Munir Khan, *Modernism and After*. New Delhi: Adhyayan Publishers, 2007. 183pp. ISBN 81-8435-022-8.

Modernism is a philosophy of cultural convergence and aesthetic coherence in the time of social fragmentation. The industrial revolution of the 19th century Europe disrupted the pace of traditional life and drew people towards new ideas and unconventional lifestyles. It injected in the European social system a streak of scepticism, atheism, introversion, experimentation, and innovation. Each individual became an island himself fostering anxiety, alienation, and empiricism in the very fabric of common life. The European culture became, in T.S. Eliot's phrase, "a heap of broken images." This cultural precariousness was further intensified by the pervasive consumerism and the prevalent ideas of Darwin, Freud, Bergson, Nietzsche, Einstein, and Marx. It became more pronounced with the new scientific and technological discoveries in the major European countries. The end result was the First World War, which caused the death of the human psyche in the European life, literature, and arts. The enlightened souls sought to put an order upon the rampant chaos on the social, religious, and political levels. Their efforts in this direction created a complex of ideas, insights, and observations, which we know today as Modernism.

Munir Khan has assiduously mapped the growth and development of this fascinating movement in his book. He has astutely divided it in seven chapters of which each deals with a significant facet of the modernism project. His division imparts a historical perspective to his argument in terms of the mood, moment, and milieu. Hence, the book offers a sumptuous treat to the reader who is left at the end asking for more. In the first three chapters, Munir details the character, nature, and the dominant varieties of modernism. He starts with a scholarly account of the divergent strands of modernism, which make it difficult for commentators to come out with a clear and conclusive definition. The difficulty in identifying its precise parameters arises mainly because "It encompasses the sum of a host of movements within the entire Western cultural period – broadly speaking between the two World Wars." Nevertheless, the movement ushered in a revolution in the various fields of creativity giving birth to some of the monumental works of all times. The modernists resorted to a serious reconstructive agenda by "conscious mannerism, sophistication, inversion, technical display, and internal self-scepticism, in search of a deeper penetration of life and probe into human consciousness." The result, in Munir's view, was *The Magic Mountain*, *The Castle*, "The Second Coming," *The Waste Land*, *Ulysses*, *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, *To the Lighthouse*, etc. Beyond the new styles, themes, and techniques, modernism flowed in varying streams such as existentialism, which occupied a substantive space in arts and literature of the period. Existentialists were concerned not with the abstract but with the concrete aspects of individual existence. The initial inspiration for existentialism came from Soren Kierkegaard, Karl Jaspers, Heidegger, and Nietzsche and was carried to the climax by Camus, Beckett, Adomov, Genet, and Harold Pinter. In Munir's opinion, existentialism points to an innate tendency in man to believe and to search for meaning in his otherwise meaningless existence. That is the corner stone of his identity and inspiration to continue his ordeal

like Sisyphus. Closely related to existentialism were the modernist concepts of history, myth, and text. Time as an unceasing flux, history as a circular recurrence, and myth as a timeless construct came to usher in a new concept of text. Form, style, technique, coherence, and symmetry in the construction of text became the essential requirements. Yeats, Eliot, and Pound championed the poetic dictum advanced by the American poet Archibald McLeish that a literary work "should not mean but be." Their unacknowledged adherence provided text an autonomous identity and the status of a self-existent entity independent of its meaning and the author. Text became an artefact of inner evanescence in symbols, images, metaphors and other creative short hands and generated the multiple layers of meaning like Mona Lisa's elusive smile.

In the next three sections, Munir narrows down his focus from the broader aspects to the crucial specifics of modernism. Here he goes on to locate the locale and texture of modernism in the English poetry. This offers interesting illustrations of his earlier observations on modernism with examples from the representative English poets of the period. Munir locates the origin of modernism in the cities of Paris, Berlin, Zurich, and Chicago, which worked as the cradles of change in the cultural climate of their respective countries. He attributes rearing of the modernist ideas to the mass society in these cities, which expressed itself in terms of money, corruption, mechanisation, industrialisation, sterility, and the bankruptcy of spirituality. The writers and artists in these cities went on a search for "new models and tools and traditions to bloom their artistic talents." The city for them acted as the microcosm of the existing human condition and created on their mind an impression of the inherent reality. Here, Munir's point is well taken, but he could have done it better by reaching out to the role of the city in the formation of modernism via the British neo-classicists and the Roman classicists. Both these classicists considered the metropolis as cultural laboratories where old cultures metamorphosed and new cultures incubated. This incubation entailed new ideas and new artistic trends, which slowly culminated into dominant literary, artistic, spiritual, and ideological movements of the time. Like their classicist ancestors, the modernist writers ironically exposed the cultural and spiritual degeneration of the city centres in order to chastise the urban people for their moral laxity. To them a healthy metropolis ensured a healthy culture and society in the country. Hence, Munir aptly identifies the genesis of modernism in the art forms, especially in painting, which grew in these European cities in the 19th century. In his opinion, Dadaism, cubism, vorticism, and surrealism contributed substantialy to the emergence of modernism in the European literature. But, it would be an unexpected omission if he had left out the contribution of the Pre-Raphaelites before Van Gogh, Cezanne, Picasso, and Gauguin who later revolutionised the contemporary sensibility in observation and appreciation. They all seriously transgressed the prevalent trends and techniques in pictorial representations in favour of an unorthodox vision of aesthetics in the fields of arts, literature, architecture, music, dance, and dressing. The search was set into the subliminal, dark, irrational recesses of the human psyche, which remained unexplored in the earlier creative forms. This discarded the Romantic and Victorian preoccupation with the external or the apparent, or what D.H. Lawrence called "the old stable ego." Similarly, the new poets denounced the escapist

