



The Crying of Lot 49 as a Postmodern Text

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Abstract

Postmodernism, a widely discussed subject in today's world, finds representation in Thomas Pynchon's literary work, *The Crying of Lot 49*. *The Crying of Lot 49*, a postmodern work, portrays a society that is fragmented and consumed by paranoia. Pynchon employs various postmodern elements in his novel to depict the contemporary world and its profound influence on human life and the future of literature. Throughout the narrative, he explores the disconnection of individuals from actual reality in today's society, highlighting their relentless pursuit of unknown objectives. Pynchon delves into the theme of people's overwhelming busyness, which leaves them with little time for themselves or their loved ones. Furthermore, he reflects on the materialistic nature of society, where the relentless pursuit of a better future often results in a loss of identity, feelings of alienation, and frustration. This paper aims to shed light on the concept of postmodernism and its impact on contemporary human existence. Moreover, it seeks to examine the themes and techniques employed in *The Crying of Lot 49* by Thomas Pynchon through a postmodern lens.

Keywords: Postmodernism, alienation, paranoia, fragmented narrative, intertextuality

Postmodernism is one of the most discussed topics in the contemporary world. Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* is considered as one of the representative works of the postmodern movement in Literature. In this text, Pynchon discusses some postmodern themes like loneliness, alienation and paranoia. He also employs some postmodern techniques in the text, such as fragmented narrative, temporal distortion, parody, irony, intertextuality, dark humor and open ending. This paper will throw a light on the concept of

postmodernism and postmodern effect in human life in contemporary time. Furthermore, it aims at discussing themes and techniques of *The Crying of Lot 49* by Thomas Pynchon in the light of postmodernism.

Defining postmodernism is not an easy thing to do. The word itself is paradoxical, how can something be after modernism? The postmodern era is after the modern era that supposedly started from the 1950s and forward. In her book *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, Linda Hutcheon explains the paradoxical nature of the word and states that the term postmodernism itself is problematic as it is both over-defined

and under-defined, that is, it has too many definitions, but at the same time lacks definition (xii). In the introduction to *The Routledge Companion to Postmodernism* its editor Stuart Sim claims that "Postmodernism is to be regarded as a rejection of many, if not most, of the cultural certainties on which life in the West has been structured over the last couple of centuries"(vii). Elizabeth Ermarth offers another explanation of Postmodernism. She suggests that "this term [Postmodernism] can mean almost anything" and she describes two key assumptions that characterize this literary movement. The first is the assumption that "all human systems operate like language". It leads to the understanding of language as "a variety of symbolic systems, whether they involve politics, fashion, gender relations, wrestling, or money" (Ermarth). It really is difficult to define postmodernism, as the word itself is paradoxical. It is both nothing and everything, meaning with no meaning. Postmodernism is not an organized way for understanding any issue. It is not an area of study in ontology rather it is ambiguous. Postmodernism is skeptical, and shows a care-free attitude. It does not have right or wrong judgments because it does not believe in the existences of value judgment. Theorist Solomon says, "postmodernism is the resentful projection of too many self-important smart people feeling slighted by the Zeitgeist" (Solomon 268).

Postmodernism is a notable term in contemporary texts. In 1950s, critics started to make use of this term and declare that this is a movement and that it is against modernism. For example, Christopher Witcombe explains the term Postmodernism in comparison with the ones of Modernism. He offers further explanation of the basic differences between Modernism and Postmodernism:

The Postmodern is deliberately elusive as a concept, avoiding as much as possible the modernist desire to classify and thereby delimit, bound, and confine. Postmodernism partakes of uncertainty, insecurity, doubt, and accepts ambiguity. Whereas Modernism seeks closure in form and is

concerned with conclusions, Postmodernism is open, unbounded, and concerned with process and "becoming" ("Modernism & Postmodernism").

Actually, there is no clear-cut difference between modernism and postmodernism. Postmodernism is somehow like modernism but the key ideas are different. It can be considered as a continuity of modernism. Postmodern welcomes disorder, anarchy, indeterminacy and multicultural ideas. Jean François Lyotard states, the definition of postmodernism, in the introduction of his most famous work, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on knowledge*. He says,

We no longer have recourse to grand narratives ... But as we have seen, the little narrative remains the quintessential form of imaginative invention ... In addition, the principle of consensus as a criterion of validation seems to be inadequate. (*The Postmodern Condition* 60).

