

BOOK REVIEW

Book Review of Sanjay Kumar Shukla: *Modernity and Post Modernity Debate: Related Issues and Challenges*, Satyam Publishing House, New Delhi, 2014, Pages 198.

Sanjay Kumar Shukla's 'reflections and deliberations over recent trends of Western Philosophy', as he writes in the Introduction of his book *Modernity and Post Modernity Debate: Related Issues and Challenges*, unfolds some worthy features of western philosophy that attracts readers of philosophy. The author and the publisher have to be commended for their painstaking efforts to present the philosophy enthusiasts, a much needed insight into the said debate and issues, so much so needed and relevant. The book should be evaluated for its merit based on the following issues that the author has considered in detail.

The Modernity and Post-Modernity Debate

In the First Chapter of his book the author "Re-examines the project of modernity", that is, he first of all outlines the basic feature of the modernity trends in western philosophy *a la* its *metanarratives* within the horizon of reason, advocating individualism, universalism, egalitarianism, meliorism as well as epistemological foundationalism and coherentism. Thorough going critique of these presents us postmodern philosophical perceptions of fantasy of thought, pluralism, discontinuity, irrationality and fragmentism.

Shukla argues in the five sections of this chapter that among some worth noting factors for seismic shift to postmodern philosophy are cultural identity crisis; ill-conceived dualities of mind-body and fact-value; negation of emotions, dehumanization and technological nihilism. In the face of the outfall of modernity, the author comes up in the first place with a secure "critical theory of society" (p. 5), which he says, is a "revised critical theory". However, this revisionary vision has not been well developed except for author's 'firm conviction' (p.5) that race and ethnicity 'make up the historically mediated structural features of *lebenswelt* and uniform lived experience'. The author commendably moves on to Habermas and Heidegger to save the case

and to show how well 'communicative reason' can cure the modernist malady of 'subject centered reason' so that a proper 'decentered' understanding of the world is possible [J. Habermas : *The Philosophical Discourse*, *undated and Martin Heidegger : *Being and Time*, 1962]. The modernist malady is evaluated notwithstanding the great value that rationality has; still better, it has to be perceived for various role it plays in the broader *cultural contexts* where validity claims are inter-subjectively recognized than subjectively narrated. In many other ways, the author shapes up an engrossing modernity-postmodernity debate showing us factors responsible for postmodern philosophical transmutation at the metaphysical, epistemological and ethical levels.

Shukla carries on explicating the nuances of modern and postmodern understanding of key issues in metaphysics. He is no doubt, extremely efficient at inducing philosophical heat of the debate at critical best, showing why postmodern metaphysics have greater points to score in the seven sections of chapter two. The crux of the chapter is to show the demise of an otherwise glossy metaphysics searching for objective truth through three routes: French postmodernism, vision of pluralism and critique of grand metaphysical narratives of Kant, Hegel (Hegel at two places in p. 17), Marx and Nietzsche. Shukla gives a cryptic account of how a careful reading of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche in particular focuses subjectivity, multiplicity, identity and of course, individuality. Further based on these the author shows how postmodern nominalism backed conception of universals, particularism and moral pluralism scores heavily on modernist agendas of realism, transcendentalism, objectivism and objective moral values.

Coming to the postmodern philosophical conception of reality, the author brings out the "de-realization" of subject and object of experience as a reaction to the modernist agenda of reality as something transcending, objective, and basic and the really real. This is supported by his analysis of Kierkegaardian 'network of phantoms'; Marxian conception of dehumanization and alienation, Nietzschean conception of "I" as a "grammatical necessity" and Baudrillard's conception of "simulacrum".

