

Entropic Symbolism of Confusing the Confused: A Study of Thomas Pynchon's *The Cry of Lot 49* in the Context of Postmodern Aesthetics

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Postmodernism is a very much unclear and very much contested artistic and cultural concept of the 1960s which claims that there is no real truth/knowledge but it is always made or invented and even not discovered. Literary critics like Leslie Fiedler, Ihab Hassan, and Irving Howe used the term 'postmodern' to characterize the experimental fiction of authors like Samuel Beckett, Jorge Louis Borges, John Barth, Donald Barthelme, and Thomas Pynchon who came to prominence after the Second World War. Postmodernism increasingly spread from the arts to philosophy and the social sciences in the late 1970s and 1980s the field of literary theory. By the late 1980s and 1990s the concept 'postmodernism' had pervaded the general consciousness of our entire culture i.e. the world of advertising, mass media, and popular culture. Postmodernism involves the undermining of the distinction between reality and its mere image or simulation through the growing sense that reality itself is but a construction made by images and representations. Since 'the real is no longer what it used to be', our desire for reality issues in the increasing production of what Jean Baudrillard calls 'the hyper-real', 'models of a real without origin or reality', together with the production of extravagant fictional images that make the hyper-real seem authentic.

In the novel *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966) Thomas Pynchon presents a postmodern society of a huge replication of confusing, yet entropic symbols and ciphers, which results in endless interpretations and meanings. Therefore, the authentic interpretative communities are both indefinite and chaotic. The sole protagonist of the novel, Oedipa Maas,

is loaded with a flood of the information, yielding too much confusion, chaos and uncertainty. Throughout the novel Oedipa is tapped by the misleading entropic information she collected through chaotic forms of communication resulting in an inability to find a balance between order and anarchy where truth is hyper really lost. She, as a quester, wants to know the reality of the mysterious yet realistic riddles but fails; and consequently gets hopeless and mentally upset in the hyper real confusing world of uncorrelated information. Thus, *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966) hyper-realistically fictionalizes the states of confusion, predicaments and disorientation as witnesses of the current postmodern era. Moreover, Pynchon's concept of hyper-reality is shadowed in the novel through the proliferation of signs and symbols which result in misleading and confusing communities of interpretations, meanings and information. The present research paper aims to discuss the fact that Pynchon's postmodern world is the world of confusing and simulated information and signs that dissolve the meaning and creates a fuzzy state that leads to entropy which signifies both order and disorder.

The postmodern aesthetic is defined by a playful, ironic, and eclectic mix of styles, often borrowing from popular culture and past art movements to challenge traditional ideas of originality and authenticity. Key features include the use of commercialism, kitsch, and a deconstruction of "high art" through techniques like mass-produced repetition and collage, leading to a subjective and context-dependent meaning in art. A popular postmodernist phrase was "anything goes," which referred both to this growing convergence culture as well as to the collapse of the distinction between "good" and "bad" taste and the difficulty of assigning value or judging works of art based on traditional criteria as in the case with Jeff Koons, *a popular artist of the world today*. Postmodernism is not a cynical rejection of aesthetics, but its celebration. However, it does contest the primacy of aesthetics' quest for essentialist definitions, compartmentalizing principles, and foundationalist theories of art. In short, postmodern aesthetics represents a departure from modernism, characterized by a rejection of universal truths and an embrace of subjectivity, cultural context, and playfulness in art.

The word 'entropy,' was first used by Rudolf Clausius, taken from Greek word *tropee* meaning 'transformation.' He used the word in relation to the transformation of energy in his study of thermodynamics. Thermodynamics is the science that deals with the relations between heat and work and those properties of systems that bear relation to heat and work. A system in thermodynamics is defined as a definite quantity of matter of fixed mass and identity which is bounded by a closed surface. A closed system is a system that is completely isolated and is not connected in any way with any other system. Entropy refers to this irreversible tendency of a system toward increasing disorder and inertness. Precisely, it means the measure of disorder in a closed system. The closed system can be a heat engine, a human being, a culture, galaxy or anything. In Leonard Rastrigin's opinion, ". . .all closed systems gradually become disorganized, decay, and die. In engineering practice this process is often called depreciation; in biology-aging; in chemistry-decomposition; in sociology-decay; in history-decline." (Rastrigin 43).

Entropy, above all, is about the fate of energy; its running down and its final decline in the Universe. And the fact that while energy cannot be created but entropy can be created and that the entropy of the Universe always tends to a maximum situates the contemporary writers in a gloomy atmosphere. Tony Tanner opines that 'entropy' has lot of implications in contemporary literature. Especially, it seems to have pervaded into the whole of contemporary American sensibility. In the broad apocalyptic sense, Tanner states that, entropy could be appropriately applied to those works. . . which foretell the doom of a present civilization or society" (Tanner 142). He lists John Barth and Thomas Pynchon, along with Norman Mailer, Saul Bellow, John Updike, Walker Percy, Stanley Elkin, Donald Barthelme, as writers who have actually used the word.

