

**GAUHATI UNIVERSITY**  
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**M.A. Third Semester**

**(Under CBCS)**

**ENGLISH**

**Paper: ENG 3046**

**MODERN LITERARY CRITICISM  
AND THEORY**



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# **Block-I**

**Unit 1: Romantic Theory and Criticism**

**Unit 2: Victorian Theory and Criticism**

**Unit 3: Russian Criticism**

**Unit 4: New Criticism**

# UNIT 1

## ROMANTIC THEORY AND CRITICISM

### Unit Structure:

- 1.1 Objectives
- 1.2 Historical Background
- 1.3 Important Figures
- 1.4 Key Concepts
- 1.5 Summing Up
- 1.6 References/Suggested Readings

### 1.1 Objectives

We are hopeful that by the end of working through this unit, you will have gained a comprehensive idea of the basic ideas of Romanticism. You should be able to

- *name* the writers and thinkers associated with Romanticism
- *describe* the main features of the movement
- *explain* the basic ideas of Romantic thought, and
- *sketch* the reach of Romantic thought

### 1.2 Historical Background

Two famous documents lead us to the romantic movement in Germany and England: *Das Athenaeum* (1798 - 1800), sponsored mainly by the Schlegels, in Germany; *Lyrical Ballads* (1798), in England. Wordsworth's famous 'Preface' to the *Lyrical Ballads* was added in 1800. In one sense, romanticism signified a departure from "the Latin tradition and the adoption of a view of poetry centered on the expression and communication of emotion." This can be traced back to a wider current spreading through much of Western Europe.

But romantic criticism also achieves the task of the "establishment of a dialectical and symbolist view of poetry".

The beginnings of Romanticism can be found in the late eighteenth century while it reached its zenith in the early nineteenth century. Romanticism emerged during the time span in which various movements and events took place-the French Revolution, especially, and the revolutions of 1830 and 1848, the growth of intense nationalism, the oppositional movements of socialism, and even anarchism. Rather than the imitation of classical writers and models, a shift in philosophical orientation occurred through the ideas expounded by thinkers like Locke, Hume, and Burke. In the later eighteenth century alone neoclassical ideals had been displaced by a new emphasis on individual experience. In some ways, Romanticism shares similarities with Enlightenment thought as in the profoundly utopian faith in progress and also the emphasis on experience as authoritative. This supported an intense individualism but it also embraced a belief in democratic values. From critics like Edward Young, William Duff, and Joseph Warton came a stress on originality, creative imagination and genius.

**A historical view of the Romantic Movement in Germany:**

"The Romantic Movement began less as a protest against the Neoclassicism of Weimar than as a radical extension of some of its beliefs and interests, especially, at first, in its emphasis upon Greek antiquity, longed for like some lost paradise. The Romantic poet could create his own world from reality or from fancy and could turn whatever he liked into poetry. There was to be no end to the innovations made in content and style by the great wealth of literary talents who now emerged all over Germany and from various strata of society. The rising generation felt free and able to revise all accepted representative values, not only in art and literature but in other spheres as well. Among the topics then in vogue were nature

and the spirit in all their manifestations, particularly the supernatural, the subconscious, and the mystical. In the evolution of German Romanticism no small part was played by the philosopher Johann Gottlieb Fichte and the theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher.

Two major writers fall between Neoclassicism and Romanticism proper: Friedrich Hölderlin and Jean Paul (Johann Paul Friedrich Richter). Hölderlin was one of Germany's greatest poets. He was a friend of the philosophers Friedrich Schelling and G.W.F. Hegel and was influenced by Klopstock and Schiller. His lyrical novel *Hyperion* (1797 -99) sums up his major concerns: his yearning for antiquity, for union with the divine, and for a political renewal of Germany. Jean Paul's once immensely popular novels introduced a new focus on ordinary life. They lack shape but sustain interest by their display of humour, warmth, sentiment, and whimsy. His main novels include *Hesperus* (1795), *Siebenkäs* (1796-97; *Flower, Fruit and Thorn Pieces*), *Titan* (1800-03), and *Die Flegeljahre* (1804-05; *Walt and Vult*).

The first Romantic school originated in Jena about 1798. It was partly inspired by the subjective idealism of Fichte, but its principal philosopher was Schelling, whose *Naturphilosophie* asserted the unity of nature and the human spirit. The major literary theorists were the brothers August Wilhelm and Friedrich von Schlegel, who held that the first duty of criticism was to understand and appreciate, while Romantic literature was to encompass all forms of writing in "progressive universal poetry". Their main literary model was Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister*. The chief creative writers of the Jena school were Wilhelm Heinrich Wackenroder, Ludwig Tieck, and Novalis (Freidrich von Hardenberg). Wackenroder's collection of anecdotal accounts and sketches, *Herzensergiessungen eines kunstliebenden Klosterbruders* (1797) was the school's first major literary production, and it gave to art a religious significance. . .The

finest imaginative achievement of early Romanticism, however, was found in Novalis' lyrics and aphorisms and in his unfinished novels."

"The first Romantic school had dispersed by 1804. After 1805, however, a second school developed in Heidelberg around Achim von Arnim, Clemens Brentano, and Johann Joseph von Görres. Unlike the members of the earlier school, the Heidelberg writers produced historical works and also collected folk songs and popular prose romances."

(From the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, fifteenth edition, 2005)

We can see here some of the reasons for the (initial) Romantic support for the French Revolution as in the examples of Blake, Wordsworth, and (Johann Christian Friedrich) Hölderlin, a major German poet. Major poets and writers like George Sand, Shelley, Byron, Heine, and Victor Hugo, upheld calls for justice and liberation for traditional forms of oppression. Figures like Blake, Byron, Shelley and Wordsworth, however, also reacted vehemently against those features of the social and economic conditions which favoured the bourgeoisie such as the industrialised, mechanical order of life with the accompanying misery and squalor. The new, lowered standards of morality based on the ideals of utility and maximum profit, the ideals of weighing such profits ("calculation") were objects of artistic and poetic condemnation.

Romantic thought also makes its earliest appearance in writers like Thomas Gray, Oliver Goldsmith and Robert Burns. Wordsworth and Coleridge stand out as perhaps the most influential exponents of Romantic thought. Many critics have noted that the Romantics sought a vision at the cultural and aesthetic levels to counter the social and cultural effects of bourgeois practices which had broken the world into fragments divorcing individual from society, reason



and emotion, past and present. Thus William Blake turned to a mystical vision which attempted to reconcile contradictions. Poetry could effect the reconciliation of opposites, Blake thought. He took a mythical view of history. In *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1793) he presented his views on religion.

**SAQ**

How are such Romantic ideas (of the reconciliation of opposites) adumbrated in Blake's *Songs of Innocence and Experience*? (90 words)

.....  
.....  
.....  
.....

**1.3 Important Figures**

Shelley, in his *Defence of Poetry*, expounded fundamentally Romantic principles showing the superiority of the imagination over reason, and the higher status of poetry. Along with other Romantic thinkers - Dorothy Wordsworth (1771 - 1855; who influenced the poet and her brother, William Wordsworth, considerably), Coleridge, Mary Shelley (1797 - 1851; author of *Frankenstein*), and Byron - Shelley and Keats expounded important Romantic ideals of "negative capability", the high status of poetry, the rejection of conventional beliefs, and so on.

If we look to Germany in the late eighteenth century, we see the names of Johann Gottfried von Herder (1744-1803), Goethe, and Schiller who experimented with the movement known as the *Sturm und Drang* ("Storm and Stress"). It was Herder (who came under the tutelage of Johann Georg Hamann, "who emphasized the

inspirational and symbolical function of language") and who "grasped, as no thinker before him had done, the idea of historical evolution and engendered the main current of the Sturm und Drang. He stressed the value of historical continuity in literature and pointed to the folk songs, ballads, and romances of the Middle Ages as sources of inspiration to which Bishop Thomas Percy's *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (1765) had recently drawn attention. It was, moreover, Herder who aroused in Goethe an interest in Gothic architecture, the *Volkslied*, and Shakespeare."

German Romanticism revolved around figures like Schiller, Heinrich Heine (1797 - 1856), Friedrich Hölderlin and Friedrich Novalis (1772 - 1801). The foundations of Romanticism were laid down in Germany, especially in the work of Immanuel Kant and Friedrich von Schlegel. Kant advocated aesthetic autonomy - an idea that helped to reinforce the Romantic stress on the creative imagination and its originality. The poet, Friedrich von Schiller (1759 - 1805), was profoundly influenced by the concept and saw the aesthetic space as allowing freedom, and reconciling sensation and reason. Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762 - 1814) put stress on the ego or self as the primary reality which mediates between appearance and reality. Friedrich Schelling (1775 - 1854) is to be remembered as the chief exponent of Romantic philosophy who proposed in his *System of Transcendental Idealism* (1800) that consciousness is centered on itself and that knowledge of the world mediates self-consciousness.

Friedrich von Schlegel was another contributor to German Romantic thought. With his openness to the ideas of Schiller and Fichte, Schlegel relied upon the concept of Romantic irony as giving to poetry its special status. For him, Romantic irony recast Socratic irony: "In this sort of irony, everything should be playful and serious, guilelessly open and deeply hidden. It originates in the

union of *savoir vivre* and scientific spirit, in the conjunction of a perfectly instinctive and a perfectly consciously philosophy. It contains and arouses a feeling of indissoluble antagonism between the absolute and the relative, between the impossibility and the necessity of complete communication." Schlegel conceives of irony as a form of paradox in the sense that it accommodates divergent perspectives on the world without proposing a higher reconciliation but with the acknowledgement that contradiction and paradox are of this world.

**SAQ**

1. With whom do you identify the following?

*Confessions of an English Opium Eater*.....

*Alastor; or, The Spirit of Solitude*.....

*Childe Harold's*

*Pilgrimage*.....

*"Lines Written a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey"*.....

.....

*"A Slumber did my Spirit Seal"*.....

*The Lay of the Last Minstrel*.....

*The Mysteries of Udolpho*.....

2. Pick the odd one out:

*Visions of the Daughters of Albion, The Book of Urizen, The Book of Thel, A Vindication of the Rights of Women*

William Hazlitt (1778 - 1830) wrote in his essay "First Acquaintance with the Poets" of his deep appreciation of Coleridge (and of Wordsworth) which is identical with what he expresses in *Lectures on the English Poets*, that Coleridge was "the only person from whom I ever learnt anything". But, as Prof. Wellek points out,

Hazlitt is quite different in his critical methods from Coleridge. He is a practical critic whereas Coleridge dealt with general principles. Elsewhere, as Wellek observes, Hazlitt rejected Coleridge's position as a critic as well as his philosophical principles. In his book *On the Characters of Shakespeare's Plays* (1817), Hazlitt even maintains silence with regard to Coleridge's Shakespeare lectures. This is just to bring to you both the closeness and the distance between these critics and thinkers. Hazlitt was also influenced by Wordsworth's prefaces to the *Lyrical Ballads*. There are other affinities between Hazlitt and Charles Lamb (1775 - 1834). Prof. Wellek mentions this relationship between Lamb and Hazlitt in these words: "What is common to Lamb and Hazlitt are three methods of criticism which were apparently new at that time: evocation, metaphor, and personal reference. The methods are ultimately Longinian, but there are no examples in English 18<sup>th</sup> century criticism which even approximate what Lamb and Hazlitt were doing." Lamb himself put paid to any estimate of himself as a theorist, saying, "I can vehemently applaud, or perversely stickle, at *parts*: but I cannot grasp at a whole." However, many of the assessments he made of other poets show a fine critical mind at work. Of Hazlitt as a critic, Wellek remarks that, "Hazlitt wrote much on his contemporaries. He meets the difficult test of recognizing the best of his time remarkably well - a test so difficult that it is in fact rarely met even by the greatest critics. Though Hazlitt's political outlook embittered his relations with Wordsworth and Coleridge, he always recognized their greatness as poets."

To include John Keats (1795 - 1821) among the critics of the Romantic period may seem that we are stretching the category, but Keats did write "one review, published criticism of two performances by Kean, left some marginalia in copies of Milton, Shakespeare, and Burton, and pronounced on poetry and poets in his

private letters." Keats derived his critical ideas from Hazlitt and Wordsworth. He greatly admired Hazlitt but Keats expressed his critical ideas in his own unique way. His focus was on the "poet, his character and function, not with poetry as a structure and meaning". (Wellek).

### **Stop to Consider**

"The best known and most striking passages in Keats's letters are those on the impersonality, the "negative capability" of the poet. "Negative capability" means to Keats something quite specific, the capability of "being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason." By this standard the poet (and Keats always has Shakespeare as a model for himself in mind) should not be committed, should not be, like Coleridge, a philosopher "incapable of remaining content with half knowledge." "Negative capability" is this a phrase which defines Keats's grasp of the nature of an aesthetic which is not the same as the intellectual or the didactic. Keats condemns the overtly didactic many times: "we hate," he says speaking of Wordsworth, "poetry that has a palpable design upon us," "we do not want to be bullied into a certain philosophy." Shelley seems to Keats too much of a propagandist in verse: in the only letter he wrote him he advised him to "curb his magnanimity" and be more of an artist and "to load every rift of his subject with ore." But this recognition of the special workings of poetry does not mean the later 19th-century aestheticism, the view that the poet is maker of merely beautiful and useless decorative things. It means that Keats "never wrote a single line of poetry with the least shadow of public thought," that poetry should come (as Keats felt that it did to him in his best moments) as "naturally as the leaves of a tree." The "genius

of poetry must work out its own salvation in a man: it cannot be matured by law and precept, but by sensation and watchfulness in itself. That which is creative must create itself." Thus poetry is to Keats mainly self-expression and an expression of feeling rather than of ideas or moral precepts."

[From René Wellek : *A History of Modern Criticism 1750 - 1950: The Romantic Age* , p.213]

"In Romantic as in Neoplatonic thought, division, separateness, externality, isolation are equated with evil, as well as with that other consequence of the Biblical fall of man, death. "So long as I myself am *identical* with nature," said Schelling, "I understand what a living nature is as well as I understand my own life. . . .As soon, however, as I separate myself . . . from nature, nothing more is left for me but a dead object." "The activity of differentiating" by the understanding, Hegel wrote, effects the "dismembered "unactuality" that we call "death"; while "the life that endures and preserves itself through death is the life of the spirit." As Novalis summarized what was a Romantic commonplace: "All evil and wickedness is isolating (it is the principle of separation)." "

"In consonance with this outlook, Romantic thinkers regard philosophical reflection, the very act of taking thought (since it necessarily seeks understanding by the analytic division of one into many) as in itself, in Schelling's words, "a spiritual sickness of mankind . . .an evil," because once begun, it continues inexorably to divide everything "which nature had permanently united." And the radical and cardinal malaise of man, because it is both the initial cause and the continuing manifestation of his evil and suffering, is the separation with which consciousness and reflection begins when "man sets himself in opposition to the outer world" - in the split, as it was variously expressed,

between ego and non-ego, subject and object, spirit and other, nature and mind. The primal fracture which results when man begins to reflect, and so to philosophize, is usually conceived as having two dimensions, one cognitive and the other moral. . . ."

Romantic philosophy is thus primarily a metaphysics of integration, of which the key principle is that of the "reconciliation," or synthesis, of whatever is divided, opposed, and conflicting."

[From *Natural Supernaturalism*, by M.H.Abrams, pp.181 -2]

We cannot leave out the spread of Romanticism to America. From the wider political angle, the French Revolution of 1789, and the tumultuous upheavals in Europe in 1830 and 1848 also had their impact on the situation in America. Economically, industrial capitalism was common to both Europe and America which alone can be said to have engendered a certain way of perceiving the world. In brief, having achieved independence from Great Britain in 1776, American thinkers turned to questions of national identity and a distinctly American literary tradition. This happened under the influence of Romantic notions of nature and self. Romantic thinkers in America included the names of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Walt Whitman, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Margaret Fuller, Henry David Thoreau, and Herman Melville.

Emerson is central to American Romanticism as he brought together ideas from Wordsworth, and Coleridge, in relation to nature, imagination and language. America is posited as a "poem" needing inscription, in the works of Emerson and Whitman. Henry David Thoreau (1817 - 1862) is to be remembered in this connection, too, especially with reference to his *Walden* (1854) which embodies his high Romanticism. Both Emerson and Thoreau also were influenced

by Carlyle. Thoreau's essay, "Civil Disobedience" lent inspiration to both Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr.(leader of the American civil rights movement).

**SAQ**

Try to comment on the potential for 'revolutionary' thought in Romantic. What does it say of the Romantic conception of the relation of individual/self with the world? (80 + 80 words)

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.....  
.....

**1.4 Key Concepts**

Romanticism arose largely in the fields of literature and philosophy. A major element of Romantic thought is its turn towards subjectivity which is to be contrasted with the classical insistence on the objective. Following the ideas of Fichte, and Schelling, as much as of Hegel, Romanticism addressed the relations between self and nature, and the subject and the object because it saw these different worlds as 'mutually constructive processes'. It understood human perception as being active rather than being passively receptive to impressions from the outside world. Thus it became possible to valorise uniqueness, originality, experience, in place of convention and tradition. The self of Romantic thought is not identical with the self of the bourgeois individualism of political and economic philosophies. Romantic thinkers conceived of the self as much more authentic and profound, concealed within the coverings of convention. Through principles of unity, as in irony, for instance, Romantic thinkers propounded the self as embodying a unity only thus made possible and bringing together the fragments splintered



via the visions of the bourgeois world. Such a process was the achievement of the poetic vision. Thus the Romantics tended to exalt the poet as the poet's originality made him capable of making the essential connections between discrete phenomena and sublimate the human faculty of perception in terms of a unifying, a comprehensive vision.

