

Literature, Culture and Media
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Lecture - 11
Modernism and Postmodernism I

Dear participants, welcome to the third week of this module of this course on literature, culture and media. During this week, we will discuss with you the theories of modernism, postmodernism, also the peripheral aspects of these theoretical groundings including metanarratives, knowledge and power and post structuralism and deconstruction.

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- Virginia Woolf, “In and around 1910, human nature changed”
 - English translation of Freud’s works
 - Exhibition of Impressionist paintings at the Royal Court Theatre
- Three major conceptual influences
 - Marxism
 - Psycho-analytical Theories
 - Feminism

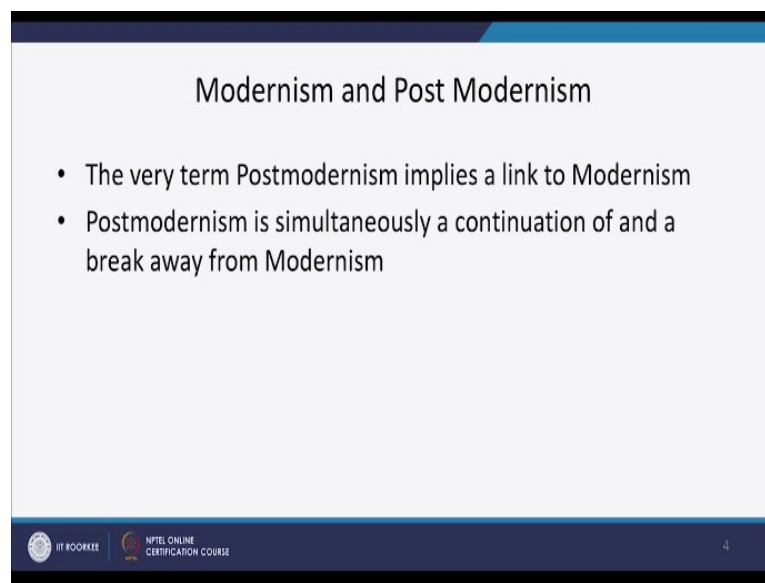
Virginia Woolf, the famous early 20th century novelist had mentioned in one of her diary entries that “in and around 1910, human nature changed.” Virginia Woolf in her diary entry was referring to two major literary and critical developments in the contemporary Europe. She was referring first of all to the English translation of the works of Freud. Freud had earlier published in German language and the English translations came out in Europe only in 1910.

The second incident she was referring to was the exhibition of impressionist paintings at the Royal Court Theatre. These are seemingly innocuous, literary and cultural events but as a critical and imaginative writer, Virginia Woolf was able to envisage the significance and fundamental shifts which these two incidents represented and showcased in the contemporary cognition.

The three major conceptual influences of the 20th century have been Marxism, the psycho-analytical theories and feminist analysis of things. We may agree or disagree with these theoretical approaches but once Marxism was introduced, it was not possible for any of us to sideline the issue of labour and equality. Similarly, after the psycho-analytical framework was available, no discourse in humanities and social sciences was possible without taking into impact the significance of our emotions.

Similarly, after feminism, as a creed was started, it was not possible for any of us to sideline the issue of gender equality. In terms of significance, we find that postmodernism is also at par with these three major groundbreaking approaches of the 20th century. This is a development of the late 20th century and the term unlike the previous three terms which I have referred to is a bit fuzzy and confusing.

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The very term postmodernism implies a link to the modernist theories. It is simultaneously a continuation of as well as a break away from modernism. We will discuss first the theoretical grounding of modernism, the development, the chronology of these theories first before we go into the other aspects related with the critical approaches.

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Modernism

- Concepts have long history*
- Modernity
- Latin term *modernus* was used in the fifth century to distinguish the Christian present from the pagan Roman past
- French/European Enlightenment established its contemporary meaning
- Modern – post-medieval civilization- based supremely on Reason was superior

*Lyon, David. *Postmodernity*. Delhi: Viva Books Pvt. Ltd., 2002.