In postmodern literature there is no strict form. Postmodern writers choose any topic, structure, and any style of writing or blending of them. Even they can create new form, new perspective new ideas and so on for writing. Fragmentation, historiographic metafiction, self-reflexivity, parody, pastiche, hyper-reality, temporal distortion, schizophrenia, paranoia, and magic realism are the common features of postmodern texts.

Thomas Pynchon is considered as one of the prominent figures of postmodernism in literature and many critics call him as the quintessential postmodern author. He belongs to the post-war generation of the 50s and 60s who suffered from some of the modern anguishes, such as the lack of clear moral values and loneliness and alienation. The Second World War represents in many respects a break with the past, and this is the first generation to deal with this break and with the necessity to provide a new

path. Some critics praise Pynchon's texts and say that they redefine postmodernism; moreover, they consider them as a major part of the postmodern canon of literature. Ali Chetwynd states in his review of *The Cambridge Companion to Thomas Pynchon* (2011) that:

Thomas Pynchon joins Phillip Roth, Toni Morrison, Don DeLillo and John Updike on the list of US textists to merit a Cambridge Companion during their lifetime: a significant milestone in the academic mainstreaming of an author who, despite his reasonable sales and attendant research 'Pyndustry', retains a cultist aura. (142)

But his texts have been criticized for being boorish and obscene, highly complex and a mockery of high culture. Pynchon's work is divisive as it needs the reader's full attention. His redundant style of writing is bound to confuse readers, and the huge scale and complexity of his work change everything from simple detective stories to metahistorical retellings featuring hundreds of characters in the same book¹ and multiple narrators each with their own unique style.

Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*, is one of his distinguished texts, published in 1966. Pynchon was awarded many prizes because of this text. The main character in the text is Oedipa Maas. She is a standard house-wife who lives with her husband, Mucho Maas in Kinneret. Oedipa finds out that her ex-lover, Pierce Inverarity, is dead and now all property belongs to her upon his request as stated in the will he left for her.

¹ For example, **Gravity's Rainbow is one of his complex novels** that contains over **400 characters**.

² After being defeated by Thurn und Taxis in the 1700s, the Tristero organization goes underground and continues to exist, with its mailboxes in the least suspected places, often

So she has to go to San Narciso where she meets Metzger, the lawyer and co-executor of Pierce Inverarity's state who makes a vow to help to execute the property, but having an affair with her, he runs away with another girl. For executing Pierce's state she meets lot of people whose names are weird, such as, Dr. Hilarius, her psychotherapist, John Nefastis who claims that he has created a working version of Maxwell's Demon and the band group 'Paranoid' who sings songs by coping. A third of the way through the novel, the mystery deepens. "Oedipa's quest to untangle the confusion surrounding a dead lover's estate has sent her to see *The Courier's Tragedy*, a barely known (and in reality nonexistent) Jacobean revenge tragedy" (Grausam 42). Moreover, through the process later she finds out that a mysterious and conspiratorial underground postal service that she suspects is hiding everywhere beneath the surface runs by a group, name Tristero². Then she starts investigation of the system. Later on the reader sees that Oedipa will know that Pierce is a stamps' collector. At the end of the text, Oedipa attends an auction and waits for the bidding to start. This is how the text ends.

One of the main themes of most postmodern texts is the theme of loneliness that is usually associated with the alienation of the main character from a world without clear value system that he/she cannot understand. In this text Oedipa recognizes that the absence of true values that can guide her life. She is caught in a complex quest to discover subsequent plots that appear out of the main plot, Pierce Inverarity's will. Most

appearing under their slogan W.A.S.T.E., an acronym for *We Await Silent Tristero's Empire*, and also a smart way of hiding their post-boxes disguised as regular waste-bins. In the plot of the novel, the existence and plans of the shadowy organization are revealed bit by bit, or, then again, it is possible that the Tristero does not exist at all.

notably, these are accompanied with the existence of the secret organization, Tristero. Oedipa's loneliness is also partially filled up with the momentary existence of a large volume of characters that she runs across in her quest. This reflects the existential theme of life-long quest for answers that is flowing out through the text.

