

Elements of Post-Modernism and Neo-Marxism in Anthony Doerr's *All The Lights We Cannot See*

A.Sai Fhalgun¹, Dr. Sanjay Prasad Pandey²

Abstract

All the Lights We Cannot See is a novel written by American short-story writer Anthony Doerr which discusses the life of two characters Marie-Laure and Werner Pfennig and their crossing each other in a war-based scenario. Doerr discusses the idea of morality and lack of gratitude among people through his work and tries to show that human must be grateful for what he has rather than seeking for what he doesn't. Through this paper the researcher will get to know what is Post-Modernism and Neo Marxism and their role in the novel as elements and their working which will help understand their importance in the novel

Key words: Post-Modernism, Neo-Marxism, New Historicism, Existential Crisis, Alienation

I. Introduction

Anthony Doerr is an American novelist, short story writer who was born in the year 1973 in Ohio. An author of the post-modern century, Doerr gained widespread recognition for his 2014 work *All the Lights We Cannot See* which brought him the most widely recognized Pulitzer Prize for Fiction. He also wrote a collection of short stories called *The Shell Collector*. He is currently in Ohio with his family. *All the Lights We Cannot See* is his most recognized work which he wrote based on a train conversation which made him realize that the lack of gratitude in the human world

Post-Modernism began as a movement from the 20th Century. Post-Modernism began as a response to Modern age concepts and writings. This was the actual age of development of some of the famous theories introduced by some famous theorists. As its name suggests this era speaks about the time after Modernism or the time after Second World War. Many Theorists during this time took the concepts of their predecessors and produced them forward with new concepts. T.S Eliot writes in his essay the idea of how to derive the knowledge from your ancestors and produce it forward.

Neo-Marxism was a school of thought which was generated from Marxism which had contributions from great writers like Terry Eagleton, Max Webber, Karl Marx and many other socialists. The social structure which stands as the back-bone of the entire country goes through quick development which helps it to stand on

¹Department of English, Lovely Professional University, Punjab

²Assistant Professor, Department of English, Lovely Professional University, Punjab

its own bringing down its work to analysis and synthesis. With the coming age it is necessary for one to understand and mold himself as per his society helping the country move forward in its structural journey strengthening itself properly with every aspect

II. The Elements of Post-Modernism

Post-Modernism is one of the central concepts of English Literature and was a development of Modern theories and concepts. This is the time of endless progress in English Literature which is still going on without any obstacle. The theorists of this age found many loopholes in the theories of their ancestors and resolved to solve it. This led to a new kind of theories which were similar to their ancestors yet were very different. These Theories came to be known as Post-Modern theories and became an intrinsic part in Post-Modern Literature creating a new kind of critical approach towards literature.

It is a refined and more structural version of Modern thought process as it helped in understanding in a clearer manner. Theorists like Jean Baudrillard talked intensively about the idea of copy which was the actual concept given by Aristotle in his poetics and helps in understanding the idea of Occident and Orient as delivered by Edward Said and Homi J Bhabha who proposed the furnace theory and helps in standing forward with life many have created a new understanding of the theories. In the text we see many themes like existentialism, alienation and New Historicism

Post-Modernism was initiated as a movement with reference to Modern thoughts and was quite deep in understanding the same as it helps in holding onto the objectives of personal thoughts which are still alive. As Britain progressed in its development America was born which led to a new literature. Britain can be called the creator of new literature which helps to understand it more properly without any obstacle towards it which helps one to have a clear thought regarding any perspective in human life and help in making it more progressive. One always questions himself whether a progress is linear or grouped? The answer to this is quite simple if one starts to use his own perspective.

The Concept of New Historicism discusses the historical and cultural significance of a particular novel. To understand this more clearly we have to take a similar evidence for e.g.- *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* is a book written by Maya Angelou gives a vivid description of how a young girl faces racism in the country of America where the blacks were sold as slaves during her time. Angelou talks about and represents her surroundings more vividly portraying the original situation through the lines of her text. She shows how a black girl who left her family and stayed with her aunt viewed the society around her.