The imagination is, for the Romantics, a crucial human faculty with the capacity to unify and harmonize such polarities as sensation and reason. We should not suppose, simplistically, that the Romantics displaced Enlightenment 'reason' with imagination, (associated with emotion, instinct, and spontaneity). What Romantic thought sought to do was to situate 'imagination' within a larger, more comprehensive scheme of perception. To understand this better, we have to return to Immanuel Kant who really attempted to show the limits of the superiority of 'reason'. Much of Romantic thought takes Kant's distinction between phenomena and noumena, as its starting point. Novalis (Friedrich von Hardenberg), like all the other German Romantics, argued against scientism: science had made "the infinite creative music of the universe into the dull clattering of a gigantic mill driven by the stream of chance and floating upon it, a mill, without architect and without miller, grinding itself to pieces, in fact a *perpetuum mobile*". If we look at the philosophical currents of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, we can recall the empirical and analytic trends which the German romantics sought to counter with "a program for poetic re-establishment of the analytically dissolved harmony between man and nature and between the parts of man's own consciousness" (Wimsatt & Brooks). Both Kant and Friedrich von Schlegel laid down the idea that aesthetic judgments arise independently of moral standards or of judgments based on knowledge or information. For Kant, the mind has an active role in constructing the world; what we know of the world is through its

phenomena. What the world might be in reality, in itself, is unknowable and is the world of noumena. Friedrich von Schiller, the poet, was perhaps one to be most influenced by Kant's idea of the aesthetic as a mode of freedom which united sensation and reason. As we have already noted, the philosopher Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762 - 1814), attempted to overcome what appeared to be the irreconcilability between the worlds of the phenomena and the noumena through his positing of the self or the self as the primary reality. However, Friedrich W. J. Schelling (1775 - 1854), who can be counted as the most influential for Romantic thought drew up the principles of a new philosophy without adopting the Kantian distinctions between aesthetics, epistemology and ethics. He, like Fichte, merged both subject and object by making exalting human creativity ("poetry"): "I am convinced that the highest act of reason is the aesthetic act embracing all ideas and that truth and goodness are made kindred only in beauty. The philosopher must have as much aesthetic power as the poet. Poetry thus assumes a new dignity; it becomes what it was in the beginning - the teacher of mankind: for there is no philosophy or history any more; poetry alone will outlive all other sciences and arts." Wellek explains Schelling's position on the role of imagination in this light - "Both the philosopher and the artist penetrate into the essence of the universe, the absolute. Art thus breaks down the barriers between the real and the ideal world. It is the representation of the infinite in the finite, a union of nature and freedom, for it is both a product of the conscious and the unconscious, of the imagination which unconsciously creates our real world and consciously creates the ideal world of art." We can see Schelling's influence on Coleridge and the other English Romantics.

### **Check Your Progress**

1. Explain the prominence given to poetry in Romantic thought.
2. Explain the importance ascribed to the role played by imagination in human perception as propounded by Romantic thinkers.

Wellek tells us that the term, 'romantic', did not carry the same associations in England as it did in Germany. There was no corresponding movement in England where it referred to medieval romance and the epics, particularly in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. By the eighteenth century, English writers, no doubt, were aware of a movement in Germany which rejected the standards of the neo-classical Enlightenment. In 1811, Coleridge distinguished between the classical and the romantic-by referring back to the ideas of August Wilhelm Schlegel. This debate drew the energies of the German critics who had begun to use the term, 'romantic', in referring to what they considered a "central and dynamic literary conception". A.W.Schlegel conducts a systematic discussion on the topic in his Vienna *Lectures on Dramatic Art and Poetry* (1809 - 1811) while talking of the whole history of drama. While trying to work out a proper theory of criticism, Schlegel recognised "the cooperation and interpenetration of criticism and history, theory and practice." Wellek further adds here that "[A.W. Schlegel] argues that there cannot be history without theory, since history, if it is not to be a mere chronicle, requires a principle of selectivity. Each phenomenon of art can be assigned its true position only by relating it to the idea of art. On the other hand, no theory of art can exist without the history of art, for obviously history, especially art history, has to teach by examples. Schlegel recognizes the central difficulty of art history, . . . Each genuine work of art is perfect by

itself; but if history means progress, approximation to perfection, then art history must be made up of imperfect phenomena which actually should not have a place in the realm of genuine art." If you follow Schlegel's argument you can see how systematically he is able to articulate the search for the foundations of an impartial critical method which has to recognise the presence of a subjective element as well as its capacity to be both theoretical and historical. He thought thus that "Critical reflection is thus a constant experimentation to discover theoretical statements." The full-fledged form of his argument is expressed in his contrast between the classic and the romantic. In his third lecture course of 1803 - 04, Schlegel made a systematic survey of romantic literature. Only in his Vienna lectures does he discuss the terms fully. Schlegel devoted his attention to German 18th-century literature even while he was well grounded in the study of Shakespeare's plays besides other modern literature. For English Romantics A. W. Schlegel and his brother Friedrich Schlegel, "best formulated a view of literature and criticism which was transmitted by Coleridge to the English-speaking world and is, on many essential points, accepted by recent English and American criticism."

### **Stop to Consider**

#### **Irony in Romanticism**

We can note three features of Romanticism: its original association with tales of adventure especially of the medieval period, with the fantastic, with folklore, the legendary, and finally, with nature. Romanticism also calls up a focus on the subjective, the expression of the subjective, the sublimation of nature, primitivism, spontaneity chiefly related with childhood, the poetic and the sublime, and the insistence on the imagination

as a greater power than reason. An important disposition of Romanticism lies in the break with ideas that ultimately derived from the Roman poet of ancient times, Horace, who proposed that literature should both please and instruct. If we look closely into this last proposition we can find a place in it to also add that this imposes utilitarian and moralistic constraints on literature. Romanticism can be seen as the attempt to break away from this mould and to emphasise the autonomy of art. With this idea comes the related point that art and literature can therefore be accommodative of conflicting perspectives on life and the world. Thus we should remember that the philosophical basis of Romanticism lies in the status it gives to irony.

How does irony accommodate contrary points of view?

One strand of Romantic thought leads to Friedrich von Schlegel who propounded the concept of Romantic irony. Schlegel began as a classical philologist. Through his being influenced by the ideas of Schiller and Fichte, he saw irony as the special orientation of poetry. Schlegel attempted to work out a definition of poetry as also to define 'romantic'. He saw irony as "a form of paradox. Paradox is what is at the same time good and great." He viewed irony as the recognition of the paradoxical nature of the world. This meant that an ambivalent attitude is the means of grasping the contradictoriness of the totality of the world. Irony stands for the struggle between the relative and the absolute, "the simultaneous consciousness of the impossibility and the necessity of a complete account of reality." (Wellek). A distance between the object and the artist allows art to be created in a "liberal frame of mind". An artist can be objective only when he is detached from his work. Like Kant who saw art as free activity, Schlegel viewed art as founded in irony - "we demand that the events, the people, in

brief the whole play of life, should really be conceived and represented as play" - because irony is to be associated with "transcendental poetry", the "poetry of poetry" as in the work of Pindar, Dante, and Goethe. "Irony to Schlegel is objectivity, complete superiority, detachment, manipulation of the subject matter." (Wellek). Schlegel introduced the term, "irony" into discussions of literature. He gives it a meaning different from the ancient association with rhetoric. He did not use the term, "romantic irony". But his interpretation of 'irony' is also different from 'tragic irony' (as in the work of Sophocles) which was developed by Connop Thirlwall in the 19th century.

In his "Critical Fragments", he recast Socratic irony and wrote: "In this sort of irony, everything should be playful and serious, guilelessly open and deeply hidden. It originates in the union of savoir vivre and scientific spirit, in the conjunction of a perfectly instinctive and a perfectly conscious philosophy. It contains and arouses a feeling of indissoluble antagonism between the absolute and the relative, between the impossibility and the necessity of complete communication." Schlegel saw incomprehensibility as a feature of understanding; in 1800, in his essay "On Incomprehensibility," he spoke of the "irony of irony" and that "all incomprehension is relative". You must understand that this is very different from the Enlightenment stand that incomprehension is an 'evil'. Through such an argument Schlegel was able to point out the limits of rationality and that our knowledge - systems are based on principles of which we have no full understanding.

[Wellek, *A History of Modern Criticism*; M.A.R.Habib, *A History of Literary Criticism*]

### **Check Your Progress**

1. Give a brief sketch of the main exponents of Romantic critical theory along with an outline of their main critical concerns.
2. Write short notes on the following:
  - a) The Romantic Imagination
  - b) Human nature in Romantic theory
  - c) Keats as Romantic critic
3. Write an essay on the influence of the German romantic thinkers on English critics highlighting the specific areas of concern.

We have already noted the Romantics' high elevation of the poet. Some of this high regard may be traced back even to Aristotle who linked poetry with natural endowment. We should also note that this is to be seen in contradistinction from the classical view of art as the employment of conscious craft. Through the Renaissance, inspiration was commonly linked to nature. By the time we come to the eighteenth century, we see Addison attaching 'genius' to inborn poetic power. Pope declared Shakespeare to be "original". The notion of 'natural' genius brought in related questions of poetic inspiration. How to explain the source of poetic invention, and thus the status of artistic creativity? With periodic variations, this ideational concept continued to draw critical attention since artistic standards needed universal foundations, not the ordinary values of 'taste'. By the end of the eighteenth century in England, poets began to acknowledge inventiveness as the product of whim, the unpremeditated impulse, or nature, and therefore 'organic' in this sense. In his 'Defence of Poetry', Shelley asserted that poetic composition cannot be consciously willed - he called it an "error to assert that the finest passages of poetry are produced by labour and study". But Shelley also sets up his concept within another frame:

inspiration is seen as a "power [that] arises from within" the mind; the creative process (as involved in the work of art), or invention, is a natural process, like embryonic growth. Hazlitt, in his essay, "Is Genius Conscious of Its Powers?", claimed that "The definition of genius is that it acts unconsciously; and those who have produced immortal works have done so without knowing how or why". We can now see that ideas of originality in art, poetic inspiration, nature, genius, poetry, all began to be intricately linked. You must also appreciate that the concept of the unconscious is also bound up with these ideas since what is 'natural' and not subject to the force of conscious will, can be identified with the 'unconscious'.

Coleridge was much influenced by the German critics, especially A.W. Schlegel, in his distinctions between mechanical and organic art. To Coleridge, organicism was a useful concept applicable in the field of literary criticism. You can understand how this idea is made to work if you consider the instance of Friedrich Schlegel who wrote in 1795-6, that all Greek art can be viewed as "a single growth whose 'seed is grounded in human nature itself,' and which possesses a 'collective force' as its dynamic and guiding principle". Schlegel continued- "And in its historical course, each 'advance unfolds out of the preceding one as if of its own accord, and contains the complete germ of the following stage' ." Similar to what the German theorists held, Coleridge presumed that the process of literary invention involved those same forces by which things grow, -- the natural, the unplanned and the unconscious.

M.H.Abrams, from whom we have given you this lucid explanation of the meaning of organicism, also provides this description of how the model of organic growth came to underlie important issues in aesthetics: "The essential categories of organicism fostered characteristic and important criteria of aesthetic value. These are opposed to the main inclination of taste, in French and early English



classicism, for the simple, the clear, the concordant, and the complete. Organic criteria bear a resemblance to the aesthetic qualities which were collected, in the course of the eighteenth century, under the rubric of 'the sublime,' but are formulated in distinctive terms, and with a novel rationale. For example, organic growth is an open-ended process, nurturing a sense of the promise of the incomplete, and the glory of the imperfect. Also, as a plant assimilates the most diverse materials of earth and air, so the synthetic power of imagination 'reveals itself,' in Coleridge's famous phrase, 'in the balance or reconciliation of *opposite* or *discordant* qualities.' And only in a 'mechanical' unity are the parts sharply defined and fixed; in organic unity, what we find is a complex interrelation of living, indeterminate, and endlessly changing components." (p.220, *The Mirror and the Lamp*)

### **1.5 Summing Up**

By now you should be familiar with much of the basic complex of ideas inherent in Romantic thought. You would have also gathered thus far that Romantic poetry grew out of a whole philosophy of life, nature, social relations and human nature. The most explicit statements of this philosophy are to be found in Wordsworth and Coleridge. The theoretical premises may be faulted on grounds of consistency, according to the critics of Romanticism, but considering the impact of such philosophical premises on literary writing of the time, we have to regard these poets as major exponents of a particular world-view. Thus their formulations centre on ideas of the imagination, human nature, the natural world, relations between this human matrix and the non-human features of worldly existence, the self and the other, the nature of perception and cognition, as well as such topics as human subjectivity and its connections with language. You will also read more specific

discussions of these as you read of Wordsworth and Coleridge below.

### **1.6 References/Suggested Readings**

1. Duncan Wu (ed.): *Romanticism: An Anthology*, Blackwell Oxford UK & Cambridge USA, 1996
2. M.A.R.Habib: *A History of Literary Criticism: From Plato to the Present*, Blackwell Publishing, Indian Reprint 2006
3. René Wellek: *A History of Modern Criticism: 1750 - 1950, Vol.2: The Romantic Age*; Jonathan Cape, London, 1955
4. M. H. Abrams: *Super Naturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature*, W.W.Norton & Company Ltd., 1971, First South Asian Edition 2002
5. M.H.Abrams: *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition*, Oxford University Press, 1953, Indian Edition 2006

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## UNIT 2

### VICTORIAN THEORY & CRITICISM

#### **Unit Structure:**

#### **2.1 Objectives**

#### **2.2 Historical Background**

#### **2.3 Important Figures**

#### **2.4 Other Victorian Thinkers**

#### **2.5 Summing Up**

#### **2.6 References and Suggested Readings**

#### **2.1 Objectives**

By reading this unit you will be able to get a better grasp of the set of ideas that we normally associate with the thinkers of the Victorian period. We are hopeful that by the time you have worked through this unit, you will be able to-

- *name* the thinkers that we include among Victorian critics,
- *connect* these thinkers to the concepts brought up by these thinkers,
- *describe* the achievements of Victorian critical thinking.

#### **2.2 Historical Background**

We should remember that the Victorian critical trend comes on the heels of the Romantic period, around the exact middle of the nineteenth century. René Wellek notes that the principles of romantic thought "systematically propounded by Coleridge had not taken firm root in England, though it was upheld, in various versions, by Lamb and Hazlitt, and after their death by a few survivors such as De Quincey and Leigh Hunt." New ideas appear through writers and critics whose main achievements lay in fields

other than the literary. Thus we have the names of Thomas Carlyle, John Stuart Mill, Thomas Babington Macaulay and John Ruskin.

Literary ideas in the form of theories and critical standards underwent transformation around this time with newer attitudes like utilitarianism (which applied the standards of utility to decide the value of everything) and an Evangelicalism which distrusted art as "secular and frivolous". What is called "Victorianism" (a didacticism which sprang from utilitarian ideas and an evangelical distrust of art) was coming into existence in these attitudes. It came together with much "literary antiquarianism" (a backward turn to collecting additional information about the literary past), and a widening interest in literary history. Wellek describes this lucidly as he traces the roots of such attitudes to the preceding 18th century: "The intense interest in older English literature had its patriotic overtones, connected with the resurgence of English nationalism during the Napoleonic wars, and reflected a general change of taste: the new enjoyment of medieval and particularly of Elizabethan literature. But these motives behind the revival of older English literature quickly decayed, and its study became, more and more, the exclusive domain of the literary antiquarian whose ethos was an indiscriminate love of the past, a worship of new facts, and a mildly scientific curiosity." Some areas of interest within literature included Anglo-Saxon studies, the study of medieval romances, folk songs and ballads, and Elizabethan literature. (We learn that the word "folklore" comes in 1846.) Plays by Marlowe, Greene, Middleton, Ford, and Webster became accepted subjects of criticism while there were reprints of many plays and new editions of Elizabethan criticism. Through such interests it was now possible to write English literary history for the first time. Some foreign literatures were also brought into this circle of interest: German, Spanish, Danish, Slav literatures, modern Greek, and the Oriental literatures.

Although literary historiography did not emerge in full form at this time, we have the names of Robert Chambers, Henry Hallam, John Dunlop, as also Thomas Carlyle associated with it.

### **Stop to Consider**

**Thomas Carlyle (1795 - 1881):** We are reminded that "Today Carlyle excites hatred or boredom rather than admiration. He is considered a forerunner of Hitler, a worshipper of supermen heroes for whom "might makes right". . . Carlyle's style militates against any revival of his writings. Its repetitive, loud-voiced, emphatic, mannered grandiloquence, the whole biblical pathos . . .repels the present-day reader who does not know the quieter stretches of Carlyle's writings. " But Carlyle was also, finally, a social thinker, historian, stylist, literary critic, and an 'interpreter of German literature'.

**John Stuart Mill (1806-73):** Mill's father, James Mill, was probably the most prominent disciple of Jeremy Bentham, the founder of utilitarianism, and educated his son in the spirit of rationalism. Utilitarianism, being driven by attitudes held by a society favouring commerce, science, and technological progress, had no use for poetry. But J.S.Mill, going against intellectual bent of his father and Bentham, upheld the values of poetry as to be found in his essays of 1833, "What Is Poetry?" and "The Two Kinds of Poetry". Mill tried to reconcile poetry with knowledge and philosophy and for most of his life devoted himself to economics, logic, and sociology. From Mill we get the famous phrases, "Eloquence is heard, poetry is overheard" (while distinguishing between poetry and rhetoric) and "Eloquence supposes an audience; the peculiarity of poetry appears to us to lie in the poet's utter unconsciousness of a listener". From this

latter thought we obtain the idea that "all poetry is of the nature of soliloquy".

**Thomas Babington Macaulay(1800 - 1859):** He did not count himself a great literary critic although he is now remembered as poet, historian, and politician. For us, in India, he is associated with the derogatory remarks he made on Indian learning and with the Minutes formulated on the subject in 1835. However, as a literary critic, he is mentioned for some commentary he delivered on the poets, especially figures of the late 17th- and 18th-centuries.

**John Ruskin (1819 - 1900) :** He is remembered mainly for the "aesthetics propounded in the first three volumes of *Modern Painters* (1843, 1846, 1856) and later to his social teachings, in which art assumes a central place." As Wellek emphasizes the point, that "he held a theory of art (and literature) which is far from incoherent or even old-fashioned, but is an impressive restatement of romantic organicism."

Wellek's reading of this period may be of use as a description:

"It would not be unfair to say that around 1850 English criticism had reached a nadir in its history: the great romantics, Coleridge, Hazlitt and Lamb, had died in the thirties; Carlyle, the strongest figure after them, had relinquished criticism for history and social pamphleteering; Macaulay and Mill were no longer concerned with criticism. The camp followers of the great romantics, De Quincey and Leigh Hunt, both lived till 1859, but were only pale ghosts of their youth. Poetic theory was practically nonexistent or simply a remote derivative of popularized romanticism: genius, imagination, sincerity of feeling, the moral and finally social function of the poet

were the constant themes of perfunctory discussion ultimately derived from Wordsworth.

Still, a revival of English criticism was just around the corner. It came about in various and often devious ways. One could sort out the different motives by pointing to a new historicism, a new classicism, a new realism, and finally a new aestheticism which opposed the all-pervading Victorian atmosphere of didacticism and moralism. But these motives are not clearly set off from one another: they combine, they enter into compromises, they attempt genuine syntheses." [Vol.IV: *The Later Nineteenth Century*]

As you read this passage above, you can note that in terms of the history of criticism, the Victorian period does not stand out as a the high point of English criticism. But Wellek traces some of the new trends like a revised historicism, a fresh sense of the meaning of realism, a revised sense of what classicism meant - all these contributed towards a new turn in critical standards.

### **Stop to Consider**

Literary Criticism in relation to European currents of critical thought

"In the later nineteenth century, the vast unifying systems of thinkers such as Hegel, as well as the unifying visions of the Romantics, collapsed into a series of one-sided systems, such as utilitarianism, positivism, and social Darwinism. To be sure, there were a number of movements that continued the oppositional stance of Romanticism to mainstream bourgeois and Enlightenment ideals: Matthew Arnold criticized the philistinism of bourgeois society, while Thomas Carlyle promoted his own version of German idealism, and John Ruskin perpetuated a Romantic idealization of the Middle Ages. A tradition of

alternative philosophy, often pessimistic, was inaugurated by Schopenhauer and ran through thinkers such as Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, and Bergson. More politically forceful were the various movements of socialism inspired by Marx, Engels, and others.