Thomas Pynchon is considered as one of the prominent figures of postmodernism in literature and many critics call him as the quintessential postmodern author. The novel *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966) employs unreliable narration and questions the nature of truth and reality, reflecting a postmodern skepticism of "grand narratives". Other key features

include a blending of genres like detective fiction with avant-garde elements and a focus on communication and conspiracy as central themes. Thus, Oedipa's quest in *The Crying of Lot 49* from the beginning to the end is another interesting textual quest. The main character in the text is Oedipa Maas and she is a standard house-wife who lives with her husband, Mucho Maas in Kinneret. The novel begins with Oedipa coming to know from a letter that she had been named executrix of the estate of Pierce Inverarity, her ex-lover. The letter from Metzger informs her about the death of Pierce and the eventual discovery of his will. Metzger was to act as co-executor and special counsel in the event of any involved litigation. Oedipa had been named also to execute the will in a codicil dated a year ago. This text in the form of a will and the letter initiates her quest, but in the process, she starts textualising all her experience. She forms the habit of noting down anything strange she comes across in her memo book. The first item she makes note of is the address and the ambiguous WASTE symbol that she happens to find on the wall of a toilet in one of Inverarity's firms. Though later it has been removed miraculously from the wall, it stays there in Oedipa's memo book which continues to haunt her. Soon she understands that the symbol she saw on the wall is related to an underground postal system named "Tristero."

Subsequently, she identifies the connection between the Tristero and the plot of *The Courier's Tragedy* by Richard Wharfinger. After finding a chance to see the enactment of the play she approaches the director for the script. But she learns that the director is not using the original but only its worn out copies. Those copies were made from a paperback anthology of Jacobean Revenge Plays, the publisher unknown since the director found it at a Used Books Shop by the freeway. The director recalls that there was another copy yet he is bewildered that so many like Oedipa were interested in the text than the performance. Somehow Oedipa manages to trace the text of *The Courier's Tragedy*. Nevertheless, it happens to be just the beginning of her quest and the more she comes to know about the word Tristero the more its meaning eludes from her because of its net work of textual connections.

Yet Oedipa decides to check it up on her own and she gets the book from the publishers in Berkeley. After getting the book, Oedipa is in a shock to realise that the line about Tristero is just missing. Puzzled she finds that this edition also has a footnote. Instead of clearing her doubts the note only enhances her suspicions about the possibility of other editions of the same text. Undaunted she intends to meet the Professor at California who has given the note. She meets Emory Bortz, the professor, who is astonished to find that she has brought a pirated and bowdlerised edition of his. The eventual discussions and textual investigations lead her to further entanglement in the linguistic maze. In the end she starts doubting the authenticity of all these texts including the codicil that named her the executrix as well as the meaning of her own self which is now in relation with all these texts. Oedipa, fondly called by her husband and others as 'Oed,' may as well stand for the Oxford English Dictionary. This polymorphous texture of the text of her quest reveals to Oedipa the ultimate amorphous texture of the self within. Pynchon finds this the appropriate point in which he gives an open-ended ending to his own text.

In this context of the confusion of fictitious history and fact/reality Karl Marx's famous observation that important events in history tend to occur twice: the first time as tragedy, and the second time as farce! To stretch this observation further, and relate it to the fictional history, the death of the Victorian type novels occurs in Modernism as tragedy and in Postmodernism as farce. Put in this way, if the Modernist aims at a version of reality, the Postmodernist's objective is to create a subversion of it. Re-reading history as *his-story*, the Postmodernists are wanton spectators than participators in the chronicles of their times. In addition, as onlookers they see the events with flippant interest as if they occur in a game. Hence, if at all Barth and Pynchon deal with history their aim is mostly to play with it than to handle it in all solemnity.

Pynchon's inclusion of so much actual history in *The Crying of Lot 49* further confuses the distinction between fiction and fact. When so much of the novel concerns well-known places and real events, the reader's problem in sorting out the real from the imagined becomes similar to

Oedipa's uncertain experience of the Tristero. Pynchon's use of such historical facts is one of the main devices for making the reader think about possible connections between private feelings and the world outside the self. The repeated references to Nazi Germany, and the fascist abuse of power, particularly concerning the Jews, is one example of how the novel uses facts from actual history to suggest connections between Oedipa's world and the reader's own, forming a disturbing historical background to her experiences of modern California.