To understand this more properly, Let's discuss the research of Hayden White who discussed the historical context when talking about New Historicism. White took two instances from the First War of Independence in 1857 and derived two instances of the Sepoy Mutiny. Firstly, he mentioned about the cartridges covered in cow and pig fat and then he mentioned the term of mutiny. Through these he derived the entire scenario of 1857 First War of Independence and using it as an example he talked about how texts are related intellectually to historical contexts forming evidences for the secrets hidden within its folds.

White projects the idea of History and textuality as being working in a cause and effect relation where the one event results in the other. As said earlier, White refers to the two major examples which are based on a same event. His experiment required that his idea of history with reference to its text should be used as an influential move for example, as discussed earlier, the cartridges filled with the fat of cow or pig were an attack on the sentiment of the Indians who were already traumatized by the suppression under the colonizers.

This event marked a final blow resulting in the 1857 First War of Independence which was a sign of mutiny against the suppression of the colonizers who were ruling them. Similarly, In Germany, Hitler's rise to power marked a significant cause which became an example of the dictatorship in the world. Hitler's hatred for Jews marked a beginning of their persecution around the world and his eagerness to be the powerful made him attack countries which he felt could be a sanctuary for the Jews and a threat to his rise of power. This made him attack France as it was one of the significant areas of power which made both countries to declare the beginning of World War II.

In the novel, Doerr creates a background of World War II and reflects the moments of France and its stand throughout this phase. Doerr reflects upon the age and how people struggled to be free from the Nazi hold. France at that point of time suffered a lot which is reflected by thought process of people in the text. We see Madame Manec gathering her friends and planning to cause trouble to the Nazi soldiers as a sign of their revolt against their oppressors though the smallest means possible which we get to know and understand in this novel.

The example of Marie-Laure and Werner Pfennig can help us understand the concept of Existential Crisis and Alienation in great detail, Marie's character is continuously effected by the war situations where she is continuously target of alienation and fear. Though her uncle and aunt love her a lot she stays in her own world continuously missing her father. She reflexively blurts that her father is not a thief which is the anger that has been suppressed within her after missing her father for a long time and longing for him. Madame and her husband handled her well but couldn't handle her emotions properly but they understood her pain.

Same is the case with Werner Pfennig, Pfennig's life is a major example of Existential crisis as we see continuous progression in it. Werner in the beginning of the novel is an orphan with an urge for knowledge and an exceptional skill in mechanics. His life takes a drastic turn with a simple error of judgement i.e. repairing a radio due to his interest in mechanics which turns his entire world upside down. The once orphan living with his sister Jutta abandons everything and joins a Nazi high school where he witnesses constant brutality and abusive nature.

This brutality and abusive nature is a continuous source of hindrance in his inexperienced world. He couldn't bear so much pain but he handled his emotions slowly. He started to reflect the exact image of his oppressors which is a major example of simulacra. If we see in the novel, we can see this idea of simulation or the idea of copying your master so much that you lose your identity which belongs to you. Identity was one of the main points of focus in the world. Presently identity is one of the most important things that rules the world and has become an intrinsic part of humans.

This is one of the most important aspect when coming through to understanding a particular text with every possible understanding towards it. Post-Modern theories helped to redefine the Modern ideology towards the society as it was said the literature is the mirror of society. As age took a leap the ideas of society started growing old hence it was required the society should be viewed from a new and latest perspective of things as they are establishing them with a firm basis and giving them opportunity to walk forward and create a new path with new and latest ideas towards a future of exist able notion.

There is also Frederic and Werner. Frederic is a thin young man who loves reading about birds and is innocent yet confident upon himself. On the contrast is Werner who in his days of arrival have seen and understood the brutal way of Nazi. Frederick is termed as the weakest and a constant victim of brutality like when the sergeant asks him to run. Doerr describes the scene through the following line *“Fredrick runs hard, but the fastest boys are greyhounds, harvested from all over the nation for their speed and eagerness to obey,”*

A hound represents wilderness, savagery, brutality, strength. This is a sign that is used to represent the characteristics of Nazis because they were generally called to be brutal savages with no sign of humanity inside them. For them, whatever their further ordered was the law and they followed it with their heart and soul. There are other symbols also in this novel like snails which represent laziness, slow pace and time. Through this idea, Doerr represents the past of France which was slow and peaceful and which was disturbed by the chaos of war.