Throughout this text, Pynchon shows contemporary American's life. He mirrors how American suffer from alienation and paranoia just like Oedipa, who suffers throughout the text. After the World War II, people felt isolated, and started questioning themselves. They started losing their faith in religion. So they involve themselves into many illegitimate acts, drinking alcohol, using drugs. They suffered from emptiness lack of communication, and they lost their identity. As an effect of all of these things, people were haunted by nightmares, just like Oedipa, and her psychotherapist, Dr. Hilarius.

Some critics consider Pynchon as the first postwar writer who is able to introduce the paranoid generation coming out of the McCarthy era and facing the consternation of the Vietnam War and political upheaval. The increasing paranoia and tension which burst forth in America during the 1960s are reflected in this text. It is a typical postmodern complex text because plots are not easy to follow and the names are difficult to understand. Society is not in order and communication is distorted. Describing this text Jayemanne says,

The Crying of Lot 49 is a notoriously difficult text... Pynchon himself is famously obscure. Two of the typical ways in which readers orient towards a literary text – title and author – are forestalled before the covers are even open. The book's title nevertheless frames the text in a very distinctive way, raising acute questions about entropy and

communication... *The Crying of Lot 49* links an enigmatic titular framing device with a complex *mise-en-abyme* structure – executing a vertiginous figure of reversal in which the role of uncertainty is both greatly expanded and explicitly thematized. (80)

Postmodernism regards paranoia as a fluctuation of people's life. In postmodern texts there are chaos and no order system exist which is an absurd idea. Postmodern authors show paranoia in different ways, such as searching for identities in social system. Thomas Pynchon's *Crying of lot 49* is perfect example of paranoia. In *Oxford Dictionary* paranoia is defined as "a mental disorder which is characterized by delusions of persecution, unwarranted jealous or fear of unknown or exaggerated self-importance". It blurs the line between reality and imagination. In this text, characters are suffering from paranoia especially, Oedipa, Mucho and Dr. Hilarius. The text also teases and induces paranoia in the readers mind. After starting her journey for executing Pierce's state Oedipa herself seems very hesitant about what she exactly wants. She actually does not know whether she wants a definite answer from this quest or it's all her imagination due to mental state, or she is not that what she really thinks. Does she really want to disclose the mystery? Is she able to do that? Oedipa herself does not know the answers at all. Oedipa Maas is searching for meaning in a world overfilled with multiplicity. The journey that she starts and does not have an end. She does not even know why she starts the quest. This kind of uncertainty makes people paranoid. Paranoia makes fragmentation of self and identity. As a result society becomes fragmented. Pynchon states,

Either Oedipa in the or biting ecstasy of a true paranoia, or a real Tristero. For there either was some

Tristero beyond the appearance of the legacy America, or there was just America and if there was just America then it seemed the only way she could continue, and manage to be at all relevant to it, was an alien, unfurrowed, assumed full circle into some paranoia. (Pynchon, 126)

The extensive use of drug also makes social system fragmented. In this novel, drug culture is first introduced by Dr. Hilarius who is a psychologist. He experiments with LSD drug. Oedipa, Mucho Mass, even Dr. Hilarius himself are victims of drug. The use of drugs creates the border between reality and hallucination. Throughout the text, Oedipa gives a sense of confusion between reality and hallucinations. She is not sure of anything that is it real or hallucination. The reader later in the text recognizes that Oedipa hallucinates. Her husband becomes insane as well as Dr. Hilarius, due to drug effect. Oedipa's husband, has lost his identity, and destroyed their marriage and social life because of drugs. Moreover, when Oedipa tries to talk to Dr. Hilarius he says, "do you think anyone can protect me from these fanatics? They walk through walls. They replicate: you flee them, turn a corner, and there they are, coming for you again" (Pynchon 110).

Using drugs not only makes people insane, but also makes them feel depressed, isolated, alienated and also makes them lose their identity. This is exactly what happens to the characters in this text. Thus, Pynchon reflects the incomplete self of people as a result of the disorder of the social system. People are living careless and uncertain life; they feel alienated which leads them to use drug. As a consequence of it, people feel paranoia and get insane.

