Review Paper

Reclaiming youth in a postmodern world

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Abstract

Youth is a significant phase in the life of a person. It is however a very delicate stage; not only is it a transitional phase from childhood to adulthood, but it is also a time when a person begins to make crucial life choices. This article is divided into two parts. The first part offers broad insights into the struggles of youth beginning from existential issues and progressing to moral, sexual and social concerns. The second part situates these struggles within the postmodern ethos that pervades contemporary society and global culture. The reality is that it is tough to be a young person today owing to the multitude of influences that constantly exert themselves externally while internal struggles fight for adequate attention. The article hopes to offer its readers a fair idea of what it means to be a young person in a postmodern world.

Introduction

It's amazing to be a young person today. One is open to experiences and opportunities like no other generation before. One needn't walk for miles, carrying a heavily-packed bag to college, on the condition that one's parents could afford the luxury of offering you a higher education. Now, one can simply sit on one's personal computer and study literally anything under the sun for little or no cost at all! Today's youth enjoy elements that were luxuries suited to the highest rungs of society only a few decades ago. Take for example, the television. In the 1990's, the television was a large box-like object that was not very cheap but yet found its way into nearly every middle-class home in India. One had to pay quite a sum of money to receive no more than a few dozen channels, most of which one never even watched! Fast-forward 2 decades later and you have televisions that look nothing like their ancestors. Gone is the box-like structure. In its place has come a slim object that projects an image that is qualitatively, at least 10 times better than its box-like ancestor. As if this progress wasn't amazing enough, one needn't even possess a television set to watch what one desires. The internet has made it possible to watch whatever one chooses, whenever one wants and for however long one desires, without any breaks for commercials, and mostly for free!

As of mid-2023, the world population has crossed 8 billion. Over 40% of the total population turns out to be young people below the age of 25. That's nearly half of the overall world population! In contrast, the population in the retirement and post-retirement or elderly category put together is barely 12%[1]. That does say a lot with regard to world demographics. The majority of the population around the world is young and therefore, full of energy, ideas, ideals, passion, hopes and dreams. A young population promises great scope for progress and development. The economic potential is significantly higher since so many people are either in or are preparing to enter the workforce. Statisticians call this a 'demographic dividend.' Such dividends are the reason for the enormous progress made by East Asian countries like China and Japan.

Young people today are living through a fascinating period of history. Despite being dispersed over continents spanning the vast land mass of the earth, they are able to get in touch and maintain contact with individuals living thousands of miles away. Globalization has brought the world together like never before. The widespread availability of the internet has fostered the process of globalization to the extent that the world is no longer the global village it was once thought to be. Rather now it is more like a room where everything is at arms-reach and can be made available at the push of a button.

Existential Malaise

Youth is a crucial and delicate stage in the human development continuum. One is no more a child and demands that one not be treated as such, but at the same time, one is not an adult despite wanting to be treated as such. This perennial issue requires to be treated delicately so as not to create any negative impact on the individual. Ignoring or not dealing with it appropriately can create an equally divisive situation.

Psychologists diagnose this tension to arise from an inherent search for identity that happens in the life of every individual. Personal identity is not the only thing young people are struggling to discover and develop.

They also find difficulties with other aspects of life that contribute to shaping their identity like religion, sexuality, morality, relationships and peer groups. All that goes into making them the person they want to be comes into tension with the person they are. This tension is healthy since it challenges the individual and causes him/her to reflectively decide on what to adopt and what to reject. Some youngsters find the heat of such decision-making too much and end up following the crowd, thus, growing up as spineless sheep who move with the crowd and go where the herd goes, even if that is off a cliff!

The Search for Identity: Erik Erikson[2] captures the pressure of forming an identity in his insightful analysis of the adolescent condition: "In the social jungle of human existence there is no feeling of being alive without a sense of identity[3]." That is how imperative the task of identity formation is to a young person; it is equivalent to being alive. To put it in another way, one is alive only as much as one's identity makes one out to be. This reveals itself very strongly in the modern technological world where one is given the possibility of 'creating' an identity for oneself in and through the various platforms of social media. However, one must note here that the 'identity' referred to here is purely a psychosocial one. It is an identity developed by an individual in keeping with his/her social situation.

Erikson gives 8 stages that individuals undergo in their search for identity. They span from infancy right up to adulthood although most of them take place in the period leading up to adulthood.

Basic Trust vs Basic Mistrust: This element is first developed in an infant. A baby is trying to make sense of all the sensory stimuli that it is exposed to. In the midst of all this newness, it looks for something stable. This homeostasis is provided usually, by the mother. The comfort and nourishment that the mother provides enables the child to develop a sense of basic trust. The absence of the above will result in the development of mistrust. Both have their long-term psychological effects while colouring all of the individuals' future social experiences[4].

