

GENEALOGY OF MINIMALISM

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Abstract

Minimalism is a movement that was emerged in 1960s, in painting and later in various other art forms. It is an opposed to the traditional approaches rather believes in originality and simplicity which reflects in its Music, Architecture, Visual arts, Literature. Minimalism is known by several names like ABC Art, Primary Structure, Dirty Realism and many more. It follows new method of representation that advocates ordinary, simple, and spacious stuff. It is far away from complex designs of the past. To a certain extent, it is characterized by simple and visual qualities which eliminate nonessential details from designs, structures, paintings, and writings. This paper discusses the meaning, use, and origin of Minimalism.

Key words: Minimalism, Arts, Tradition, Society, Literature etc.

It is a general opinion that whatever we have in the present era that is the reflection of the past. Minimalism in America was very much influenced by the World War II, which was responsible for many changes in the society. The notion of traditional approach has converted into self-centred ideology which is continued till today in all over the world including the United States. Now traditional approaches have been replaced by the original. At that time, a wider movement came into existence in the 1960s known as Minimalism. It began after the World War II in America through visual arts especially in painting. Later it emerged into sculptures, architect, music, literature, theatre, fashion and several other areas. Minimalism was influenced by the traditional art form of Japanese that focuses on space to generate simplicity. It derives from the reductive aspects of Modernism and a reaction against the dynamic movement of expressionism. It was a trait that presented the distort world in subjective perspective. It conveyed the emotional effect in order to evoke moods or ideas. While, Minimalism does not believe in twisting the moment rather it prefers to present the things as it is. As Stella Mary George discusses in her book *Twentieth Century American Literature* that:

The change most transform the American society, however has been the rise of the mass media and mass culture. First radio, then movies, and now an all-powerful, ubiquitous television presence have change American life

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at its roots. From a private, literate, elite culture based on the book, the eyes, and reading, the United States has become a media culture attuned to the voice on the radio, the music of the compact discs, film, and the images on the television screen. (2)

In order to understand the Minimalism, it is must for the reader to know the meaning and definition of Minimalism. According to the *Cambridge Advance Learner's Dictionary* Minimalism is, "a work of art that mixes styles, materials, etc". However, in the opinion of Jeremy Robert Bailey "the root word of "Minimalism," is defined as something that exists in the smallest amount or degree" (8). Minimalism is referred by several names like Objective art, Primary Structure, "Minimal art, also called ABC art" (Clark 109). It depicts "the culmination of reductionist tendencies in modern art that first surfaced in the 1913 composition by the Russian painter Kasimir Malevich of black square on a white ground" (109). Hartmut Obendorf describes Minimalism in his book *Minimalism: Designing Simplicity*, "...Minimalism denotes the reduction of the functionality of an interface. Ideally, only necessary core functionality is left in...minimal design" (68). Minimalism is a wider movement that is not only established in painting but also in almost every form of visual art. Now, this avant-garde movement is frequently used in contemporary arts in all over the world and marked by numerous artists. Here is an attempt to provide a brief survey of Minimalism that is as follows:

Minimalism in Visual Arts: The concept of Minimalism come out of geometric form introduced by a Russian painter Kasimir Malevich (1878–1935) who used the term "Suprematism" for paintings and sculptures. He portrayed it in his work by drawing circles and lines which revealed in an exhibition in 1913 in St. Petersburg. Whereas, in France an artist Yves Klein (1928–1962) who was considered as one of the famous painters of the French artistic movement and an active member of "Nouveau realism" established this thought in 1960. While in America, Frank Stella (1936-) is a painter, printmaker, sculpture artist, and an architect. He is the first painter who is connected with Minimalism. His painting of "Black Pin Stripe" made a huge impact on Americans. As Jeremy Robert Bailey mentions in his thesis *Mining for Meaning: A Study of Minimalism in American Literature* that:

the term "Minimalism" was first used in America to describe certain facets of visual art,...[minimalist] sculptures are composed of ordinary materials and characterized by the repetition of shape, size and material and the unique juxtaposition of form (predominantly flat in nature) with open space... (5-6)

All artists of Minimalism who are interested in paintings and sculptures focus upon heard-edged, geometric forms. It is based on performative art, which is also known as Minimal art, and Pop art. There are several followers of Minimalism who uses geometric pattern in their work:

