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A Comparative Study of Modernism and Postmodernism: Philosophical Foundations and Social Significance

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Abstract

Postmodernism, as its name suggests, emerged as a reaction against Modernism. Modernism first appeared in embryonic form in the 1860s, coalesced into a recognisable movement around 1910, and is generally held to have run its course by 1939. It championed reason, empirical inquiry, scientific progress, logical clarity, technological advancement, and sweeping cultural change, and it dominated literary and philosophical discourse across the first half of the twentieth century. Postmodernism, which began to take shape in the decades following the Second World War, also invoked reason and logic, but denied that any single, universal, absolute truth could be established; it held instead that human nature and human knowledge are shaped by the particular circumstances, cultures, and power relations within which individuals find themselves. Where Modernism, for all its progressive rhetoric, often reproduced a patriarchal and Eurocentric social order, Postmodernism explicitly sought a more genuine and equitable representation of gender, class, and cultural difference. Modernist writers of the early twentieth century foregrounded reason, reality, and the rational human subject as the proper objects of literary and philosophical attention; Postmodernist thinkers, convinced that no discourse is final or complete, turned instead to the deconstruction of inherited narratives and to an expanded sense of individual liberty against rigid, totalising doctrines. This article examines the differences between Modernism and Postmodernism from a social perspective, asking which movement contributed more meaningfully to human welfare, and it evaluates the positive contributions each movement made to literature, philosophy, and society.

Keywords: Modernism, Postmodernism, Reason, Truth, Social Values, Literary Theory

1. Introduction

Human history, seen through the lens of intellectual movements, is in large part a history of reactions: each generation of thinkers builds upon, and then eventually revolts against, the assumptions of the generation before it. Modernism and Postmodernism together illustrate this pattern with unusual clarity. Modernism arose out of a hard-won confidence in reason and science following centuries of religious conflict and dogmatic authority; Postmodernism arose, in turn, out of a deep suspicion of the very

confidence that Modernism had cultivated. Understanding either movement in isolation is difficult, because each is defined substantially by its relationship to the other. This paper therefore treats Modernism and Postmodernism as a single, continuous conversation about reason, truth, language, gender, and the self, tracing how the terms of that conversation shifted across the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and asking, finally, what each movement contributed to the social good.

2. Historical Background: The Rise of Modernism

Religious and ideological wars have repeatedly devastated human societies and prevented people from realising their full humanistic and social potential. The Thirty Years' War (1618–1648), fought largely along confessional lines across Central Europe, is estimated by many historians to have killed a substantial proportion of the Germanic population, though precise figures remain disputed. Such catastrophes convinced European thinkers of the urgent need to ground social and political life in something more stable than sectarian dogma — namely, in reason, evidence, and a shared conception of human dignity. It was in this climate that Modernism began to take its earliest shape in the closing decades of the nineteenth century before crystallising as a self-conscious movement in the early 1900s.

The movement gathered particular momentum in London, where writers, philosophers, and artists disseminated ideas of progress, reason, logic, and a humanistic universalism grounded in truth, moral clarity, and honest discourse. Because it offered hope amid social upheaval, the period is frequently described, somewhat loosely, as an extension of "the Enlightenment," though strictly the Enlightenment proper belongs to the eighteenth century and Modernism to a later, more anxious phase of the same broad rationalist tradition.

Modernism's emergence coincided with, and was substantially driven by, rapid advances in science and technology and by the political upheaval of the French Revolution. William Wordsworth, reflecting on the early days of that Revolution, famously wrote that it was bliss to be alive in that dawn, and heaven itself to be young — a sentiment that captures the sense of possibility Modernist writers associated with the overthrow of inherited hierarchy. The Industrial Revolution likewise reshaped material life on a scale that made older certainties seem provincial. Before 1789, political voice in much of Europe belonged almost exclusively to monarchs and the propertied classes; the Revolution, whatever its violence and its subsequent betrayals, opened a wedge through which broader claims to reason, rights, and representation could be advanced.

