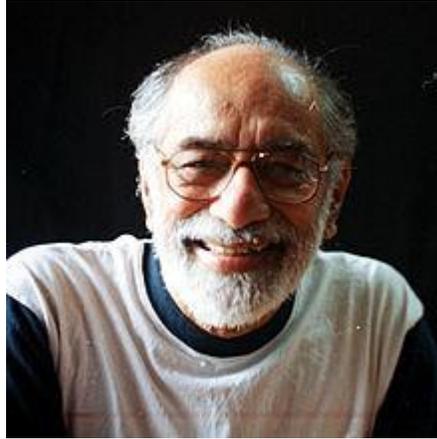


The Elements of Postmodernism in the Short Stories of O. Henry and Sundara Ramasamy

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Sundara Ramasamy 1931-2005

Courtesy: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sundara_Ramasami

Abstract

This paper traces the post-modern elements in the short stories of O. Henry and Sundara Ramasamy. Strikingly similar features of eclectic styles of writing parody, irony, pastiche, plurality, commercialism, matters of money, power, spiritual aridity, immoralities and so on, are found in the short stories of both writers. During their life time, religion, love, marriage, culture, values and other important aspects of life were not given due importance. They concentrate on the collapse of different social structures, education, customs, and habits. Both writers promulgate the practice of social conduct, and codes of moral ethics; they present ironical portrayals of people and reveal the many forms of illegal relationships. Belief in god is shown to have turned to disbelief; the cruelties toward women and old people are well portrayed. Both writers are disillusioned and disappointed with the present world. Both O. Henry and Sundara Ramasamy reveal the senselessness of people, and the rejection of age-old traditional values. They also reflect irrationality, micro-level family politics, and social incoherence, fragmentation and indeterminacy. Anti-social characters like drunkards, whore-mongers and cheats abound in the short stories of both writers. Some of their concepts are about the absurd, the anti-hero, the anti-novel and magic realism. They are very strong in the satirical portrayal of men and women.

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Postmodernism

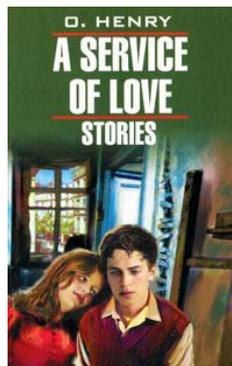
This paper points out the differences between modernism and post-modernism. It traces the post-modern elements in the short stories of O. Henry and Sundara Ramasamy. It also proceeds to highlight problems of love and marriage. Post-modernism is 'a state of mind'; it also refers to a 'series of social and cultural tendencies.' It is a way of life and a way of feeling. O. Henry's 'A service of Love' reflects the life of 'Modern orthodoxy.' Joe and Della have together. They bluff to each other; he says that he learns art, and she tells him she learns music. In real life, she was employed in a Laundry and he was working in a Mechanic shed.



O. Henry 1862-1910

Courtesy: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/O. Henry](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/O._Henry)

The story begins with a dictum 'when one Loves one's Art, no service seems too hard.' The lovers, Joe Larrabee, 'a genius for pictorial art' and Delia Caruthers, interested in music, come to London to earn money and live together. They get married; within a short time Mr. Larrabee begins to learn art under Mr. Magister; Mrs. Larrabee begins to learn music under Herr Rosenstock. Marriage is not a great ceremonious deal and not much importance is given to it in the postmodern period.



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In Sundara Ramasamy's 'Adaikalam', Bakirathi Paati, an orthodox lady does not like the modern way of living she has seen in her daughter and son-in-law family. They live in Delhi where they follow modern culture, like for example, her granddaughter and grandson's way of dressing not very sensibly, etc. Yet, she takes pity on a pregnant lady whom she meets at the bus stand and she prays for her and her undelivered baby.

A few stories of each writer are critically examined for the purpose of finding the post modern elements. The postmodern age is a transitional stage, characterized by a dramatic change from the past through wars, social turns and revolutions. According to Toynbee, it is an age of "anarchy and social relativism." It is also a time of troubles marked by the collapse of rationalism and the ethos of enlightenment.