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Modernism the concept itself has a long history. The first recorded reference of this term modernity is found in the shape of a Latin term ‘modernus’ which was used in the fifth century to distinguish the Christian present from the pagan Roman past. However, by the time we come to the European enlightenment as well as a French enlightenment, we find that the contemporary meaning of modernity has been established.

Modern by this time meant a post medieval civilization which was primarily based on reason and it was considered that a reason was superior than any other aspect related with our world picture. So modernity came to be a concept which is based on reason. It was considered to be a very dynamic aspect also as it rejected particularly those traditions which were considered to be superstitious as they were not supported by reason.

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Modernity

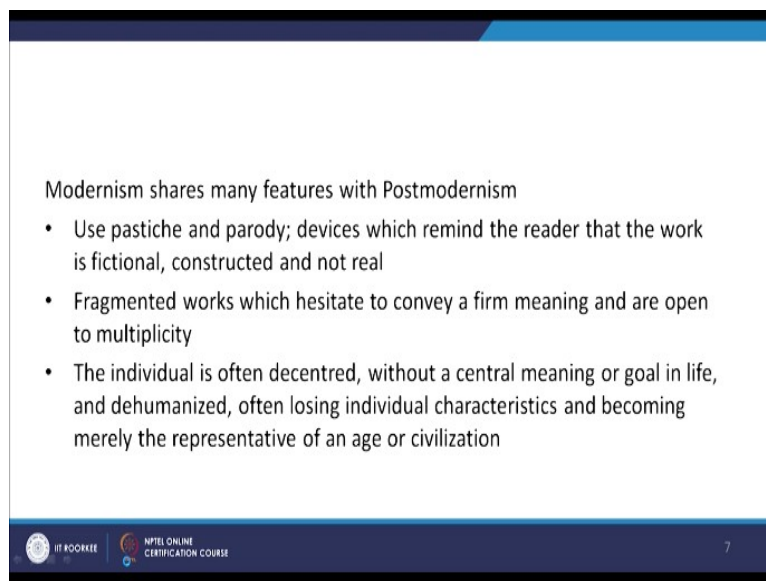
- Based on reason. Dynamic.
- Dismissal/marginalization of traditions, often as superstitions if not supported by reason
- Belief in power and adventure. Optimism.
- Global Consequences – space opened up and time seemed to speed up
- Also resulted in Colonialism and Industrialization

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The modernist worldview encouraged a particular optimism in contemporary Europe. It resulted in a belief in an individual power and adventurous feelings also. Gradually, we can see the global consequences of modernist vision also. Individual belief in one's power and an abatement of the adventurous feelings collectively resulted in a space which was opening up continually and the time which seem to speed up suddenly.

And we find that it resulted on the one hand in industrialization and on the other hand it resulted in the colonial empires. Modernism as a literary theory as a critical approach shares many features with postmodernism also. So let us try to enumerate them first.

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Modernism shares many features with Postmodernism

- Use pastiche and parody; devices which remind the reader that the work is fictional, constructed and not real
- Fragmented works which hesitate to convey a firm meaning and are open to multiplicity
- The individual is often decentered, without a central meaning or goal in life, and dehumanized, often losing individual characteristics and becoming merely the representative of an age or civilization

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For example, these approaches commonly share the use of pastiche and parody. The devices which remind the reader that the work is fictional, it is constructed and it is not real in fact. The works are often fragmented in these two critical approaches. These works hesitate to convey a firm meaning and they are open to a multiplicity of interpretations also. In this, we find that the individual is often portrayed as being decentered as if the individual life does not have a central meaning or a goal in life.

And therefore it is dehumanized, often losing individual characteristics and becoming merely the representative of age or civilization.

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- Modernism, as well as, Postmodernism gives voice to the insecurities, disorientation and fragmentation of the 20th century western world.
- Whereas they employ fragmentation , discontinuity and decentredness in theme and technique, the basic dissimilarity between the two schools is hidden in this very aspect.

Modernism as well as postmodernism thus represents the insecurities, disorientation and fragmentation of the 20th century western world. Whereas they employ fragmentation, discontinuity and decentredness in theme and technique, the basic dissimilarity between the two schools is hidden in this very aspect. It is a very strange phenomena that these commonalities also bring about the differences in these two critical approaches.

