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Reading Canada and the Postmodernist Culture in Linda Hutcheon's *The Politics of Postmodernism*

Summary. Linda Hutcheon, one of the foremost Canadian critics of the day, in her famous work *The Politics of Postmodernism*, seems to find herself initially in a dilemma. She attempts an elucidation of what postmodernism is and what it is not, recognizing its both positive and negative dimensions. The present paper focuses on the literary culture in Canada, and the manifestation of postmodernist traces therein, with a special reading of Hutcheon's *The Politics of Postmodernism*.

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Introduction

Talking of Canada today is to think of a world in miniature, and the fascinating thing to note in this context is Canada's emerging trend of multiculturalism. The standard of 'Canadianness' is also quite diverse; one writes about Canada, is born in Canada, thinks about Canada and inspires others to work on Canada, is a foreigner and resides in Canada, is part of a Diaspora, and many similar equations – all these aspects entitle one to become a Canadian writer. Governed by multi-national capi-

talism, Canada has developed into a state of a 'salad bowl', where different cultures have their own scope of development. It is in the process of becoming a state that a *sui generis* pattern of multiculturalism negotiates with the burgeoning issues in the global context. In most cases, Canadian studies is leaning towards the study of landscape; the landscape which includes both the natural and the human. Contemporary Canadian writing has enjoyed an extraordinary continuity throughout the 20th century, with marvelous production between 1960 and 1973. The literature, here, is full of happening and reality. The culture(s) have seen their perfect representation in contemporary Canadian writing. The oft-quoted phrase, 'mosaic to salad bowl' has proved its veracity with reference to Canadian literature. Contemporary Canadian literature, in general, is the product of lived realities. The popular saying on the making of contemporary writing, namely that 'literature is never written in a vacuum' holds true of Canadian literature. The cultural and literary milieu of Canada has carved unique features for literature. Contemporary writing has overcome different barriers that emerged in the smooth flow of literature, and it has become the literature of a world in miniature. It was in the 1970s that the borders of Canada were opened to Asian immigrants, and subsequently they made their way into Canadian literature in English. Feminism(s) various forms of postcolonialism, postmodernism, eco-criticism, alienation, displacement strategies for survival, indigenous writing, diasporic writing, children's writing, and many other trends and patterns have created the trajectories of contemporary Canadian literature.

In Canada, literature and other allied disciplines have become a mode of engaging with reality. To cite Lopez, "a succinct way to describe the frame of mind one should bring to a landscape is to say it rests on the distinction between imposing and proposing one's views. With a sincere proposal you hope to achieve an intimate, reciprocal relationship that will feed you in some way. To impose your views from the start is to truncate such a possibility, to preclude understanding.¹ Under these burgeoning forces, the oft-quoted term "Canadianness" is in the process of deconstruction. The literature written over here has created a prismatic spectacle. Davey states in this regard:

Specific novels may argue for a humanist Canada, a more feminist Canada, a more sophisticated and worldly Canada, an individualist Canada, a Canada more responsive to the values of its aboriginal citizens, but collectively they suggest a world and a nation in which social structures no longer link regions

¹ B. Lopez, *A Literature of Place: A Sense of Place: Regional American Literature*, Delhi 1996, p. 8.

or communities. Political process is doubted, and individual alienation has become normal.²³