After twenty-three pages the author tells us that "postmodern" in philosophical lexicon was introduced by Lyotard (*Objectivity, Relativism and Truth*, 1991) and shows us the most important factor in postmodernist transmutation by virtue of his analysis of impacts of Wittgenstenian language game theory and Austin's theory of speech acts. We could come to realize why modernist agendas of universalizing and homogenizing meta-prescriptive are not amenable to the heterogeneous language games and that de-realization of the world is just the disintegration of grand narratives of reality into "clouds of colliding linguistic combinations and language games". Truly, for Austin and the author, postmodern performative criterion does not have space for speculative metaphysics so popular in grand narratives. The author does not lose sight of Foucault's contribution in breaking up the universalist, foundationalism, dialectical and normative stand points regarding reality and establishing contingency, differences and discontinuity.

Shukla tries to compound postmodernist metaphysics by arguing why postmodernists are right in refuting the idea of an objective mind dependant reality because it has to be understood individually or culturally. Similar truth reverberates when the author refers to a number of cultural factors in understanding personal identity. The a-historic narrative metaphysics is responsible, says the author, in understanding totally reduced being of entities of calculative order and objects to "standing reserve" as resources of exploitation.

Further the author brings in Jacques Derrida. Derrida's work epitomizes critique of western metaphysics and ontology. The author particularly presses on us the account of "something" on which meaning, language and essence of objects are grounded, which is what both Husserl's phenomenology and early Wittgenstein's 'logocentrism' failed to notice - "deconstruction" or "inter- linguistic free play of signs". For Derrida, there is no immediate access to reality, no "transcendental signified" that is not obtained through culturally constituted language.

Then there is not Richard Rorty for us who concludes that language does not reflect "reality", nor do we have any access to presupposition-less

neutral or universal truth. The author now feels the heat on placating his thinking mind over the given repository of the said. He shows signs of moving out of over caressing post-modern metaphysics by mentioning what Habermas has to say regarding the presupposition backed postmodern theses as a futile exercise and the way "horizon of possibility" opens up owing to a shift from subjectivity to inter-subjectivity. Shukla concludes that postmodern conception of reality is not a 'denial' but 'reconstruction' or giving a new meaning to *modernity* (he owes it to Lyotard though).

Shukla attends to the same debate focusing on *epistemological issues*. He makes it amply clear that no omnibus approach for this is available rather, considers the nature of knower, role of reason, mode of knowing and use of language in producing and disseminating knowledge.

In the five well written sections Shukla brings out at the outset the reasons behind Habermasian opposition to subject centered reason *vis-a-vis* communicative reason, which is to come out of the holy-grail of rationality to a liberal assessment of reason in terms of capacity of participants in knowing process and inter-subjectivity. This way, he thinks, postmodern epistemology has come out from an otherwise culturally callous attitude of modern epistemology and rightly embraces a negation of totalitarian thinking. Shukla reaches forty odd pages, to provide solid reasons for the anti-foundational postmodern stance taken particularly by Calvin and Schrag to provide perception of knowledge and truth *de novo* - a pluralistic narrative of the known *a la* knower. Postmodern epistemology's inching towards contextualism compounded by Thomas Kuhn's support for paradigm dependent evidence for our beliefs is really absorbing. The author then wisely turns his attention to postmodern critique of coherentism because it goes right against the contextualist postmodern position. The situational context determines the epistemic merit of beliefs and for that reason, rational logical arguments do not, enjoy a distinctive force in belief justification. It appears that these are Shukla's views as well. But we are presented interesting criticism of the said positions because Shukla thinks that both coherentism and contextualism are flawed theories of epistemic justification as they stretch

far towards self evidence and lacks in what he thinks, an "objective epistemic warrant". The author is at his critical best in the final section to come up with an appreciation that growth of postmodern epistemology is owing to its uncanny *critique of critiques*. The author has reasons to show that despite that merit, postmodern contextualist justification ends up in some sort of undesirable *solipsism*. But he ends up with a queer 'this is good but that is also good' argument (p. 47). For him, foundationalism, coherentism and contextualism are sound and unsound. And such appreciation can come only from postmodernists, not others!

