus the transformation of social experience into a flow of images in which everything is for sale produces a sense of loss of reality which is simultaneously euphoric and terrifying. The feelings associated with it keep on changing direction, oscillating between intoxication and anxiety. This makes this depthlessness schizophrenic in nature. The postmodern consumers are trapped in schizophrenic depthlessness in which the traditional grounds of cultural contexts, customs, class and even family organization have been swept away.

Like Jameson and Baudrillard Section II, Zygmunt Bauman is another thinker who argues that contemporary culture revolves around consumerism. But he prefers the term liquid modernity for contemporary reality, which has been described as postmodernity by other thinkers. For the phase described as modernity by postmodern thinkers he prefers the term solid modernity.

Bauman suggests that traditional society was more coherent. Activities and knowledge was integrated fully in everyday life. People did not merely populated their world, rather they were a part of it, and it also was a part of them. The relation was so close that like facts of nature it was also considered natural. Whereas traditional society was governed by predictability and certitude, modernity is inherently disorderly as there is no state of modernity, but only process of modernization. But it endeavours to predict future and seek order in

future perfect. This, according to Bauman, is the ambivalence of solid modernity. He insists that solid modernity was ambivalent since its inception as it sought a new kind of permanence in a world marked by the contingencies.

The idea of liquid modernity emerges from where the solid modernity begins to understand this ambivalence. Bauman insists that liquid modernity is solid modernity "coming to terms with its own impossibility; a self-monitoring modernity, one that consciously discards what it once was unconsciously doing" (1991, 272). Solid modernity -the stage of order seeking in the face of increasing disorder- has over the years been gradually transformed into a liquid modernity, which means living without some ultimate and perfect model of society. Where individual's life reflects the experience of being in an increasingly deregulated and flexible world. A world which is full of uncoordinated and often contradictory changes and voices, where there are no clear cut standards by which superiority of any of them can be established. We have shifted towards a society in which consumption and consumer culture have been taking on central role in economy that had once been the place of production and work. From a more structured society, in which identity was largely ascribed by social class, gender and ethnicity, world has shifted towards a society in which individuality dominates more and more. In liquid modernity identity remains always a work in progress. More than anything else it is achieved through consumption. In such circumstances, change of identity becomes a necessity rather than being a possibility.

Liquid moderns live their lives against a backdrop of relentless upheaval and change. In contrast to solid moderns, who lived working for the future perfect, liquid moderns live a life composed of present tense only. Liquid modern living can be compared to rhizome as it is constructed not as any kind of rooted or structured way of life. Its features include incessant modifications to the identities and multiple social networks. Liquid modernity seeks palimpsest identities that go along with a reality in which art of forgetting is considered to be an asset. Infact liquid moderns live most of their lives re-writing themselves. They have several identities available to choose from and they do not like to play same identity again and again. An important strategy employed to cope with turbulent existence is to live parallel lives which do not have much to do with one another.

Like identities, relationships of liquid moderns are also contingent and temporary. They are made only to be broken. In Bauman's words, "Bonds are easily entered but even easier to abandon. Much is done ... to prevent them from developing any holding powers; long term commitments with no option of termination on demand are decidedly out of fashion" (2004a, 20). Bauman suggests that all this infact is related to the consumer culture pervasive in liquid modernity. When one becomes habituated to consumer culture where the norm is immediate gratification, then the capacity for long term commitments is also reduced. Liquid moderns are afraid that committing themselves to another will deprive them of newer experiences. In the life of liquid moderns freedom is all pervasive, but it is associated with various types of insecurities.

In order to overcome insecurities and anxieties associated with their lives, the liquid moderns seek remedy in community. But there is no such thing as community in liquid modernity as there is no solid ground on which conditions for community could be realised. Liquid moderns are masters of ambivalence who give passionate lip service to togetherness while infact secretly avoiding it at all costs. In case of any need, instead of turning to community, liquid moderns prefer self-help manuals for wisdom. The liquid modern yearning for togetherness gets manifested in forms which are quite different from the orthodox communities. In liquid modernity, community has gone bust and its "void is hastily filled by 'peg communities", "ad-hoc communities", "explosive

communities", and other disposable substitutes meant for an instant and on-off consumption..." (2002: 3). What all liquid forms of community have in common is impermanence and depthlessness. It is fleeting landscape of temporary togetherness whose pattern is always changing, shifting from one event to the other. It can be death of a celebrity, a cup final, a charity concert, etc. What actually gives a sense of community is some event that is consumable in the society -for liquid moderns are never more together than when they are consuming.