In the light of this statement, the writings of critics like Linda Hutcheon hold true. Hutcheon, one of the foremost Canadian critics of the day, in her famous work *The Politics of Postmodernism*,⁴ seems to find herself initially in a dilemma. She attempts an elucidation of what postmodernism is and what it is not, recognizing its necessarily and simultaneously positive and negative dimensions. It should be mentioned here that postmodernism is a phenomenon whose mode is resolutely contradictory as well as unavoidably political. Hutcheon characterizes postmodernism in terms of irony, denaturalization and a commitment to duality and duplicity, 'as though all its statements were in quotes'. She is most interested in the politics of representation and showing postmodernism's duality with regard to it. Her position is informed by Althusser's view that ideology is both a system of representation and always a part of a social totality. Louis Althusser argues that 'art makes us see', in a distanced way, 'the ideology from which it is born, in which it bathes, from which it detaches itself as art, and to which it alludes'. Since ideology, for both Hutcheon and Althusser is an important notion, it is desirable here to recall and quote him on this: "It is a representation of the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence; ideology is a system (possessing its own logic and proper rigour) of representations (images, myths, ideas or concepts according to the case) endowed with an existence and a historical role at the heart of a given society."⁵ A dominant system of ideology is normally projected by the ruling class as the 'common-sense view of things', and is accepted by the other classes, thereby securing the interest of the dominant class. However, art and literature achieve a fictional distance, or 'retreat' from the ideology from which it is born and thus transcends the ideology of the creator. Driven by a desire to show why postmodernism should matter, Hutcheon's *The Politics of Postmodernism* is a study of representation in various art forms, ranging from fiction and film to photography and painting, where the author has examined or seems to examine the potential and real political challenges of the postmodern to dominant ideologies, past and present. Less about the representation of politics than about the politics of representation, this work examines a wide range of postmodern art that is

² Davey F., *Post National Arguments: The Politics of the Anglophone Canadian Novel Since 1967*, Toronto 1993.

³ B. Lopez, *A Literature of Place...*, Delhi 1996.

⁴ L. Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism*. London : Routledge, 1989.

⁵ N. Krishnaswamy, *Contemporary Literary Theory: A Student Companion*. New Delhi, 2001.

paradoxically both self-reflexive/textual and worldly/historical; that is, looking both inward and outward. Hutcheon seems to be interested in a confrontation which she thinks key to postmodernism's view of representation and the way in which we construct ourselves and our 'selves': "where documentary historical actuality meets formalist self-reflexivity and parody". While this mode of double-coded representation can be considered politically compromised, it can also be seen as a way to "de-naturalize" the things western culture takes for granted. Postmodern representations – its images and stories – are anything but neutral, even if their critique is inevitably complex. Manifestations of postmodernism in various fields of cultural endeavor, such as architecture, literature, photography, film, painting, video, dance, music, and in other arts generally, takes the form of self-conscious, self-contradictory, and self-undermining statements. It is rather like saying something whilst at the same time putting scare quotes around what is being said. The effect is to highlight, or 'highlight', and to subvert or 'subvert', and the mode is, therefore, 'knowing' and ironic, or even 'ironic'. Postmodernism's distinctive character lies in this kind of wholesale 'nudging' commitment to duality or duplicity. In many ways Hutcheon says it is an evenhanded process because postmodernism ultimately manages to install and reinforce as much as it undermines and subverts the conventions and presuppositions, it appears to challenge. Nevertheless, it seems reasonable to say that postmodernism's initial concern is to denaturalize some of the dominant features of our way of life; to point out that those entities that we unthinkably experience as 'natural' (they might even include capitalism, patriarchy, liberal humanism) are in fact 'cultural'; made by us, not given to us.⁶

Hutcheon is eclectic in her approach. She quotes Victor Burgin to assert that all cultural forms of representations, be they literary, visual or aural, in high art or in the mass media, are ideologically grounded, and their involvement with social and political relations and apparatuses is unavoidable, and the postmodern theory works to turn this unavoidable or inevitable ideological grounding into a site of denaturalizing critique. Hutcheon is able to claim for double-edged weapons, such as irony and parody, special efficacy within her culture. She explains, "parody-often called ironic, quotation, pastiche, appropriation, or intertextuality, is usually considered central to postmodernism, both by its detractors or defenders".⁷ Hutcheon argues that: "through a double process of installing and ironizing, parody signals how present representations come from past ones and what ideological consequences derive

⁶ L. Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism...*, pp. 1–2.