projections of the Edwardian and Georgian poets who "With their simplified attitude towards life, a poor concern for technique, and the low artistic sensibility… wrote mostly poetry of withdrawal, dealing with the countryside, dreams, nature, folk life, ghosts, nymphs, and phantoms." The Edwardians, Georgians, and neo-Georgians thus reverted to romanticism to offer a refreshing antidote to the Victorian complacency. However, they did occasionally exhibit their capability for novelty in terms of language, rhythm, and poetic techniques. The modernists revolted against their romanticism in favour of concrete poetry made of suitable symbols, images, conceits, objective correlatives, and other poetic short hands, which were charged with the essence of the contemporary experience. The transition in aesthetic toils and tastes took many readers by surprise because the new poetry was often "strange and incomprehensible." Nevertheless, people soon came to recognise the inner intent of these poets and soon hailed them as the true spokesmen of their age. Their extensive use of the symbols, images, metaphors, verse libre, and several linguistic innovations not only invigorated the English language but also gave flexibility commensurate with the contemporary sensibility. Yeats, Pound, Eliot wrote suggestive and evocative poetry, which directly appealed to the inner recesses of the selfless Prufrockian man of the modern time.

After the English poetry's shift from the romantic to the modern, Munir traverses into the Post-modern terrain, which is as elusive to define as the modern. In his opinion, it is again difficult to define the paradigms of postmodernism precisely because it is a complex cauldron of discourses, theories, art objects, stylistic innovations, and historical events from diverse disciplines. Still the author makes a bold bid to clarify certain doubts of long standing about the nature and character of postmodernism. Interestingly, he does it while tracing the origin and growth of this multifaceted movement, which leaves out no sphere of contemporary arts en route. He finds it difficult to outline postmodernism because it involves a "plethora of discourses, theories, socio-cultural condition, art objects, stylistic traits, and historical events," etc. Also, there are conflicting opinions on the subject advanced by some of the prominent thinkers such as Lyotard, Jencks, Baudrillard, and Foucault and some others. But, in Munir's view, they all share some of the basic principles of postmodernism *inter alia* their dissentions; they are self-reflexivity, incredulity toward meta-narratives, and parody. To support his views, the author very lucidly sums up the commentaries of the leading postmodernists of the present time. He begins with Lyotard's views in his epistemological bible of postmodernism, *The Postmodern Condition* (1971). Lyotard anchors his beliefs in the emergence of the postmodern society, which is characterised by "individuation, fragmentation, localisation, specificity, difference, local narratives, and local creativity." According to Lyotard, the aim of knowledge in the present time is not enlightenment or intellectual enrichment; its purpose now is productivity and utility in terms of material or monetary benefits for a comfortable living. The knowledge of science and technology has now replaced the good old labour and therefore now the whole aim of learning is utilitarian. It rejects outright spirituality, ethics, and morality in favour of maximal gains. It also outdates, by its verificatory nature, grand narratives, myths, and language

as a means of mere communication. Baudrillard adopts an anthropological approach while reflecting on postmodernism. In his opinion, postmodern society is marked by "plurality, diversity, intense fragmentation, and indirection." All this is rooted in the postmodern society's consumerism, mass media, hyper-reality, and fractal order. Contrary to the Marxian value of an object in its utility, Baudrillard traces it in the sign-value of the object. "The consumer consumes the sign, not the object." Hence it is nothing but a later day reincarnation of capitalism. In *The Order of Simulacra*, he makes a convincing case in favour of his hypothesis of postmodernism by pointing to how the relationship between the real and simulacra has undergone a complete change "in the new condition of media saturated society." Now the consumer is caught into, in W.B. Yeats's phrase, a hall of mirrors, with mirrors upon mirrors – images upon images of a singular reality. Hence, Baudrillard declares in *America* the "Death of meaning, the death of reality, the Death of history, the Death of the social, the Death of the political, and the Death of sexuality in postmodern society." Similarly, Munir forays deep into the baffling quarters of postmodernism in the critical oeuvres of Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida who have eminently employed the postmodernist principles in their philosophical and critical projections. In his exceptionally lucid exposition of Foucault, Munir focuses on the theory of discourse, which interweaves the relation of power with knowledge and plays a crucial role in the control of society. Derrida in his deconstructive theory "subverts the established ides, meanings, identities, in philosophy as well as in other disciplines." Here the author's figural explication of Derrida's complex set of difference, difference, and deferral is particularly interesting.

The subject of the book is well researched, well analysed, and well documented. The book moves from postmodernism's basic assumptions to their well-developed forms and formulations in the theoretical commentaries of the stalwart postmodernists. In the process, it presents some of the complex arguments in a simple and comprehensible manner to the equal benefits of the beginners and the senior scholars. To satisfy their need for more, the book carries a bibliography at the end, which includes other primary and secondary sources on the subject. In all, Munir's authentic explorations into the complexities of modernism and postmodernism are indeed worthy of a personal as well as library possession.

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