Autonomy vs Shame and Doubt: As the child develops he/she begins to realize his/her capacity for decision-making. Erikson playfully terms it the ability 'to hold on and to let go.' A child, therefore, is constantly faced with the decision to hold on to things or people or to let them go. An extreme of either holding on or letting go which could range from stifling possession to a relaxed 'to let pass' and 'to let be,' could prove disastrous to the child's development. Thus, parental guidance must "protect the child against the potential anarchy of his as yet untrained sense of discrimination, his inability to hold on and to let go with discretion". When a child's autonomy is jeopardized, occasions for sowing the seeds of shame and doubt are born.

Initiative vs Guilt: This stage grows out of the previous one. The child once able to come to terms with the ability to decide is now spurred on to 'actively undertaking, planning and attacking a task for the sake of being active and on the move.' Initiative can be looked at as the practical application of freedom. "In the boy, the emphasis remains on phallic-intrusive modes; in the girl it turns to modes of 'catching' in more aggressive forms of snatching or in the milder form of making oneself attractive and endearing." Guilt arises from the 'goals contemplated and the acts initiated' in so far as one is unable to realize them in the unrestricted fashion one conceives.

Industry vs Inferiority: With the ability to engage constructively in free actions, the child develops a sense of industry, i.e., he/she develops an affinity for tools. These could be as simple as Lego blocks and plastic cutlery through which he/she seeks to mimic the actions of grown-ups. In all cultures, this is the stage when children receive some systematic instruction either as formal or non-formal education. The danger of this stage 'lies in a sense of inadequacy and inferiority.' This inferiority arises when the child feels aversion for the 'tools' of industry. A child's unwillingness to learn the alphabet even while the rest of his/her class does so, for example, could give rise to a sense of inferiority. "It is at this point that wider society becomes significant in its ways of admitting the child to an understanding of meaningful roles in its technology and economy."

Identity vs Role Confusion: This stage marks the end of childhood and the commencement of youth. The individual at this stage must not only come to grips with the physiological changes that are taking place within them but must also prepare for the adult tasks that lie ahead. At this crucial juncture, one becomes "primarily concerned with what they appear to be in the eyes of others as compared with what they feel they are, and with the question of how to connect the roles and skills cultivated earlier with the occupational prototypes of the day." When these tensions are not resolved in a healthy way one gets confused and begins to act out that confusion in the form of sexual deviance, delinquency and psychotic behaviour.
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Intimacy vs Isolation: An individual who has developed a particular notion of self-identity is now in a position to share that with others. This sharing of the self is known as intimacy— "the capacity to commit himself to concrete affiliations and partnerships and to develop the ethical strength to abide by such commitments, even though they may call for significant sacrifices and compromises." The inability to look beyond the ego-self "because of a fear of ego-loss may lead to a deep sense of isolation and consequent self-absorption."

Generativity vs Stagnation: This is perhaps one of the most vital stages of development after identity formation. Generativity reflects the concern for future generations that is expressed in the rearing and education of children. The concept is not just limited to sexual productivity but extends to productivity in other areas of life as well, for example in the areas of work, education, science and art. This is a powerful drive in human beings and if not channelized properly can give rise to serious issues.

Stagnation is the term used to describe untapped potential as well as the inability to effectively channelize the generative drive.

Ego Integrity vs Despair: This final stage is not really a 'stage' but rather a way of being and of approaching reality. Erikson highlights the need for a coming-to-terms with who one is and what one wants; the ability to love oneself albeit not in a narcissistic way but in a self-assured, serene and if I may dare say, spiritual way. Lack of integration gives rise to a fear of death that in turn breeds despair. One feels stifled by the shortness of life and the lack of time to see one's life project through to its end.

The Search for Morality: As a child develops into a teenager, one notices a growing sense of morality. The individual begins to understand that there are some behavioursthat are right and therefore acceptable while others are wrong and therefore, unacceptable. Parental guidance and exposure to social mores initiate the process of moral development in an individual. An infant, at the teething stage, tries to bite whatever it can fit into its mouth; that could mean a toy, the dog's tail or a dirty rag. The child is not able to distinguish between good and bad at this point. However, through repeated correction and instruction from the part of the parents, the child realizes that these objects are not to be put into the mouth. Nevertheless, the child's concept of morality is mostly connected to a fear of consequences and not to any abstract notion of good or bad. At adolescence, the individual begins to display 'moral autonomy.' The ability to make moral judgments is closely linked with the ability to think about and understand abstract concepts like good and bad. Thus, "the adolescent begins to develop a sense of ethical and moral responsibility based on abstract principles of what is right or wrong[5]."