So after having listed the commonalities in these two approaches, let us also think about the differences as far as they exist in these two critical approaches.

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- Modernism projects the fragmentation and decentredness of the contemporary world as tragic. It laments the loss of the unity and centre of life and suggests that works of art can provide the unity, coherence, continuity and meaning that is lost in modern life.
 - T.S. Eliot laments that the modern world is an infertile wasteland, and the fragmentation, incoherence, of this world is effected in the structure of the poem. However, “The Waste Land” tries to recapture the lost meaning and organic unity by turning to Eastern cultures, and in the use of Tiresias as protagonist
- In Postmodernism, fragmentation and disorientation are no longer tragic. It celebrates fragmentation. It considers fragmentation and decentredness as the only possible way of existence, and does not try to escape from these conditions.

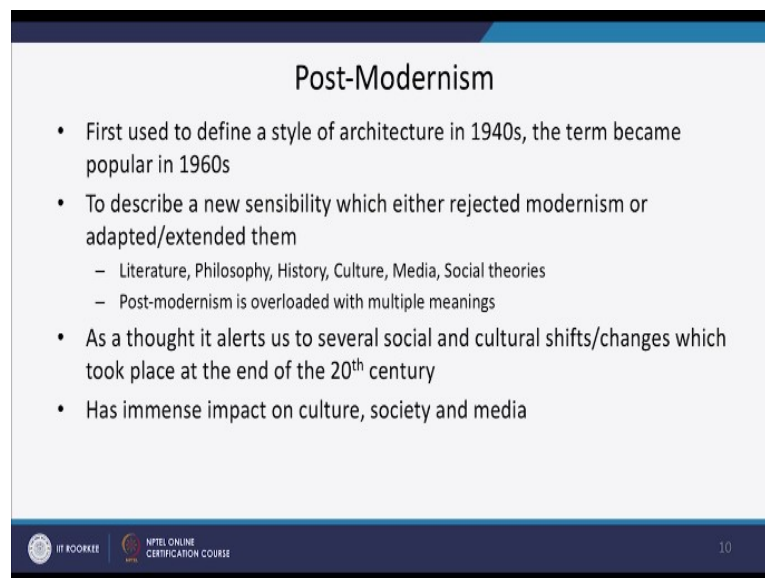
Modernism projects the fragmentation and decentredness of contemporary world as being essentially tragic. It laments the loss of the unity and center of life and suggests that work of art can provide the unity, coherence, continuity and meaning that is lost in modern life. It

would be an interesting idea to refer to T.S. Eliot's work *The Waste Land*. Eliot laments that the modern world is an infertile wasteland.

And the fragmentation and incoherence of this world is effected in the structure of this poem. However, the poem also tries to recapture the lost meaning and organic unity by turning to Eastern cultures. So we find that in modernism the emphasis is on the representation of the fragmentation and decentredness but at the same time, it attempts to find out a reason, a center, coherence in things on the basis of reason alone.

Whereas in postmodernism fragmentation and disorientation are no longer tragic. It celebrates fragmentation, it considers fragmentation and decentredness as the only possible way of existence, it revolves in them and never tries to escape from these conditions and herein lies one of the most significant differences between the modernist and the postmodernist approach.

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Post-Modernism

- First used to define a style of architecture in 1940s, the term became popular in 1960s
- To describe a new sensibility which either rejected modernism or adapted/extended them
 - Literature, Philosophy, History, Culture, Media, Social theories
 - Post-modernism is overloaded with multiple meanings
- As a thought it alerts us to several social and cultural shifts/changes which took place at the end of the 20th century
- Has immense impact on culture, society and media