Doerr’s novel reflected upon the absurdity of life through his idea of lack of gratitude. This concept is something which formed the central idea of many of the war novels written during that time. Doerr through a small memory of a conversation reflects upon the larger picture of a major element the lack of gratitude which results in the chaos of the world. Though the story on an outer surface is a novel of social crisis and alienation within it’s a novel of moral corruption and power displacement caused due to the idea of lack of gratitude seen in people

III. The Elements of Neo-Marxism in the Novel

Marxism was one of the main concepts of the 19th Century works of Karl Marx and Fredrick Engels. Many people when studying about Marx have a tendency of linking him with communist ideology but Marx was never a communist. He was always a social thinker thinking about and working for the betterment of the society and propagating the idea of a progressive capitalist society. Marx believed in social equality among the middle class and working class people. Marx believed that in the social hierarchy. According to him the rich got richer while the poor tended to grow poorer.

After the establishment of Marxist theory many eminent figures like Max Weber, Terry Eagleton brought forth new changes which focused on either capitalism or social system. Eagleton in his theories brought forward the idea of superstructures in his journals and Weber talked about social inequality and power. Doerr’s novel discusses this concept and helps to understand it more properly with reference to inequality and power hunger. To understand this more properly and in great detail we have to understand the situation that has been portrayed in the novel.

Neo-Marxism helps in watching the Marxism with a new perspective and helps in understanding it clearly without much difficulty using the only human perspective available for the humans which is necessary without any particular bias towards a community and emphasizing on diversity in the community which is highly important for one to understand this concept of the social hierarchy which is one of the important aspects of the society whether the modern or the post-modern which will help it move forward with every step towards a progress of development.

Before the World War II, In Germany Hitler rose to power and slowly occupied the entire country proclaiming a sovereign rule over Germany. During this time, the Jews were being discriminated around Europe due to Anti-Semitism. Those who were Jews were not treated properly in the European Society. In *The Diary of a Young Girl* by Anne Frank the young girl discusses the horrors of war and how that had to spend their time in the attic away from the horrors of the war. After Miss Frank died young as a prisoner to the Nazis, her father collected her diaries and published it as a book to portray Jew persecution in Germany to the world.

Doerr brings out this same situation in his novel where we see Marie-Laure running away with her father to protect the famous diamond called "Sea of Flames". Her father leaves her at Madame Manec's house and is himself arrested by the army who take him as a labor to make roads for them. As we read the scene of escape of Marie-Laure we see how brutal and horrific a war is and the persecution by Hitler upon innocent people whom he considered were inferior to him. Those prisoners who were arrested by him were either tortured or were used as a part of labor for roads.

In one of the scenes we see how the coach abuses his students and beats them with a slender rubber tube asking them if they are strong. Those who admitted to not being strong were made to run in the ground with others chasing them then if caught they were whipped till their back broke. This is a major example of social inequality and misuse of power where students are being beaten into lying to protect themselves which is the height of irony in this text. Another major depiction is power, in this novel we see how power has been given importance

The idea of gaining power through shortcut methods rather than proper means is one of the most prominent themes in many novels which discuss the idea of power hierarchy. The major example is Major von Rumpel looking for the Sea of Flames wanting it for its mystical properties to use in favor of German army. Rumpel wants the jewel at any cost and is ready to cross any lengths to reach it if possible. The Nazi army respected power above all and preferred cruel means to get to it to become superior. Using Rumpel's quest for the gem Doerr talks about the idea of Nazi's want for extreme power over everyone else as they wanted the supreme rule of the world

The novel's settings are a reflection of the political strategies in the history of that time. Doerr through his ideas and his themes tries to weave a story based on the historical perspective which helps us to study the text with the perspective of that time making us to have a clear understanding and visual of how the progressing age left its impact on people's moral structure and the way political unrest was showing impact on the people making them suffer from alienation and isolation trying to fight the inevitable as them seem fit. Doerr through his novel tries to represent the idea of lack of gratitude as root to all evil.