Lawrence Kohlberg[6] developed a theory of moral development in which he distinguished three stages: the preconventional or premoral level, the conventional or moral level and the postconventional or autonomous level.

The Preconventional Level: Individuals are spurred to act so as to gratify their desires. Thus, their actions are solely performed to satisfy the ego. They respond to the definitions of 'good' and 'bad provided by their social reference group. Thus, one acts in consonance with what one is told, be it a parent, elder or a significant other. At this stage, "moral decisions are primarily egocentric, hedonistic, and based on self-interest, fear of punishment, anticipation of reward, or material considerations[5]."

The Conventional Level: The child moves from making decisions to satisfy the ego to trying to meet 'external social expectations.' Kohlberg describes the child at this level as conforming to social conventions and desiring strongly to maintain, support, and justify the existing social order. There is little or no serious moral reflection or conviction.

One is simply gripped by a particular moral order and abides by it. This is the level at which nearly all adolescents and even many adults remain. Morality takes on a perfunctory role and forms part of one's identity to the extent that it allows one to blend seamlessly into one's social group.

The Postconventional Level: This stage is marked by a personal effort to develop moral convictions. "At this level the approach to moral problems—no longer based on selfish needs, nor on conformity to others or the social structure—depends upon autonomous, universal principles of justice that retain validity even beyond existing laws, social conventions, or one's personal social reference group. At this highest level of moral reasoning, moral judgment and behaviour reveal more internal congruence than at earlier levels."

The Search for Sexual Identity: Puberty inaugurates a difficult phase of life. The hormones secreted by the body begin to have physical, psychological and emotional effects that create deep tension within an individual's personality. Sigmund Freud[7] seeks to explain the development of sexual identity beginning from infancy. He identifies 'libido' or the desire for pleasure, particularly sexual pleasure, as being the driving force behind sexual development. His studies show that as a child develops it begins to derive pleasure from different parts of the body at different times. He identifies each stage with the specific area where pleasure is sought from. Thus, he delineates the oral, anal, phallic and genital stages, finally culminating in a latency period where the libidinal drive grows significantly weak[8].

This sequential order of development can be disrupted by *fixation* or *regression*. Fixation is the stalling of development at any particular stage. The individual does not progress to a higher mature level but rather remains at the same level. At the oral level, for example, fixation can take the form of alcoholism and smoking. Regression on the other hand, takes place when the individual is unable to fulfill his/her desires. This causes the individual to revert back to a less mature stage of development where he/she can satisfy his/her libido. The typical example is the child's return to thumb-sucking when a younger sibling is born[5].

The Search for Social Stability: In a liberal and free market economy, it is surprising that so many people still find it so hard to make ends meet. One of the key factors for such trouble is unemployment. A few years ago, in 2018, the unemployment rate was at an all-time high of 6.10%. The issue was aggravated by the policies of the Government especially the infamous Demonetisation of 2016 and the introduction of Goods and Services Tax (2017); the COVID-19 pandemic further exacerbated the problem and caused the percentage to rise to a frightening 8%[9]. This serious problem has strongly impacted the lives of youth. The unemployment rate among youth is 12.90%, which is significantly high for a country having a relatively young population.

Many young people struggle to find jobs, not because they aren't qualified or competent but because of corruption or caste-based politics.

Speaking of politics, it is one sphere that has the greatest capacity to make or break young people's lives. Sadly, politics, especially in India, has turned to bigotry, religious fundamentalism, caste and ethnic-based polarizations. There is hardly any sense of service. Politicians seem more worried about passing projects and amending the Constitution than effecting any concrete changes for the good of the people. In such an unhealthy political environment, young people are either preyed upon and exploited for political mileage or sidelined altogether. The voice of youth is hardly given any attention. When it does manage to reach the surface, it is either dismissed as being nonsensical or branded as 'anti-national.'

Another serious issue that has destabilized societies across the globe is violence and war. Wanton violence for a number of political or social reasons has triggered a mass exodus on a scale that has never been seen before in history. A study has shown that there are 33.3 million people displaced worldwide; 16.7 million have been forced to live as refugees and 232 million have migrated for a variety of reasons[10]. The issue of displacement and migration is linked up to the heinous crime of human trafficking. Young people are often soft targets for such criminal activities. Young girls are kidnapped by the thousands across the globe and forced into the flesh trade. Young boys are enticed into drug cartels with their lure of easy money. Terrorism is another serious problem that plagues our world. A majority of terrorists fall into the younger age group of society. Their tender and inquisitive minds are easily radicalized by undesirable elements.