World War I (1914–1918), which claimed millions of lives, complicated Modernism's optimism about science and technology considerably. The same rational, technical ingenuity that had promised progress now produced mechanised slaughter on an unprecedented scale. Writers such as T. S. Eliot, Wilfred Owen, Virginia Woolf, and Siegfried Sassoon gave voice to the resulting disillusionment, anger, and grief, and their work marks the point at which Modernism's faith in reason became self-critical rather than simply celebratory. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922), Woolf's experiments with interior consciousness in novels such as *Mrs Dalloway*, James Joyce's *Ulysses*, Ezra Pound's *Cantos*, and W. B. Yeats's apocalyptic later poetry together register both Modernism's formal ambition and its growing awareness of civilisational fragility.

It is worth pausing on the scale of what preceded Modernism, because the movement cannot be understood except as a response to a specific historical wound. The Thirty Years' War was fought largely over the right of princes and populations to determine their own religious confession, and it drew in most of the

major powers of Europe before exhausting itself in the Peace of Westphalia. The devastation it left behind depopulated towns, ruined agriculture, and a lingering distrust of confessional politics helped to establish, over the following two centuries, the intuition that political and social order required a foundation independent of any single religious authority. That intuition matured slowly, through the scientific revolution of the seventeenth century, the political theorizing of Hobbes and Locke, and the Enlightenment philosophy of the eighteenth century, before finding its distinctly literary and artistic expression in Modernism at the turn of the twentieth. Modernism, in this sense, inherited rather than invented the conviction that reason could substitute for dogma as the basis of social life; its innovation lay in applying that conviction to literary form, to psychology, and to the representation of individual consciousness in ways that earlier rationalist philosophy had not attempted.

3. Philosophical Foundations of Modernism

3.1 The Cartesian Legacy

Modernism's philosophical roots reach back to René Descartes, widely regarded as the father of modern philosophy. Descartes held that inherited knowledge the accumulated wisdom of tradition and custom was inherently suspect, and that certainty could be achieved only by subjecting every belief to systematic doubt until one arrived at something indubitable. His famous method of radical scepticism, culminating in the assertion "I think, therefore I am," sought to place knowledge on a foundation independent of tradition, theology, or received authority. Descartes' contemporaries and successors John Locke, George Berkeley, and David Hume among them extended and complicated this rationalist and empiricist project, though they diverged sharply from one another and from Descartes on important points, particularly the reliability of innate ideas versus sense experience.

Descartes' influence proved pervasive: his emphasis on epistemological scepticism and on the primacy of scientific, rather than theological, categories of knowledge shaped subsequent developments in law, science, the humanities, the arts, politics, religion, and culture for centuries. Yet Descartes' own scepticism, carried to its logical extreme, generated a well-known philosophical difficulty later termed the "Cartesian circle": Descartes attempted to guarantee the reliability of clear and distinct ideas by proving the existence of a benevolent God, while relying on clear and distinct ideas to prove that God exists in the first place. Later philosophers identified this as a form of circular reasoning, and the problem has never been fully resolved to the satisfaction of all commentators.

The philosopher Brendan Sweetman, in *The Failure of Modernism*, argues that the moral, religious, political, and intellectual assumptions of Modernist thought remained too dependent on this fragile Cartesian foundation, and that this dependency ultimately weakened Modernism's claims to epistemological and metaphysical realism. Sweetman's critique anticipates, in important respects, the Postmodernist challenge to Modernist certainty discussed later in this paper: if the foundational reasoning of Modernism is itself circular or unstable, then the movement's confident claims about universal truth and reason inherit that instability.