"..... As the culmination of a historical pattern beginning in the Renaissance, science effectively displaced religion and theology as the supreme arbiter of knowledge. The economic and social forces mentioned above had led to the institutional demise of religion. Scientific development and broadly scientific attitudes intensified this process....

"...the natural sciences became the model and the measure of other disciplines. The broadest name for this emulation of science is positivism, which derives its name from those self-proclaimed "positive" philosophies of thinkers such as Auguste Comte and Emile Durkheim in France, and Herbert Spencer in England. These thinkers wished to exclude from investigation all hypotheses that were not empirically verifiable, and they rejected as "metaphysical" all inquiries that were not ultimately reducible to supposedly scientific terms of analysis, such as "matter", "motion", and "force"."

[M.A.R.Habib, *A History of Literary Criticism*]

### **2.3 Important Figures**

From among the figures associated with the expression of views on art and literature during the Victorian period, you have already been introduced to some of the better known figures. There were many others also - Thomas De Quincey (1785 - 1859), Leigh Hunt (1784-1859), Matthew Arnold (1822 - 1888), Walter Bagehot (1826-1877), and Leslie Stephen (1832 - 1904), for instance.



Leigh Hunt was definitely influenced by Coleridge's theory of imagination. He praised what had been said of Wordsworth by Coleridge as "the finest lecture on the art of poetry in the language". He wrote the introduction to the anthology of extracts from Chaucer to Keats, entitled *Imagination and Fancy* (1844), calling it "In Answer to the Question: What Is Poetry?" where he formulated his principles most clearly. He was one of the first to recognise Keats's merit and to make the biographical sketch. He was also among the first "to emphasize the peculiar greatness and fineness of Coleridge's poetry" and to uphold Shelley. He gave favourable reviews to early collections of the Tennysons and also praised Elizabeth Barrett Browning for *Aurora Leigh* and *Sonnets from the Portuguese*. Hunt is to be remembered as "a propagandist of imaginative "pure" poetry, as a mediator of older Italian literature, as an early champion of Keats and Shelley."

Thomas De Quincey has also been described as "a minor Coleridge", even being referred to as "the adjective of which Coleridge was the substantive". However, De Quincey differed vastly in opinion from Coleridge and indeed can be better understood as following Wordsworth. He stated: "For the most sound criticism on poetry, or any subject connected with it that I have ever met with, I must acknowledge my obligations to many years' conversation with Mr. Wordsworth." As Wellek points out, "in literary theory, De Quincey belongs not to the Coleridgean and German dialectical symbolism but to the empirical psychological tradition of the British and to the emotionalist trend, descending from Dennis through Hartley to Wordsworth." De Quincey distinguished between the literature of power and the literature of knowledge. Despite the use of the terms, De Quincey's formulation did not, however, make clear that by "power" he meant 'emotional impact'. (The confusion can be caused by the way in which, in other

instances, we can equate knowledge with power.) You can read his famous little essay, "On the Knocking at the Gate in *Macbeth*" (1823) for his perceptive analysis of an important scene in the play.

#### **Stop to Consider**

##### **From De Quincey's "On the Knocking at the Gate, in *Macbeth*"**

"From my boyish days I had always felt a great perplexity on one point in *Macbeth*. It was this: the knocking at the gate, which succeeds to the murder of Duncan, produced to my feelings an effect for which I never could account. The effect was, that it reflected back upon the murder a peculiar awfulness and a depth of solemnity; yet, however obstinately I endeavored with my understanding to comprehend this, for many years I never could see why it should produce such an effect."

"In *Macbeth*, for the sake of gratifying his own enormous and teeming faculty of creation, Shakspeare has introduced two murderers: and, as usual in his hands, they are remarkably discriminated: but, though in *Macbeth* the strife of mind is greater than in his wife, the tiger spirit not so awake, and his feelings caught chiefly by contagion from her,--yet, as both were finally involved in the guilt of murder, the murderous mind of necessity is finally to be presumed in both. This was to be expressed; and on its own account, as well as to make it a more proportionable antagonist to the unoffending nature of their victim, "the gracious Duncan," and adequately to expound "the deep damnation of his taking off," this was to be expressed with peculiar energy. We were to be made to feel that the human nature, i.e., the divine nature of love and mercy, spread through the hearts of all creatures, and seldom utterly withdrawn from

man,--was gone, vanished, extinct; and that the fiendish nature had taken its place. And, as this effect is marvellously accomplished in the dialogues and soliloquies themselves, so it is finally consummated by the expedient under consideration; and it is to this that I now solicit the reader's attention."

"All action in any direction is best expounded, measured, and made apprehensible, by reaction. Now apply this to the case in Macbeth. Here, as I have said, the retiring of the human heart and the entrance of the fiendish heart was to be expressed and made sensible. Another world has stepped in; and the murderers are taken out of the region of human things, human purposes, human desires. They are transfigured: Lady Macbeth is "unsexed;" Macbeth has forgot that he was born of woman; both are conformed to the image of devils; and the world of devils is suddenly revealed. But how shall this be conveyed and made palpable? In order that a new world may step in, this world must for a time disappear. The murderers, and the murder, must be insulated--cut off by an immeasurable gulph from the ordinary tide and succession of human affairs--locked up and sequestered in some deep recess; we must be made sensible that the world of ordinary life is suddenly arrested--laid asleep--tranced--racked into a dread armistice: time must be annihilated; relation to things without abolished; and all must pass self-withdrawn into a deep syncope and suspension of earthly passion. Hence it is, that when the deed is done, when the work of darkness is perfect, then the world of darkness passes away like a pageantry in the clouds: the knocking at the gate is heard; and it makes known audibly that the reaction has commenced: the human has made its reflux upon the fiendish; the pulses of life are beginning to beat again; and the re-establishment of the goings-

on of the world in which we live, first makes us profoundly sensible of the awful parenthesis that had suspended them."

[Excerpts downloaded from Project Gutenberg's edition of the essay]

Matthew Arnold is undoubtedly the most important name in the history of English criticism in the later nineteenth century. His eminence as a critic is secured by virtue of his stature as a commentator on English society and culture in general. Wellek comments: "Today both in England and in the United States - especially in academic circles - his influence is still felt. It is rather the influence of his Kulturphilosophie than of his literary criticism, but among critics of the 20th century Irving Babbitt, T.S. Eliot, F.R. Leavis, and Lionel Trilling show marked affinities with his outlook."

**SAQ**

Attempt an analysis of Wellek's view of the state of English criticism at this time. Do you think his opinion can be justified on the basis of historical arguments? Some of these reasons may even be sociological, or political, rather than being purely 'literary'. (80 words)

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.....

You should learn of Walter Bagehot as the critic who seems to be 'symptomatic' of Victorian writing. We are told by Wellek that

Bagehot is "limited, preoccupied with the normal, distrustful of everything eccentric, even Philistine in the Arnoldian sense". But we are also reminded that he "hit upon an important theme: the "type," which almost simultaneously engaged the attention in France and Dobrolyubov in Russia. He gave it an original twist with concept of "egotistical," "self-delineative," but representative poetry." Bagehot made an attempt to explore this scheme in his essay, "Wordsworth, Tennyson, and Browning: or Pure, Ornate and Grotesque Art in English Poetry" (1864), in which he says, "The business of the poet is with types; and those types are mirrored in reality." Bagehot writes: "The poet must find in that reality, the literatesque man, the literatesque scene, which nature intends for him, and which will live in his page."

Leslie Stephen was the first editor of the *Dictionary of National Biography* to which he alone contributed 378 articles. He wrote five volumes for the *English Men of Letters* series; was a moral philosopher; a historian of ideas who wrote *History of English Thought in the Eighteenth Century* (1876) and *The English Utilitarians* (1900). But other commentators have questioned his critical status (although Q.D. Leavis has valued his critical abilities with the words, "Cambridge critic").

#### **Check Your Progress**

1. Attempt a survey of the main critical works of the major thinkers of Victorian England.
2. Make a comparative study of the critical ideas of the main Victorian literary critics.

## 2.4 Other Victorian Thinkers

We should be aware that besides the critics we have already looked at above, there were other writers and thinkers in the period who also made some contributions to the body of thought that we know as "criticism".

One stream of thought enters onto the scene through what is known as the "aesthetic movement". In this connection, the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood is regarded as an important source, especially through their journal, *The Germ*, which finally ran only four numbers in 1850. In this magazine were set out ideas based on pure naturalism and on medievalism espoused by its contributors such as Holman Hunt, F.G. Stephens and Dante Gabriel Rossetti. (You will read about the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood at greater length in the block on Victorian poetry in Paper 14. So we shall not expand this point here.) The names of Swinburne and Walter Pater assume much importance in this context.

Algernon C. Swinburne (1837 - 1909) declared, in his book on William Blake (1868) that, "Art for art's sake first of all, and afterwards we may suppose all the rest shall be added to her (or if not she need hardly be overmuch concerned); but from the man who falls to artistic work with a moral purpose, shall be taken away even that which he has." However, we should not believe that Swinburne was an uncompromising supporter of art or poetry without substance. His literary judgments were often too extreme to be sustainable. Swinburne stands out as a pioneering critic of Blake's poetry but we can also note that he differed in his assessment of the romantic poets from Arnold. Wellek's estimate of him - "he was a genuine critic who succeeded in defining and upholding a specific coherent taste for the imaginative sublime and the moment of poetic magic. . . the first in England to apply purely imaginative standards

to the whole range of literature without too many concessions to purely moralistic, realistic, or philosophical standards."

Walter Pater (1839-1894) is now often dismissed as an "impressionistic" critic. But it is also correct to note that Pater went beyond the limited personal pleasure to the "duty of the critic to grasp the individuality, the unique quality of a work of art." He wrote on Wordsworth, Coleridge, Lamb and the Pre-Raphaelites. His book on *The Renaissance* (1873) is a discussion, as much of art, as of literary matters. In his famous essay, "On Style" (1889), he explored the subject and apprehended the need for intellectual labour and classical restraint: "In truth all art does but consist in the removal of surplus age." Towards the end of the essay Pater's stand regarding the value of art in relation to subject matter becomes dichotomous.

### **Stop to Consider**

#### **The English Aesthetic Movement**

Against a larger backdrop of realism and naturalism which held sway in European literature as also in America, beginning around the 1840s, poets like Charles Baudelaire in France were occupied with other subjects like language, poetic form, the access to the innermost core of human subjectivity and the evocation of mental states. Partly, these concerns were traceable back to the Romantics as also to a rejection of the newer values associated with an industrialized, urban life given to commerce and utilitarian values. You have already encountered the name of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood in this connection. This anti-realist and anti-bourgeois stream of thought was also to be found in the ideas of the Parnassian poets in France who followed the ideals of Théophile Gautier and Leconte de Lisle (1818 - 1894),

who upheld "art for art's sake". Similarly, such ideas flowered in the theories of poetic composition propounded by Edgar Allan Poe. Those who were associated with the French symbolists, and espoused such aestheticism, were the followers of Baudelaire. These included Paul Verlaine (1844 - 1896), Arthur Rimbaud (1854 - 1891), and Stéphane Mallarmé (1842 - 1898).

*The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (1899) by Arthur Symons introduced French symbolism into England. Symons described the preceding few decades of the later nineteenth century as "the age of science, the age of material things". He defined the symbolist movement as "a revolt against exteriority, against rhetoric, against a materialistic tradition" which heralded a "turn of the soul" with "a literature in which the visible world is no longer a reality, and the unseen world no longer a dream".

Walter Pater's famous phrase "art for art's sake" echoed the influence on him of the Renaissance paintings of Florence and other places. He defined the object of criticism in his preface to *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry* differently from Arnold (to "see the object as in itself it really is") with his recognition that, in thus seeing the object of criticism, we actually learn about our own subjectivity - "to know one's own impression as it really is, is to discriminate it, to realize it distinctly".

The famous preface to 'The Picture of Dorian Gray' stands as Oscar Wilde's statement of his aesthetic outlook: the "artist is the creator of beautiful things"; "All art is quite useless."; "It is the spectator, and not life, that art really mirrors." Wilde's most important views on art are set out in "The Critic as Artist" in the form of a dialogue. His most important statement intimately relates art and criticism:



"the highest Criticism, being the purest form of personal impression, is in its way more creative than creation, as it has least reference to any standard external to itself, and is, in fact, its own reason for existing ... Certainly it is never trammelled by any shackles of verisimilitude. No ignoble considerations of probability, that cowardly concession to the tedious repetitions of domestic or public life, affect it ever . . . That is what the highest criticism really is, the record of one's own soul."

John Addington Symonds (1840 -1893) is often thought of as following the ideas of Walter Pater. But we are alerted by Wellek to the view that we would be mistaken to think of him as an "aesthete". Symonds averred that, "Art exists for humanity". As we learn, Symonds' work "is intellectual and rational in style and even scientific in pretension. Symonds expounds a cosmic evolutionism, a modernized Hegelianism." In the essay, "On the Application of Evolutionary Principles to Art and Literature" (contained in his *Essays Speculative and Suggestive* of 1890), we can find Symonds' application of the ideas of evolution, with borrowings from Hegel, pantheism, Wordsworth, Goethe, and Whitman. From this standpoint, Symonds was brought up against the question of the status of criticism in the light of evolution which placed artistic development within a cycle. Wellek rates Symonds' book, *Shakespeare's Predecessors in the English Drama*, as his best because "it reflects the peculiar combination of scientific evolutionism with evocative description and good appreciative criticism; it is one of the few great achievements of English literary historiography in the 19th century."

Oscar Wilde (1854 - 1900) is another writer whose ideas regarding art, literature and critical standards are not always acceptable or

tenable. Some of his opinions can be traced back to Pater, Arnold, Swinburne, Gautier, Baudelaire, and Poe. However, "The very extremism of his formulas, the scintillating wit, the inverting of commonplaces, the studied anticlimaxes shock us into awareness of issues often hidden by reasonable argumentation conscientiously weighing the pros and cons." At times he would propound a "pan-aestheticism" which sees art as embracing all life, and life to be lived for the sake of art. This is not the same as art for art's sake which declares art to be autonomous. At yet other times Wilde, as in his 'The Picture of Dorian Gray', saw extreme aestheticism as containing the seeds of moral corruption. There are also statements by Wilde that carry weight: "Form and substance cannot be separated in a work of art: they are always one. But for the purpose of analysis, and setting the wholeness of aesthetic impression aside for the moment, intellectually we can so separate them." We should note that Wilde regarded realism as failure as a method.

George Bateman Saintsbury (1845 - 1933) is remembered as possibly the most influential academic literary historian and critic of the early twentieth century. The bulk of his writings is enormous, indeed so vast, that the "sheer bulk and scope of his writings have prevented an adequate discussion." Perhaps we should limit ourselves to observing that Saintsbury holds up different critical standards for poetry and for the novel, while drama is gathered to poetry. Concerning poetry, his thinking is similar to Swinburne and Pater (and Baudelaire, even Leigh Hunt, De Quincey, Hazlitt, and Lamb) and he maintains a thoroughly formalist stance. He saw criticism as based on personal sensibility and taste. In this sense he was averse to theorising. He was criticised for the neglect of theoretical principles in his voluminous *History of Criticism*, to which he replied: "The complement of Theory I do not pretend to supply, and I cannot see that anybody has a right to demand it."

Wellek sums up his description of Saintsbury with the words - "Saintsbury does not succeed in strictly separating his artistic judgment from ideological or national prejudices and in achieving his idea of universal learning and personal impression. But one should recognize his great merits as a mapmaker in the *History of Criticism* and as a lively commentator and surveyor of modern literary history, at least of England and France."

**SAQ**

Find out the major works by (i) Oscar Wilde, and (ii) George Saintsbury. (90 + 90 words)

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George Bernard Shaw (1856 - 1950) is named by Prof. Wellek as nearly the "anti-Victorian critic" by virtue of being "the enemy of hypocrisy and smugness, the self-proclaimed destroyer of bourgeois values." But we should note Wellek's observation that "In spite of his professed break with tradition Shaw belongs to the Victorian propounders of realism, common sense, and optimism, and the enemies of romanticism and pessimism." We should remember that Shaw had been a drama critic in *The Saturday Review* just as George Henry Lewes had done for *The Leader* before him. Shaw acknowledged similarities between himself and Lewes in this connection. Before his work as drama critic Shaw had been an advocate of Ibsen's work which was crystallized in *The Quintessence of Ibsenism* in 1891. As he reviewed the English stage in the 1890s, the theatre in England was only gradually renewing

itself through some imitative works borrowed from the French apart from the familiar re-workings of Shakespeare's plays. There were also some un-remarkable plays by Henry Arthur Jones and Arthur Wing Pinero. Shaw's drama criticism helped in a re-assessment of Shakespearean drama. On the whole, as Prof. Wellek remarks, Shaw does not display much prowess as a literary critic.

## **2.5 Summing Up**

Through reading this unit above, you have learnt that while we will, for the university curriculum, talk only about Matthew Arnold below (in the next unit) as a Victorian critic, there were many other critics who discussed and debated art, poetry and literature in more generalised terms at the same time. Even while we talk of only a few names in the history of criticism, there are many more that we have left out. Don't you now think that we are far too utilitarian to learn well? I think that is how we should understand our own situation. You have seen many names you will not discuss but we have tried to give you a very brief idea of some dialogues that went on intellectually during the period. You will see the name of George Saintsbury on many books in our own university. That itself shows how important he was as a critic in the early twentieth-century. You would know G.B. Shaw better as a dramatist but here you will see that he made some effort to theorize on drama. We have added portions from De Quincey's famous essay so that you get the flavour of his criticism at first hand and do not miss out on such a famous piece of work. We cannot do without mentioning Bagehot, Pater, Ruskin, Leigh Hunt, and others who will always figure among those to be remembered as belonging to the Victorian age. So, at the very least, you will be able to mention against these names the ideas that are left behind by them.

## 2.6 References and Suggested Readings

1. Duncan Wu (ed.): *Romanticism: An Anthology*. Blackwell Oxford UK & Cambridge USA, 1996
2. M. A. R.Habib: *A History of Literary Criticism: From Plato to the Present*. Blackwell Publishing, Indian Reprint 2006
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4. M. H. Abrams: *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature*. W.W. Norton & Company Ltd., 1971, First South Asian Edition 2002
5. M. H. Abrams: *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition*. Oxford University Press, 1953, Indian Edition 2006

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## UNIT 3

### RUSSIAN FORMALISM

#### Unit Structure:

#### 3.1 Objectives

#### 3.2 Historical Background

#### 3.3 Important Figures

##### 3.3.1 Roman Jakobson

##### 3.3.2 Yuri Tynyanov

##### 3.3.3 Victor Shklovsky

##### 3.3.4 Boris Tomashevsky

#### 3.4 Key Concepts

##### 3.4.1 Literariness

##### 3.4.2 Form

##### 3.4.3 Fabula and Syuzhet

##### 3.4.4 Formalism and 'Literary History'

##### 3.4.5 Defamiliarization

#### 3.5 Summing up

#### 3.6 References and Suggested Readings

#### 3.1 Objectives

Originating in the work of OPOYAZ and the Moscow Linguistic Circle, Russian Formalism is one of the most influential critical movements of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This unit is designed to familiarize you with the major figures as well as the concepts central to Russian Formalism. By the end of this unit, you will be able to

- *understand* Russian Formalism in the context of the changing critical scenario in Russia,
- *identify* the major figures of the movement as well as assess their contribution,

- *explore* the concepts expounded by the contributors to the movement,
- *assess* the contribution of the formalists to subsequent critical/theoretical development.