This section would not be complete if I didn't address the issue that perhaps finds its way into many a young person's life, and that is substance abuse. Substance abuse, in all its diverse forms, be it alcoholism, smoking, drugs or pornography, is not always a free choice. Some are pushed into it while others use it as a means of escape from the stress of daily life.

Postmodern Ethos

Young people's search for personal, psychosexual and socio-economic identity is situated in a postmodern culture. Postmodern culture is the fruit of a worldwide historic 'turn' that began in the 1950s. It first made its appearance in architectural and literary movements that opposed accepted canons regarding the unity and coherence of narratives and artistic styles. Sociologists used the term to indicate discordant social trends like the far-reaching cosmopolitan globalization and parochial traditionalism[11]. The term entered into the philosophical lexicon with the publication of Jean-François Lyotard's _The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge_ (1979). Subsequently, other French and German philosophers made use of the term to represent a critical movement against

reason, which was seen during the Modern Age[12] as the universal and certain foundation for knowledge and morality.

The term 'postmodernism' suggests a breaking with its immediate predecessor. It signals a breaking with modernity, determined economically by the popular acceptance of capitalism and culturally by the decline of humanism and a rejection of Enlightenment[13] values, while also extending itself to the literary and aesthetic movements of the late 19th and early 20th centuries[14]. The shift to postmodern cultural values was in no small way, the result of Friedrich Nietzsche's (1844-1900) radical critique of the Enlightenment ideals of absolute truth, universal morality and transhistorical values. Instead, he chose to shift the focus to human knowledge, morality and culture[14]. This might not seem like much but it sparked off a revolution in the philosophical arena that led to transcultural change. Thus, Nietzsche can be attributed with the initiation of postmodernism and the inauguration of postmodernity—the cultural situation created by postmodern values.

Lyotard offers a very basic definition of postmodernism in his ground-breaking book. He says, "Simplifying to the extreme, I define _postmodern_ as incredulity toward metanarratives[15]." A metanarrative can be understood as "a 'metadiscourse' containing the universal rules and principles to which we can appeal to resolve a dispute that may arise between the 'small discourses' or 'language games' in which different people are engaged in Nuyen, A. T.[16]." Lyotard immediately points out to an example of a metanarrative: metaphysics. Metaphysics is a metanarrative since it provided the basis for philosophizing up till the Modern Age. When I say 'basis,' I mean not just the content of philosophizing but also the wider context, scope and boundaries within which philosophy ought to engage and remain. Just as this met narrative was challenged in the Modern period, many of the ideals of modernism have also come under the postmodern scanner. I will now list a few of the metanarratives that postmodernism tries to 'deconstruct[17].'

Truth: The moderns, in all ingenuity, didn't effect a major change in the realm of epistemology. True, they changed the mode of assessing knowledge but ultimately, all they really did was replace dogmatism with rationalism. It was a mere change of names and focus. The deconstructive hammer of the postmoderns first broke through metaphysics, which had already been sidelined by the moderns, however, not in an absolute way as they thought. The moderns, for the most part, believed that they had killed metaphysics and therefore, Absolutes, of the medieval age with their empiricism and scientific temper. However, reason became for them an Absolute. Thus, postmodernism first sought to deconstruct this false 'god' of the modern era. The postmodern critique was "directed against the lopsided development of scientific reason which led to a calculative, functional, instrumental, rational, objectivistic, and formal interpretation of society, which absorbed all the rich variety and fullness of reality into its monolithic totalizing gaze of reason and autonomous subject[18]."

With the breaking down of metaphysics, epistemology took a strong hit. The goal of the epistemological project is truth. Since, truth was considered a metaphysical Absolute, i.e., an ultimate end that is valid across all times and cultures, it came under the postmodern hammer. Truth, therefore, came to be replaced by truth/s. Since there was no Truth to be attained, one had to settle for truth.

In the absence of objective truth, there is no final bar of appeal to determine truth and reality when cultures view the world in different or mutually exclusive ways. We are left with cultural relativism, or what the postmodernists term "local knowledge" or "paradigms." Within each paradigm people think differently and have their own truth, which is real to them alone[19].

Consensus became the new criteria for arriving at truth[20]. Such a mentality led to a separation of the fragments that is human culture. A relativistic mindset is not concerned with discovering truth, for truth is whatever one chooses to make it out to be. Thus, the whole epistemological enterprise is jeopardized and despite how attractive it might seem, the effects can be truly disastrous. Young people in their search for truth could be misled into the relativist trap, thus paving the way for ego-centric life choices that ultimately devalue human dignity and downplay the freedom of others.