3.2 Reason as the Foundation of Knowledge

Modernists held that a rational, scientific method could yield an accurate, credible, and coherent foundation for human knowledge, applicable equally to people of every location, ethnicity, and creed. For the Modernists, Reason was not a merely human convention but existed, in some sense, independently and universally: it was the faculty by which human beings distinguished right from wrong, moral from

immoral, and it was therefore capable, in principle, of resolving even bitter and long-standing conflicts. A Modernist, on this view, approaches the world rather like a pacifist who is confident that patient, rational argument can eventually dissolve enmity.

This confidence in reason coincided with a paradigm shift in the sciences that persuaded many Modernists that knowledge itself constitutes the foundation of civilisation, and it fuelled a marked increase in research activity across disciplines. Language, as the principal medium through which reason expresses itself, took on correspondingly heightened importance: Modernists believed that the careful, deliberate choice of words could shape, reshape, or damage human relationships, and that careless language could destabilise the social order. Hazrat Ali (a.s.) is reported to have observed that a man is concealed behind his tongue and revealed only when he speaks, and, on another occasion, that words remain one's servant before they are spoken but that the speaker becomes their servant once they are uttered. Modernist writers, sensitive to this responsibility, treated linguistic precision as a moral obligation rather than a mere stylistic preference.

3.3 Truth, Reason, and the Question of Certainty

For Modernists, truth was the ultimate reality of the world: it existed independently of any single human consciousness, whether or not any particular mind was capable of grasping it. The central epistemological question, then, was how such truth could be known, and Modernists answered, with Descartes, that reason was the primary instrument available for the task. They were not naïve about reason's limitations — human rationality, however rigorous, remains fallible, and error is an ineradicable feature of human inquiry — but they held that humanity had no better alternative than to rely on intellect, wisdom, and disciplined investigation. The convergence of reason and truth, in Modernist thought, constitutes what is generally called enlightenment: an inner illumination achieved through patient rational effort.

Modernists further believed that a society's laws, justice mechanisms, and civilisational refinement all depend on a shared commitment to reason. Equality and equity, in this view, are themselves dictates of reason rather than arbitrary preferences, and scientific and technological progress ultimately rests on reason's disciplined application within particular fields of inquiry. The combination of truth and knowledge — what Modernists termed enlightenment — was, in their view, something to be disseminated as widely as possible, in the service of a society that guarantees humanity, equality, equity, morality, and justice for all its members.

3.4 Gender and the Critique of Patriarchy in Modernist Thought

Modernists generally recognised that women lived under patriarchal subjugation, and many argued that reason offered women their principal avenue of liberation: a balanced, humane application of reason — what several Modernist writers termed a feminist or humanist rationality — could help a woman reclaim her social identity and independence. Existentialist-inflected Modernist thought held that existence precedes any externally imposed circumstance, and that human beings, including women, are entitled to a stable and unwavering sense of their own existence. Allama Iqbal, the celebrated poet-philosopher of the Indian subcontinent, expressed a resonant sentiment when he wrote that the world was not made for the individual, but the individual for the world — a line that captures the Modernist conviction that the human being finds meaning through participation in a larger, rationally ordered whole rather than through private self-assertion alone.

It should be acknowledged, however, that Modernist practice did not always live up to Modernist theory on this point. Even as Modernist writers criticised patriarchy in principle, the movement's canon — and its institutions of literary production, criticism, and publication — remained dominated by men for most of the period under discussion, a tension that later feminist and Postmodernist critics would highlight forcefully.

3.5 Modernism in Literary Practice

The philosophical commitments outlined above found concrete expression in the literary techniques for which Modernism is best remembered: stream-of-consciousness narration, fragmented chronology, unreliable narration, and radical formal experimentation. Virginia Woolf's shifting interior monologues, James Joyce's dense allusive prose in *Ulysses*, and T. S. Eliot's collage of quotation and voice in *The Waste Land* were not merely stylistic novelties; they were attempts to represent, formally, the Modernist conviction that a single rational consciousness could, with sufficient discipline, organise the apparent chaos of modern experience into coherent meaning. Ezra Pound's dictum to "make it new" captured the movement's insistence that inherited literary forms had to be broken and remade if they were to remain adequate to a rapidly changing world, while W. B. Yeats's later poetry, written amid the collapse of empires and the approach of a second world war, registers the same anxious tension between order and disintegration that runs through Modernist philosophy more broadly. Institutions such as the University of Toledo's Canaday Centre played a documentary role in preserving and disseminating Modernist manuscripts and correspondence, helping to consolidate the movement's place in literary history even as its writers themselves debated, often bitterly, what Modernism actually stood for.