The characteristics of modernism and post-modernism can very clearly be seen in the short story of O. Henry, 'The Gift of the Magi'. Living together, the couple, Della and Jim, are both unaware of what the other person requires. They buy the surprise Christmas gift items, for each other, like the ordinary watch and the comb; they seem to attach no great values to life except as temporary enjoyment like any surprise that is momentary and fleeting. No consultation with each other about the desires of the other person is the natural outcome of a busy life all around. Short-lived momentary joy is the tendency of the post modernistic world. Petty thinking, sobbing, sniffing and smiling are some of the examples of this kind of life. The money they earned is far too insufficient to meet their daily expenses.

Lifeless Life

Lifeless life in the post-modern world is found in the short story of Sundara Ramasamy, 'Pallam'(Hollow) deals with the empty inner hollows and refers to the present empty civilization; here we have the vacant-hearted people, who are spiritually dead within, but are physically alive. All these modern people are filled with false and frenzied meaningless activities. An incident referred to, is that of a boy who is left with an empty eye socket while the mother was enjoying a film in the theatre. The mother was sitting on the sand floor with her child on her lap. As she was digging the pebbles from the sandy floor, she could not differentiate the eye ball of the child. Taking it to be a pebble, she dug out the eye ball of the child. This is a macabre incident. Normally a mother cannot do something like that but Madukunju's mother was so passionate about seeing the cinema, she made his life empty which is compared with the hollow. Though the hollow was filled, it retained its emptiness like his life.

The Guilty Party

'The Guilty party' is yet another short story of the post-modern world with a tragic end born of rivalry in love making. This is very common among the youngsters of both sexes in the American as well as the Indian context. Life is becoming a vengeful play and a foolish

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challenge; the age old customs, family codes and social conducts are just like things that thrown out on an impulse. The youth become unmindful of their glorious future; with the result, life turns out to be bleak, useless and utterly wasteful. O. Henry spins the story to educate the youth to be careful instead of acting impulsively, making hasty decisions and doing careless and foolish things which would affect their entire life. The author warns the young people through the story.

Vasanai

In 'Vasanai' (Essences), Sambasivan, a born cripple lives a decent life with his wife. Owing to his sexual contact with a Brahmin lady, a man becomes a fingerless leper who arouses violence, brutality and even a sense of sexuality in Sambasivan, by attacking him with filthy and indecent words. Sambasivan's inferiority is thrown out by the man. His opinion about his wife is shattered and he proves that he was not like his forefathers. Life is valuable if it is understood properly. He realizes life through the leper's indigestible words. Sambasivan's inferiority is gone after he punished the leper for his words. Sundara Ramasamy writes this satirical story about the man becoming a leper after having relations with a Brahmin lady. He attacks such superstitions and exposes the people who have hypocritical thoughts like Sambasivan.

Woman Wreaking Vengeance

This paper also goes on to show how a woman wreaks vengeance for the man in her future in 'The Guilty party' by O. Henry. It also points to the love affair between people of two different communities in the post-modern world. But, in Sundara Ramasamy's 'Meikathal' (True Love), Varathan was a play boy. He had love affairs with many girls, but he had an opinion about love – love is only love and it should not end with marriage. He was an opportunist. He came to the city for his higher studies and spread the net for love. Joswa was the innocent girl who loved him very much, and is cheated by him. He realized she was hurt and felt guilty at heart. But he never wanted to marry her because he had the opinion about it as love is for love only, like art is for art's sake. He was different from Rasa who loved Azhagu but married a north Indian girl in 'Muthalum Mudivum' (The First and the Last) thus both Varathan and Rasa were not honest in their love. They cheated women easily. Both Azhagu and Joswa were innocents in their love affairs, but Azhagu got married to Rasa's father after his wife Nayaki died. Here we see the irony of life; she became the stepmother of the man who cheated her. Such things do happen in the post-modern world.