The author uses the temporal distortion and break the story down into smaller stories, without following a distinctive timeline. Actually, the events

of the text seem to be tied together into a temporal framework, which is obvious through the quest and mystery characteristics of the text. Oedipa is in process of attempting to expose the mystery presented at the beginning of the story and which evolves as more elements are added to this. May be the reader cannot speak of the temporal distortion here; however, he/she can emphasize that the author seems to connect different temporal levels together in what makes the text look as a surrealistic work. For example, the way the 17th century revenge play is inserted as a play within a play, moving the action to a different timeframe.

The Crying of Lot 49 offers almost no distinction between the time of initial publication and the time of setting. While the narrator occasionally distances the reader from Oedipa's perceptions, we are never in noticeably more privileged position with regard to knowledge. Within the novel, Oedipa's attempt to connect her present with the past are also frustrated because the narrative never resolves the principal mystery of whether or not a long history of alternative postal delivery actually exists. (Grausam 44)

Making a reference to the *The Courier's Tragedy*, the Jacobean revenge play, is the best example of intertextuality, as the tragedy is a story within a story. In this text, Oedipa goes to the theater to watch the play and to talk to the director of the play. When Oedipa discusses the Jacobean play with the director Randolph Driblette, says that "[it] isn't literature, it doesn't mean anything. Wharfinger was no Shakespeare." 'Who was he?' she said. 'Who was Shakespeare. It was a long time ago' (Pynchon 60).

Thomas Pynchon's novel *The Crying of Lot 49* has often been seen in the context of comedy. Different literary devices participate in the creation of this

comical effect. Parody, often with a satirical, ironic or sarcastic note, is one of the most prominent devices that contribute to create this effect. According to this, Richard Poirier says in his essay "The Importance of Thomas Pynchon",

Pynchon extends parodic perception from literature not only to science, to pop culture, to the traditions of analysis, but even to the orderings of the unconscious, to dreams themselves... It is as if human life in all of its recorded manifestations is bent towards rigidification, reification and death... Pynchon seems to say not only that history is in itself a form of repression, but so, too, is the human impulse to make or write history. (155)

According to the detective novel's traditions, the story safely leads its chief detective and the reader from one evidence to another until the final resolution of the mystery in question in that sense. There is always this belief that the "who did it?" question will be resolved in the end. A detective text always begins with an event, in many cases a murder, and in the beginning has many possible alternatives. As the story progresses, there are fewer and fewer murder suspects and in the end the murderer is finally revealed and the reader gets his/her answers. However, in the case of *The Crying of Lot 49*, both the reader and Oedipa Maas, the detective of the novel, get increasingly confused as the plot deepens and the abundance of information diversifies. It starts with a simple plot of handling an estate, but evolves into an almost infinitely complex story which features almost endless possibilities as to what might actually be true. The reader is left with no answers at the end of the text, and the questions just pile up on each other as the text progresses. The parody here lies in the impossibility to reveal the mystery and

bring the story to its final resolution by putting together the puzzle set before Oedipa. It is ironical that Oedipa herself is not even sure if there is any mystery. Moreover, the existence of Trystero itself is never completely confirmed.

There is also a playful and ironic tone in *The Crying of Lot 49* in the use of the characters' names which seems to direct the reader towards a parody approach to the text. In this text, Pynchon uses these characters' names either to conjure up comical response in his reader or to deliver confusion. The author may also use some names to allude to different issues, which is an important instrument in postmodern expression as the critic Robert Brazeau claims in his paper entitled "A Note on Pierce Inverarity featured in Pynchon Notes". He says, "Pynchon offers his readers a clue (or a bluff) in the names of his characters, allowing another book to pierce his own, opening Lot 49 to varied levels of interpretations"(186). To understand the irony in the allusion inserted in Oedipa's name, the reader must have an idea about the Greek tragedy *Oedipus the King*, where Oedipus' harsh pursuit of knowledge and solutions to the riddles in his life at last leads to misery. This reference suggests that the Oedipa will, like her namesake, encounter and ultimately solve many riddles, including the mystery of the Trystero. At the end of the novel, Oedipa is unable to prove or disprove the conspiracy which violate the expectations her name implies and create irony. Pynchon shows ironic potential in other character names, such as Genghis Cohen, a philologist whose name links to the tyrant Mongolian warlord Genghis Khan. Again, irony is created by the violation of the expectations the reader forms; a character whose name suggests bloodthirsty conquering is collecting postage stamps.