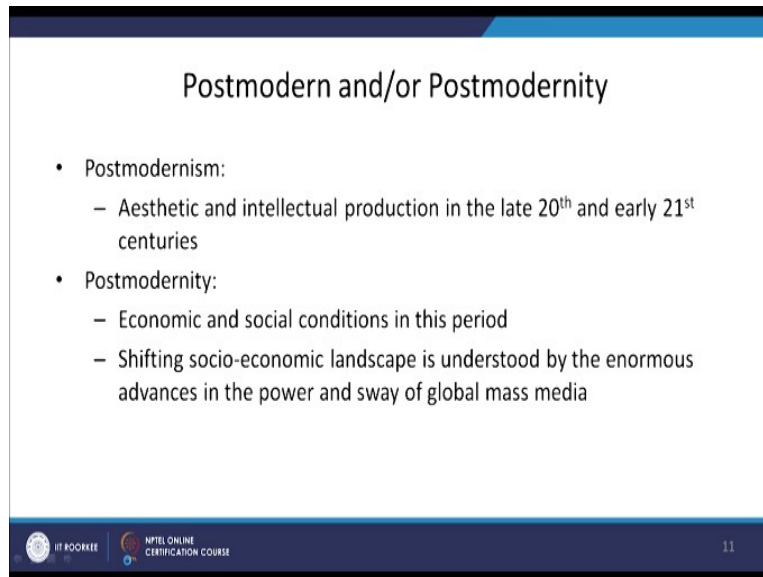
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The term postmodernism for the first time first used in 1940s to define a style of architecture and we find that this term becomes popular around 1960s. It describes a new sensibility which either rejected modernism or adapted that and further extended them. So we find that the term postmodernism becomes very popular by 1960s in literary criticism, in Philosophy, in history, in culture, in media dialogues and various other social theories.

And therefore as it was a stretched thin, we find that it came to be overloaded with multiple meanings. As a thought, it is a very significant idea as it alerts us to several social and cultural

shifts and changes which were taking place towards the end of the 20th century and it also has immense impact on culture, society and media.

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The slide is titled "Postmodern and/or Postmodernity". It contains two main bullet points. The first is "Postmodernism:" followed by a sub-bullet "– Aesthetic and intellectual production in the late 20th and early 21st centuries". The second is "Postmodernity:" followed by two sub-bullets: "– Economic and social conditions in this period" and "– Shifting socio-economic landscape is understood by the enormous advances in the power and sway of global mass media". At the bottom left of the slide is the IIT Roorkee logo and the text "IIT ROORKEE". At the bottom right is the text "NPTEL ONLINE CERTIFICATION COURSE" and the number "11".

Often we find that the two terms of postmodern, postmodernism and postmodernity are confused. So let us try to distinguish between these two terms as a point in the beginning. Postmodernism relates to the aesthetic and intellectual production in the late 20th and early 21st century whereas postmodernity is used to denote almost similar changes in economic and social conditions in this period.

The shifting socio-economic landscape is understood by the enormous advances in the power and sway of global mass media. So whereas the issues remain the same, we find that the fields which they impact become slightly different. Before we go deeper into our understanding of postmodernism, let us also try to understand a brief history of ideas which led the philosophical approach of our world towards these two major theories.



The western idea of development starts with providence. Providence suggests that the process of history moves forward in a linear fashion towards progress under the care of God.

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History of Ideas

- Western ideas start with Providence
- In a linear manner, process of history moves forward to progress under the care of God
- Providentialism denies any cyclical movement in history
- Inspires hope – guided by God – denies pessimism or fatalism. Divine protection was mingled with the idea that rapid advance can be achieved by human endeavors
- Reason, which fought against medieval excesses, encouraged this idea
- This idea of progress by human endeavor alone ultimately led to nihilism*
- Contested by Church/Institutionalized religions

* Nihilism is the belief that all values are baseless and that nothing can be known or communicated. It is often associated with extreme pessimism and a radical skepticism that condemns existence. A true nihilist would believe in nothing, have no loyalties, and no purpose other than, perhaps, an impulse to destroy.

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Providence rejects any cyclical movement in history and by denying the cyclical movement in history we find that it has also generated a hope. It denies fatalism; it also denies depression provided everything takes place moves on in a linear fashion under the care of God. Divine protection was mingled with the idea that rapid advance can be achieved by human endeavors.

However, we find that a reason which fought against medieval excesses encouraged this idea but this idea of progress by human endeavor alone brought us towards nihilism also. This idea of nihilism becomes more popular later on in the works Nietzsche, which also becomes a guiding principle for the development of the postmodernist philosophy. Nihilism is the belief that all values are baseless and nothing can be exactly known or communicated.