Making Up Stories of Lies

Post-modern world is full of people who try to make up stories of lies. The culture is at ebb and civilization seems to move fast; for the sake of love deliberate lies are uttered. Loneliness, in a crowded world, is a characteristic of post-modernism. This is portrayed in 'The Assessor of

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Success'. Hastings Beauchamp Morley watched the union square 'with a pitying look at the hundreds that lolled upon the park bench'. The picture shows the life of the down-trodden; O. Henry writes: 'they were a motley lot, the men with stolid, animal, unshaven faces; the women wriggling and self-conscious, twining and untwining their feet....' It is the pathetic life of the hundreds of poor people who frequent the place. O. Henry insists that if he were Mr. Carnegie or Mr. Rockefeller he would put down a few millions... and arrange for benches in all the parks of the sanatoriums. Here is a character called Morley with a cent in his pocket. Every day his pockets would be empty at sun down but at sun rise things were different. The author contrasts Morley's extreme qualities of cheating others and helping some unfortunates. First, Morley goes to the house of a clergy man with a forged letter and gets 5 dollars. Then he gives it away, and has only one cent left by evening.

Kovil Kalaium Uzhavu Maadum

In 'Kovil Kalaium Uzhavu Maadum' (Temple Bull and Plough Ox) one sees the example of the youth who spends his time in utter laziness. Vairavan Pandaram is symbolized by the temple bull who has no work except collecting money from the public. He has nothing and yet has compassion in his heart while he mourns the old man when he dies. The old man is the hard worker symbolized by the plough ox who wants to be useful to others. It is a story that symbolizes the old traditional and the new fangled modern generation.

No Unified Postmodern Theory – Diverse and Basic Elements

In their book 'Postmodern Theory – Critical Interrogations', Steven Best and Douglas Kellner say that "there is no unified postmodern theory, or even a coherent set of positions. Rather, one is struck by the diversities between theories, often lumped together as post modern and the plurality...of post modern positions." As Best and Kellner say that the emerging postmodern discourse raises such issues which resist easy dismissal or easy incorporation into paradigms which have been already established.

The elements of post-modernism like mental depression, mental conflict, disillusionment, loneliness in a crowded life, with no appreciation of genuine, genial qualities of a great writer, the post-modern writer needs encouragement, to come out of the depression but no one has the mind to help the writer; rather no one understands the true nature of the artist.

There is deep-set craving in the mind of man for genuine praise; when it is not received at the appropriate time of the production of the artifact, the artist feels marooned. The negative qualities of the artist are the outcome of a society of 'plurality, fragmentation and indeterminacy.' The writer feels that it was his duty to go on writing; his creations are the pathways of light for the present and the future generation. There is an optimistic note which is one of the pluralities of the post-modern world.

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Indian Postmodernists Living in Railway Stations

In 'Contemporary Literary Theory' N. Krishnaswamy, John Varghese and Sunita Mishra point out the life of the post-modernist: 'Postmodernists are living in Railway stations, constantly on the move. It is a ceaseless dissatisfied movement.' 'The Making of a New Yorker' by O. Henry is a perfect example of it. The central figure Mr. Raggles could feel the pulse of each American city and without writing a line he was a poet. The author humorously mentions: 'he lived his poetry' (p.148). In an elliptical way of saying..., he 'was philosopher, an artist, a traveler, a naturalist and a discoverer. (P.148) Mr. Raggles, a post-modernist is a compendium of fragmentations. 'He studied cities as women study their reflections in mirrors. But in Sundara Ramasamy's 'Rail Thandavalathil Odum' (The Train runs on the Track), the train engine driver narrates some details about fate; as a humanist he feels sorry for the male baby who was not seen by him on the track. .The boy was dead on the tracks and he understands later it is the same whether it is a boy or a buffalo for the train. This is the practical and philosophical thought which is portrayed here. He had learnt knowledge and wisdom in thirty years service.

Thus postmodernism is a general term used to refer to changes, developments and tendencies which have taken place in literature, art, music, architecture and philosophy since the 1940s or 1950s. The striking features of postmodernism are found in the short stories of O. Henry and Sundara Ramasamy.

A Conscious as well as an Unconscious Endeavour

To conclude, postmodernism is a conscious as well as an unconscious endeavour to create new trends and fields in criticism and literature. The stress is laid more on language than on the themes. Though postmodernism appears to be fragmentary, it clearly reflects the systems of life of the people of our age.

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