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 93.

from both continuity and difference”⁸. She insists that an ironic distance from representation, genre and ideology serves to politicize representation, illustrating the way that interpretation is ultimately ideological. To use her favourite term, ‘de-doxification’, she says, ‘parody de-doxifies’ i.e., it unsettles all doxa, all accepted beliefs and ideologies. She values postmodernism’s willingness to question all ideological positions, all claims to ultimate truth.

Hutcheon proves her arguments by giving illustrations from certain seminal literary and cultural texts. She identifies Nigel William’s *Star Turn* as a novel which explores the simultaneous inscription and ‘de-doxification’ of both bourgeois and Marxist notions of class. This work shows a significant trajectory in the politics of representation. It does not stop at an analysis of class difference. Race is shown to enter into complicity with class on both the formal and thematic levels of the novel. Hutcheon finds that this novel is a specimen of the mingling of fiction, history, race, class, and nationality. Here difference and ex-centricity replace homogeneity and centrality as the foci of postmodern analysis, and the author discovers that even this focus on the ‘marginal’ gets called into question in this self-undercutting novel. Further, she observes that the postmodern parody in the works of Salman Rushdie, Angela Carter or Manuel Puig is one of the means by which culture deals both with its social concerns and its aesthetic needs, and the two are not unrelated. Postmodern parody resembles modernist parody, which Hutcheon acknowledges, can be found “in the writings of T.S. Eliot, Thomas Mann, and James Joyce and the paintings of Picasso, Manet and Magritte.”⁹ However, what postmodernist parody questions, is, in her words, the “unacknowledged modernist assumptions about closure, distance, artistic autonomy and the apolitical nature of representation. It is more willing to break down distinction between “reality” and “fiction”, as in such desperate works as Christa Wolf’s *No Place on Earth*, E.L. Doctorow’s *Ragtime*, Timothy Findley’s *Famous Last Words*, and Woody Allen’s *Zelig*, a postmodern generic trait that Hutcheon terms “historiography metafiction”. It is also more willing to incorporate mass-market forms in its critique, with photography and film serving as two especially noteworthy examples. As Hutcheon puts it, “postmodernism is both academic and popular, elitist and accessible.”¹⁰ Linda Hutcheon infers that, “postmodern film does not deny that it is implicated in capitalist modes of production, because it knows it cannot do so. Instead it exploits its ‘insider’ position in order to begin a subversion from within,

⁸ Ibidem.

⁹ Ibidem, p. 99.

¹⁰ Ibidem, p. 44.

to talk to consumers in a capitalist society in a way that will get us where we live, so to speak".¹¹

Broadly speaking, Hutcheon's take undermines Marxist 'History' and places great value on 'histories' in the plural. This move is part of the general resistance offered by her theory to monadic totalizations of various kinds. She sees post-modern fiction as exploiting, and yet putting into question, notions of closure, totalization and universality that are part of the challenged grand narratives. It is her belief that rather than seeing this paradoxical use and abuse as a sign of decadence or cause for despair, it might be possible to postulate a less negative interpretation that would allow for at least the potential for radical critical possibilities – but trying to find totalizing narratives that dissolve differences and contradictions would be delusional in her view. A novel like Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* is crucial to her theorizing. Rushdie's novel offers 'histories' in the plural, and at the same time works to prevent any interpretation of the contradictions within it as simply 'the outer discontinuous signs of some repressed unity- such as Marxist 'History' or 'the Real'. In her work in question, *The Politics of Postmodernism*, Hutcheon writes:

Critique is as important as complicity in the response of cultural postmodernists to the philosophical and socio-economic realities of postmodernity: postmodernism here is not so much what Jameson sees as a systemic form of capitalism as the name given to the cultural practices which acknowledge their inevitable implication in capitalism without relinquishing the power or will to intervene critically in it.¹²

With a view to claiming for postmodernist art the ability to intervene critically in the socio-economic order that grounds postmodernity even while it is itself implicated in that order, Hutcheon tries to posit a distinction between postmodernism as a cultural and aesthetic mode, and postmodernity as 'the designation of a social and philosophical period or 'condition'.

