

**HIRENTHA:
Journal of the Humanities
Volume 2, 2016**

ISSN:2659-13391

Postmodern Nationality in the 21st Century



**College of Humanities
Redeemer's University, Ede**

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Volume Editor
Ofure O. M. Aito



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HIRENTHA: Journal of the Humanities Volume 2, 2016;
ISSN 2659-1391

HIRENTHA: Journal of the Humanities, c/o College of Humanities,
Redeemer's University, Nigeria hirenharun@gmail.com

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HIRENTHA: Journal of the Humanities Volume 2, 2016;
ISSN 2659-1391

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Defining Postmodernism: A Review of Kevin Hart's *Postmodernism:
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Bernard B. Fyanka

Book Review

Defining Postmodernism: A Review of Kevin Hart's *Postmodernism: Beginners Guide*

Bernard B. Fyanka

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Kevin Hart, Postmodernism: Beginners Guide, Oxford, England: Oneworld Publishers, 2004, X + 179. Further Reading, Glossary, Bibliography, Index. ISBN: 1-85168-338-0. Print.

Kevin Hart provides with this book the classic primer for any novice to the subject of postmodernism. His style on the subject in a base and rudimentary way is akin to a series of undergraduate lectures. He introduces postmodernism in a manner that grants a beginner a relatively modest understanding of the subject. The volume contains seven chapters. The first four are devoted to theoretical questions on the subject: from an introduction to leading thinkers on postmodernism to issues of definition and dichotomy with other related concepts such as modernity, post-modernity, post-humanist, and post-structuralism, among others. The remaining three chapters anchor a discourse on theology and religion, specifically Christianity. The questions that postmodernism pose to Christianity and vice versa represent the baseline of the discussions. Hart's work is essentially a book that does not only introduce the concept of postmodernism; it analyzes the relevance and basic applications of key thinkers on the subject. The author goes further to elevate the postmodern discourse on religion as his primary thesis for the book. This is understandable given the controversial nature of religion and its narrative. Thematically the book has two main directions:

- A. Philosophical Origins of the subject of postmodernism with an attendant survey of the foremost thinkers.
- B. Postmodernism and its impact on and interpretation of theology and religion.

In chapter one which is titled "Postmodernism: Some Guides", the author first bemoans the lack of a definite landscape for describing postmodernism. Its major thinkers do not readily agree on what it is and how to really identify it. This blurry landscape so to speak is a major challenge for clear discernment of postmodernism. The author, thus, attempts to provide an

explanation of the origins of postmodern thinking. Although he alludes to the fact that the word postmodernism has been around as far back as the 1870's, he locates a more distinctive explanation with the French thinker Jean-François Lyotard (1925–1998) whose books, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on knowledge*, first published in 1979, (Hart 2) sets the pace for the author's explanation of postmodernism. Lyotard's claim that postmodernism is "an attitude of suspicion towards the modern" (Hart 2) is elaborated by the author to mean distrusting the claim that we can attain enlightenment or peace by the judicious use of reason (Hart 2).

The author's discourse of foremost postmodernist thinkers continues with Jacques Lacan (1901–1981) whose main concern is a reflection on the theory of subjectivity and Jacques Derrida on phenomenology. The author weaves his exploration of postmodernist views through literal criticism mentioning the likes of Maurice Blanchot, James Joyce, Stéphane Mallarmé and Paul Celan. Michel Foucault's position on Knowledge, power, man and the nature of being follows is also reviewed. He closes the chapter with his views on the dichotomy between modernity and postmodernism among others. He claims post-modernity on the other hand "is commonly taken to denote the historical period in which we live today" (Hart 16). Lastly, he outlines what he considers to be the origins and content of the post-structuralism and post-humanism.

The second chapter "The loss of Origin" (Hart 26) begins with the author's claim that it is impossible to derive a single viewpoint that can unify postmodernism. True as this may be, he proceeds to identify three theories that he believes are most widely held by postmodernist thinkers. These are anti-essentialism, anti-realism and anti-foundationalism. The most widely held position on anti-essentialism posits that "there is no natural or universal essence to being human: everything to do with our state has been historically formed and culturally conditioned" (Hart 26). The understanding of anti-realism on the other hand is relative to the individual's persuasion on realism. However, they generally agree that theoretical entities which are items that we cannot observe, like electrons and genes are no more than convenient fiction (Hart 28). Science for the anti-realists is not in the business of discovering facts about nature but rather of constructing schemas and concepts that help us to predict what will happen (Hart 28). Finally, anti-foundationalists argue that our knowledge of the world is not necessary based on solid grounds, meaning our claims to knowledge are not sacrosanct. Here the chapter focuses more on anti-foundationalism by working through the positions of Descartes and Nietzsche among others.