The stiff debate now centres around *ethical issues* in chapter four consisting six well written sections having far reaching impact on what he shapes up in eight chapters to follow. In fact the rest of the chapters gives us impact - account of what has been construed thus far. A little awkwardly, the author in p. 50, lines 1 to 4, remarks that 'ethical perspectives' of *any* philosophical trend is "determined by" metaphysical and epistemological orientations. He argues that postmodern ethics has to justify the possibility of an *aporetic* ethics, but this is a hard nut to crack for two reasons: postmodern ethics begs some foundational epistemological, metaphysical, social, political and cultural claims and that bereft of any foundational claim, there is bland immorality and social dissolution. The author resolves the crisis aptly by showing how anti-foundational ethics is possible particularly in the age-long onslaught of the sacrosanct reason-obsessed universal normative ethics. The second problem is resolved by taking refuge to Rorty's conception of "truth is not out there in the world" and Zizek's context dependent ethical truth theory and a strong back up by Laclau why such ethics does not fall in an immorality limbo.

Naturally the author turns to the anti-foundational ethics of deconstruction championed by both Derrida and Levinas which does not threaten ethics itself, rather constructive to guide our beliefs and actions. Shukla brings out the truth of an *aporetic* but not psychopathic postmodern ethics hinged on the maladies of modern universal principlistic ethics (of reason) in view of Kant (pp. 58-63) and Hegel (pp. 63-68). He then clarifies

how Heideggerian (pp. 68-73) and Foucaultian (pp. 73-78) ethical rumblings post a firm postmodern aporetic ethics. Author's support to aporetic ethics in view of Heidegger and Foucault in the particular is owing to their shunning of a-historical and non-contextual ethics. Equally efficient is he while dealing in a similar tone Foucault's observation in *The Government of Self and Other: Lectures at the College de France (2010)*. The author emphasizes on 'caring for unblemished truth' through critique of self—one's own self and another to constitute one's subjectivity than subjugation and to bring out the finer points of "frank speech" in great details (Foucault : *Fearless Speech, 2007*).

It is commendable that Shukla has given us an account of postmodern epistemology, metaphysics and ethics as paradigm shifts from modern accounts of the same. He now backs it up with his deep interest in showing that the post modern perceptions deciphered thus far have far and wide ramifications - social, economic, political, religious, gender and other extremely important issues calling for philosophical care. Chapter five to twelve is a testimony to show postmodernist rumblings has some merit in dealing with globalization, terrorism, multiculturalism and many other issues. These chapters in are fact author's genuine contributions to philosophy.

The Impact Account

In the first place, Shukla considers not a social scientific postmodern account of globalization. Rather, what a postmodern account of ethic of globalization would be like. It is not awkward with the advent of applied ethics to consider questions of ethical value with regard to some human interventions like globalizing economy, free trade and things like that. Even as simple as a worldwide process of change by which people across the world are put in a single fabric, globalization, raise important questions of ethical right, good, just and so on. Shukla is also concerned about such questions but more fundamentally he considers the antithesis of globalization and cultural pluralism the latter holding its ground on available philosophical arguments. The author presents his own solution to this stiff problem. He then considers what the nature of global ethics should be like if "moral tolerance" is preferable in case of globalization. He has reasons (in this regard) to favor

globalization with an ethical face sans egotism and bland utilitarianism. He is also not in favour of toeing a populist propagandist agenda of "*vasudheiva kutumbakam*" either.

Shukla then considers numerous follies of a globalized world; most notoriously famous is "terrorism" of many shades because it is marked in our times for monopolist cultural hegemony, a kind of imperialism and social, political and economic exploitations. He researches on postmodern terrorism or new terrorism (W. Laqueur: *Postmodern Terrorism, 1997*) which is anchored to filthy religious hegemony and most astonishingly supported with élan by technological advances, the godfather of world globalization. Gradually Shukla enters into a well deserving but stiff challenge of multiculturalism in the perspective of globalization because truthfully a number of modern democratic nations are multinational in nature and enjoys that stature. But the moot point is, in a globalized world, concepts of identity and difference are trouble shooters as they downplay 'equal citizenship'. He has for solution an interesting analysis backed up by Bhikhu Parekh (*Rethinking Multiculturalism, 2000*), which is a middle stance of naturalism and pluralism and a strong support for "inter-cultural dialogue". The author unambiguously (given his postmodern leanings), argue in favor of an ethically charged multicultural ethos in our societies because for him *a la* Robertson, it is "universalization of particularism and the particularization of universalism" (R. Robertson: *Social Theory, Cultural Relativity and the Problem of Globality, 1997*).