Within the Canadian context, that kind of an enabling move opens up spaces for postcoloniality, ethnicity and multiculturalism, but all the dangers that Jameson sees inherent in postmodernism do not disappear by that move. After all, Jameson relates his description of postmodern pastiche to the death of modernist norms, and characterises postmodern parody as a condition in which belief in the impossibility of norms enters into a deal with the modernist challenge to norms. She theorizes

¹¹ Ibidem, p. 114.

¹² Ibidem, p. 26.

this phenomenon in broad global terms, as well as in terms more suited to the Canadian condition. In the same work, she identifies Robert Kroestch's *The Studhorse Man* as a representative postmodernist Canadian text. She attaches great value to postmodern parody and irony, and as a continuation of this project she produced a new text: *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, theory, fiction*.

Hutcheon focuses on the politics of representation in *The Politics of Postmodernism*. Looking at both mass media and high art forms, she challenges the seeming transparency and apparent apolitical innocence of our visual images and verbal stories, asserting that these construct rather than reflect or express our experience of the world. Overlapping but never entirely coinciding with feminist practice, she contests the prevailing value systems and dominant ideologies of the western world, calling our attention to the politics of how we represent ourselves to ourselves. An introduction to postmodernism in general, and to the issue of representation in particular, *The Politics of Postmodernism* is a comment on certain complex theories, and serves to be of great value to students of the literary and visual arts.

In yet another remarkable feature, which gives a unique dimension to her ideology, is her preference to speak of "feminisms" rather than a single feminist movement. She maintains that feminism has affected postmodernism in demonstrating how cultural production is carried on within a social context, and as an ideology. Postmodernism's ironic and parodic representational strategies have offered feminist artists an effective way of working within – and yet challenging – dominant meta narrative discourses, to refer to Lyotard's 'incredulity towards meta narratives.' As Hutcheon puts it, "feminisms work to change systems, not merely to de-doxify them". If feminism is a politics, postmodernism is not. She emphasizes that feminisms have their own meta-narratives towards which they display no incredulity. Tracing the relationship between postmodernisms and feminisms in various contexts, she speaks of the problem that Quebec women writers face – of articulating a new heterogeneous subject in language. Thus the image of feminism as a coherent ideology or a set of dogmas, of a homogeneous monolithic feminism is only a misconception.

In this work, she quotes a number of theorists and acclaimed writers, such as Jean Francois Lyotard, Baudrillard, Umberto Eco, Foucault, Derrida, Frederic Jameson, and several examples of representation in postmodernist texts, film, painting and photography, to speak of postmodernism as constituting the expression of a contextual discourse that problematizes other discourses. It exists, therefore, as an alternative discourse to prevent a hegemonic domination of any single discourse. To put it another way, problematizing the concepts of author and authorship is part of the postmodernist project, to call all structures in society and cultural practices that are accepted

as 'natural' and 'logical', into question. For postmodernism, 'natural' and 'logical' are human constructs and hence not ideology neutral. Now, if the question 'what precisely is postmodernism?' is ever answered unequivocally, then it will be necessary to question the acceptability and validity of the answer. To cite from one of my papers in joint authorship, it can be inferred that "the question still remains: what precisely is Canadian postmodernism? Even more importantly, does it reside in the method or in the motivation or in something else? Have the postmodernists been able to find their own idiom and their own rootedness? Whatever the answer is, but one thing to be sure about this postmodern Canadian literature, is that they are cerebral in their function. It rather offers us an answering process instead of 'any' answer."¹³

Conclusion

Linda Hutcheon is a major voice in illustrating postmodern culture in Canada. She has presented an authentic survey of Canadian literary tradition and culture. Though her content is not completely her own, her choreography i.e. her presentation skill, presents a specific postmodern cult, and illustrates the postmodern culture in Canada.

Literature

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