4. The Emergence of Postmodernism

Modernism, whatever its internal tensions, was ultimately unable to sustain its own foundational confidence. Two world wars, the collapse of European empires, the horrors of totalitarianism, and rapid technological change combined to erode faith in the idea that reason alone could guarantee moral or social progress. Out of this erosion emerged Postmodernism: a movement, or perhaps more accurately a loose constellation of tendencies, that began to cohere in the decades after 1945 and reached its most visible articulation in the 1960s through the 1980s.

Postmodernists did not reject reason and logic outright, but they denied that reason and science, as practised, were free of ideological interest or culturally neutral. Where Modernists treated reason as a stable, universal faculty capable of adjudicating between competing claims, Postmodernists argued that what passes for reason is always embedded in, and often serves the interests of, particular historical and cultural configurations of power. Jean-François Lyotard, in *The Postmodern Condition* (1979), offered what remains perhaps the most widely cited definition of the movement: postmodernism, he argued, is characterised by an "incredulity toward metanarratives" — that is, a refusal to accept any single, overarching story (whether religious, Marxist, liberal, or scientific) as capable of explaining or justifying the whole of human history and experience.

Postmodernism's diffusion beyond the academy also owed much to changes in media and communication. The proliferation of television, and later of digital and networked media, gave concrete, everyday form to Baudrillard's claims about simulation: audiences increasingly encountered events through mediated images and narratives rather than direct experience, which lent plausibility to the Postmodernist claim that "reality" is always already filtered through representation. In this sense, Postmodernism was not simply

an academic theory imposed on an unchanged social world; it was, in part, a response to genuine transformations in how information, culture, and even personal identity were produced and circulated in the second half of the twentieth century.

5. Philosophical Foundations of Postmodernism

5.1 From Nietzsche to Poststructuralism

Postmodern thought draws on a philosophical lineage that the earlier Modernist tradition had largely set aside. Friedrich Nietzsche's nineteenth-century critique of objective, transcendent truth his contention that what we call truth is a mobile army of metaphors and that morality itself has a genealogy rooted in relations of power anticipated many later Postmodernist concerns. In the twentieth century, French poststructuralist philosophers extended this critique in more systematic form. Michel Foucault examined how knowledge and power are mutually constitutive, arguing that what a society accepts as true or normal is inseparable from the institutional mechanisms prisons, clinics, schools that produce and enforce it. Jacques Derrida developed the practice of deconstruction, a method of close reading that exposes the unstable, self-contradicting oppositions (reason/passion, presence/absence, speech/writing) on which Western philosophical texts have traditionally relied. Jean Baudrillard, somewhat later, argued that contemporary media culture had replaced reality with simulation, such that the distinction between the real and its representation had itself become unstable. These thinkers, taken together, supply the theoretical apparatus that the original account of Postmodernism lacked: without them, claims about the movement's rejection of truth and reason float free of any argued philosophical basis.

5.2 Truth as Culturally and Discursively Constructed

Where Modernists treated truth as an ultimate reality existing independently of human consciousness, Postmodernists held that truth, in practice, is inseparable from the social and cultural circumstances within which claims to truth are made. On this view, what a given society calls "true" reflects that society's particular arrangement of power, interest, and convention rather than any context-free correspondence to an external reality. Human beings, Postmodernists argued, are not passive recipients of pre-given truth but active participants sometimes constrained, sometimes empowered in the discursive processes through which truth-claims are constructed, contested, and revised. Postmodern thought here shows a family resemblance to existentialism, in that both traditions emphasise lived, situated experience over abstract universals, though Postmodernism is generally more sceptical than existentialism about the possibility of an authentic, self-determining subject standing outside all social construction.