...its principal practitioners were Bard Davis, Robert Kuser and Cynthia Carlson. A late 1970s and early 1980s 'return' to the more traditional art forms of painting and sculpture, in a practice which owed a debt to German expressionists of the early twentieth century. The work of artists such as George Baselitz, Kiefer, Sandro Chia, Susan Rothenberg, Salle and Julian Schnabel was typically large, figurative and crudely executed,

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emphasizing the personal, imaginative and subjective experience. (Woods 150-51)

Minimalism in Architecture: “Postmodernism raises question about the appetite for architecture which it then virtually at once redirects” (Jameson 96). Architectural Minimalism was influenced by the traditional art forms such as: Japanese designs, Bauhaus art, and De Stijl arts etc. In America it was first used by Mies van der Rohets (1886–1969) was born in Germany and later settled in America. He applied Minimalism in his designs and style which was described as “less is more” (Kleiner 406). He used minimalist element in the designs of buildings. There are few major attributes of minimalist design described in Tim Woods’s *Beginning Postmodernism* that:

This manifesto proclaimed that utility and functionalism ought to be the presiding features of modern architecture, with such emphatic assertions as ‘The great problems of modern construction must have a geometric solution, and ‘Without plan we have the sensation, so insupportable to man, of shapelessness, of poverty, of disorder, of wilfulness’. (108)

Hence, architectural Minimalism describes simple, natural, open, and plain spaces through the lines. There are few renowned minimalist architects of the world who follow this pattern in their work such as: John Pawson (1949-) is a British minimalist architect whose designs deal with excessive use of light. Alberto Campo Baeza (1946-) a Spanish architect who uses lights and empty spaces in his designs. Kazuyo Sejima (1956-) is a Japanese architect famous for the use of modernist elements like glass, marble, and metals. Minimalist architecture is based on the determination of reductive use of the mechanism, as Tim Woods defines that:

Style was removed from vocabulary of form in favour of a new ascetic geometry. The tyranny of historicism in architecture was rejected, as ‘ornament was crime’. A radically functional approach to architecture was taken, in which the imperative was Mies’ notion that ‘form follows function’. Regularity, rationalisation and standardisation, and clarity of outline and geometry, became the principal organisational features, as the architects sought a universalist and abstract style. (111)

Thus it is clear that, Minimalism in architecture is a “historically new and original way of living” (Jameson 128). It reflects space for human and slow down fast social system, “that rejects any attempt to intellectually, technically, or industrially overcome the forces of nature” (Swaffield 87). Rather, it advocates an abstract reality of the natural system.

Minimalism in Music: In Music, Minimalism creates its own structure which is based on real unheard ignored sounds. Keith Potter elaborates in the book entitled *The Ashgate Research Companion to Minimalist and Postminimalist Music* that, “...the self-reflexive sound structures of early Minimalism, exploring the mechanisms of repetition, and ‘applied’ these to opera” (129). There are several musicians who deal with Minimalism in their music which Keith Potter describes:

Philip Glass’s Music in Similar Motion and Music in Contrary Motion (both 1969) and Louis Andriessen’s Melodie (1972–74) and Hoketus (1977) are highly self-reflexive and focus primarily on structuring sound in time. Glass, Andriessen – and also Steve Reich – are today, however,

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among our leading contemporary opera composers. These days, they use the techniques elaborated in their early works in order to ‘recycle’ other musical languages through them, and in the process this music becomes engaged with extra-musical phenomena. (129)

Beside these musicians there are few other composers of minimalist music in the world: Madeline Charlotte Moorman (1933–1991) was an American and an avant-garde musician. She was one of the founding members of the “Annual Avant Garde Festival” of New York. Henning Christiansen (1932-2008) was a Danish composer who was associated with the “Fluxus-movement”. He has given the idea of isolation in his work. Michael Laurence Nyman (1944-) is a British minimalist composer. His musical albums are based on piano, he has written several operas in minimalist manner. All these musicians deal with natural sounds of music and use less musical instruments, usually one in number. As there are certain minimalist characteristics in visual arts and architecture. Music also contains few positive features in itself. It uses simple and self reflective pastiche of past styles and blunt with new, “These Postmodern features are themselves part a technology which simulates ‘real’, ‘live’ music” (Woods 205). They prefer experimental music that neither focuses upon any achievement nor any goal. Basically, its major portion is based on silence mixed with natural sounds.