### **3.2 Historical Background**

The second decade of the twentieth century saw the emergence of two groups of literary thinkers and linguists: “Moscow Linguistic Circle” and the OPOYAZ often known as the “Society for the Study of Poetic Language”. The former group was formed in the capital city of Russia in 1915. It was founded by the eminent linguist and scholar Roman Jakobson. The other members of the group were Grigory Vinokur, Peter Bogatynev, Osip Brik and Boris Tomashevsky. OPOYAZ was formed in St. Petersburg in 1916. Victor Shklovsky, Yuri Tynjanov, Boris Eikhenbaum and Victor Vinogradov belonged to this group. We must remember that the term ‘formalist’ was initially applied pejoratively to the literary scholars and critics associated with these two literary circles of Russia. These Russian critics, if separated into two different groups, were nevertheless associated in much of their intellectual effort. Their intellectual co-operation gave birth to several volumes of essays, titled “Studies in the Theory of Poetic Language” (1916-23).

Although initially used in a derogatory sense, ‘formalist’ was a neutral designation to a group of thinkers in later times. Leading thinkers of post-revolutionary Russia such as Lunacharsky, Bukharin, and Trotsky repudiated the formalist project for its adherence to the formal aspects at the cost of its wider historical and social dimensions. In fact, the formalists hardly reconciled formalist and stylistic analysis with wider socio-historical issues until Mikhail Bakhtin entered the critical arena.

**Stop to Consider:**

It is important to note that two major influences in 20<sup>th</sup> century criticism were Russian Formalism and the findings of Mikhail Bakhtin. Though not a formalist, Bakhtin linked question of literary genres and language to larger issues of ideology, class and subversion. For Bakhtin, like the formalists, language was a key concern, but his concept of language has a much wider sociological dimension. For instance, he sees language as a site for ideological struggle and social intercourse.

Throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century and well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, sociological considerations were dominant in the critical climate of Russia. Russian critics dwelt extensively on literature's connections with issues of social well-being. Perhaps, the most important critic in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Vissarioni Belinsky (1811-48), maintained that literature should contribute to social betterment while at the same time remaining artistic. Social usefulness of literature was also asserted by Nikolay Chernyshevsky who believed that art could be an instrument for the transformation of social reality. Nikolay Dobrolyubov (1836-1861) even maintained that social and political demands should overshadow the aesthetic in literature. Dimitry Pisarev (1840-68) was an iconoclast and had extreme views on this issue: for instance, he denounced Pushkin because his works, he opined, were useless as they are harmful to social progress.

Pushkin and Gogol were at the centre-stage of critical debate in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. Pavel Anenkov brought out Pushkin's works and tried to defend the autonomy of art and the dualistic ideal of the artistic and the political against the monistic doctrines of the Russian critics. Anenkov's intellectual ally was Alexander Druzhinin (1824-64) who flouted art's social commitment and said



that the socially beneficial role of art was only possible when it ceased to be art's principal aim.

Anenkov, Druzhinin and their associates were recognized as 'aesthetic' critics and their 'radical' counterparts were Chernyshevsky, Dobrolynov, and Pisarev, among others. Tolstoy, in his "What is Art?" took a position akin to the radicals. However, he pleads for a literature that can infuse Christian ideals into the readers and thus unite people. Tolstoy's notion of 'committed art' does not have the sharp political edge of the radical critics like Dobrolynov, but he shares their basic assumption about art's commitment to social good.

After the controversy between the radical and aesthetic critics subsided, the populists appeared on the critical scene. The populists saw peasantry as the potential force for the revolutionary transformation of society. Hence, they saw literature as part of a wider political programme. The most important critics from this school were Nikolay Konstantinovich Mikhaylovsky (1842-1904). Mikhaylovsky wrote articles on major Russian writers— Tolstoy, Turgenev, Dostoevsky, Mikhail Saltykov- Shchedrin and Chekhov. He even denounced Dostoevsky for his lack of social ideal.

**SAQ:**

Would you agree with the view that strong focus on the 'social' aspect of a work of art leads to a loss of aesthetic merit? (80 words)

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Russian Formalism thus can be seen as an effect of this long-standing critical debate. Historical and social dimensions of art are flouted and extra-textual yardsticks are pushed aside. Agreement is reached on the issue of what should be the proper object of literary criticism. Before 'formalism', literary analysis was not a discipline by itself but part of academic research. Besides the conventional scholars like Alexander Veselovsky, there were the symbolists who transposed literary critical discourse from the academy into the journals. The Symbolists offered a highly subjective and impressionistic mode of criticism, drawing largely on the French symbolists. The Formalists entered the scene with a reaction against the subjectivism of the symbolists, pleading for a scientific mode of literary study. They sought to emulate the models and methods of science and resorted to scientific positivism. Boris Eikhenbaum, a leading formalist critic, sees formalists isolating literature from politics and ideology as expressive of a revolutionary attitude.

Initially, the formalists offered a distinctive view of language, and underlined the distinctiveness of literary language in contrast to the language of ordinary discourse. Then we see theorizing about verse and the study of narrative plot. It was during this time that the distinction between plot and story was extensively examined. Russian Formalism was paralleled by Anglo-American New Criticism with their views of literary text as autonomous entity and hence, the proper object of study. Initially the Europeans were unaware of the Formalist school. It was only later that Roman Jakobson went to New York and formalist works began to be translated into English. Thus, 'formalism' began to attract the attention of the English-speaking world. Hence, the 'formalists' affinity with New Criticism was not a matter of influence but that of convergence.

### **Stop to Consider:**

#### **Russian Formalism Versus New Criticism**

We will discuss in the next unit of this block the affinities and the differences between Russian Formalism and New Criticism. It is pertinent to note here an important observation from *Modern Literary Theory*: “Although Russian Formalism is often likened to American New Criticism because of their similar emphasis on ‘close reading’, the Russian Formalists regarded themselves as developers of a science of criticism and were more interested in the discovery of a systematic method for the analysis of poetic texts. Russian Formalism emphasized a differential definition of literature as opposed to the New Critical isolation and objectification of the single text; they were also more emphatic in their rejection of the mimetic/expressive account of the text. Indeed, Russian Formalism rejected entirely the idea of the text as reflecting an essential unity which is ultimately one of moral or humanistic significance. The central focus of this analysis was not so much literature per se but literariness, that which makes a given text ‘literary’.”

You can understand from this an important difference between the two movements—the separate assumptions about a literary text. The New Critics were more likely to accept a text as “literary” based on derived notions of genre. The Russian Formalists would however seek to explore the status of the text with regard to prevailing notions of what the text stood for.

### **3.3 Important Figures**

#### **3.3.1 Roman Jakobson**

Roman Jakobson is a vital link between structuralism and linguistics. His life-long research was mainly directed towards the

relation between language and literature. Jakobson held that literary research and the study of linguistics should go hand-in-hand. Let us, in this context, note that one of his most important essays that propounded 'formalist' preoccupation with 'literariness' is "Linguistics and Poetics."

He was born in Russia in 1896 and died in the USA in 1982. He entered Moscow University in 1914, completed his study at the University of Prague and taught at Masaryk University from 1935 till the Nazi occupation in 1939. In 1939, he fled to Scandinavia, then immigrated to the USA in 1941 and taught at Ecole Libre des Hautes Etudes (1942-46) among many other educational institutes.

Jakobson founded Moscow Linguistic circle in 1915 and was also associated with the OPOYAZ. He founded the 'Prague Linguistic Circle' where he started an engagement with Ferdinand de Saussure's work. He was also associated with the founding of the Linguistic Circle of New York after he moved to America.

#### **Stop to Consider:**

##### **Moscow Linguistic Circle & OPOYAZ**

The founding of the Moscow Linguistic Circle in 1915 provided an unprecedented forum for research into the relations of literature and language, since such research had remained outside the scope of the neo-grammarians' linguistics then dominating language studies. The work of the circle promoted research into prosody, myth and both traditional and contemporary folklore. Jakobson counted among his collaborators and friends many leading avant-garde poets and painters. The close affiliation of the circle with the Petrograd-based OPOYAZ provided a context in which scholarly and historical research proceeded hand-in-hand with contemporary literature.

Jakobson held the view that poetics cannot be separated from linguistics and that poetic elements are object of linguistic scouting. Incorporating the concepts of synchrony and diachrony, he explains that literary study is concerned with elements of the literary text that persist at a given point of time, as well as with changes occurring in a tradition or a system over time. However, Jakobson's contribution to the formalist movement lies in the analysis of 'literariness'. He attempted to define what makes a verbal message a work of art in linguistic terms. 'Literariness' was a major concern for the formalists from the very beginning of the movement. In "Linguistics and Poetics" Jakobson explored this fundamental 'formalist' idea using a wide range of illustration and example. Closely linked to this concept is a theory of poetry. Jakobson identifies metaphor and metonymy as two fundamental ways of organizing discourse.

### **3.3.2 Yuri Tynyanov**

Born in Latvia, Tynyanov graduated from Petrograd University in 1918. Besides his identity as a 'formalist' critic, Tynyanov was also regarded as an authority on Pushkin. The question of what counts as literature and what does not was a constant pre-occupation among the 'formalists'. If Jacobson and Shklovsky expounded 'literariness' and 'defamiliarisation' as an answer to the problem of the division between what is literary and what is ordinary, Tynyanov's argument was that a text being 'literary' depended on its relationship with both literary and extra-literary orders. His concept of a literary system is that a text may be literary and non-literary depending on the nature of the literary systems within which it is set. An important offshoot of such a position is the notion of literature's relative status and the negation of the concept of tradition as an integrated system as found in this statement: "Tradition, the basic concept of an established history of literature, has proved to be an unjustifiable

abstraction of one or more of the literary elements of a given system within which they occupy the same plane and play the same role. They are equated with the like elements of another system in which they are on a different plain, thus they are brought into a seemingly unified, fictitiously integrated system.” (Tony Bennett)

The initial position of the ‘formalists’ was aesthetic and historical. They pleaded for the study of devices and techniques which account for the literariness of a given work of art. By 1924, literary study introduced a systematic, functional and dynamic perspective; and it started with Tynyanov. The most distinguished work of Tynyanov was *Theses on Language*- a collaborative work with Jakobson. The points made here are important for the ‘formalist’ movement.

1. Literary study must be carried on rigorously on a theoretical basis using precise terminology.
2. Within a particular form in literature (such as poetry) structural laws must be established before it is related to other fields.
3. Study of literary history must be systematic and ‘evidences’ must be analyzed attending on how they work within the system.
4. A system is not assemblage of all contemporary phenomena; it involves a hierarchy of which elements can be situated.

### **3.3.3 Victor Shklovsky**

Victor Shklovsky was another major figure closely associated with Russian Formalism. He is known in modern literary criticism for the concept of ‘defamiliarization’— a dominant concern of this school.

Born in St. Petersburg in 1893, Shklovsky completed his education at the University of St. Petersburg. In 1923, he moved to Germany

to settle there permanently. There he published two novels: *A Sentimental Journey* (1923) and *Zoo* (1923). He came back to Russia and started serious engagement with literary criticism. As a result, his two critical works—*On the Theory of Prose* (1925) and *The Technique of the Writer's Craft* (1928) came out. As it happened to writers of that period in Russia, he was under pressure from Soviet authorities. He attempted to adopt 'socialist realism'—the official doctrine in literary culture in post-revolutionary Russia. Echoes of such an undertaking can be heard in essays such as "Movements to a Scholarly Error" (1930). Shklovsky was appointed as a commissar in the Russian army during the war. Literary criticism and biographies written by Shklovsky centred on such writers as Lawrence Sterne, Maxim Gorky, Leo Tolstoy and Vladimir Mayakovsky.

Shklovsky is perhaps best known for his work *On the Theory of Prose*, where he offers a poetics of prose fiction. His earlier writings show a close link between Russian Formalism and futurism. In essays like "Resurrection of the Word" (1914) he upholds the idea of things in their sensuousness against the mystificatory poetics of symbolism. It was a radical attitude that invited a certain kind of poetry and marked a conspicuous break with conventional poetry. Whereas the futurist rejects bourgeois good taste and common sense, characteristic of traditional poetry, Shklovsky pleads for innovation and experimentation in art—the ways in which true perception can be achieved as against the automatized perception of everyday life. Shklovsky's works include *Mayakovsky and his Circle* (1941), *Third Factory* (1926), *Leo Tolstoy* (1963), *Knight's Move* (1923) and *Energy of Delusion: A Book on Plot*.

**SAQ:**

Would you agree with the appellation of “journalist” ascribed to this group of thinkers? Do their concerns focus on form (or structure and genre) or on language, or a combination of both?  
(30+60 words)

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**3.3.4 Boris Tomashevsky**

Tomashevsky graduated from the University of Liege and took a degree in electrical engineering. He studied 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century French poetry at Sorbonne. He also studied Russian philology at St. Petersburg University and joined ‘OPOYAZ’ in 1918. From the mid 1920s he taught poetics and stylistics at Leningrad University. In 1930s he was forced to give up teaching but in his last years he was allowed to resume teaching at the university where he also prepared some of his works on poetics and stylistics.

Tomashevsky played an important role at the ‘OPOYAZ’ by developing a theory of versification. He wrote *Russian Versification. Metrics* and articles like “The problem of verse rhythm”, “Verse and Rhythm”, the “Rhythm of the Four Foot Iamb based on observation of Eugene Onegin”, “the Five Foot Iamb in Pushkin”, etc. *Russian Versification. Metrics* is a concise introduction to the problems of Russian versification defining poetic speech as speech organized in its phonetic aspect and concentrating on the role of stress and intonation in the metric division of verse. But he also saw the need to investigate the interrelations between



intonation and syntax, sound and semantics, thus paving the way for the functional approach to the study of metrics.

### **3.4 Key Concepts**

Going back to Matthew Arnold, we find him proclaiming that the greatness of a work of art depends on the greatness of action. With such proclamations, Arnold emphasized the importance of the ‘content’ of literature. In stark contrast, the Russian Formalists were pre-occupied with the question of form. The questions they raised and resolved were, in a way, more important: what makes a work of literature ‘artistic’ and ‘literary’; what is the object of literary and critical study? How is the study of artistry of a given work related to language? Let us now discuss some of the key concerns of the ‘formalists’.

#### **3.4.1 Literariness**

The Formalist critics were preoccupied with the artistic/literary quality of a given work. For them, ‘literariness’ elicits the distinction between literary language and the language of practical discourse. Roman Jakobson held the view that the object of literary study is not literature per se, but ‘literariness’, that is to say, the sum of special linguistic and formal properties that distinguish literary texts from non literary texts.

As ‘poetic’ language focuses on the ‘message’ for its own sake, a verbal message, on the other hand, calls attention to itself. Consequently, the relation between sign and its referent is disturbed. We must understand that ‘poetic’ function is not confined to poetry only. It points to any verbal message that foregrounds the signs more than making them a vehicle for meaning. However, that

‘poetic’ function, to Jakobson, is not all about the ‘palpability of signs’, but also suggests a basic organizing principle underlying all verbal discourse. Jakobson says, “poetic function projects the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection into that of combination.” In poetry, a particular word is selected from among a stock of equivalent words (synonyms, autonyms etc.) The chosen words are then combined not according to the grammatical rule of combination, but according to the same principle of equivalence. Along the axis of combination, this equivalence is created through various means such as rhyme, rhythm, alliteration, parallelism, or other rhetorical devices. These two ways of organizing verbal discourse are likened to metaphor and metonymy.

Jakobson not merely expounds the metaphoric and metonymic principles, but tries to understand different ‘genres’ and types of literary work in these terms. Poetry exhibits the principle of metaphor whereas metonymic principle is the very heart of prose literature. Thus, we can see that the issue of literariness marginalizes the content element of a given work of art. What is worth discussion, to the formalist, is not the ‘what’ but the ‘how’ of literature.

**Stop to Consider:**

In order to understand the distinction between ‘practical’ and ‘poetic’ language, we must see how Jakobson formulates the functions of language. Language is not merely a means of communication. Jakobson describes six functions of language schematizing six elements of linguistic communication in this way:

addresser  
message  
addressee

context

contact

code

In a verbal communication, the 'addresser' sends a 'message' to the 'addressee'. The message is placed in specific 'context' and sent through a physical channel (Contact). Both the addresser and the addressee may use a common 'code'. To each of these six factors of verbal communication is attached a particular function of language. For instance, 'referential function' is linked to the context while 'emotive function' indicates the predominance of the addresser. So these functions can be schematized in this way:

Emotive

Poetic

Conative

Referential

Phatic

Metalingual

**Emotive:** It focuses on the addresser and conveys the speaker's attitude

**Poetic:** It focuses on the message and makes verbal signs palpable.

**Conative:** it is oriented towards the addressee. It consists in the vocative and imperative use of language.

**Referential:** It consists in what the message 'means' or 'denotes'.

**Phatic:** It implies those messages that establish or prolong communication as social connection.

**Metalingual:** Its focus is language itself, instead of denoting object on events or expressing attitude.

### 3.4.2 Form

The 'Formalists' were manifestly oriented towards form. If there can be dispute over meaning and scope of the term, we can say that 'form' includes all formal aspects, compositional elements, constitutive principles, as well as the rhetorical devices that go into the making of a literary text. The neo-classical critics defined form as a combination of component elements according to the principle of decorum. Coleridge upholds 'organic form' that develops from the very heart of the creative process like a growing plant, where the parts are inseparably related to the whole.

The New Critics use the term 'structure' synonymously with 'form'. It implies a paradoxical relationship of elements that gives rise to tension and ambiguity and all taken together constitute the totality of meaning. What prevailed throughout the different phases of critical tradition is the form/content dichotomy. (The Marxists, however, argue that it is the content that determines the form and not the other way round.). The 'formalists' resist the idea that form is a container or an envelope. Instead, they define form as something concrete, dynamic and self-contained. Form determines structure and meaning. Even 'form' is itself understood as 'content'.

To the New Critics, form is by itself, not important; formal aspects are important as they are decisive to the understanding of a poem. The Formalists in contrast, do not go beyond form because it is the ultimate 'telos' of literary pursuit. Insisting on the distinction between literary and practical language, they emphasize that neither the referential function of language nor its mimetic relation to reality is essential to literature where the signs do not refer to an external signified. A text foregrounds its formal aspects and marginalizes the referential function.