5.3 Reason, Power, and Political Critique

Postmodernists were considerably more suspicious than Modernists of reason's political uses. They observed that appeals to reason and civilisation had historically accompanied, and sometimes justified, expansionist and colonial projects the seizure of land, resources, and labour under the banner of bringing order, progress, or enlightenment to supposedly less rational peoples. Twentieth-century military interventions have likewise often been defended in the vocabulary of reasoned necessity or national interest, even when their human costs have been severe; Postmodernist critics regard such episodes as evidence that "reason," far from being a neutral arbiter, can function as an instrument of domination when it is monopolised by those who already hold power. Postmodernists extended this suspicion to gender relations as well, arguing that appeals to a supposedly universal, rational order have historically been used

to justify the subordination of women, and that genuine emancipation requires dismantling the presumption of a single rational standard against which all persons are measured.

5.4 Language, Gender, and the Self

Postmodernists regarded language not as a neutral, universal medium of communication but as something structured by social, academic, and cultural stratification, such that access to authoritative speech is itself unevenly distributed according to power and status. Gender, similarly, was understood not as a fixed biological given but as a social and discursive construction: an individual's identity, on this account, is produced through participation in social life rather than assigned in advance by anatomy. Postmodernists extended this constructivist logic to the very notion of the "self," arguing that there is no essential, pre-social core of personal identity; the self, instead, emerges from the accumulated texture of social and cultural experience, and is therefore always provisional, plural, and open to revision.

5.5 Postmodernism in Literary Practice

Where Modernist writers sought, however anxiously, to impose form on chaos, Postmodernist writers frequently made the impossibility of any final, authoritative form their explicit subject. Techniques such as metafiction (fiction that draws attention to its own status as fiction), pastiche, and the deliberate mixing of "high" and "popular" cultural registers became characteristic of Postmodernist literary practice, reflecting the movement's conviction that no single narrative voice or literary convention could claim privileged access to truth. This is not merely a formal preference; it follows directly from the philosophical positions discussed above. If truth is discursively constructed rather than given, and if grand narratives cannot be trusted to explain the whole of experience, then a literature that constantly reminds its reader of its own constructedness is, in an important sense, being more honest than a literature that presents its narrative as simply transparent to reality.

6. A Comparative Analysis of Modernism and Postmodernism

The following table summarises the principal points of divergence discussed above.

Dimension	Modernism	Postmodernism
View of Reason	Universal, stable faculty capable of yielding certain knowledge	Historically and culturally situated; entangled with power
View of Truth	Objective, singular reality independent of human consciousness	Constructed through discourse; plural and context-dependent
Attitude to Grand Narratives	Builds and relies on unifying narratives (progress, science, humanism)	Expresses "incredulity toward metanarratives" (Lyotard)
Language	A precise instrument for expressing pre-existing thought	A system that shapes, stratifies, and constructs meaning
Gender	Recognises patriarchal oppression; seeks liberation through reason	Treats gender as socially constructed; seeks liberation through deconstruction

The Self	A stable subject capable of rational self-determination	A fluid, socially constructed identity without a fixed essence
Key Figures	Eliot, Woolf, Joyce, Pound, Yeats, Descartes	Nietzsche, Lyotard, Foucault, Derrida, Baudrillard

This comparison should not be read as suggesting that the two movements are simply opposites in every respect. Both, for instance, share a commitment to questioning inherited authority and to taking seriously the social consequences of language and representation; they differ chiefly in how far that questioning extends and in whether it ultimately arrives at a stable resting point.