Nihilism as a belief is often associated with extreme pessimism and a radical skepticism that condemns existence. A true nihilist would believe in nothing, have no loyalties and no purpose other than perhaps an impulse to destroy. So you would find that this idea of nihilism which believed only in reason and denied the care of God was contested by Church as well as other institutionalized religions.

The progress had continued till the 20th century under the divine providence but we find that there has been certain dent also. For example, the major dent came with the First World War, it resulted in the economic depression of 1930s, the population of Europe was disturbed very severely, very soon it was followed by the Second World War.

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- There were some dents also
 - The WW I and the economic depression of the 1930s
 - Hitler came to power promising progress through socialism; and the consequent WW II
- Still hopes were not totally dampened
- Massive scientific and technological progress and unprecedented consumer boom

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Hitler came to power promising progress through socialism but it resulted into unparalleled destruction throughout the world. Still we find that the hopes were not totally dampened, people still believed that the massive scientific and technical progress during the 20th century, the first half of the 20th century particularly would result in unprecedented consumer boom and would again established the values in the old order.

However, by the time the Second World War changed, we find that the damage was done and it was not possible for humanity any more to go back to the uncorrupted idea of modernist progress. Colonialism had crumbled and therefore we find that as states started to gain independence one after the other in Asia and Africa, the economy of the developed world also started to go down.

People migrated at increasing rates, sometimes out of compulsion, sometimes out of choice but this type of a larger scale of migration was unprecedented in human histories and as people migrated from one country to other from one cultural pattern to other, they also carried with them their own load of cultural practices and independent histories.

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- BUT, damage was done:
 - Colonialism crumbled.
 - States gained independence one after the other
 - People migrated at increasing rates
 - Downside of industrial growth resulted in environment degradation, depletion of renewable sources, depletion of ozone layer

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So the downside of industrial growth had also resulted in environment degradation. People had started to understand the significance and the importance of the depletion of renewable sources and depletion of ozone layer so to say. These effects were seen in our individual psyche also. At an intellectual level, people had started to question the received doctrines.

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- At the intellectual level, people started to question received doctrines
- Political and cultural changes - Vietnam war, Watergate
- Democracy in Eastern Europe gave way to Communism and then disintegrated
- Nightmares which were the off-shoot of Modernist Progress also became more catastrophic
 - drug abuse, low citizen-worker motivation, mood of hopelessness owing to growing gap between rich and poor etc.
- The years **1789-1989** became symbolic two centuries span of modernity, expressed politically as the quest for a rationalized world-
- From the French revolution to the fall of bureaucratic state socialism

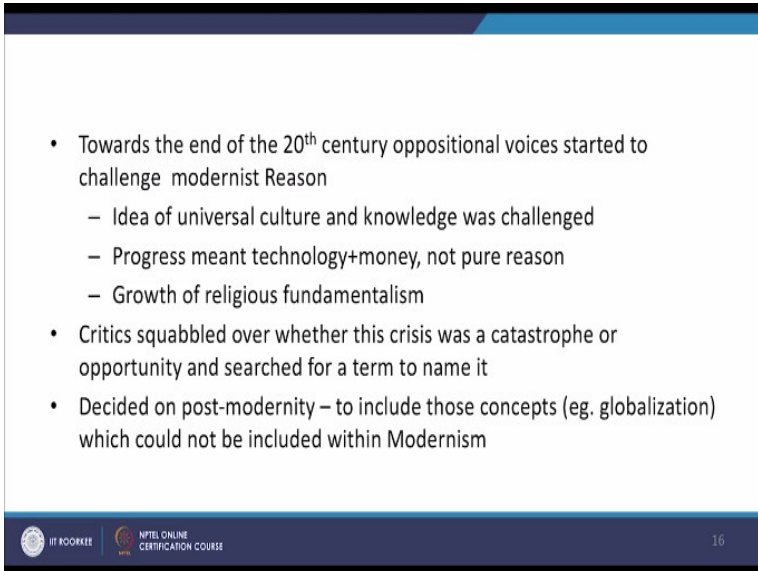
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The political and cultural changes had also started to take place, for example the Vietnam War changed the thinking of the young people not only in America but throughout the world. The Watergate systematically eroded and individuals believe in the political prestige of institutions. At the same time, in the Eastern Europe, we find that democracy in Eastern Europe was giving way to communism.