Hence, it is the form that remains to be studied as the proper object of literary study.

### 3.4.3 Fabula and Syuzhet

One important area for the formalists to explore was the language of prose fiction. The concepts of 'fabula' and 'syuzhet' are explained by Boris Tomashevsky. The *Dictionary of Narratology* however, defines fabula as 'the set of narrated situations and events in their chronological sequence'. Syuzhet implies a logical ordering of events and situations. In fact, it is the content/form or material/device opposition that gets translated into the fabula/syuzhet division.

Fabula is a straightforward account of event and situations. Ordering of which has nothing to do with the artistic effect to arouse suspense. Syuzhet, on the other hand is the artistic re-arrangement of the representational elements. How can we then make a distinction between fictional language and ordinary language? Tomashevsky asserts that more than a difference in language, it is a difference of presentation. How does a detective novel work, for instance? It manipulates the fable with a certain artistic aim in view: a certain of maximum amount of suspense. The artistic effect of a fictional narrative depends on how the content elements are unfolded, manipulated, and hence 'defamiliarized'.

Similarly, Shklovsky elaborates the story/plot distinction. The story is the basic succession of events that the artist is disposed to. Plot is the distinctive way in which the story is organized so as to defamiliarise the familiar materials. Plot, therefore, has to do with the 'form' of a novel, the 'how' of its telling, like rhythm in poetry. (Shklovsky finds in Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* an archetype of the novel, in which the focus is not on the story per se, but on story-

telling). As syuzhet (or plot) works upon the Fabula (or story), and ‘defamiliarize’ familiar material, one fabula can give rise to a number of syuzhets.

Such a formulation is also akin to structuralism. This story/plot dichotomy was carried forward by structuralists and subsumed in their theories of narrative. Vladimir Propp is an important link between these two movements. Propp was greatly inspired by the distinction between fabula and syuzhet, and his *Morphology of the Folktale* is evident manifestation of formalist influence. Here, Propp studies many Russian folktales and fairy-tales and reveals that underlying all of them there is only one story. The individual tales (syuzhet) are variations upon a basic fabula.

#### **Stop to Consider:**

*Morphology of the Folktale* by Vladimir Propp, is a major contribution to ‘formalism’ as well as an important step towards the poetics of fictional narrative. Narrative, Propp says, is characterized by its syntactic structuring. He sees narrative not in terms of character but as constituted by ‘functions’ that the characters have within the plot. Propp identifies certain functions that confer uniformity on the tales. He concludes that a character is attached to a certain function. The functions are distinguishable and they are constant elements independent of their agent. The number of functions Propp distinguishes are thirty-one.

He also concluded that all the characters could be resolved into only 7 broad character types in the 100 tales he analyzed:

The villain — struggles against the hero.

The donor — prepares the hero or gives the hero some magical object.

The (magical) helper — helps the hero in the quest.

The princess and her father — give the task to the hero, identify the false hero, princess marries the hero, often sought for during the narrative. Propp noted that functionally, the princess and the father cannot be clearly distinguished.

The dispatcher — character who makes the lack known and sends the hero off.

The hero or victim/seeker hero — reacts to the donor, weds the princess.

[False hero] — takes credit for the hero's actions or tries to marry the princess. (www.wikipedia.com)

In a particular fairy tale, one character might be involved in more than one sphere of action. In the same vein many characters can be involved in a single action.

Such an analysis of Propp's ideas regarding Russian folktales may help in your understanding of Russian Formalism to a considerable extent. This is rigorous analysis at its abstract best: the cultural elements, as associated with mythical ideas of doom, evil, power, weakness, etc., is left aside. The focus is on elements of the construction of the narrative. The characters or figures in the folktales are seen as signifiers or as coded functions. The various combinations give us the syuzhet.

#### **3.4.4 Formalism and 'Literary History'**

The idea that 'formalists' are pre-occupied with the concepts of form, devices and technique would have us believe that formalists view literature synchronically. The formalist notion of form not only explains the 'literariness' of art at a given point of time, it also explains historical change. A particular form is valid only until

when it can retain its artistic effectiveness, or can defamiliarize. When the form loses its artistic effect, it is regarded as outmoded and is pushed to the background. A new form emerges to impede the reader's familiar perception, not to express new content. Thus, literary history is a service of the substitution of literary forms and defamiliarizing devices cater to shifting artistic sensibilities of readers.

**SAQ:**

How do literary forms reflect cultural changes? Do you think that the Russian Formalists gave enough attention to this problem? (75 words)

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History, to the formalist, does not have unity, coherence or purpose. It is also not development, because it does not replace any artistic form with a developed one, because all forms are equally artistic at the specific periods of their use. As history involves substitution of forms, it is never a peaceful or continuous process. Instead, it involves struggle of old and new values, as well as competition between various schools. Of course, this history has nothing to do with the history of a particular person; we can quote Boris Eichenbaum in this context, - "For us, the central problem of the history of literature is the problem of evolution without personality the study of literature as a self-formed social phenomenon".



### 3.4.5 Defamiliarization

Defamiliarization as expounded by Shklovsky is a theory about artistic perception. When we are accustomed to an image, idea or a phenomenon, the perceptive effort is reduced. Art defamiliarizes images, ideas or situations which are otherwise familiar to us and thus impede our perception. Art and literature assume significance only against the backdrop of ordinary habitual perception. Devices to achieve defamiliarization are not eternal, but are time-bound. When they cease to dehabituate our perception, they lose validity. Therefore, defamiliarization implies perpetual change in literary tradition.

An important reason why the Formalists were so much occupied with the formal aspects of literature or the literary devices that make a work 'literary' was the assumption that form determines content; the formal devices defamiliarize the content elements. Let us look at how Tony Bennett puts it in *Formalism and Marxism*: "the formalists sought to reveal the devices through which the total structure of given works of literature might be said to defamiliarize, make strange or challenge certain dominant conceptions ideologies even, although they did not use the word of the social world." You must, therefore, be aware of the fact that defamiliarization is, in a broader sense, not just a set of literary devices; it is also a mode of representation that has a subversive potential. This subversion can be a subversion of already existing literary genre, ideology, or a dominant perception prevalent at a particular point of time. If we look at twentieth century avant-garde literary practices, (consider, for instance, the works of James Joyce and Franz Kafka) they subvert, through their own unique mode of representation, the realistic trend of the nineteenth-century novel. Kafka makes strange the familiar world that was so plausibly delineated in a Victorian novel.

### **Check Your Progress:**

1. Give a brief sketch of the critical concerns of the Russian Formalists with regard to ideas of language and the role of metaphors in language.
2. Describe the works of the Russian Formalists with special reference to their ideas of 'form' and 'content'. Explain their stand in contradistinction to that of the New Critics.
3. Highlight the contributions of the Russian Formalists to literary theory with reference to their ideas touching upon the role of art, the special status of poetic language and the relation of art to social reality.

### **3.5 Summing Up**

How do we then understand the Formalist view of literature? Firstly, they held that if we want to find out what is specific to a given literary work, we must examine its formal properties. So, it is not necessary to consider how large the historical and social factors are in shaping a literary work. Secondly, the formalists resisted the mimetic theory of literature which propounded literature as the result of imitation of reality. A literary text does not reflect reality but defamiliarizes our perception of reality. In other words, it does not reflect the real world but signifies it through its inherent semiotic process.

After post-structuralism, the basic formalist assumption that there is something distinctive about literary language and that it differs substantially from ordinary uses of language has been contested. The possibility of multiple meanings is not a specific property of literary language but a common trait in any language. Again, such diverse trends as pos-colonialism, feminism, neo-historicism are all

in indifferent ways reactions against the formalist's exclusive focus on the insularity of the literary text.

What is of lasting influence in formalism is their linking of literary study with linguistic investigation. In subsequent critical trends the question of language has become an issue of paramount importance although different critical school study different aspects and questions such as gender, power, subjectivity and so on. These are all conducted through an acute investigation of language.

### **3.6 References and Suggested Readings**

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Makaryk, Irena R. (Ed.). *Encyclopedia of Contemporary Literary Theory: Approaches, Scholars, Terms*. Canada: University of Toronto Press, 1993.

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## **UNIT 4**

### **NEW CRITICISM**

#### **Unit Structure:**

- 4.1 Objectives**
- 4.2 Historical Background**
- 4.3 Important Figures**
  - 4.3.1 I.A. Richards: (1893-1979)**
  - 4.3.2 William Empson: (1906-1984)**
  - 4.3.3 Allen Tate: (1899-1979)**
  - 4.3.4 John Crowe Ransom: (1888-1974)**
  - 4.3.5 William Wimsatt, Jr. (1907-1975) and Monroe C. Beardsley: (1915-1985)**
- 4.4 Key Concepts**
  - 4.4.1 Autonomy of the Text**
  - 4.4.2 Intentional Fallacy**
  - 4.4.3 Affective Fallacy**
  - 4.4.4 Irony and Paradox**
  - 4.4.5 Ambiguity**
  - 4.4.6 Metaphor**
  - 4.4.7 Tension**
  - 4.4.8 Organic Form/Unity**
- 4.5 Summing up**
- 4.6 References and Suggested Readings**

#### **4.1 Objectives**

New Criticism was an influential critical movement in the course of modern literary criticism. If it is in some ways aligned with Structuralism and Russian Formalism, more recent trends such as Marxism, Post-structuralism, Feminist or New-historicism

developed as a reaction against the New-critical ethos. By the end of this unit you will be able to

- *familiarize* yourself with the historical background and philosophical heritage of New Criticism
- *discuss* how the movement is continuous with or departs from critical tendencies and theorization prevalent in earlier times
- *find* out important critics and literary scholars associated with New Criticism
- *explore* ideas and concepts central to this particular school of criticism.

#### **4.2 Historical Background**

The term ‘New Criticism’ was coined by John Crowe Ransom in his book entitled *The New Criticism* published in 1941. It implies a theory and a form of practice prevalent in Anglo-American literary criticism between 1940s and 1960s. Three important books that served as the foundational text of this critical movement are *Principles of Literary Criticism* (1924), *Practical Criticism* (1929), and *Understanding Poetry* (1938). Various critical essays of T.S. Eliot also paved the way for the development of New Criticism.

During the course of your studying New Criticism, you might ask yourself—where does New Criticism stand in the tradition of English literary criticism? Firstly, it can be argued that it is a reaction against some of the important critical insights and tendencies of the Romantics whose dominant tendency was to see the value and significance of literary work as the result of authorial intention or the ‘expression’ of the intention of the authors. The root of literary truth thus lies in the sincerity of emotions and feelings experienced by the author. New Criticism dispensed with the

question of author while assessing a work of art. Secondly, it is a reaction against the historical and philological approaches to literature— a thrust then prevalent in the arena of literary study. John Crowe Ransom, for instance, when he was Carnegie Professor of Poetry at Kenyon College, organized academic discussions regularly pleading for a pure criticism that could overthrow historical and philological scholarship then in vogue in the universities. He argued for exclusive focus on the literary techniques rather than on biography, morality, psychology and sought to replace extrinsic with ‘intrinsic’ criticism. Thirdly, during the heyday of New Criticism, criticism became a self-contained academic discipline. It is not that literary works were not part of the curriculum in schools and universities in the English-speaking world, but study of literature was included in various disciplines— rhetoric, philology, history. But criticism did not play any significant part. However, from the 1920s, there started a sudden vogue in academic institutions of critical interpretation which included analysis and introduction of evaluative judgment of literary works.

Is there any common agenda of this New Critical school? Key theorists and thinkers associated with this school have their own agenda and propositions. In fact, there are differences and disagreements amongst the New Critics themselves. Yet they all agree upon the question of the object of literary criticism. The basic assumption was that reading a text in terms of authorial intention, effect on the reader or its historical context cannot do justice to the text which is a texture of variously patterned linguistic elements. The text is an autonomous, self-contained entity and is itself the proper object of criticism. A text must be studied in its own terms and extra-textual yardsticks should not be brought to bear upon it.

### **Stop to Consider:**

#### **New Criticism and Empiricism**

New Criticism not merely talks about literary text as the object of literary study, it also dwells extensively on the 'nature' of 'textual experience'. 'Experience' here is a key word because critics see literature, and more specifically, poetry as embodied experience, which cannot be reduced to a set of principles or propositional truth. Philosophically the term 'experience' refers to empiricism, and let us note that the philosophical origin of New Criticism is empiricism.

How do we derive knowledge of a literary text? According to the New Critics, any reference to context, either historical or biographical, or understanding of how a text affects a reader does not help us in this regard. The only way to acquire the experience of the text itself is through 'close-reading' of the text. Reading is itself an experience which is the authentic source of truth and knowledge. Empiricism is based on the assumption that all knowledge is derived from experience. (The first empiricists were physicians who derived their rules of medical practice from their experience alone.)

The mind, according to the Empiricists, is capable of organizing experience and that there is no 'innate' idea as ideas are impressed upon the human mind by experience itself. There are two ways in which knowledge-formation is possible- (i) perception and (ii) reflection of the mind. John Zock Dennis refers to the existence of 'innate' ideas but asserts that mind has an innate power of reflection.

We should not, however, confuse poetic experience with scientific and practical knowledge. New Critics are assertive of the distinctive character of literary knowledge which greatly

differs from scientific knowledge. Whereas literary knowledge is derived through perception, non-literary knowledge is based on reflection of the mind.

Despite insistence on ‘authorial intention’ or ‘spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings’, there are also continuities between Romantic criticism and New Criticism. Let us take the example of Coleridge. In *Biographia Literaria* Coleridge offers a theorization of poetry and its relation to the poet. Poetry, to Coleridge, is not just an outward expression of a poet’s inner feelings because imagination plays a creative and transformative role. Imagination, Coleridge says, “dissolves, diffuses, dissipates in order to recreate”. Besides, imagination fuses the opposites; it denotes a balance or reconciliation of “opposite or discordant qualities: of sameness, with difference; of the general, with the concreto; the idea with the image; the individual, with the representative.....” This accounts for the organic unity of poetry, the interrelationships of poetic elements and their inseparability from the whole—facilitated by imagination. Such a doctrine is an important antecedent to the New Critical concept of literary work as a self-contained whole. Of course, pervasive insistence of the Romantics on the link between the poet and the poem, the cause and the effect, the literary phenomenon and its subjective origin did not find any importance in the New Critics. New Critical ethos goes against the dominant Romantic concept of the origin of any literary phenomenon.

John Keats’ idea of the relation between a poet and his/her poem greatly departs from the expresser’s notion of art, and is more attuned towards new critical ethos. As I shall elaborate later, the biographical account of the poet is irrelevant to the reading of the poem, declare Wimsatt and Beardsley in *The Intentional Fallacy*. Keats is dismissive of Romantic subjectivism. In a letter to Sir



Richard Woodhouse, he says: “The poetical character... is not itself, it has no self, it is everything and nothing, it has no character...a poet is the most unpoetical of anything in existence; because he has no identity- he is continually in for and filling some other body”. The implication is important as knowledge about the poet does not help in the reading of the poem.

**SAQ:**

Can you name a text or any category of texts where the ‘author’ or the source can be overlooked? Would you include a newspaper report in this category? (20 + 20 Words)

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If you ask yourself a question—Is New Criticism just a method of reading or does it also embody a distinctive ideology? In subsequent critical trends, with the advent of a variety of ‘political reading’ of literary works, the New Critics are accused of a certain snobbery because of their exclusive focus on a clearly demarcated text, alienated from its various contexts. You should however understand that such a separation of the text from history as well as the circumstances of its production could also imply a ‘closure’ of reading rather than opening up of the text to diverse possibilities of meaning. Critics like Terry Eagleton, Frank Lentriccia critiqued New Criticism for this kind of conservatism. Such conservatism has also its political origin. In America, the ‘little magazine’ *The Fugitive* formed a group of critics that included Allen Tate, John

Crowe Ransom and Austin Warren. By 1931, *The Fugitive* evolved as 'The Agrarians'. The Agrarians were conservative and defended the south because the north was seen as materialistic, industrial and socially progressive. They upheld, in numerous essays and letters, the organic unity of the south. Although the group disappeared by 1937, Ransom, Tate, Warren and Brooks turned to literary criticism and the conservative political background inspired them to uphold a formalist poetic.

An affinity between the Formalists and the New Critics can be perceived. Both unanimously fixed the object of investigation. Both employ a mode of 'intrinsic' criticism, brushing aside the 'extrinsic' elements from the scene. Both share a pervasive concern for 'form', unlike the formalists, the New Critics insisted on the irreducibility of literary experience that cannot be paraphrased by any degree of scientific precision.

### **Stop to Consider**

#### **New Criticism versus Russian Formalism:**

An important point of convergence between New Criticism and Russian Formalism is that both regard literature as self-contained verbal entity. They insist on the autonomy of the literary text. One important offshoot of such an assumption is that they promote a mode of intrinsic criticism and reject extra-literary criteria to judge literary texts. Let us, in this context, quote from Hans Bertens: "Although Eliot is obviously very much interested in poetic technique and in the form of specific poems, an interest that would be worked out by a group of American poets and critics, the so-called New Critics – he is ultimately more interested in a poem's meaning. Poetry should convey complex meanings in which attitudes that might easily

be seen as contradictory are fused and which allow us to see things that we otherwise would not see. Our job, then, is to interpret poems after which we can pass judgment on them; that is, establish how well they succeed in creating and conveying the complexity of meaning that we expect from them...the idea that we read poems, and literature in general, because they contain meaning, is obvious. This search for the meaning of poems, novels, plays and other works of literature has from the 1920s well into the 1970s absolutely dominated English and American literary studies and still constituted one of their important activities.” To the Formalists, however, literary investigation should not be directed to the meaning *per se* but to the discovery of form that makes meaning possible.

Both schools dwell on the specific nature of literary language. Whereas New Critics hold literary language in opposition to the language of science and of practical discourse, Formalists like Roman Jakobson define ‘literariness’ by insisting on the poetic function of language. However, Formalists rely more on overarching organizational principles such as fabula, syuzhet, metaphor, metonymy or on specific mode of literary representation–defamiliarisation. On the other hand, “the principles of the New Criticism are basically verbal. That is, literature is conceived to be a special kind of language...and the explicative procedure is to analyse the meanings and interactions of words, figures of speech, and symbols” (*A Glossary of literary Terms*).

However, whether or not one dwells on the ‘origin’ of meaning or exploration of meaning through interrelationship of verbal entities that constitute the text, one must invariably seal off experiences of the external world, and read the text itself

carefully. Hence, both groups adopt a habit of 'close reading'.

We must also note that the Formalists, unlike the New Critics, confer a greater amount of scientific enquiry to the study of literature. This can be better understood when we read M. H. Abrams. He says: "Unlike the European Formalists...the New Critics did not apply the science of linguistics to poetry' and their emphasis was not on a work as constituted by linguistic devices for achieving specifically literary effects, but on the complex interplay within a work of ironic, paradoxical, and metaphoric meanings around a humanly important theme."

