



A Postmodernist Approach to Women, Development Theory and Practice

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Abstract

Postmodernism arose as a theoretical movement to challenge modernity's presumptions and concepts as well as the idea of being universally correct. Postmodernism posits that the significant modifications made to modernism's institutions and lifestyles mean that contemporary society is not the same as "modern" society. Employing secondary sources, this paper examines the postmodernist approach to women, development theory, and practice. This paper was analysed using the post-development theory, which questions the conventional Western development paradigm. The study revealed that one of postmodernism's major contributions is its critique of the dominant narratives that influence how we perceive social, political, and economic issues. Postmodern feminism contends that these narratives frequently leave out the experiences and viewpoints of women and other marginalised groups. Hence, the feminist interpretation of postmodernism recognises the diversity of women's experiences, with multiple interconnections with age, race, culture, ability, education, and immigration status such that political measures at the international, national, and local levels are required to protect women without overshadowing the appreciation of differences. Further, this paper argues that while postmodernist feminism provides insightful perspectives, it is not without criticism.





Specifically, some feminists contend that the movement's emphasis on difference can cause women to become less cohesive and neglect to address the structural problems that underpin gender inequality. Furthermore, it is possible to interpret postmodernist feminism's rejection of universal truths and critique of grand narratives as relativism hindering the fight for social justice and gender equality. In light of the inclusive culture and the voices of the marginalized, this paper suggests that governments of developing nations enact laws requiring development partners and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) from other countries that work with local, community, and faith-based NGOs to co-design and implement intervention initiatives.

Keywords Modernism, Postmodernism, Postmodern Feminism, Women, Development, Gender Inequality

Introduction

A philosophical and cultural movement that challenged the ideas and precepts of modernism emerged in the middle of the 20th century and was called postmodernism. It is associated with questioning the supremacy of master narratives, rejecting realism in favour of pluralism and diversity, and going against common wisdom. The theories and practices around women and development have been significantly impacted by postmodernism. (Karim & Ariff Aizuddin Azlan, 2019).

One of the most significant contributions of postmodernism to women and development theory and practice is its critique of master narratives. Master narratives are the dominant stories that are widely accepted and shape our understanding of social, political, and economic issues. The argument put out by postmodern feminism is that women's experiences and viewpoints have frequently been left out of and marginalized by these master narratives. By bringing attention to the differences and diversity among women, postmodernism opposes the essentialist idea of a women's perspective put out by radical feminism. Postmodern feminists argue that existing ideas often overlook the realities and experiences of marginalised women, instead being constructed with the interests of specific groups in mind.

This emphasis on heterogeneity and the critique of master narratives greatly liberates women of colour and other disadvantaged groups, as they have been left out of the traditional discourses on gender and development for far too long. The approach of postmodernism to



women, development theory, and practice challenges the idea that women everywhere have the same experiences and perspectives. The focus of postmodern feminism is on contextual identities and the variations in women's real political, social, legal, and environmental circumstances. It also recognises the diversity and complexity of women's identities and experiences, acknowledging that different social, cultural, and economic contexts have varied effects on women's lives that cannot be reduced to one universal experience.

Postmodern feminists contend that in order to comprehend and propose targeted solutions to the practical and strategic requirements and obstacles experienced by various groups of women, it is imperative to draw attention to these distinctions and complexities.

Modernism's proponents believe their analysis to be the "truth." Postmodernists, on the other hand, disagree with this viewpoint, arguing that each of us is a product of our upbringing and society. According to postmodernism, the shared language, traits, and lifestyles of various societies serve to strengthen our sense of self and distinctiveness (Karim & Ariff Aizuddin Azlan, 2019). Therefore, postmodernists contend that embracing the lack of a universal "truth" and granting individuals in various parts of the world the freedom to be unique and get acceptance for who they are is a more constructive course of action than pursuing the "truth."