Once the discussion centres at multiculturalism, who can avoid issues in cultural diversity? Not Shukla, for sure. So he takes it up in chapter eight. An engrossing debate of tension between modernizing globalization and ethnic pluralism follows. The tension is deep seated because there are innumerable cultural conflicts owing to the overreaching modernizing globalization - it fathers cultural hegemony, inequalities, cultural terrorism and ethico-spiritual imbalance. In multicultural societies it is all the more problematic as recognition and respect for cultural diversity are ethically desirable. Shukla has discussed how this problem can be faced cogently given

the wisdom of assimilationists, differentialists and multiculturalists. He is in view of *democratic multiculturalism* because it soundly tackles the tension between identities, belonging and individual autonomy to knit a public policy that works, and is value based. Most importantly, in this chapter (eight), and again in the chapters ten and twelve, there are no References (!) However, the chapters are replete with what Amartya Sen, Oswald Spengler, Arnold Toynbee, Ashis Nandy, Vandana Shiva, Holyoake and others have maintained. Even we do not find end-of-the-book Suggested Readings that helps us in further enriching our minds.

Nevertheless, Shukla takes us to another important discussion about identity formation and clash of identities after so much has been said about culture, cultural clashes in a fast globalized modern world. His discussion of identity centers around what Erik Erikson and Amelie Rorty has to say in terms of interaction between self and society as well as politics of difference. When it boils down to identity clash, identity in difference and the politics of difference, how can Shukla leave aside our own toasted secularism? (He is very careful about adding 'Indian' to secularism for clarity). Then he goes on giving us a schematic presentation of secular state involving three distinct, yet interrelated sets of relationship covering states, religion and individual through Jacobian, Bradlaughian and Indian model championed by Nehru and Gandhi. He shows how Indian Secularism as per "Indian model" of "*sarvadharmasamabhāva*" wins the case (even in this globalized modern world). The constitutional detailing apart, the author brings the case of Indian Secularism in its true ethical spirit.

All these chapters (five to ten) are closely intertwined. The rest of the two chapters consider the issues of ecological crisis in globalized world that firmly adheres to its 'technological holy grail' and the case of justice to women through empowering them. These are really not 'oh! I forgot' type of chapters. A careful reading reveals that Shukla has in mind the globalization happy masses and the black hole staring case of environmental catastrophe which is what Tom and Dick are speaking about. The entire world of environmental ethics is making great impact. What can we reasonably resolve

given the grave environmental crisis that is a double trouble given its ethical maladies? Shukla discusses well researched (but vastly discussed) theories and through the rumblings of the ancients *mantras* and *sūtras* reach the expected what may be called, ecosophy-T, (the suffix 'T' unfurling an Indian Theory). It is however interesting to listen to Shukla how he renders, this ecosophy-T despite the glossy approach of postmodern ethics. Is ecosophy-T all the more domestic postmodern ethics? Finally, the author reaches gender and women related issues all very well discussed among the postmodern ethicists. Here again he glides comfortably through conceptual disambiguation and through big name feminists, including the postmodern feminists regarding ethical questions that crop up with regard to gender justice and woman empowerment. There is a lot of constitutional celebration again and some preaching and persuasion that goes without much logical debate and smart referencing (I said before).

The publisher needs to be more careful and pressing about the book design - *Contents* come after a long introduction at the left of the reader and right at the face of chapter one. We will be thankful if this wonderfully written and so much so needed book on postmodern philosophy gives us a List of Readings for the beginners and other serious readers.

DEBASHIS GUHA