Minimalism in Literature: The term Minimalism first time used in literature to designate the contemporary social as well as political culture. It sets certain characteristic which is traced in selected texts. Especially, in literature, it is marked by the period of the Cold War in the 1960s. As in visual arts, Architecture, and music, Minimalism is known by various names similarly in literature:

Dirty Realism (Granta); New Realism; Pop Realism; and out own lovable Neo-Domestic Neo-Realism...Trash Fiction; Coke Fiction; ‘Post-Alcoholic Blue-Collar Minimalist Hyperrealism’ (John Barth); ‘Around-the house-and-in-the-yard’ Fiction (Don DeLillo); Wished Up Realism; TV Fiction; High Tech Fiction; Designer Realism; Extra-Realism; and the svelte Post-Post-Modernism. (Clark 4)

Minimalism in literature is against traditional approach of writing as it opposes grand narrative, major issues, classical pattern of writing, meta-fiction and so on. Rather, it advocates self-reflection, open ended, fragmentation, simple language, simple writing, and new mode of narration etc. Adrian Wanner discusses in his book *Russian Minimalism: From the Prose Poem to the Anti-Story* that, “As far as literary Minimalism is concerned...Minimalist texts defy traditional generic expectations, constituting themselves as literary by fiat rather than by adhering to any received literary conversations. By doing so, they force the reader to revisit personal assumptions....(6)

Literary Minimalism follows the pattern of visual art. It is based on economical use of non traditional notions of writing. Therefore, it deals with the surface description of character, setting, and story. Thus the text depends on reader and the role of reader is crucial in minimalist writing. Minimalism is an avant-garde movement and becomes a part of Postmodernism as Tim Woods defines:

Postmodern fiction often shows preoccupation with the visibility of representation; the decentring of the subject by discursive systems, and the inscription of multiple fictive selves; narrative fragmentation and narrative

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reflexivity; narratives which double back on their own presuppositions; an open-ended play with formal devices...an abolition of cultural divide between high and popular forms of culture.... (82)

Minimalism established fully in the literature in 1970s, when the Vietnam conflict has finished. This is the reason Minimalism is far away from an assumption of traditional approaches like romanticism, and realism. Stella Mary George says that, “Realism, abandoned by the experimental writers in the 1960s, also crept back, often mingled with bold original elements a daring structure” (47). From the early 1980s the technology has become the integral part of American civilization and because of it, American find fictions and short stories form are more appropriate in expression of their feelings and emotions instead of any other literary form. It offers people a way to express subjective life that articulates the impact of technology on the society and on an individual:

American literature fiction has been directly influenced by the mass media and electronic technology. Films, videotapes, and tape recordings of fiction reading and interviews with writers have become available, and new expensive photographic methods of painting have been encouraged young writers to self-publish and young editors to begin literary magazines, “the 1980s- the “Me Decade”-ensued, in which individuals tended to focus more on personal concerns than on larger social issues. In literature, old currents remained, but the force behind pure experimentation dwindled” (George 47).

From the beginning till now, literary Minimalism divided into three phases: first phase writer of minimalist movement was Earnest Hemingway (1899–1961), an American writer of the twentieth century. He was known as the originator of literary Minimalism. He gave the concept of “Iceberg theory” (Boon 89) in which he talked about omission, “Iceberg Theory Hemingway’s writing technique is frequently compared to an iceberg — an object that moves gracefully, with a sense of mass, but of which only one-eighth is visible” (89). It gives the substance to the text and focuses upon omission to convey the story. However, the second phase writer of literary Minimalism was Raymond Carver (1938–88) and his contemporary who were influenced by the concept of Earnest Hemingway. Moreover, Carver is known as father of Minimalism. Whereas, third phase belongs to Frederick Barthelme (1943-) and his contemporary such as Amy Hempel (1951-), Bobbie Ann Mason (1940-), and Charles Michael Palahniuk (1962-) and many more. They use simple diction, small event, fragmentation, and short declarative sentences in their writings.

Evidently, Minimalism is a well known movement which is influences our lives and it prevails in almost every stream as well as every part of contemporary society; either it is our living, fashion, law, theater or any other field. It helps to develop a relationship with our own surroundings which we usually ignore. Minimalism believes in space, light, simplicity; therefore it helps to maintain positivity and peace in contemporary life.

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