Postmodernism: A Definitional Explanation

Modernity, or the "modern age," was characterised by modernism before postmodernism came into being. To comprehend postmodernism, it is essential to look at what makes a modern society. According to Karl Thompson (2016), the term "modern society" refers to the Western world between 1650 and 1950, and the term "postmodern society" applies to the Western world and other "advanced" societies after 1950. The advancement of science and technology, the emergence of capitalism, the growth of cities, and the increasing urbanisation of a society are the characteristics of a "modern society".

Due to the wide range of ideas and connotations connected to postmodernism, critics and academics have different opinions about what it means. There are overlapping and contradictory interpretations of "postmodernism" due to its several definitions. Consequently, to properly understand the postmodernist perspective on women and its applicability to development theory and practice, it is imperative that certain of the ideas used in this study be clarified.



A discourse mode or intellectual position known as postmodernism refers to the belief that contemporary society is essentially different from the "modern" civilization because the institutions and lifestyles of modernism have been so thoroughly changed. Postmodernism challenges modernity's presumptions and concepts as well as the idea of what is universally true.

Important characteristics of postmodern society are the lack of overarching narratives or ultimate truths in favour of multiple perspectives and experiences, increased cultural diversity, focus on individualism and subjectivity, and the dominance of technology and information. Evidence of the postmodern society is the widespread use of online platforms, smartphones, and social media platforms that give everyone to express their unique identities, and the opportunity to share information and their perspectives.

Theoretical Framework

This paper is hinged on the post-development theory, which is often referred to as post-dev theory. The theoretical framework in development studies known as "post-dev theory" casts doubt on the conventional development models' objectives, presumptions, and methods as well as the prevailing conception of development (Kebza, 2018). Post-development theory emerged as part of the more significant postmodernist trend challenging the traditional Eurocentric development perspective and questioning the notion of "development" itself.

The "Post-dev theory" surfaced in the 1980s as a response to the shortcomings and flaws of mainstream development theories and practices, which were seen as perpetuating inequalities, reproducing oppressive Western power hegemony (Molleda, 2009), imposing a uniform vision of progress on diverse societies, and most critically, failing to address the needs of marginalised communities, especially those of the global south.

According to post-development theory, social injustices and inequalities must be addressed in different ways by the field of development studies because development is a dynamic process (Aram Ziai, 2022). Supporters of the post-development theory have challenged traditional development paradigms like modernization and underdevelopment theories. One of such is Peet and Hartwick (2009) who argued that postmodern approaches should inform the rise of alternative development theories. They contend that to properly account for the complexity and diversity of experiences found in many societies, these antiquated ideas regarding



development need to be updated. The modernization method, according to post-development theorists, promotes a Eurocentric worldview and supports current power relations by pushing for acceptance of development models derived from the West.

By utilising postmodern methodologies, post-development theory dismantles the conventional development frameworks' support for universalistic and linear concepts of economic progress and modernization. Postmodernism challenges the fundamental assumptions about truth, accuracy, and reason that underpin modernist development theories. Reality, according to postmodernists, is a product of social constructions and power dynamics rather than an objective, universal reality. Postmodernists have impacted post-development theorists, who contend that there are diverse perspectives on development and that it is impossible to regard it from a single, comprehensive perspective. Rather, they support a range of context-specific, culturally aware, and diversified options that prioritise locally sourced and sustainable knowledge while taking into account the customs and values of various communities. (Radebe, 2022).

Policy proponents and Development theorists have offered a substantial critique of post-development theory. Theorists advocating for post-development have frequently asserted that development is Europe-centered and fails to consider the power relationships inherent in its classifications. This is the basis for this criticism. Its basic challenge to traditional conceptions of development has given rise to this criticism of post-development, which exposes biases and power disparities within the discipline.

After initially opposing certain post-development arguments, some well-known opponents have come around, especially when it comes to challenging the Eurocentric viewpoint that permeates conventional development discourse. This transition is a sign that scholars are becoming more aware of the need to interact with a wider range of challenging and demanding points of view and to question long-held assumptions.



Using a Postmodernist Perspective to Address Power Imbalances

A fundamental aspect of postmodernism is comprehending and addressing the power relations inside social structures. When talking about women and development, it is important to look at the power imbalances that have hitherto disadvantaged women and prevented them from fully participating and exercising their agency in these processes. (Raphael, 2013). Through the lens of postmodernism, these power dynamics can be identified, dismantled, and changed to create a society that is more just and equal.