And then it gradually disintegrated into multiple nations. The postcolonial world was also changing the significance of the western powers and at the same time we find that the cases of drug abuse, low citizen-worker motivation and a mood of hopelessness owing to the growing gap between the rich and the poor ultimately was being documented. So we can almost say that the two centuries signified the dominance of the modernist era.

And these two centuries can be represented as the years of 1789 to 1989. 1789 is the year of the French revolution and the 1989 is the year of the fall of bureaucratic state socialism. So let us say that these two centuries encompass the initiation, the progress and the ultimate fall of the modernist reason giving way to the beginning of the postmodernism. So we find that by the time the 20th century was ending, the challenge to the modernist reason was almost palpable in the intellectual climate.

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- Towards the end of the 20th century oppositional voices started to challenge modernist Reason
 - Idea of universal culture and knowledge was challenged
 - Progress meant technology+money, not pure reason
 - Growth of religious fundamentalism
- Critics squabbled over whether this crisis was a catastrophe or opportunity and searched for a term to name it
- Decided on post-modernity – to include those concepts (eg. globalization) which could not be included within Modernism

The idea of universal culture and knowledge was challenged as newer nations had come to therefore and they were claiming their loss history, their lost culture also. Progress did not mean only the progress based on pure reason but it meant technology which would lead to the power of money also and at the same time we find that in the world the religious fundamentalism was also growing.

Critics squabbled over whether this crisis was catastrophe or opportunity and searched for a term to name it and they ultimately decided on postmodernity, postmodernism to include all those concepts which could not be referred to modernism.

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- Post-modernism refers to the exhaustion, sometimes even the demise, of modernity
 - Post-modernism—cultural
 - Post-modernity— social
- It is about deposing the trinity of the Enlightenment – reason, nature and progress– which presumably triumphed over the earlier Trinity.
- For a common man, it is seen in the blurring of the boundaries between high and low culture; collapse of hierarchies of knowledge, taste and opinion, and the interest in the local rather than the universal.

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So postmodernism in a way refers to the exhaustion sometimes even the demise of modernity. It is about deposing the trinity of the enlightenment- reason, nature and progress which presumably had triumphed over the earlier religious Trinity. For a common man, postmodernism is often seen as a blurring of the boundaries between high and low culture, collapse of hierarchies of knowledge, taste and opinion and the interest in the local rather than the universal.

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- Today, the previous modes of social analysis and political practice are being questioned
- New power structures are emerging
- It can be a new form of capitalism or a totally new kind of society which is emerging
- Crucial issues today are
 - Prominence of new information and communication technologies
 - Forging of extensions of social relationships – such as globalization and consumerism, eclipsing the conventional emphasis on production

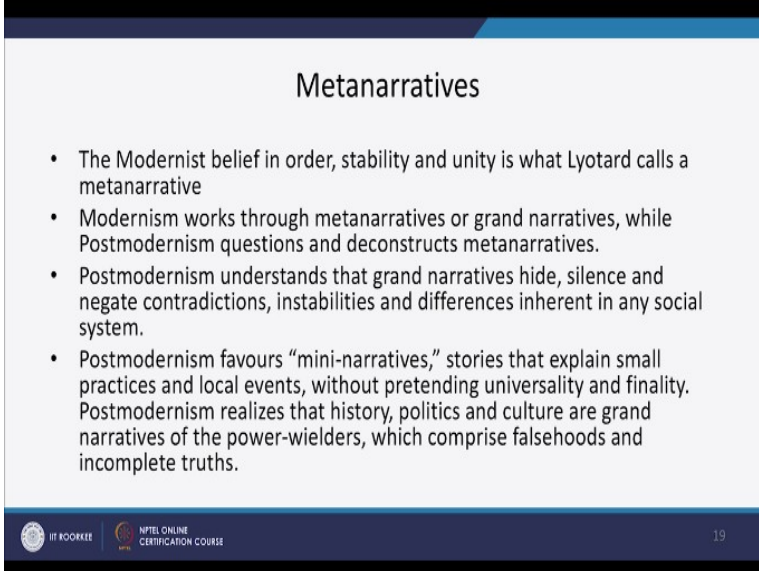
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Today, we find that new power structures are emerging. The previous modes of social analysis and political practice are also being questioned. It can be a new form of capitalism or a totally new kind of society which is emerging and the crucial issues with which the humanity is crippling now today are prominence of the new information and communication