### **4.3 Important Figures**

Discussion of New Criticism is never complete without any reference to its major exponents whose contributions not only enriched the contemporary critical scenario but also formed the grounds of later developments in literary and critical theory. New Criticism reacts against some earlier critical habits such as historicist reading and expressionist notion of art that characterizes Romantic criticism. Key figures of this critical movement were John Crowe Ransom, I.A. Richards, Cleanth Brooks, Allen Tate, Kenneth Burke, R.P. Blackmur, William Empson, Yvor Winters, W.K. Wimsatt, among others. To be more precise, New Criticism denotes a practice of reading evolved by I.A. Richards. In fact it was 'practical criticism' initiated by Richards that was carried forward by the New Critics and its impact can be seen in their exclusive textual orientation. Following is a list of the significant names and their contributions.

#### 4.3.1 I. A. Richards: (1893-1979)

I.A. Richards was an important figure in the 20<sup>th</sup> century critical scenario. Once, he distributed in the classroom some papers containing poems (where names of the poets were withheld) and asked students to critically evaluate them. Such an undertaking might seem commonplace to you, but it was indeed a formidable task then because it inspired a direct, ‘unmediated’ encounter between the literary text and the critical reader. It was principally because of I.A. Richards that scientific objectivity became the hallmark of New Criticism.

Born in Sandbach, Cheshire, in 1893, I.A. Richards was educated at Clifton College. It was Cabby Spence who inspired in him an interest for literature. Richards did not have any formal training when he began his career. We must mention C. K. Ogden who was Richard’s collaborator throughout his intellectual pursuits. Richard, Ogden and James Wood co-authored *Foundations of Aesthetics*, where they mapped the principles of aesthetic reception. Another outstanding work by Richards and Ogden was *The Meaning of Meaning: A Study of the Influence of Language and of the Science of Symbolism*. The earlier phase of his critical works focused on meaning, comprehension and communication. *Principles of Literary Criticism* by Richards is a reaction against a time when there was nothing but “an echo of critical theories”. The book is an expression of the enthusiasm he felt for science and the scientific mode of enquiry. *Practical Criticism*, another work by Richards, had a pedagogic necessity as it promoted a particular method of teaching literature in many Anglo-American universities, and inspired the practice of ‘close-reading’ in subsequent critical developments. Richards, as Basil Willy states, founded the modern schools of New Criticism.

Richards contributed a good number of terms to literary criticism. He set in currency such terms as ‘stock responses’, ‘pseudo-statements’, ‘bogus entities’, distinction between ‘tenor’ and ‘vehicle’, terms like ‘referential’, ‘referent’, ‘ambiguity’, etc. The term ‘ambiguity’ was a negative marker, and was used in a pejorative sense in earlier criticism. It was Richards who put it to use in a non-pejorative way, asserting that ambiguity is a basic trait of language itself. William Empson, who was a student of Richards, expounded the term in his *Seven Types of Ambiguity*.

#### **4.3.2 William Empson: (1906-1984)**

Empson, as S. Ramaswami and V. S. Sethuraman have said, is “perhaps the first analytical critic to apply the principles of I.A. Richards on the nature and function of language consistently and with gusto to particular passages of poetry.”

Empson emphasized a linguistic analysis of literary texts. He maintains that a particular word does not have a single meaning but a cluster of meanings. His “seven types of ambiguity” shows careful analysis of small units of a text (word, line, sentence, etc.). Empson insists on alternative readings and states that ambiguity is characteristic of poetic and literary language. He meticulously probes into texts like *Othello*, and *Paradise Lost* and explores multiple meanings of certain key words found in the text, making use of the dictionary and knowledge of historical semantics.

I.A. Richards’s principles regarding the nature and function of criticism, was first applied to poetry by Empson. In the *English Critical Tradition*, he is regarded as one of the sharpest and the most sensitive of modern critics. *Seven Types of Ambiguity* is the name of the critical treaty which makes Empson one of the leading New Critics.

#### **4.3.3 Allen Tate: (1899-1979)**

Allen Tate belongs to the Southern group of American critics. Whereas I.A. Richards separates referential and emotive function of language, Tate distinguishes between scientific and literary discourses. This distinction can also explain the distinction between New Criticism and Russian Formalism. If both schools share the view that a literary work is the proper object of study, the Russian Formalists' scientific study of literature goes against the New Critics' insistence on the irreducible and ontologically different experience of literature.

In a way, Tate's criticism is eclectic; he reconciles Richards, Cleanth Brooks and R.P. Warren. He draws on Richards' idea of reconciliation of opposed and harmonious elements, Brooks' concept of irony, and Warren's view that a poetic proposition has nothing to do with intellectual and rational scrutiny.

#### **4.3.4 John Crowe Ransom: (1888-1974)**

Ransom was a pioneering figure of New Criticism in America. He had a remarkable influence on contemporary American critics through the literary journal *Kenyon Review* (Ransom edited *Kenyon Review* for 20 years). He repudiated various forms of literary criticism including impressionism in favour of an ontological approach to critical issues. To Ransom, the function of criticism is the elucidation of literary works. Most notable among the critical works by Ransom are *The New Criticism* and *The World as Body*.

Both works contain important manifestoes of New Criticism. In an essay titled "Criticism, Inc.", for instance, he states certain basic principle of this school; he expresses his aim to make literary criticism "more scientific or precise and systematic". He underlines the importance of a critical shift from historicism to aesthetic

appreciation. His critique of left-wing criticism and humanism is caused by their adherence to moral criticism. Historical and biographical information are not irrelevant either, but they must help to define the 'aesthetic' of literature. *The History of Literary Criticism* mentions some normative principles characteristic of New Criticism, as set by Ransom. For him, criticism should exclude

- (a) Personal impressions
- (b) Synopsis and paraphrase
- (c) Historical studies
- (d) Linguistic studies (involving allusion, word-meaning, etc.)
- (e) Moral content

Ransom further asserts that poetry is ontologically different and hence irreducible to prose-meaning.

**Stop to Consider:**

Ransom's view of the distinctive nature of poetic experience can also be understood through the distinction he makes between 'texture' and 'structure' of a poem. The structure is the argument of the poem seen as a whole. 'Texture' is constituted by elements that have local value and affect the overall shape of the poem. The 'texture' does not easily give rise to the 'structure' but rather impedes it. It complicates whatever argument the poet is going to establish. As a result "in the end we have our logic but only after a lively reminder of the aspects of reality with which logic cannot cope."

The term 'Texture' is actually derived from the plastic arts which denotes the surface quality of a work, as opposed to its shape and structure. As applied in modern literary criticism, it thus designates the concrete qualities of a poem as opposed to its idea: thus the verbal surface of a work, its sensuous qualities and the density of its imagery.



#### **.4.3.5 William Wimsatt, Jr. (1907-1975) and Monroe C. Beardsley (1915-1985)**

Wimsatt, a professor of English at Yale University, contributed to New Criticism with such works as *The Prose Style of Dr. Johnson*, *Philosophic Words*, *The Verbal Icon* and *Literary Criticism: A Short History* (with Cleanth Brooks). Beardsley was a professor of philosophy and his works included *Practical Logic*, *Aesthetics*, *An Introduction to Philosophic Thinking*.

The most notable contributions of both critics are found in essays titled *The Intentional Fallacy* and *The Affective Fallacy*. These were controversial papers which elaborated a basic tenet of New Criticism: the issue of authorial intention and affect on the reader. ‘Intention’ and ‘Affect’ must be avoided in criticism because they are not implicated in the text itself. If a poem expresses certain thoughts and attitudes, they can be ascribed to the ‘dramatic speaker’ or ‘persona’ of the poem and not to the biographical author. Therefore, in critical discourse, terms such as sincerity, authenticity, originality need to be replaced by terms like integrity, relevance, unity, function because it is the literary work which is the sole object of critical scrutiny.

However, they reject Richards’ attempt to distinguish ‘emotive’ from ‘referential’ meaning, because describing emotive meaning would result in affective relativism, which would give a license to disregard the cognitive meaning of a poem.

#### **Check Your Progress**

1. Outline the main concerns of the New Critical advocacy of textual “close reading”.

2. Highlight the extent of the similarities between New Criticism and the Formalists. In what sense are both schools proponents of the 'poem'? In what way do they differ?

#### **4.4 Key Concepts**

##### **4.4.1 Autonomy of The Text**

The New Critics were oriented towards "close-reading" or 'practical reading' in the line laid down by I.A. Richards. A text, because it is constituted by a unique language, is itself a source of its meaning and value, and is thus distinguished from other texts or other uses of language. A poem is an embodied experience inextricably bound up with language, and hence its meaning cannot be conveyed by prose paraphrase.

Scientific and poetic truths are different in nature. Scientific truth is propositional and can be shown to be true or false. Literary/poetic truth is not 'scientific' in the sense that it is not susceptible to the norms of truth and falsehood. Still, critical endeavour is scientific. In the Romantic period, it is the poet who is the locus of meaning and significance (Remember Wordsworth's oft quoted definition of poetry as 'spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings'). Now poetry is said to have its own territory, its own unique mode of existence. The poem is seen by New Critics as a self-contained, self-sustaining entity. The poem, and not its relation to the external world, is the focus and object of criticism.

The New Critics' consensus on the object of critical analysis leads to the divorce between a literary work and its diverse contexts provided by history, biography, sociology and other disciplines.

New Critical method relies on a basic empirical principle that man is the observer of external objects, and, therefore, can publicly

formulate abstractions on the ‘perceived’ event/object. To isolate a work from its wider socio-historical context is to assume that the work is subjected to ‘scientific’ analysis (In a sense this recalls ‘scientific’ practice that isolates an object written in a controlled environment, in order to observe).

### **Stop to Consider**

According to John Locke, knowledge comes from two sources (i) ideas coming from experience and (ii) reflection, or the ability to look at one’s own mind. Now, a poem as an external object can be analyzed objectively, while its content concerns what is going on in the mind of the poet/reader. Hence, poetry performs a mimetic function that embodies the result of reflection on the mind. These questions cannot be described scientifically, but through a poetic structure.

The above discussion shows that although New Criticism is based on empirical philosophy, in a way it also dismisses rigorous scientific methodology in grasping poetic/textual truth.

#### **4.4.2 Intentional Fallacy**

“The Intentional Fallacy” by W. K. Wimsatt Jr. and Monroe C. Beardsley is a foundational text of New Criticism which states that ‘intention’ should not be brought to bear upon the analysis of the literary text. What do we understand by the term ‘Intention’? The authors state, “intention, as we shall use the term, corresponds to what he intended in a formula which more or less explicitly has had wide acceptance...In order to judge the poem’s performance, we must know what he intended. Intention is designed or planned in the

author's mind. Intention has obvious affinities for the author's attitude toward his work, the way he felt, what made him write."

Wimsatt and Beardsley argue that knowledge of an author's original intention is neither integral to, nor essential in the critical analysis of a work. One can interpret a text without any reference to 'authorial intention'. Their claim here is two-fold:

- (i) Authorial intentions are not available in the text.
- (ii) Notion of authorial intention dismantles the integrity of a literary work.

However, 'intention' cannot be so easily dispensed with. Have the authors completely denied the very notion of "Authorial intention"? We must know that they distinguished between the intention realized in the text and that which is supposed to exist prior to the existence of the text. When intention is realized, it is useless to consult the author because "critical inquiries are not settled by consulting the oracle".

Again, 'intention' cannot be the standard for critical evaluation of a text. Meaning can be deciphered only through a 'close' analysis of the text, attending to its linguistic as well as rhetorical components. Of course, all meanings cannot be said to be free from authorial intention. In conversation, for instance, what the speaker intends prior to his utterance is crucial to meaning of the utterance. Literary meaning resists such dependence on the psychology of the author. "The Intentional Fallacy" also contends that a text can have meanings unacknowledged by the author. Hence, author cannot be a guide to interpretation of a text because interpretation must be justified textually.

There is both external and internal evidence for a work's meaning. Internal evidence can be found in "the semantics and syntax of a poem, through our habitual knowledge of the language, through

grammars, diction, arise and all the literature which is the source of dictionaries, in general through all that makes a language and culture” (*Literary Theory and Criticism*, 181).

External evidence is private, and not part of the work, and it comes from journals, letters, conversation etc. However, Wimsatt and Beardsley could not sharply demarcate these two kinds of evidence, because the author’s expressed meaning and intention can get incorporated into the text through its linguistic texture.

**SAQ:**

How would you name the ‘authorial intention’ behind the ‘Sunne Rising’ by Donne? Would this ‘intention’ help us to understand the poem better? (70+70 words)

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**4.4.3 Affective Fallacy**

As used by Wimsatt and Beardsley (*The Verbal Icon*, 1954), this term connotes ‘a confusion between the poem and its result (what it is and what it does)’. Judgment of a literary text should not rest upon the effect it has on the readers. ‘Affective fallacy’ is thus a confusion between a poem and its “affect” on readers. A text, however emotive its context might be, must nevertheless be judged as a text, or a self-sufficient entity. It must be seen as a system of language. So, evaluating a work of art in terms of its results in the mind of the readers is supposed to be a critical error.

Eliot's "objective correlative" predates this principle. As explained by Eliot, emotions are externalized into a poem not as emotions but in the form of some events and situation, specific to the emotion as judging a poem from emotion results in impressionism.

#### **4.4.4 Irony and Paradox**

Irony indicates a 'verbal situation' where the expressed meaning differs from its implied meaning. A number of New Critics used this term and it was seen as a general criterion of affixing literary value to a work of art. We can in this context, point to T. S. Eliot who endorsed metaphysical poetry for its use of wit. To Eliot, wit is 'internal equilibrium' and 'involves' a recognition, implicit in the expression of every experience..." (*The English Critical Tradition*, 197-198). In the same vein, I.A. Richards contends that in any aesthetic experience, the rivalry of conflicting impulses is avoided as they are given autonomy. He also distinguishes between 'exclusion' and 'inclusion' in poetry, defining irony as a touchstone for the poetry of exclusion: "Irony consists in bringing in of the opposite, the complementary impulses; that is why poetry which is exposed to it is not of the highest order, and why irony itself is so constantly a characteristic of poetry" (*Literary Criticism: A Short History*).

Cleanth Brooks elaborates Richards' idea in his essay "Irony as a Principle of Structure". Poetic statements, Brooks states, can aspire for musicality only through particular, concrete details. In poetry, general meaning is qualified by the particular "the concrete particulars with which the poet loads himself seems to deny the universal to which he aspires", (*The English Critical Tradition*, 472). Brooks further states that "the obvious warping of a statement by the context" we characterize as 'ironical'. Critics like Brooks

would even like to suggest that the ‘language of poetry is the language of paradox’. This idea has been persuasively elaborated by Brooks in his book *The Well-Wrought Urn* (1947).

**SAQ:**

How is the difference between form and content apparent in a poem like Blake’s “The Tyger”? To what extent does the content forge structure of the poem? (60 + 60 words)

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**4.4.5 Ambiguity**

William Empson’s *Seven Types of Ambiguity* is a fundamental text of New Criticism. The title is misleading, because it seeks to ‘categorize’ different types of ambiguity. But what it purports to say is clear: words have multiple meanings. Besides, English syntax is flexible to adjustments of the written and colloquial word order.

Because of its unique organization of language, poetry can cover an indecision which finds an echo in the mind of the reader. Such indecision stems from the reconciliation of contradictory impulses.

Although Empson offers a classification of ambiguity, his contribution to the study of poetry is not in classification, but in the way he offers a close and acute analysis of the linguistic elements with an eye on the many-sidedness of language. Of course, ambiguity can be a nuisance if “it is due to weakness or thinness of thought”, “impression of incoherence”. Real ambiguity adds complexity and richness to poetry.

In relation to the question of multiple meanings, Empson states that a reader must know the forces that work in the mind of the author, or how it appeared to its first readers. So, knowledge of the history of language, the author’s conscious or unconscious intention as well as the reaction of the first readers— are all keys to an understanding of ambiguity.

**SAQ:**

“She is all states, and all princes, I” How would you categorize the figurative language here—metaphor, ambiguity, or irony? Give reasons for your answer. (100 words)

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**4.4.6 Metaphor**

Metaphor implies a comparison between two dissimilar things, where comparison is not anticipated. In fact, terms like metaphor, irony, and tension are widely used in New Criticism because they are all about the intrinsic properties of a literary text.

I.A. Richards has it that meaning originates from a specific context within a text. But contrary to this, metaphor exemplifies how the contexts merge. Metaphorical meaning is therefore not a version of literal meaning or “simply a prettified version of an already stated meaning” (*Literary Criticism: A Short History*, 644), but that which occupies a new, distinctive ground, adding to the richness of poetry. Richards contends that it is the link with a second context that



determines that a given usage is metaphorical. Richards introduces the term ‘tenor’ and ‘vehicle’, ‘tenor’ indicating the subject and ‘vehicle’, the metaphorical term linked to the ‘tenor’. However, metaphor does not mean either ‘tenor’ or ‘vehicle’, but a third entity that stems from their link. Resisting traditional notions of ‘displacement of words’, Richards sees metaphor as a transaction of two contexts, and its value is thus, never ornamental.

### **Stop to Consider**

Equally important are Ezra Pound’s and Eliot’s ideas of metaphor which, they think, are the essence of poetry. To Pound, metaphor, which is synonymous with idiographic method, is juxtaposition of picturable elements. Eliot’s view of metaphor is influenced by the metaphysical poets as well as the 19<sup>th</sup> century French symbolist poets. He writes of the metaphysical poets that they forcibly unify heterogeneous ideas in their minds. These poets, he writes, put together incongruous elements and unify what normally resists unification. The amalgamation of disparate elements is crucial, as it leads to the unification of thought and feeling. When thought and feeling remain separate, metaphor becomes non-structural, a mere ornament or an illustration of something. Thus New Critics see metaphor as a constitutive principle of poetry.

#### **4.4.7 Tension**

You have now seen that to the New Critics, poetry does not yield unambiguous, objective truth. This, according to them, is the inevitable result of the way in which materials and images are organized in the poetic text. Seen in this way, tension is a general characteristic of poetry. I. A. Richards holds that any experience

includes various impulses, but in poetic experience “the rivalry of conflicting impulses is avoided not by our suppressing the impulses, but, paradoxically by our giving them free reign.” What is the consequence of such a free reign of opposing impulses? “Such a conception, presenting its difficulties for an equilibrium of conflicting impulses is easily confused with the state of balance that one finds in irresolution—that is, an oscillation between two sets of opposed impulses in which the mind, like the fabled donkey poised between the equally attractive bales of hay, can only remain suspended in inaction.

In an essay, “Tension in Poetry” Allen Tate uses the term in a special sense. A poem has both denotative and connotative meaning. “In poetry, words have not only their denotative meanings but also their connotative significance. To indicate the logical meaning and the denotative aspects of language Tate used the word ‘extension’. To refer to the suggestive and the connotative aspect of language, he uses the word ‘Intension’. “A successful poem is one in which these two sets of meaning are in a state of ‘Tension’”.