7. Social Significance: The Contributions of Modernism and Postmodernism

Modernism's principal social contribution lay in its insistence that reasoned, evidence-based inquiry could improve the human condition, and in the moral seriousness with which its major writers treated the catastrophes of their age. By foregrounding individual consciousness, psychological interiority, and formal experimentation, Modernist literature expanded what literature itself was understood to be capable of doing, while its underlying humanism provided a vocabulary equality, justice, dignity, universal rights that later movements, including Postmodernism itself, would draw upon even while contesting its premises.

Postmodernism's principal social contribution lay in its insistence that no single group, tradition, or discourse has a monopoly on truth, and in the space this insistence opened for previously marginalised voices women, colonised peoples, racial and sexual minorities to challenge accounts of history and culture that had excluded or misrepresented them. By treating gender, identity, and even "the self" as constructed rather than natural or fixed, Postmodernist thought provided important intellectual resources for feminist, postcolonial, and queer theory, and it encouraged a more genuinely pluralistic approach to education and public discourse, one that draws on multiple texts, traditions, and perspectives rather than restricting inquiry to a single authoritative canon.

It is also worth noting the institutional dimension of each movement's social influence. Modernism, propagated through little magazines, university curricula, and an emerging class of professional literary critics, shaped what generations of students were taught to regard as serious literature, embedding a particular canon largely European, largely male as the standard against which later writing would be measured. Postmodernism's institutional influence has been felt differently: through the expansion of literary and cultural theory within universities from the 1970s onward, through the growth of interdisciplinary programmes in gender studies, postcolonial studies, and cultural studies, and through a broader shift in publishing and criticism toward valuing formal experimentation, hybridity, and marginal or previously excluded voices. Both forms of institutional influence carry social consequences that extend well beyond the seminar room: they shape which stories a society tells about itself, whose experience is treated as normative, and whose is treated as marginal or exceptional.

Beyond the literary domain, both movements have left a mark on how societies approach education, law, and public deliberation. Modernist humanism underwrites much of the language found in twentieth-century human-rights instruments the appeal to a universal human dignity that no culture or government may legitimately violate. Postmodernist critique, meanwhile, has made it considerably more difficult for

any single institution a government, a religious authority, an academic discipline to present its own account of history or morality as simply self-evident and beyond question; it has trained several generations of students, journalists, and policymakers to ask, as a matter of course, whose interests a given claim to truth or normalcy happens to serve. Both habits of mind insisting on universal standards, and interrogating who benefits from them are, in practice, necessary for a healthy public culture, and the persistence of both Modernist and Postmodernist vocabularies in contemporary debate suggests that neither has simply superseded the other.

8. Critical Evaluation: The Limitations of Both Movements

Neither movement is without serious difficulty. Modernism's confidence in a universal, culturally neutral reason has been criticised, not only by Postmodernists but by many historians and philosophers, for underestimating the extent to which "reason" as historically practised was shaped by the particular interests of a Western, largely male, intellectual elite; the movement's rhetoric of universal humanism coexisted, uncomfortably, with colonial expansion and with the continued exclusion of women and non-European peoples from full participation in its institutions.

Postmodernism, for its part, faces a well-known internal difficulty: if all truth-claims are merely constructions reflecting particular configurations of power, it becomes unclear on what basis Postmodernism's own claims — including the claim that all truth is constructed — can be defended as more than one more contingent, culturally situated perspective among many. Critics have also argued that an unqualified scepticism toward reason and evidence can be politically disabling, since arguments against injustice (for instance, against patriarchal or colonial domination) themselves typically rely on some shared standard of evidence and reasoned argument that a fully relativist Postmodernism struggles to supply. A balanced assessment, then, treats Modernism and Postmodernism not as a choice between one correct and one mistaken position, but as two partial, historically situated responses to the perennial problem of how human beings can know what is true and act well together, each correcting certain excesses of the other while introducing new difficulties of its own.