technologies and forging of extensions of social relationships such as globalization and consumerism, eclipsing the conventional emphasis on production and reason alone.

Certain other terms which become dominant to us, when we have to understand the significance and the total impact of post-modernist philosophy. So metanarrative is a significant term which is often used by the postmodernist critics.

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The slide is titled "Metanarratives" and contains a bulleted list of four points. The first point states that the Modernist belief in order, stability, and unity is what Lyotard calls a metanarrative. The second point notes that Modernism works through metanarratives or grand narratives, while Postmodernism questions and deconstructs them. The third point explains that Postmodernism understands that grand narratives hide, silence, and negate contradictions, instabilities, and differences inherent in any social system. The fourth point states that Postmodernism favours "mini-narratives," stories that explain small practices and local events, without pretending universality and finality. It also notes that Postmodernism realizes that history, politics, and culture are grand narratives of the power-wielders, which comprise falsehoods and incomplete truths. The slide footer includes the IIT ROORKEE logo, the NPTEL ONLINE CERTIFICATION COURSE logo, and the number 19.

Metanarratives

- The Modernist belief in order, stability and unity is what Lyotard calls a metanarrative
- Modernism works through metanarratives or grand narratives, while Postmodernism questions and deconstructs metanarratives.
- Postmodernism understands that grand narratives hide, silence and negate contradictions, instabilities and differences inherent in any social system.
- Postmodernism favours "mini-narratives," stories that explain small practices and local events, without pretending universality and finality. Postmodernism realizes that history, politics and culture are grand narratives of the power-wielders, which comprise falsehoods and incomplete truths.

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The modernist belief in order, stability and unity is what Lyotard had called as a metanarrative. Modernist works through metanarratives or grand narratives while postmodernism questions them and also tries to deconstruct them. Postmodernism also understands that grand narratives hide, silence and negate contradictions, instabilities and differences which are inherent in any social system.

Postmodernism favours mini-narratives, stories that explain small practices and local events without pretending any universality or finality. Postmodernism realizes that history, politics and culture are grand narratives of the power-wielders which comprise falsehoods and incomplete truths. So it is the proliferation of the smaller truths which the postmodernist talks about and other significant contribution of postmodernist theory is its approach towards language and validation of things through the use of language.

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Language

- Having deconstructed the possibility of a stable, permanent reality, Postmodernism has revolutionized the concept of language
- Modernism considered language a rational, transparent tool to represent reality and the activities of the rational mind.
- In the Modernist view, language is representative of thoughts and things. Here, signifiers always point to signifieds. In Postmodernism, however, there are only surfaces, no depths. A signifier has no signified here, because there is no reality to signify.

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Having deconstructed the possibility of a stable, permanent reality, postmodernism has revolutionized the concept of language also. Whereas modernism considered language as rational and transparent tool to represent reality and the activities of the rational mind, Postmodernism views it in a slightly different manner. In the modernist view, language is representative of thoughts and things and here signifier always points to the signified.

There is no fuzziness, there is no duplicity, there is no connotation. Whereas in postmodernism there are only surfaces and there are no depths. A signifier has no signified here because there is no reality to signify. So postmodernism opens the debate to endless situations and possibilities.

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Simulacrum

- The French philosopher Baudrillard has conceptualized the Postmodern surface culture as a simulacrum.
- A simulacrum is a virtual or fake reality simulated or induced by the media or other ideological apparatuses. A simulacrum is not merely an imitation or duplication—it is the substitution of the original by a simulated, fake image. Contemporary world is a simulacrum, where reality has been thus replaced by false images.
- Gulf War
- In the Postmodern world, there are no originals, only copies; no territories, only maps; no reality, only simulations. Baudrillard suggests that not only the postmodern world is artificial; but that we have lost the capacity to discriminate between the real and the artificial.