This brings us back to the central feature of liquid modernity pointed out by Bauman, i.e. "if our ancestors were shaped and trained by their societies as producers first and foremost, we are increasingly shaped and trained as consumers first, and all the rest after" (2004b, 66).

It has been seen in previous section III that there is a simultaneous disruption of traditional forms of culture, identity and values that has led to fragmentation and crisis in contemporary society. The fragmentation, and the contemporary reality both have been interpreted and described differently by various thinkers. Jurgan Habermas considers the fragmentation to be a result of going astray of the project of modernity. He contends that the project of modernity is still incomplete and insists on furthering its aims in order to overcome disintegration in contemporary society and culture. He provides an account of modernity that seeks to defend its project as being crucial and important even today. Agreeing to a large extent with postmodernists in their critique and description of present states-of-affairs, Habermas contends against them that present crisis, instead of having its genesis in excess of reason, is rather rooted in deficit of reason (1987, 361). He stresses the self-rectifying capacity of reason and argues that present crisis can be overcome within the framework of modernity by completing its project and bringing it to the logical conclusion.

Following Max Weber, and before him Kant, Habermas stipulates the cultural modernity as separation of substantive reason expressed in religion and metaphysics into three autonomous spheres of science, morality and art. Since eighteenth century, problems inherited from the older world views have been sought to be rearranged under specific aspects of validity : truth, normative rightness, and beauty. They have then been handled as questions of knowledge, or of justice and morality, or of taste. Scientific discourse; theories of morality and jurisprudence; and the production and criticism of art have been institutionalised. Each domain of culture has been made to correspond to cultural professions in which problems have been dealt by special experts. There appeared the structure of cognitive-instrumental rationality, moral-practical rationality, and aesthetic-expressive rationality. Each of them has been under the control of specialists and as a result distance grew between the culture of experts and that of the people at large. With this type of cultural rationalism, the threat to the life-world -whose traditional substance has already been devalued- increased and it tended to become more and more impoverished.

Habermas insists that the project of modernity formulated by enlightenment thinkers consisted in their efforts to develop above mentioned three spheres in accordance with their inner logic by the experts, but at the same time, the project intended to release the cognitive potentials of each of these domains to set them free from their esoteric forms. It was intended to use the accumulation of specialized culture for the enrichment of life-world and for rational organisation of every day social life. It was hoped that the arts and sciences would promote not only the control of natural forces but also increase understanding of the world as well as self that would promote moral progress leading to well being of humans.

Habermas admits that present scenario has shattered this optimism. "The differentiation of science, morality and art has

come to mean the autonomy of the segments treated by the specialists, at the same time letting them split off from the hermeneutics of everyday communication" (1981: 9).

Habermas argues that it is the colonization of life-world by the instrumental rationality, divorced from ethical and aesthetic concerns, which is responsible for present crisis. He argues that under the influence of contemporary capitalism, human reason has become more or less instrumental, as the developments of knowledge are valued for their economic and political efficiency, rather than for their potential to improve human life. Scientific and technological innovation has become an end-in-itself as it is sought for increasing the efficiency, without considering its effect on social and individual lives. As a result the life-world has split off from various expert cultures and the common person cannot take part in pro-

ceedings that in fact effect his or her whole existence.

Habermas calls for a struggle against this fragmentation and fracturing of social life which can only be done by retaining the notion of emancipation as a means of reconciling various language games that constitute a culture. It is in this sense that he considers the project of modernity to be an incomplete one. For him solution does not lie in abandoning the project of modernity, rather it consists in seeking its completion in the sense that all three spheres of reason -i.e. instrumental, ethical and aesthetic- should enrich the life of every individual as well as the hermeneutics of everyday communication. This can only be achieved if all the spheres in fact enrich the life-world rather than splitting it.

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