Postmodernism aims to question and demolish the long-standing power structures that have been detrimental to women, especially those belonging to marginalised communities. By dissecting these systems, it is possible to determine the underlying reasons for power imbalances and come up with workable solutions (Narayan, 1997). Those in positions of power often fabricate normative narratives to maintain their power and authority over marginalised groups, particularly women. The critical analysis and deconstruction of these narratives are encouraged by a postmodernist perspective (Richa, 2022). Questioning normative beliefs about gender roles, abilities, and rights can help shift discourse and cultural attitudes on women's participation in and contributions to development.

A key component of postmodernism is inclusive participation, which values equal weight for all voices and viewpoints. Whenever decisions are made about women and development, it is imperative that women from marginalised communities and diverse backgrounds be included. Encouraging women to actively participate in developing policies and programmes ensures that their particular interests and concerns are taken into account and contributes to the democratisation of power (Mohanty, 2002).

Increasing the voices of the historically marginalized and weak is an essential part of resolving power disparities. The message of postmodernism is to acknowledge and give voice to the stories and experiences of marginalised women. By giving these voices a forum, we may undermine established power structures and forward an agenda for inclusive and egalitarian growth.

Using a critical lens to challenge the current quo, a postmodernist approach asks us to rethink development practices. To make sure they do not unintentionally maintain current power disparities, policies, programmes, and interventions must be reviewed. Established power structures can be removed to give women the ability to actively direct



their development paths by implementing more collaborative and participatory methods of development.

Modernism and Postmodernism from a Feminist Perspective

Feminist perspectives on postmodernism and modernism are diverse. Numerous scholars contend that women were impacted by the modernist movement in both positive and negative ways. According to certain feminist thinkers, women had more options for empowerment and self-expression during the feminist movement of the mid-20th century. (Whetmore, 2014). Some contend, however, that modernity strengthened conventional gender norms and promoted misogynistic beliefs. Modernism has been criticised by feminist theorists for its innately male-centric viewpoint and exclusion of the experiences and perspectives of women. They contend that modernism frequently portrayed women as nothing more than subjects of masculine lust or as mere models for male artists. (Shah & Cory, 2019).

In addition, Feminist theorists like Nancy Fraser, Linda Nicholson, and Donna Haraway, among others, have taken a critical stance toward the ideologies of both modernism and postmodernism, arguing against the binary opposition traditionally drawn between them (Ranteallo&Andilolo, 2017) as they oversimplify the complexities of feminist thought and dismiss the unique contributions of feminist theory in challenging dominant power structures. Also, they reject the patriarchal reasoning associated with modernism, as well as the fragmentation often attributed to postmodernism (Cockerham, 2011) because it fails to capture the intricacies of feminist theory and its critiques of patriarchal reasoning and fragmented approaches. Instead, they contend that a more comprehensive and nuanced view is necessary, one that considers the intersections of social identities such as race, class, gender, and others (Perez *et al.*, 2001).

Marxist feminists have rejected postmodern beliefs. The fragmentation of sex, race, and class categories as well as the denial of the relevance of overarching conceptions of patriarchy, racism, and capitalism are the results of postmodernism in social theory, according to British sociologist and Professor Sylvia Walby (Walby, 1990).

The convergence of feminism with postmodernism, according to feminist scholars, offers a chance to question and analyse repressive power systems, broaden the scope of feminist analysis to include diverse experiences, and interrogate the complexities and fluidity of social identities in contemporary society (Frost, 2019).



However, it is important to note that not all feminist perspectives align completely with postmodernism. Some feminist scholars argue that postmodernism provides a valuable framework for critiquing and deconstructing dominant power structures (Ardill, 2016), while others critique postmodernism for its emphasis on individualism and fragmentation, which they argue can undermine collective feminist goals (Ranteallo & Andilolo, 2017).

In light of these diverse perspectives, feminists must recognize the complexities surrounding the relationship between feminism and postmodernism. While postmodernism offers valuable tools for challenging dominant ideologies and power structures, feminists must also remain vigilant in critiquing its limitations.