"Postmodern Experience" is rendered as the title of chapter three. Hart raises salient questions on the nature, origin of experience and the postmodern perspectives on Postmodernism. He starts out by raising

doubts about the historical division of time into the pre-modern, modern and post-modern epochs since they confine the postmodern experience to a particular time. As a guide through the analysis of experience, the author chooses Maurice Blanchot, the French philosopher. The author uses Blanchot's position on experience to demonstrate the vulnerability of the concept to anti-foundationism. For instance, he describes Blanchot's claim to the deceptiveness of literature which he Blanchot insists makes available an experience that is perceived differently by the reader from the original intent of the writer. His discourse progresses into context and content of hyper-reality, which is a derivative of the TV and media phenomena hence the question of experiencing reality is bantered within the labyrinth of what we believe to be and what truly is reality. The Reporting of the Gulf War is used here as stage for acting out what experience could be classified as real or objective. The question of what we see on TV as opposed to what truly happened is broached and systematically exhausted. The chapter concludes with insight provided by Francis Fukuyama, Jacques Derrida and Jean Baudrillard.

Chapter four is aptly titled "Fragmentary". Since postmodernists object to unity and totality, their affirmation of the fragmentary is explored by the author in this chapter. Here he makes use of Walter Benjamin and Jewish mysticism to introduce the notion of the fragmentary. The chapter initiates a discourse on fragmentary literature and proceeds to Walter Benjamin (1892–1940), one considered by the author as an exemplary postmodernist in respect of the fragmentary writing (Hart 70). The author analyses several works by Benjamin including *The Arcade Project*, a collection of fragments left unfinished at his death and itself one of the most significant fragments of twentieth-century social thought. Blanchot's works are used to clarify the concept of fragmentary and also highlight the question he raises regarding Christianity and the notion of unity.

The fifth Chapter, "The Postmodern Bible" raises the question of whether postmodernism rejects the bible or not. The author declares that no writing is more deeply embedded in western culture than the bible. Consequently, he speculates on the claim by some theorists that postmodernism divides us from the past. This chapter also considered the nature of narrative that the Bible represents (whole or grand narrative?). The idea of a postmodern Bible is assessed alongside the discourse of understanding the Bible according to Harold Bloom. Here, the legacy of the Bible in the context of postmodernism is also questioned by Blanchot.

Postmodern religion is captured in Chapter Six. The chapter begins by distinguishing religion in postmodern times from postmodern religion. Firstly, the author identifies Christian and Islamic fundamentalism as a key

characteristic of religion in postmodern times. Secondly, he draws attention to syncretism as a postmodern phenomenon in Christianity today. Consequently postmodern religion, specifically Christianity, is situated within the context of how Kabbalistic, Midrashic, and Talmudic styles of commentary are interpreted within Christian fundamentalism (Hart 111). He argues further that postmodern Christianity aims to be sophisticated with regard to literature and philosophy, however, runs the risk of bypassing revelation and “reducing the faith to ethics with a few ancient stories attached” (Hart 111). A discourse on positive and negative theology is integrated herewith its attendant implications for the deconstruction of Christianity.

The book winds down with chapter seven, “The Gift: A Debate.” The core of postmodernism is revisited in this chapter with an interrogation of the secularity of postmodernism or what may be regarded as a critique of secularism? The author questions the existence of a finite God and then proceeds to consider briefly George Lindbeck’s post-liberal theology. “The Gift”, a theme that is in the forefront of postmodernist debate is examined in the light of analysis provided by several thinkers including John Milbank and Jean-Luc Marion.

The “Conclusion” raises other possible topics in postmodernism including psychoanalysis and politics while critical realism and eco-criticism are flagged as important challenges to postmodernism.

Works Cited

Kevin Hart, *Postmodernism: Beginners Guide*. Oxford, England: Oneworld Publishers, 2004. Print. (All quotes are made from the text and contained in the body of the essay).