### **Stop to Consider**

#### **Denotation and Connotation**

Denotation is the most literal meaning of a word, regardless of what one feels about it or the various ideas and suggestions it connotes. For example, the word apartheid denotes a certain form of political, social, and racial regime. But it *connotes* much more than that because connotation refers to the suggestions and implications evoked by a word or a phrase. Connotation may be personal or individual, general or universal. Probably all existing words with lexical meaning can have various connotations.

#### **4.4.8 Organic Form/Unity**

The idea of organic unity finds echo in Romantic critical thought. According to Coleridge, a literary work must have an organic form which develops from inside the work itself. A poem is like a growing plant that achieves the organic unity of its different parts with the whole. The New Critics carry forward this argument and shows how the totality of meanings of a work is constituted by the interrelations of various elements within it. Consequently, the significance of other New Critical terms finds a vent in the idea of organic unity to produce totality in effect.

#### **4.5 Summing Up**

What makes New Criticism significant can be summarized as follows:

1. It institutionalizes the study of literature and establishes it as a self-sufficient academic discipline.
2. It also promotes a particular reading practice: the habit of “close reading.”

Of course, the basic theoretical premises of this school have been variously contested in subsequent periods. New Criticism’s implicit assumption about the high cultural values embedded in English literary culture was debunked with ‘Culture studies’ emerging as a new discipline along with the advent of post-modernism, where moral and ethical barriers are sought to be resolved, hierarchies of aesthetic works are destabilized, in order to pave the way for an open study of multifarious cultural phenomenon. For example, New Historicism, which opts for the historical and social elements as important source of literary speculation, is in sharp reaction to the insular and textual reading upheld by New Criticism. New

Historicism insists on a dynamic text, context and dialogue in the production of meaning and value of literature. In fact, the theoretical movements such as Structuralism, Post-structuralism, Deconstruction. Post colonialism, Feminism, Cultural Studies and New Historicism that started from the 1960s onwards began as a reaction against the basic principles and ideas of New Criticism.

#### **4.6 References and Suggested Readings**

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## **BLOCK II**

**Unit 1: Structuralism**

**Unit 2: Poststructuralism**

**Unit 3: Major Movements**

**Unit 4: Feminism**

# UNIT 1

## STRUCTURALISM

### Unit Structure:

- 1.1 Objectives
- 1.2 Historical Background
  - 1.2.1 Non-Intellectual Background
  - 1.2.2 Intellectual Background
- 1.3 What is Structuralism?
- 1.4 Key Concepts
- 1.5 Key Theorists of Structuralism
- 1.6 Structuralism and Narratology
- 1.7 Summing Up
- 1.8 References and Suggested Readings

### 1.1 Objectives

This is the first unit of this block. In this unit we will try to discuss Structuralism so that you can see for yourself how the intellectual world of the twentieth century preoccupied itself with the idea of finding out ways in literary studies with the help of an interdisciplinary approach.

However, after going through this unit we claim that you will be able to—

- *see* for yourself what does the term ‘structure’ mean
- *formulate* the notion of Structuralism as a theoretical trend
- *find* out about Structuralism as an approach to literature
- *trace* the unique historical and intellectual background out of which it emerged.

## **1.2 Historical Background**

A study of the historical background of both Structuralism and Post-structuralism provides scope for a better understanding of the two terms. It is because they cannot be isolated from their own specific socio-political and literary backgrounds. For your understanding we have two units in which we will try to locate the history behind their emergence.

### **1.2.1 Non-Intellectual Background**

While reading such theories we are not sure whether we should read them as diagnosis of an epoch with social reality as its referent or as a radical turn against the entire process of representation and the referent. The twentieth century saw the instability of the relationship between the viewer and the viewed object, the reader and the text, the past and the present. Questionings of received ideas of form haunt the critical writings of the modernist thinkers. Debates about tradition and rejection of tradition, about the use and interpretation of history, and about the very survival and the value of the written word have taken on a renewed urgency as modernism evolved into a variety of postmodernism. It is against such a background that we can think of the emergence, strength and relevance of structuralism and post structuralism as theoretical trends. Because, going against tradition, they really changed the ways of conceptualizations and representations.

### **1.2.2 Intellectual Background**

In the West, the beginning of structuralism can mostly be anticipated in the works of the Canadian thinker Northrop Fry whose being the most influential theorist of America hastened the

emergence of something called “Myth Criticism” functional in between 1940-1960. Drawing on the findings of anthropology and psychology regarding universal myths, rituals, and folktales; these critics were trying to restore the spiritual values to a world they saw as alienated, fragmented and commonly ruled by scientism, empiricism, positivism, and technology. In their view, myths were created as integral to human thought and believed that literature too emerged out of a collective effort on the part of various cultures and groups to establish a meaningful context of human existence. Northrop Fry’s *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957) emphasized on the point that criticism should be scientific, objective and systematic discipline. Fry’s models which exhibited recurrent patterns, is later shared by Structuralist views of language and literature.

However, Structuralism can be said to have formally begun with the *Course in General Linguistics*, a series of lectures delivered by the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) at the University of Geneva. Although published posthumously in 1960, this book provided a new definition of the ‘object of linguistics’. Saussure divided, what we call language, into two parts- *langue* (language) and *parole* (speech). The reason was to show that ‘language has its own potentials’ and that it can exist ‘outside the individual’ who can never create or modify it by himself. Language is a self authenticating system and is not supposed to be determined by the physical world. Whatever we see in language is simply the connection of a meaning to a particular sound-image. This is what provides Saussure with a scope to define Semiology.

About **Semiology**, Saussure said:

A science that studies the life of signs within society is conceivable; it would be part of social psychology and consequently of general psychology; I shall call it Semiology.



But any attempt to understand the intellectual background is never complete without the reference to New Criticism and Russian Formalism two of the most significant theoretical trends provided grounds for the future development of structuralism.

The New Critics of the 1930s focused on the meaning of a literary text. Both the New Criticism of the United States and Practical Criticism of United Kingdom opted for providing 'interpretations'. The New Critics paid a particular attention to the formal aspects of literature, which they believed, contributed largely to its meaning and their attempt at 'close reading' made their effort easier. In his book *Practical Criticism*, I. A. Richards claimed that, "All respectable poetry invites close reading." Gradually, this motto became important for every new critic as they could finally understand the point that with the help of irony, paradox, ambiguity, and complexity each word of a poem could be scrutinized in detail with regard to all its denotations and connotations.

Simultaneously with the New Critics, during the first half of the twentieth century, the literary theorist of Russia (Please refer to Unit III of Block I to know more about Russian Formalism) and Czechoslovakia developed a theory of 'literariness'. They argued that it was 'literariness' that differentiated literary texts from other forms of writings like an advertisement, or a newspaper article. Dealing with this they focused on the formal aspect of literature and the sort of language it employed. The Russian Formalists suggested that what makes the language of literature different from non-literary language is the employment of a range of devices that produce a defamiliarising effect. Later, they turned towards the more specific functions of those devices. Borrowing much from the Russian Formalists, the Prague Structuralists began to see a literary text as a structure of differences. Finally, a literary text differs from

other texts because of its orientation towards itself, its own form and not towards any outside sources.

However, the most pertinent issue underlying such an intercontinental background of Structuralism, is a new awareness of the ways of receiving literary works. Structuralism challenges some of the most cherished beliefs of the common readers. Going against the assumption that the text is a place where we can form a communion with the author's thoughts and feelings, structuralism has finally established that the author is 'dead'. In their ahistorical approach, New Criticism, Structuralism and Russian Formalism together deemphasized and ignored literature's involvement in the ideological projection of its place and time.

#### **Check Your Progress**

1. Name the major trends with collectively made structuralism a dominant theoretical approach?
2. Relate Structuralism with New Criticism and Russian Formalism
3. What do you mean by New Critical 'close reading'?
4. Why do you think a kind of 'literariness' became important for Russian Formalism?

A meticulous attempt to locate Post-structuralism in its background has been made in the next unit. The history of post-structuralism has much to do with structuralism itself. It is because post-structuralism began partly as continuation of and partly as the reaction against structuralism. Hence, we cannot but accept the fact that the premises and findings of structuralism established the future grounds for post-structuralism.

### 1.3 What is Structuralism?

Structuralism is a particular approach to literature and other cultural forms, which flourished in France during 1960s. It assumes that any cultural phenomenon can be described by probing the basic structural principle underlying the phenomenon.

Structuralism began in the works of Levi Strauss and Roland Barthes. It comes with the proposition that things cannot be understood in isolation; meanings do not reside in the things themselves. Meaning is not the *essence* of a thing. It is the outcome of a structure.

What are its implications for criticism and for the study of culture? Structuralism rejects the basic tenets of mimetic criticism or literary realism which looks into the correspondence between literary text and external reality. Structuralism also rejects romantic expressivist criticism that values a text in terms of its link with the emotions and creative imagination of its author. In contrast, it undertakes, through the study of a text, to arrive at the underlying structure/system or principles that gives a text a definite set of meanings. In this way, structuralism posits structure as the *telos* of literary investigation.

Structuralism begins with the concepts developed by Ferdinand de Saussure in his path-breaking work *Course in General Linguistics* (1916).

### 1.4 Key Concepts:

Language is not just a system of nomenclature neither is it simply what we *say*. Language, he contends, has two aspects to it: *langue* and *parole*. *Langue* is the basic underlying system that governs a language and *parole* is its manifestation in its actual speech situation. Though an individual can master a language and use it, it

exists beyond him/her. So, we must have a system in place, before we attempt to generate and communicate meaning through speech and writing, or, in simple words, before we effectively communicate through language. (So, ask yourself: which is important—system/structure or an isolated instance of language use?)

Let's move on to the next question: what is a structure? To get an answer, we need to elaborate Saussure's concept of linguistic sign.

For one thing, Saussure's concept of language differs from pre-existing ideas on language. It is a common tradition to connect language to some pre-existing reality, or sign as expression of emotional states. Saussure discards the view of language as a list of sign, and says it is basically a sign system that gives meaning to a particular sound image. What, then, is a sign, according to Saussure? A sign is not the relation between a word and a thing. A sign, in contrast, has two components: signifier and signified. Signifier and signified are psychological entity that has to do with nothing but the linguistic faculty of the interlocutor.

What is the structuralist implication of the notion of sign as psychological entity? If we see sign as having a link with tangible reality, the study of language would invariably require a corresponding study of empirical reality without which our study of language would be incomplete. By insisting on the psychological aspect of language, Saussure paves the way for later structuralists to see a text as an independent realm governed by its own structural principles. Now, language is an autonomous realm, analyzable in its own terms.

Saussure put forth a crucial proposition regarding the link between signifier and signified. **THE RELATION BETWEEN THE SIGNIFIER AND THE SIGNIFIED IS ARBITRARY.** There is no logical, existential link between them.

What does it imply? Let us, for a moment, assume that their link is quite logical and natural. Then the word 'cat' would mean an actual animal in all situations, and everywhere. The word 'cat' would become an unquestionable scientific fact. There is no necessity of structural principle to justify its meaning. Now, ask yourself: does the word mean the same animal in all linguistic communities? It doesn't (Now, read the previous paragraph again).

Let's move on to a related question: what is it that makes the word 'cat' denote a specific variety of animal in English language. or, why is a cat a cat? A cat is a cat because in English language we have other terms as well that denote different kinds of animal, such as dog, elephant, bear, deer, horse, and so on. It is the existence of different related terms that assures the meaning of a particular signifier. The meaning of a particular signifier is assured when it is placed within the language as a whole. We have dismantled the traditional atomistic view of meaning according to which each and every linguistic unit in a particular language is endowed with a certain *meaning*.

Now, we have understood that meaning of signifier depends on the simultaneous existence of other signifiers. But this is not the whole story. Meaning is intrinsically related to the relation of that particular signifier to the other signifiers. So, meaning is *relational*. What kind of relation? Is it a relation of similarity? No. Saussure says that it is differential. Meaning of a sign is generated through its differential relations to other signs.

Now ask yourself again: why is a cat a cat? Now we have an answer: a cat is cat because it is not rat or mat.

This difference is a principle, a feature, an aspect of language as a system. Thus, 'difference' here points to the systemic nature of language. We have in all language a system of minimal difference,

or binary oppositions - 'tin' is different from 'kin' because of a minimal phonetic difference of /t/ and /k/--something that enables the term 'tin' denote a specific meaning.

Saussure also expounds another important aspect of language: syntagmatic and paradigmatic relations of linguistic sign. What are they?

All the linguistic signs in a given event cannot yield meaning simultaneously (When you read anything—be it a novel, story or a poem—you cannot read all at once; you have to read in a linear fashion, moving from one linguistic sign to another, and so on). They are positioned in a linear fashion and hence their unfolding is sequential that involves passage of time.

For instance, look at the sentence: the boy kicked the girl. It is an event which becomes meaningful after its completion, and words are here positioned in a sequence. A sign can mean something only with respect to what precedes and follows it. It is the syntagmatic aspect of language (You must notice that the words follow a particular order of how they should be arranged horizontally to mean something. You cannot break this syntagmatic rule and write something like: 'Kicked the girl boy the').

On the other hand, every word in a sentence is selected out of a stock of similar (or opposite) words. For instance, 'boy' is selected out of a number of words like 'man', 'woman', 'child' and so on. So, there are so many words 'absent in every word chosen in the sentence. And they actually refine and distinguish the meaning. The word 'kicked', for instance, could have been 'killed' or 'kissed'.

## 1.5 Key Theorists of Structuralism

### **Levi-Strauss:**

*Elementary Structures of Kinship* is a foundational text of French structuralism. Here he applies the principles of structural linguistics of Saussure and Roman Jakobson to the study of kinship. Structural linguistics holds that with a number of minimal units of meaning, we can construct vast number of system. Further, relation between the terms is more important than the terms themselves. So we can identify the forms, structures, and consistent laws that lie behind diversity of human societies. These constant structural laws regulate social institutions, incest taboo, burial customs and so on.

While analyzing the myth, Levi Strauss does not analyze isolated examples of myth. Myths cannot be analyzed separately but as a group. Like the phonemes—the basic phonetic unit of a language—myths are also comprised of mythemes—the elementary units of myths. Mythemes are created by binary or ternary oppositions. Mythemes are like what Vladimir Propp calls as ‘function’ in a folk tale. (Vladimir Propp was a Russian Folklorist who identified certain basic functions and roles that lie at the heart of all kinds of folk-tales. These constant features are basic units; an individual tale is a combination of some of them. Propp identifies 31 such functions, each of which plays important role in advancing the narrative development.). Further, he also tries to expound some structural principles that characterize all human societies. For instance, he states that the institution of marriage involves a structural principle—the exchange of woman (the bride’s family gives the woman and the groom’s family takes the woman.)

### **Roland Barthes:**

Barthes applies structuralist insight to such unexpected areas as fashion system, selection of food item(s) from a menu in a

restaurant. Individual garments are selected from a paradigm of styles and types, and they are combined according to syntagmatic principles. Hence, garments can be read as though it were a language.

Works of literature, Barthes argues, are nothing but assemblage of signs that function in certain ways to create meaning. Cultural events, objects and phenomena, including film, fashion, images and advertisements—all employ certain signs to create meaning.

**Check your Progress**

1. Roland Barthes' significance in theoretical/intellectual practice primarily lies (Find out the right answer) -

- A. in his promotion of linguistic model in the analysis of culture
- B. in his application of structuralist principles in literary criticism
- C. in his evolution of a new school of criticism
- D. in his contribution as a historian of literature

**Jacques Lacan:**

Lacan re-reads Freud and re-defines unconscious in terms of language. What is unconscious? It is something that human subject cannot have access to. Unconscious is the elusive realm of free, instinctual energy, that is, governed by the pleasure principle. Unconscious, Lacan states, has a structure; it is structured like language.

Though unconscious governs human subjectivity, it never shows itself except in dreams. Freud identified two basic mechanisms involved in dream-work—condensation and displacement. Now, condensation and displacement, Lacan contends, correspond to two



basic structural principles of language identified by Roman Jakobson—metaphor and metonymy.

Condensation implies that several things (feelings, ideas, and images) are compressed into one symbol. This is similar to the principle of similarity and substitution that defines metaphor. Metaphor brings together two different images on the basis of similarity. When we say, ‘the ship ploughed the waves’, we condense into a single item two different images, the ship cutting through the sea and the plow cutting through the soil.

Displacement is a psychic trope that signifies the way the dream work transfers high-impact emotionality into unimportant matters. This is similar to the word-to-word connection that happens along the combination axis of language. And this is metonymic, because it is not similarity that defines metonymy but the contiguity, physical proximity of signs along the horizontal line.

**Michel Foucault:** Foucault argues that people share a different conceptual framework (episteme) in different epochs. Language plays a crucial role in it. What counts as knowledge changes with time, with the change of episteme and discourse.

Discourse or discursive formation is a coherent group of assumptions and language practices that applies to a particular domain of study. Assumptions which underlie cultural practices are sustained by language practices. So language plays a crucial role in the formation of discourse. For instance, when we talk about the discourse of patriarchy, we are denoting the ways of thinking and practicing language that lends coherence to male rule in society. So, atomistic study of human intercourse at various domains of human activity will not lead to these larger structures. Understanding these structures is like understanding language which governs the concrete phenomena.

**Check Your Progress**

Mention key ideas of Michel Foucault and Jacques Lacan that have structuralist tinge. (50 words)

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**1.6 Structuralism and Narratology:**

Structuralism strived to uncover the inner or immanent structure of any cultural phenomenon that includes myths, literature and language. Narratology developed as an extension of structuralist approach. It uncovers the rules and structures that govern narrative forms of fictional literature. Given below are some of the aspects of narratology. I have not attempted any exhaustive study of structural/narratological study of fictional literature here, but these aspects will help you understand how structuralist approach was applied in literature.

- At a basic level, narrative implies a succession of events. In narrative fiction, it is a succession of fictional events. we must distinguish here story, text, and narration. Story designates the narrated events, abstracted from their disposition in the text and reconstructed in their chronological order. ‘text’ is the spoken or verbal discourse which undertakes the telling of the ‘story’; it is what we read. narration is the act of production of this discourse involving the agent who speaks or writes. In our empirical world, it is the author who is responsible for the discourse. In

a narrative text, however, it is the fictional narrator who transmits a narrative to a fictional narratee.

- The story is not directly available to the reader. Do not see it as raw, undifferentiated material. It is structured. An immanent narrative structure can be abstracted from a given narrative text. Underlying an apparent level of narration is a common semiotic level, an immanent level. This immanent level is logically prior to the linguistic level of narration. Hence, a story is abstracted from: 1. The specific style of the question 2. The language of the text, and 3. The sign-system of the text.
- Is this story really independent from the rest? Todorov contends to the contrary, as he says that it is dependent on style, language and medium of the text. In this context, a discussion of the notion of the deep structure and surface structure is quite in order. An infinite variety of stories may be generated from a number of deep structures. In story, we have deep narrative structure and surface narrative structure. Surface structure is syntagmatic, governed by temporal and causal principles. Deep structure is paradigmatic based on static logical relation among elements.
- What is this deep structure of narrative? Levi Strauss's analysis of myth is relevant here. He says that the underlying structure of all myth is that of a four-term homology: A:B::C:D. there are two pairs of oppositions: in Oedipus myth, it is overrating of blood relation and underrating of blood relation. Another pair of opposition is an attempt to escape autochthony and impossibility to succeed in it.