One area of contention is the question of whether postmodernism's focus on individual experiences and subjective realities undermines collective feminist goals. Some feminist scholars argue that this emphasis on subjectivity and fragmentation can divert attention away from systemic forms of oppression and hinder collective action. They argue that a more intersectional approach, one that considers the interconnectedness of various systems of power and oppression, is necessary for an effective feminist praxis (Ranteallo & Andilolo, 2017).

On the other hand, some feminist thinkers see postmodernism as a necessary tool for dismantling oppressive systems and disrupting dominant discourses. They argue that postmodernism's focus on difference, identity, and power dynamics aligns with feminist goals of challenging and dismantling patriarchal structures.

Furthermore, discussions on the nature of truth and the supremacy of knowledge have been triggered by the combined influence of feminism and postmodernism. The notion that there is a single, universal truth or an objective reality that needs to be found is contested by postmodernism. This critique aligns with feminist perspectives that highlight how dominant discourses shape and control knowledge production, often excluding marginalized voices (Zaman & Anderson-Nathe, 2021).

However, the rejection of a singular truth has also been a point of contention within feminist circles (Hänel, 2018). Some argue that postmodernism's insistence on subjective realities can undermine feminist efforts to expose and challenge systemic oppressions. They believe that without a shared understanding of the structures of power, it becomes difficult to organize and advocate for change effectively.



Approach to Postmodern Feminism

Postmodernist thinkers, alongside feminists, have played significant roles in challenging established norms and creating a body of knowledge that seeks to ask new questions and bring about discoveries. However, while postmodernism and feminism share important critiques of dominant discourses and power structures, there remain debates within feminism about the extent to which postmodernism can be utilized as a productive framework and discussions within feminist theory and praxis.

Postmodern feminism goes further to refute preconceptions and the notion that gender is a permanent category. Postmodern feminists argue that gender is a social construct that varies among cultures and countries. Among other things, a postmodern feminist perspective has helped to recognise other types of feminism outside of the Western world. Additionally, development experts will no longer describe women from poor nations as the weak and defenceless "other," as postmodern feminism acknowledges that information about their reality can come to the fore by finding and uncovering the opinions and experiences of the "vulnerable."

It is possible to get new insights into the behaviour of people in the Third World by taking into account language and cultural distinctions. This also counters the tendency to apply Western principles to every developing country without distinction. This highlights the need to learn more about the real-world experiences that women have across a variety of cultural contexts. Therefore, it is critical to recognise the diversity of feminisms and to appreciate the significance of the lifestyles of women in the third world.

While some feminists advocate for postmodernism in its entirety, others seek to accept postmodernism from a postmodern feminist standpoint. These criticisms have compelled Western feminists to be more inclusive of diversity in order to further feminist thought and give African feminists a greater opportunity to impact practice, programming, and policy. For this reason, there is a great need for indigenous scholars to do much more.

To bring this discussion full circle further, it is appropriate to acknowledge that women from developing nations are unique individuals with their histories, practices, accomplishments, and lived experiences.



Postmodernism and Development Theory: Criticisms and Debates

Postmodern feminism has been critiqued for challenging classic feminist theories for their racial and socioeconomic biases, as well as for their exclusive attention to the circumstances of white middle-class women at the expense of women from other backgrounds (A'yunin, 2019). The intersectionality of social categories like race, sexuality, and class with gender is emphasised by postmodern feminism, and generally, women encounter intersecting kinds of oppression based on their sexuality, ability, class, and race. In addition to highlighting the necessity of addressing diversity and various oppressive systems, this viewpoint acknowledges the power relationships and historical settings that have shaped women's lived experiences. Along with acknowledging the dynamic nature of modern society, postmodern feminism also emphasises the flexibility and variety of social identities.

Once more, some feminists contend that the focus placed by postmodernist feminism on difference and fragmentation may cause women to become less cohesive and neglect to address the structural problems that underlie gender inequity. Furthermore, the challenge of relativism to the goals of social justice and gender equality may be discovered in the master narrative criticism and rejection of universal truths of postmodernist feminism.