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Another term which is often used in the context of postmodernist discussion is simulacrum. The French philosopher Baudrillard has conceptualized the postmodern surface culture as simulacrum. A simulacrum is a virtual or a fake reality which is simulated or induced by the media or other ideological apparatuses. A simulacrum is not merely an imitation or duplication; it is the substitution of the original by a simulated, fake image.

Contemporary world is often viewed by the postmodernist philosophers as a simulacrum where reality has been thus replaced by false images. Baudrillard had talked a lot about the Gulf War and he had said that the presentation of the Gulf War through media was somewhere different from the actual Gulf War. In the postmodern world, there are no originals and only copies and copies become more significant than the original.

So Baudrillard has remarked that people understood Gulf War and we can take this philosophy further into our analysis of other situations at the similar level also. So Baudrillard says that the Gulf War ultimately interested people because of its media coverage. Nobody actually bothered much about what was happening in the Gulf at that time but the media images dominated the people's imaginations.

And for the majority of the people, it was these images which became more important than the actual war which was being fought on. So in the postmodern world, we find that there are no territories; there are no originals, only maps and copies. It is not a reality but the simulation of a reality which has become the major focus in today's world. Baudrillard has suggested that the postmodern world is not only artificial but that we have lost the capacity to discriminate between the real and the artificial.

In our discussions on media theories, we would take up this point further in detail. Another aspect which is very significant to understand in the postmodernist context is the significance of multinational capitalism and globalization. Postmodernist philosophers also say that not only we have moved away from the reality but we have also moved away from the reality of the goods we consume.

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Multinational capitalism and globalization

- We have moved away from the reality of the goods we consume.
- Fredric Jameson has related Modernism and Postmodernism to the second and third phases of capitalism.
 - The first phase of capitalism of the 18th -19th centuries, called Market Capitalism, witnessed the early technological development such as that of the steam-driven motor, and corresponded to the Realist phase.
 - The early 20th century, with the development of electrical and internal combustion motors, witnessed the onset of Monopoly Capitalism and Modernism.
 - The Postmodern era corresponds to the age of nuclear and electronic technologies and Consumer Capitalism, where the emphasis is on marketing, selling and consumption rather than production. The dehumanized, globalized world, wipes out individual and national identities, in favor of multinational marketing.

Fredric Jameson is the philosopher who had initiated this idea and he has related modernism and postmodernism to the second and third phases of capitalism. According to Jameson, the first phase of capitalism happened in the 18th and 19th century and he has decided the term market capitalism for denoting it.

He says that this is the era of pure technological development such as that of the steam-driven motor and it corresponded to the Realist phase but very soon the nature of technology also changed and in the early 20th century, we find that the electrical aspects of technology became more important and with the development of internal combustion motors, we witnessed the onset of monopoly capitalism and modernism.

But then it also changed as technology moved further and we had computers gradually leading to artificial intelligence. The postmodern era corresponds to the age of nuclear and electronic technologies and consumer capitalism where the emphasis is on marketing, selling and consumption rather than production. The dehumanized, globalized world wipes out individual and national identities in favour of multinational marketing.

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- Lyotard, Baudrillard and Jameson.
- Plurality in the very constitution of this theory.
- Postmodernism can be examined from Feminist and Post-colonial angles.



So whereas we find that these philosophers like Lyotard, Baudrillard and Jameson have pointed out the plurality in the very constitution of this theory. Other philosophers have also taken it much ahead. For example, postmodernism can also be examined from the point of view of feminism as well as from the perspective of the post-colonial theory also. So today we have discussed the historical context of these theories.

We have seen how the multiplicity of directions has been significant in order to understand postmodernism. We would follow it up with a discussion of the progenitors, the significance of contemporary philosophers as well as the significance of those philosophical approaches which have ultimately led to the development of postmodernist theories. We would also discuss what are the key characteristics of postmodernism which differentiated very sturdily from the modernism as such. Thank you.