This sort of combination of historical fact with fiction occurs extensively throughout *The Crying of Lot 49*, so that as Oedipa gradually discovers the possible existence of the Tristero, she and the reader also rediscover a lost sense of America's own past history. By the time the novel ends, Oedipa has considered again how different California now is from the time when it was a land of wonderful promise he has realised how her own experiences as a student during the 1950s seem to belong to a different world from the 1960s. When she examines the history of the Tristero, she learns of the similarities between the Thurn and Taxis postal monopoly, which actually existed in Europe, and the American government's own postal monopoly. When the reader, in turn, examines Pynchon's novel, he learns of the connections between Arrabal's anarchism, beginning in Mexico but now surviving in exile in California, and the visit of Mikail Bakunin, one of the most famous anarchist thinkers, and himself an exile from Russia, to California in 1861. At the same time as Oedipa is discovering fragments of evidence about the Tristero, the reader is encountering little pieces of history which themselves seem to connect together and suggest a wider pattern of significance. So Oedipa's unsettling discovery of the Tristero is mirrored in the reader's own discovery of a network of historical clues and suggestions. The reader is forced to ask questions about this information similar to those which Oedipa asks about the Tristero.

In this way the postmodern writers, who are the producers of de-teleological texts, de-centre the concepts of conventional fictional types; and therefore the postmodern novels are the parodies of the de-teleological texts. The de-teleological characters too search for keys,

but in a milieu where they are confounded with multiple keys and they spend the rest of their lives testing the validity of those keys. In this case Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* is an exemplary novel of this kind; and the kind of 'key-novel' he is parodying is the detective fiction. In some detective novels, the reader knows from the start the truth about the 'mystery,' and watches the progress of someone who tries to discover it. More often, both the reader and the detective are puzzled by the event, and the novel presents the detective's discoveries and gradual working out of the truth. In this sense then, *The Crying of Lot 49* is rather like a detective story, for the reader is as unclear as Oedipa, notes the strange things which happen to her, follows her attempts to explain them, and shares in her possible discovery of the mysterious Tristero system. The end of the novel is quite unlike a detective story, for rather than presenting a solution to the mysteries, it leaves both Oedipa and the reader in doubt about the truth, or even the possibility that any explanation can ever be discovered for all that has happened to her.

Detective stories always assume that there is a reasonable explanation to be discovered for any event or circumstance, if only the detective looks hard and carefully enough. But *The Crying of Lot 49* examines instead this assumption itself, and raises questions about such ways of making sense of experience and reducing it to orders and patterns. If the reader learned at the end of the novel whether or not the Tristero really existed, then Oedipa's adventures could be more simply explained and interpreted. As it is, our uncertainty makes us share exactly with Oedipa both her confusion and the questions it creates about the nature and truthfulness of the interpretations she makes. Nonetheless, Pynchon also seems to have recognised that information may be defined as disorder rather than as order. In information theory, the more uncertain a message, the more information it can convey. Thus entropy, being a measure of increasing information, becomes a positive tendency. In this light, as Thomas Schaub points out, Oedipa's search offers the possibility of hope-although the more she, and the reader, learn about the Tristero, the more we are overwhelmed by the amount of information and its

uncertainty. Indeed, in each of his novels Pynchon draws us into a search for order, where the information and uncertainty become overwhelming, and where the search itself, while necessary and even ennobling, tends toward disorder.

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.

The Crying of Lot 49 ends with the probability of offering further clues to baffle their protagonists in their paranoiac pursuits. Thus, instead of unknotting the mysterious plots, the author entangles them further and leaves the questors where they commenced long before. Although the postmodernists flaunt with the endings in their novels, it is held in leash and contained by the printed medium. Notwithstanding the different unending postmodern endings, the time the reader sees the last printed word in the text, he understands that as the last word written by the author and envisages the end. But this readily presumption and the limitation imposed by the print medium is getting challenged by the new kind of fiction that has been emerging and flourishing rapidly using the electronic medium popularly termed 'the Hypertext.' In a hypertext both the writing as well as the reading occurs using the hyperlinks networked by a computer.

Conclusion

To sum up, the process involved in the fabrication of the self and the text bears similarities in their intricate complexity as well as their functional fluidity. The postmodern de-teleological texts, as demonstrated

by Barth and Pynchon, do not operate with illusive notions about purpose or design with pre-determined ends. With its mosaic texture, it considers the transpiring of any experience basically a falsification. Conversely, fiction is not a lie but a true representation of the distortion one makes of life. Here, faithfulness to the self connotes strict observance to the fluid, de-teleological text-self-written or mirrored. Hence, the protean wo/men's quests start and end with texts and their identities hang in relation between the blurred boundaries of texts and their endless references.

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