Postmodernist feminism highlights the diversity of women's experiences and relationships in an effort to go beyond a one-size-fits-all approach. Additionally, it criticises the prevailing narratives and power structures that uphold marginalisation and inequality while promoting alternative viewpoints and narratives in development theory and practice (Walby, 1990).

Postmodernist feminism has enabled a more thorough and nuanced understanding of women and development. It has, meanwhile, also drawn criticism for denying universal truths and perhaps undermining the unity of women. It is crucial to recognise, nonetheless, that postmodernist feminism does not negate the need for group action and addressing systemic issues but subverts the established myths and hierarchies of power that uphold gender inequity, making room for the voices of disadvantaged and alternative viewpoints. A postmodernist perspective on women and development places a strong emphasis on acknowledging intersectionality, diversity, and a range of viewpoints.



Postmodernism's Impact on Development Practice

Postmodernism's influence on development practice is seen in the shift from top-down, universalistic procedures to context-specific, participatory methods that prioritise the voices of excluded women and local knowledge. Development professionals are increasingly realizing how critical it is to comprehend the distinct needs, experiences, and goals of various women's groups within particular cultural contexts. Adopting feminist economic practices, gender mainstreaming, and participatory development are examples of this movement. Rather than imposing solutions from the outside, development practitioners are now expected to collaborate with local communities, involving them in the conception and execution of development projects.

This requires a reevaluation of power relations with a focus on providing marginalized populations agency and a voice. Postmodern feminism contests the idea that only state institutions or external forces can determine development and promotes a critical analysis of power relations. Rather, it acknowledges the significance of the unique, locally relevant survival techniques that women in the Third World use. These tactics could entail political activism and resistance, which are frequently disregarded by conventional development methodologies. Women and development concerns can be better analysed and practiced by adding the postmodern feminist perspective (Parpart, 1993).

While a blindly applied postmodernism could give rise to the idea that gender is essentially unstable and infinitely varied, which would prevent political action and cause paralysis, postmodern feminism challenges the blindly accepted modernity that frequently serves as the foundation for development projects (Willey et al., 2014).

Women, Postmodernism, and Upcoming Development Trends

Regarding upcoming development tendencies, postmodernist feminism provides an insightful viewpoint. An intersectional perspective of gender and development is promoted, encouraging a departure from universalizing approaches that ignore the diversity of women's experiences (Rahmayna, 2022). It also recognises that women's lived experiences are complicated and varied and that it is impossible to homogenise their demands and experiences.

The power structures and prevailing narratives that uphold marginalisation and inequality are also contested by postmodernist feminism. Different narratives and viewpoints are given room in



development theory and practice by postmodernist feminism, which challenges essentialist conceptions of gender and existing frameworks.

Conclusion and Recommendations

There are several advantages to the relevance of postmodernism, which is a collection of varied concepts and methods that need to be taken into account. Postmodernism recognises that social structures, power relationships, and individual interpretations shape knowledge and "truth". It also highlights how crucial it is to challenge and dissect prevailing narratives. Postmodernism promotes scepticism towards prevailing ideologies and knowledge systems as well as critical thinking.

By encouraging a questioning mindset, postmodernism also aids people in navigating the intricate and dynamic information world. Furthermore, postmodernism encourages cultural variety and tolerance, acknowledging that all communities and civilizations have distinctive viewpoints and methods of comprehending the world. Without necessarily taking on all of the postmodern concepts' baggage, growth globally will benefit from embracing the fundamental principles of postmodernism. It is necessary to go past postmodernism's obsession with modernity's justifications and preserve its positive aspects.

This paper, therefore, recommends that governments enact laws that compel the development partners and the different international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) operating within developing countries to co-create intervention plans or initiatives with home-grown non-governmental organisations, faith-based organisations, and community-based organisations while keeping in mind the marginalised and inclusive cultures.

Moreover, it is important to promote and encourage indigenous academics and researchers in developing nations, particularly male scholars and researchers in all academic fields, to make significant contributions to knowledge building.



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