There is another example of irony in this text. The reader finds that Dr. Hillarius is sort of an insane doctor who

treats patients who suffer from any kind of mental stress or disorder. The doctor calls Oedipa at 3:00 AM, and asks her to take a part in the experiment involving LSD drug. The irony here lies in the fact that at the end of the novel, Dr. Hillarius is the one hallucinating when he thinks that everyone is out to kill him. There are also elements of dark humor which is considered to be one of the main constituents of the novel.

In an extraordinary sequence of events, human bones serve as the source from which ink is produced and used in the writings suffused with black humor "Later on, their bones were fished up again and made into charcoal, and the charcoal into ink, which Angelo, having a dark sense of humor, used in all his subsequent communications with Faggio, the present document included" (Pynchon 50). Metaphorically speaking, human condition in all its frailty poses here as the source the writer's ink is drawn from, but the human pain is still alleviated through dark parodic laughter. (Kalaba)

The Crying of Lot 49 is actually "[Pynchon's] most postmodern work... with its insistently apocalyptic tone and subsequent denial of any kind of revelation" (Grausam 45). Open ended technique is certainly one of the main technique in postmodern fiction. This text is not exceptional than other postmodern texts. According to this Moore says,

since *The Crying of Lot 49* is a parable about literary analysis and interpretation, one that is deliberately open-ended—the only mystery the reader solves at the end is the meaning of the text's odd title—I suppose it would be arrogant to reject such an approach.

From the beginning of the novel, the reader finds Oedipa, as a detective character rather than an ordinary

housewife. She has a quest throughout the whole text, but at the end her quest is not fulfilled. She leaves the reader with an open ended action of the story. At the end of the story the reader sees Oedipa waiting for the auction of lot 49.

Oedipa sat alone, toward the back of the room, looking at the napes of necks, trying to guess whichone was her target, her enemy, perhaps her proof... She heard a lock snap shut; the sound echoed a moment... The auctioneer cleared his throat. Oedipa settled back, to await the crying of lot 49. (Pynchon 152)

The blurb on the back of the 2006 edition from Harper Perennial modern classics of the book describes the text as

[t]he highly original satire about Oedipa Maas, a woman who finds herself enmeshed in a worldwide conspiracy, meets some extremely interesting characters, and attains a not inconsiderable amount of self-knowledge. (Pynchon)

The reader may have read books on conspiracies before and by the end of these books he/she knows what the conspiracy aimed to achieve. In this novel, Pynchon reflects the deepest psychological terror resides in the conspiracy that is everywhere, but with no obvious aim beyond the quest. Oedipa becomes involved in a conspiracy while dealing with Inverarity's property and explores many different subcultures while trying to figure out the truth of Trystero, which may or may not be part of a conspiracy stretching across history and nations. This is the center of which the plot goes around, but it is always unclear whether this conspiracy is a joke, a hallucination or an actual thing. Oedipa Maas starts an almost Odyssean journey through California and in the end, ends up on the crying of lot 49, an auction of Inverarity's estate without any real answers. The parody of her quest implies that in the contemporary era answers

appear to be possible. This perfectly reflects postmodernism as the movement itself is paradoxical and rather than providing answers or definitions, all what postmodernism does is ask questions (Hutcheon vii).

The Crying of lot 49 is a postmodern text that shows a fragmented and paranoid society. Pynchon uses some postmodern characteristics in his novel in order to display today's contemporary world and its impact on human life and future of literature. Throughout the text he discusses the how nowadays people are disconnected from actual reality, and how they are running after something, but do not really know what they are running after. He shows how people are so much busy that they fail to manage time for themselves or for dearest ones. Moreover, he reflects how they become so materialistic and running after a better future which ultimately leads to lost identity, feel alienated and frustrated.

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