Religion: With the shadow cast on metaphysics, it does become hard to see God or more practically, religion. Religion is basically founded on metaphysical truths or principles, but when the foundation is itself compromised, can the structure stand? Young people today are largely suspicious of institutional religion and for the most part, avoid or reject it altogether. However, there is a search for spirituality and therefore a consequent rise in groups or movements that promise a spiritual experience that one is looking for. The danger here is that of syncretism. In a relativist context, all religions are treated as being different rays coming from the same sun with minor differences separating them. There is no fundamental difference between religions and they all look forward to the same goal[21]. This misguided notion is responsible in no small way for the lack of religious fervor and experimentation with 'new-age' spiritualities[22].

Closely connected with religion is the issue of morality and ethics. Most people develop an ethical sense from the religious values they are brought up with. However, in a postmodern world that disregards religion and glorifies secularism, ethics has become an area of serious concern. Ethical relativism is perhaps the worst disease that can afflict any culture. When people take morality into their own hands there is the highest risk of abuse and violence. Young people find it hard to develop sound moral convictions because their cultural ethos doesn't offer them a sound education. They easily succumb to moral relativism and become easy prey to fundamentalist and deviant outfits.

Gender: The postmodern charge found its way into hitherto untouched areas of gender and sexuality. The rise of feminism initiated the women's liberation movement in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The movement aimed at freeing women from the clutches of patriarchal strangleholds that had oppressed them for centuries[23]. The shift to women's rights and dignity gradually led to a shift also in terms of the identity of woman. Feminist philosophers began to question and explore the mystery of womanhood, relieved from the shackles of patriarchy. Simone de Beauvoir seems to have captured the spirit of the movement very well in the words, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman[24]."

Feminists began to distinguish between sex and gender. The former they claimed is biologically given while the latter is a socio-cultural construct. They go on to argue that just because the former is fixed, the latter need not also be. This reasoning has given impetus to the gender debate that is raging till the present day. The Indian Supreme Court's decision to strike down Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code which decriminalized gay sex was seen as a landmark event in the slowly unraveling context of gender fluidity[25]. Young people today, like never before in history, are sensitive to gender and related issues including homosexuality. While the movement has positively influenced people and society by helping create an environment of acceptance and tolerance, it has simultaneously contributed to encouraging confusion, especially in terms of sex and gender among young people[26].

Looking to the Future

Being young is extremely challenging. The possibilities available are endless. The ability to decide between them is limited and weak. Why do young people often find themselves at crossroads? It's precisely because of this. Everything around them seems so enticing that they become confused. Youth, as it is, is a time of existential confusion. One outgrows childhood and enters into adulthood without leaving childhood behind since that is all one knows! Freud points out this fact when he talks of regression: When one feels existentially frustrated, one turns back to a behaviour and mindset that allows one to attain gratification.

The postmodern ethos offers young people a plethora of opportunities to satiate their existential longings. However, it also makes it difficult for them to do so by providing temporary solutions. The search for identity is very often misguided by technology and the media which projects unrealistic images and furnishes models that are attractive but lacking in human depth and sound character. The 'selfie culture, fueled by narcissism creates in young people a false sense of identity. Social media often does something similar. The young are not really given a healthy way of fostering their self-identity despite technology's promises. The young person's search for morality is frustrated by insipid secularism and irreligion.

A culture of moral relativism and materialism gives way to pure hedonism and nihilism. Young people are often accused of lacking meaning and purpose in life, wasting time and money on substances, friends and experiences that leave them dissatisfied, frustrated and damaged in the long run. Since there are no Absolutes to aim for and guide one's choices, these evils become prominent. Sexuality is a crucial area of life. Freud had a point in claiming the root cause of psychological disorders to be unresolved sexual feelings. In a sexually-conscious world, the young are open to experimenting with their sexuality and gender identity. The results of such experimentation threaten the sanctity of traditional institutions like marriage and family.

Despite the breathless pace of life, young people need a certain amount of stability. Parents and elders are primarily responsible for helping the young find that stability. There is no easy cure for the diseases wrought by modernism and fostered by postmodernism. Young people require good and reliable guidance in their search for authenticity. They need strong moral norms to base their life on and shape their choices. Above all, they need a sense of transcendence or God, to give them ultimate meaning in life. For all the threats postmodernism poses, it also offers good things like respect for pluralism and giving voice to the voiceless. Young people need to be helped to discover these goods and use them for their own and others' benefit.

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