IV. Conclusion

Throughout this research paper we saw many kind of theories. We saw how Post-Modernism and Neo-Marxism work. We saw how a progressive novel helps us to understand the concept of Post-Modernism and Neo-Marxism. Every example has a particular influence over the work which holds an effect over this research paper which helps it in understanding properly throughout its existence which will help in the further development and hold the progress to the future claiming the attentive nature of the reader.

Doerr's skill with Post-Modern elements and Neo-Marxist elements gives the text a new perspective and understanding through its lines. The Post-Modern elements give the already current text a more established identity making it to be more understandable as a reason to which it is preferred by more audience which can help them to be more creatively understanding towards its perspective as writing and helping it to move forward without any effort. Doerr used his entire ounce of creativity to provide more base to his novel which helps it to be more understandable as a text.

Doerr tries to instigate the human conscious into understanding that there is a marginal difference between gratitude and greed. Gratitude is a form of respect towards a certain necessity which proves its worth at a certain point in life. Greed on the other hand is a want for a particularly unnecessary wish at an unfamiliar movement. Doerr segregates both and shows how both are completely different from each other and do not have any possible effect on each other rather they effect the human in a different manner. One one hand Marie-Laure represents the idea of gratitude in her innocence while Hitler represents greed in his hatred.

With reference to its background this text tries to bring to life the idea of lack of morality which still persists in the world as a root cause causing its foundations to be weak and also the destruction of civilization. Many wars were generally fought for the want of land, livestock, property, etc. The more privileged in their greed to earn a position where they cannot be touched or affected by the change of social scenario always tread on the less privileged. Those who have enough display the idea of gratitude for their life which helps them to have peace of mind.

Both Post-Modernism and Neo-Marxism help us to see a proper understanding of the society based on its Modern and Marxist elements. A society goes through various changes both in thought and in action but sometimes these actions are taken with the idea of impulse rather than proper analysis of the situation and without understanding of the difference between need and greed which gives the individual the idea of what is right for him and what is wrong which helps us to be more careful with the resources and be grateful for what comes into the space in our fist.

Finally, we come to the conclusion which has been formed through the above made perspective is that there are post-modern elements and Neo-Marxist elements in the text "*Allthe Lights We Cannot See*". Doerr can be considered as one of the pioneers who brought the past to make the present valuable and more precise without any problem towards the text which makes it more understandable helping one to make proper conclusions and thematic perceptions in knowledge and learning from them properly without any mistakes that the might commit making it happen with perceptions.

Works Cited

1. Doerr, Anthony. *All the Lights We Cannot See*. Scribner, 2014, New York, United States
2. Sanders, Andrew. *The Short Oxford History of English Literature* Third Edn. Oxford University Press, 2004, New Delhi, India
3. Butler, Christopher. *Postmodernism; A Very Short Introduction* Oxford University Press, 2002, New York, United States
4. Fowler, Henry Watson. *Oxford Dictionary for English* Oxford University Press, 1884, London, United Kingdoms
5. Mitchell, Margaret. *Gone With The Wind* Fingerprint Publications, 2016, New Delhi, India
6. Nayar, Pramod K. *Contemporary Literary and Cultural Theory; From Structuralism to Ecocriticism* Pearson, 2019, Uttar Pradesh, India
7. Schulman, Martha. *How Story Comes Together: Anthony Doerr*. Publishers Weekly, 2014, <https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/authors/profiles/article/61823-how-the-story-comes-together-anthony-doerr.html>
8. Dean, Mitchell. *Anthony Doerr: I grew up Where calling yourself a writer would be pretentious*. The Guardian, 2015, <http://theguardian.com/books/2015/apr/22/anthony-doerr-pulitzer-interview.html>