A further limitation, applicable to both movements, concerns their relationship to ordinary social life outside the academy and the literary avant-garde. Modernist formal experimentation, for all its ambition, often produced texts of considerable difficulty that reached a comparatively narrow, educated readership, raising the question of how far a movement genuinely concerned with universal human dignity can claim social significance if its principal artistic achievements remain largely inaccessible to the very publics it claims to serve. Postmodernist theory has faced a parallel criticism: its characteristic vocabulary — discourse, deconstruction, simulacra, metanarrative — is frequently criticised, including by sympathetic readers, as needlessly obscure, such that a body of thought partly motivated by concern for marginalised and excluded groups risks remaining legible chiefly to a specialised academic audience. Any comparative evaluation of the two movements' social contribution should therefore weigh not only the content of their ideas but also the practical question of accessibility: an insight that cannot be communicated beyond a narrow circle of specialists achieves only a fraction of its potential social value.

9. Modernism, Postmodernism, and the Urdu Literary Tradition

Although Modernism and Postmodernism are most commonly discussed as Western movements, their central questions — the status of reason, the nature of truth, the relationship between the individual and the collective — resonate strongly within the Urdu and broader South Asian literary tradition, and it would

be a distortion to treat the comparison as relevant only to European letters. Allama Iqbal, quoted above, developed in his poetry and philosophical prose a concept of *Khudi* (selfhood) that shares the Modernist confidence in a stable, purposive human subject capable of shaping history through disciplined will and reasoned striving, while remaining rooted in a religious and communal framework quite different from the secular humanism of many European Modernists. Iqbal's insistence that the world exists for the sake of the human being, rather than the reverse, exemplifies a distinctly non-Western Modernist sensibility: it shares the movement's faith in human purposiveness while resisting the individualism that characterises much European Modernist writing.

Postmodern currents entered Urdu and Pakistani literary criticism somewhat later, chiefly from the 1980s onward, as scholars trained in comparative and English literature began applying poststructuralist reading practices to classical and contemporary Urdu texts, and as fiction writers experimented with fragmented narrative, metafictional self-reference, and a scepticism toward received nationalist and religious metanarratives. This later reception illustrates a broader point about the global diffusion of intellectual movements: ideas that originate in a specific European context rarely transfer unchanged; they are, in practice, reinterpreted, contested, and blended with local intellectual traditions, producing hybrid forms that neither purely Modernist nor purely Postmodernist frameworks fully capture on their own.

10. Conclusion

Modernism and Postmodernism, taken together, chart the twentieth century's evolving relationship with reason, truth, and human identity. Modernism emerged from the wreckage of religious war and dogmatic authority with a confident, humanistic faith that science and reason could secure progress, justice, and dignity for all; Postmodernism emerged from the wreckage of Modernism's own unfulfilled promises with a more sceptical, pluralistic insistence that truth, gender, and selfhood are all, in important respects, socially constructed rather than given. Each movement made genuine contributions to human understanding and to the practical pursuit of a more just society, and each carried within it serious limitations that the other movement helps to expose.

For students of literature and social thought, the practical lesson of this comparison is not that one must choose a side, but that the two movements supply complementary intellectual tools. Modernism's insistence on shared, defensible standards of reason and evidence remains indispensable whenever a society must adjudicate between competing claims — in law, in science, in public policy — without collapsing into pure subjectivism. Postmodernism's vigilance against the misuse of those standards by the powerful remains equally indispensable, since history offers no shortage of episodes in which appeals to reason, science, or progress were used to justify exploitation, exclusion, or violence. A comparative view of this kind therefore suggests that the social good is served not by declaring one movement simply victorious over the other, but by holding their respective insights in productive and continuous tension: applying Modernist rigour to the evaluation of evidence while retaining Postmodernist alertness to whose interests a given "rational" consensus happens to serve. Future research might usefully extend this comparison into the twenty-first century, examining how digital communication, algorithmic culture, and the renewed global prominence of populist and nationalist metanarratives have complicated — and in some respects revived — the very debates about reason, truth, and authority that first divided Modernists from Postmodernists a century ago.

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