- For the convenience of analysis, structural analysts derive a story-paraphrase by labeling the events. The labels given to events in a story, to the sequence of events in a story, are not necessarily identical with language used in the text. And labeling depends on the level of abstraction. A particular event may be labeled differently. The paraphrase, however, must be homogeneous. And it would be better to paraphrase an event not just as a label but in a simple sentence as it will include the participants of the event. This narrative sentence, called narrative proposition is different from the sentences of the text. And such narrative propositions have to be arranged according to chronological principles. It is the chronological principle that separates a narrative text from a non-narrative text.
- **Surface structure:** Events are of two kinds: ‘kernel’ that offers an alternative to a action. A phone rings. It offers alternatives: either the character can pick it up or not. Catalyst, on the other hand, can amplify, delay or expand the action, and they go with the kernel. Events combine to create micro-sequences which in turn combine to create macro-sequence which jointly create the complete story. Just beneath the complete story, it is possible to find a story-line which is a story involving one set of individuals. Various story-lines within a story can intersect in various ways. Depending on the relative predominance of the story-lines we can find a main story-line and subsidiary story-line.
- How are these events combined into sequences and then into the story? There is a principle of temporality. But story-time is usually identified with ideal chronological order. But events may be simultaneous and the story is often multi-linear. There is, besides, a principle of causality. E. M.

Forster distinguishes between story and plot while both are narrative of events, story stresses the temporality of events and plot emphasizes on the causal connection of events. But it is possible to discern a causal, logical connection among temporally ordered events as well. Causality may be implied in chronology itself.

- Vladimir Propp's *Morphology of Russian Folktales* is a pioneering study of the structural aspects of narrative literature. He unearthed a common pattern that governs narrative propositions of from close to two hundred Russian fairy tales. For this, he abstracted the constant elements, which he called 'function'. A function is an act of a character from the point of view of its significance for a course of action. Function remains constant while the performer, the agent changes. But the same event, located at different points in the story, can fulfill different functions. And he identifies 31 functions in all. Whenever they appear in a story, they occur in the same order. A function contributes to the next function in the story.

(The above points are abstracted from Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan's book *Narrative Fiction*. You can have a look at the book.)

#### **Stop to Consider**

On the basis of the ideas of narratology, you may consider analyzing a fictional text of your choice. I think a reading of Rimmon-Kenan's book will help you in your analysis. Mind that structuralist/narratological analysis hardly considers the representation of reality, character's psychological realism or historical background or setting of the fictional work.

## 1.7 Summing Up

With reference to Structuralism, we can say that it tends to reject a life beyond the text preferring to see every book as a 'construct' working by certain rules. Moreover, any attempt to interpret a text is often affected by the interpreter's own sense of reality and his/her own values. Hence, the focus on the text alone, rejecting interpretation in favour of a description of the text's operation cannot be fully accepted. Considering everything as a 'construct' and 'order-system' structuralism presented itself as yet another ordering system. It prioritized underlying systems and rules over individual elements or historical specificities.

## 1.8 References and Suggested Readings

Seldon, Roman. *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory*. Great Britain: The Harvester University Press, 1985

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Macey, David. *Dictionary of Critical Theory*. London: Penguin Books, 2000.

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## UNIT 2

### POSTSTRUCTURALISM

#### Unit Structure

#### 2.1 Objectives

#### 2.2 Introduction

#### 2.3 Poststructuralist Thinkers

#### 2.4 Poststructuralism and Deconstruction

#### 2.5 Deconstructionist Approach: How can it be applied to literary texts?

#### 2.6 Summing Up

#### 2.7 References and Suggested Readings

#### 2.1 Objectives

In this unit we will try to discuss post-structuralism so that you can see for yourself how the intellectual world of the twentieth century preoccupied itself with the idea of finding out ways in literary studies with the help of an interdisciplinary approach.

However, after going through this unit we claim that you will be able to–

- *see* for yourself what does the term ‘structure’ mean
- *formulate* the notion of Post-structuralism as a theoretical trend
- *find* out about post-structuralism as an approach to literature
- *trace* the unique historical and intellectual background out of which it emerged.

#### 2.2 Introduction

The term ‘Post-structuralism’ became a popular critical and theoretical usage during 1970s. It is not a unified school of thought

or movement. Thinkers most commonly attached to this term are Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Jacques Lacan and Roland Barthes. The dismissal of any 'real' (which means an original, authentic, stable referent, experience and meaning) is both a topic and an effect of Post-structuralism. However, the problematic relationship between 'signifier' and 'signified' or event and concept is perhaps the strongest point in Post-structuralism. What makes Post-structuralist theory a relevant way of looking at the contemporary world of change is the 'erasure' or weakening of divisions between 'signifiers' and 'signified', reading and writing, literature and criticism.

**Stop to Consider:**

There is no denying the fact that Post-structuralism is the working out of the various implications of Structuralism. But it is also quite evident that Post-structuralism tries to deflate the scientific pretensions of structuralism. If structuralism tried to master the manmade world of 'signs', post-structuralism refused to take such claims seriously. We can also say that Post-structuralists are actually Structuralists who suddenly shift their interest finding an error on their ways.

The important thing to notice is that Structuralism set out to master the text and open its secrets. Post-structuralism instead believed that this desire is futile because there are various unconscious, or linguistic or historical forces which cannot be mastered. Post- structuralism explores the differences between what the text says and what it thinks it says. We may also be irritated by Post-structurailsm's failure to arrive at conclusions but we should not forget that while doing this they are only trying to be free from the trap of 'Logocentrism'.



Post-structuralism has radically revised the traditional notion of theory by raising it to a position of prime importance and significance. The thinkers opined that theory has more than literature to account for. Since everything, from the unconscious to social and cultural practices, is seen as functioning like a language, the goal of Post-structuralist theorists are to be found in an understanding of what controls interpretation and meaning in all possible system of signification.

It is also argued that Post-structuralism began with a suspicion of Structuralism's tendency to impose a comprehensive theory on literature. It is concerned less with having a firm hold over the text than with celebrating the text's elusive nature and the fallibility of all readings. As a theoretical tool, it has derived much from Derrida's idea that language is an infinite chain of words having no extra-lingual origin or end. According to Derrida, a text should be seen as an endless stream of 'signifiers' without any final meaning. Such a view rejects the functionality of elements like common sense, and reason the readers have in their minds as they want to pull the text into his or her own frame of reference. At the same time, any attempt at imposing an order on language on the part of the writer, also proves to be inadequate. Such thinking resulted in his most acclaimed theoretical concept known as 'Deconstruction' which is often used interchangeably with Post-structuralism. In another sense, Post-structuralism takes an interdisciplinary stance by incorporating all other approaches that developed after Structuralism.

### **2.3 Post-Structuralist Thinkers**

It is never an easy effort to make a complete list of the Post-structuralist thinkers because being an interdisciplinary approach it

has influenced people from various disciplines starting from humanities to social sciences. Following is an attempt to know some of the prominent ones.

**Jacques Derrida:**

Derrida was a French thinker who taught philosophy at the Ecole Normale Supérieure in Paris. He made a tremendous impact on contemporary literary studies, especially in the universities of America where his notion of 'Deconstruction' became a major force in 1970s and 80s. Derrida joined a polemic of tradition directed against metaphysics that extends from Nietzsche to Heidegger. His critique of metaphysics and of presence of consciousness owes much to Sigmund Freud's discovery of the unconscious. His challenge against the idealist concept of language is an extension of principles laid down by Ferdinand de Saussure and his Structuralist undertakings. (Read more about Derrida in the next unit)

**Michel Foucault:**

Foucault was the professor of the History of Systems of Thought at the Collège de France in Paris. However, he has been described variously as a philosopher, social scientist, and historian of ideas. Foucault likes to be called a Post-structuralist. His works call our attention to the role of language in the exercise and preservation of power. He thought that Structuralism ignored the superficial appearances or common sense view of cultural phenomena in its efforts to have a firm hold over the conditions of their possibilities. While the Structuralists like Levi-Strauss and Barthes, used language and linguistics as their methodological tool, Foucault used the history of social and political institutions and discourses. His claim over the instability of any universal truth had a powerful impact on writing of literary history in Britain and America.

Foucault believes that the world is more than a galaxy of texts, and that some theories of textuality usually ignore the fact that any discourse is discursively formed out of a power-politics. Such discourses reduce the political and cosmic forces and ideological and social control to aspects of signifying processes. His publications include *Madness and Civilization* (1965), *The Order of Things* (1970), *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1972), *Discipline and Punish* (1977) and a multi-volumed *History of Sexuality* left unfinished by his death.

**Jacques Lacan:**

Lacan, the French psychoanalyst, entered the Freudian psychoanalytical movement in 1936. But his radical critique of the orthodox psychoanalytical theory and practice led to his expulsion from the International Psychoanalytical Association in 1959. The publication of his research papers and articles later published as *Ecrits* in Paris in 1964, made him one of the leading figures who became instrumental in the International Dissemination of Structuralist and Post-structuralist ideas of language, literature and the nature of the human subject. His most celebrated theory, “The Unconscious is Structured Like a Language”, implied his borrowing of methods and concepts of modern linguistics and tried to question Saussure’s assumption that there is nothing problematic about the bond between the ‘signified’ and the ‘signifier’ by pointing out that the two ‘signifiers’ ladies and gentlemen may refer to the same signified—a toilet . He concluded that language, the signifying chain, has a life of its own which cannot be anchored to a word of things. Perhaps, this is how his poststructuralist inclinations come to the fore front.

**Roland Barthes:**

Roland Barthes' Post-structuralism is best represented by his essay '*Death of the Author*'. Rejecting and dismissing the traditional notion of the author's being the origin of the text, the source of meaning and the only authority of the interpretation. His author is stripped off all metaphysical status and finally reduced to allocation where language with its citations, repetitions, echoes and references crosses and re-crosses. The reader is thus free to enter the text from any direction. Barthes' Post-structuralist notions lie in the premise that readers are free to open and close the text's signifying processes without respect for the signified.

**Paul de Man:**

De Man was the Sterling professor of the Humanities at Yale University. Credit goes to Paul de Man who in a way established the 'Deconstruction' as a valid theoretical tool. Inspired by Derrida, during 1970s, he made Yale the center of 'Deconstruction' He was mostly interested in the interdisciplinary mix of literature, philosophy and linguistics the components of theory. He is known for his influential books *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism* (1971) and *Allegories of Reading* (1979). These two books are regarded as rigorous works of 'Deconstruction'. His *Blindness and Insight* circles around the paradox that critics achieve insights only through a certain kind of blindness. Citing an example of the American New Critics de Man said that they based their practice upon the Coleridgian notion of organic form, according to which a poem has a formal unity analogous to that of natural form. However, instead of trying to discover in poetry the unity and coherence of the natural world, they reveal multifaceted and ambiguous meanings. This ambiguous poetic language seems to contradict their idea of a totality. His other book *Allegories of Reading* develops a rhetorical type of

'Deconstruction' already discussed in his first book. He is concerned with the theory of tropes which accompanies rhetorical treatise. Figures of speech (tropes) allow writers to say one thing but mean something else: to substitute one sign for another (metaphor) and to displace meaning from one sign in a chain of signification to another (metonymy). Tropes tend to pervade the world of language by destabilizing Logic, thereby denying the possibility of straightforward literal or referential use of language. To the question "Tea or Coffee?" one may reply "What's the difference?". While doing so, one may produce two meanings. One rhetorical- "It makes no difference which I chose", and the other, literal-"what is the difference between tea and coffee." De Man grounds his theory on a meticulous 'close reading' of specific texts, and considers that it is the effect of language and rhetoric that prevents direct representation of the real. For De man, every reading is a misreading, because tropes intervene between critical and literary texts. His most radical belief is that literary texts are 'self-deconstructing' means that a literary text simultaneously asserts and denies the authority of his own rhetorical mode. The interpreter or deconstructor has nothing to do except to collude with the text's own processes.

### **J Hillis Miller:**

Known for his books like *The Disappearance Of God* (1963), *Poets of Reality* (1965) the American Professor in English Miller became an enthusiastic disciple of Derrida by applying his theory and method to interpret the idiom of literary criticism. Taking the deconstructive practice a step further, J Hillis Miller in his essay entitled *Stevens' Rock and Criticism as Cure* explained, "Deconstruction is not a dismantling of the structure of a text but a demonstration that it has already dismantled itself." In this process, texts are subjected to a kind of uncovering of structures that operate

in a text and showing of how these structures can be dismantled by making use of the elements of the text itself.

**Check Your Progress:**

1. Relate the ideas of the key thinkers of Post-structuralism.
2. What relation can you make of Derrida and Paul de Man?
3. Re-read Lacan and Foucault to understand the significance of what they are saying.
4. Think about Paul de Man's ideas on figurative and literal meaning of a text.

#### **2.4 Poststructuralism and Deconstruction**

Poststructuralism and Deconstruction are closely linked intellectual movements. Deconstruction is one of the many strands of poststructuralist thoughts, though both these approaches go back to the thought of Jacques Derrida, emerging as a reaction against assumptions and principles of structuralism. While there can be a number of poststructuralist approaches in the analysis of cultural phenomena, deconstruction is basically a textual approach denoting a theory and practice of reading that dismantles traditional assumptions about a literary text. It resists the assumption, for instance, that a text has a coherent, unified and a determinate meaning(s). Deconstruction demonstrates how some irreconcilable, conflicting and opposed forces reside at the heart of the text. Derrida, the French thinker and one of the most radical intellectuals of contemporary times, is the originator and the foremost exponent of this theory.

Behind such contentions of Derrida's lies a linguistic theory associated with a Swiss linguist called Ferdinand de Saussure, who

defines human language as a system of signs. The signs of a language are not just a list of names and objects. The signs are not positive entities; they can 'mean' something only through a process or a network of difference. Derrida does not merely borrow this concept of difference from Saussure; he re-fashions it into what he calls *differance*. *Differance* means both 'to differ' and 'to defer'. 'To differ' is a spacial concept, because what a sign is *not*, is not a specific entity; it refers to many entities, and they are spaced out within the system. For instance, when we come across a word 'rose', what does it differ from? A rose is not a lotus, a lily, a fruit, *ad infinitum*. To defer, on the other hand, implies passage of time. It refers to endless postponement of meaning. As a reader moves on reading a text in a linear fashion, a sign's meaning is also in flux. Hence, what this notion of 'difference' dismisses is the long-cherished idea of meaning as presence.

Let us elaborate more on this notion of meaning as 'presence'. Traditional criticism's belief in definite and stable meaning stems from what Derrida calls the 'metaphysics of presence'. Derrida states that the metaphysics of presence is an inherent trait of western culture. Behind all process of signification lies a desire for presence and center, a self-sufficient and self-certifying ground. Language is also phonocentric, because it accords priority to the spoken over the written language, with the assumption that while speaking the intention of the speaker is fully present in his/ her consciousness; hence it is communicable to an auditor.

This centre, presence or self-certifying ground accords a structure and unity to what we say or write. But such a centre, Derrida contends, is bound to be inherently unstable because it cannot lie outside of language and is, hence, subject to linguistic play. Again, both speech and writing share certain common properties because they are after all signifying processes lacking in full presence.

Logocentric language resorts to binary oppositions such as truth/error, nature/culture, and so on, a system without which it cannot operate. They are, moreover, violently hierarchical, and accord priority to one concept over the other. It is in this way that logocentric language creates a particular value-system in a culture, and naturalizes it.

What is the function of deconstruction?

Deconstruction subverts those binary oppositions; but turning things upside down won't solve the problem. If we move on to centralize the marginal term in a hierarchy, we would unwittingly create another hierarchy. Deconstruction, then, destabilizes both hierarchies, leaving them in a condition of undecideability. By subverting both hierarchies in a dualism, deconstruction denies any possibility or demand of absolute distinction and truth and clarity. This is because clarity, truth and definiteness hinge on the absolute distinction of terms in a dualism. A concept cannot be seen individually in an isolated way because it is inhabited by its opposite, and cannot exist without the other. Difference inhabits every entity or concept in a dualistic system of language; it is in the discovery of such moments that the textual unity and coherence established through hierarchical oppositions collapses.

An important assumption of traditional criticism is there exists a boundary that limits a textual world separating it from the world outside. New criticism, for instance, separated a text from the extra-textual world and favored close scrutiny of the text itself. Deconstructive criticism undoes such categorical divisions of inside and outside. Whereas a text is implicated in a context, the context is also inseparably associated with textuality. This deconstructive move was taken forward by the new historicists who deny 'history' and 'text' as separate categories, because any text has a historical



dimension and historical knowledge is also invariably produced through a process of textuality.

Deconstruction does not explicitly seek to produce a canon by establishing and upholding certain properties of something like a ‘deconstructive’ text. Neither does it seek to associate this condition of meaning with a writer’s intention. Dispersal and postponement of meaning is an inherent property of language; it is not the same as ‘a specific set of determinate meanings’ nor does it have anything to do with the writer’s intention.

How does deconstruction help modern criticism? It liberates criticism from traditional dogma. Deconstruction has radically opened the text to diverse and limitless interpretations. Secondly, it has inspired an intellectual credo to destabilize and decentre larger discourses which had been held stable, rational and sacrosanct. It has become an important strategic critical tool in the hands of the feminist, new historicist and post colonialist critics and scholars to break fresh ground in the domain of criticism.

#### **Check Your Progress**

1. What is deconstruction? (40 words)
2. How are poststructuralism and deconstruction related? (50 words)
3. How does deconstruction problematize the notion of textual meaning? (100 words)

### **2.5 Deconstructionist Approach: How can it be applied to literary texts?**

Deconstructionist approach to literature is basically a theory and a practice of reading literary text that dismantles the assumption that a

text has coherence, unity and determinate meaning. It shows how conflicting forces underly the supposed unity of the text. Derrida was the originator of this approach. Behind Derridean deconstruction lies a linguistic theory—the theory for Saussure that holds that language is a sign-system. Moreover, the ‘signs’ of language are not positive entities; they can signify or mean something only through a process of difference or a network of differences. Derrida reformulates it into the concept of differance which means both ‘to differ’ and ‘to defer’. To differ is a special concept: it denotes what a sign is not, its ‘other’s are spread out within the synchronic system. To defer is temporal, indicating endless postponement of meaning. What it dismisses is the notion of meaning as ‘presence’.

Traditional criticism’s idea of definite and stable meaning stems from the ‘metaphysics of presence’ which is an inherent trait of western culture. Behind all processes of signification lies a desire for presence and center, a self-sufficient and self-certifying ground. They are also phonocentric, because they accord priority to the spoken over the written language, assuming that while speaking, the intention of the speaker is fully present in his/her consciousness, and is equally communicable to an auditor.

This centre, presence or self-certifying ground accord a structure and unity to what we say or write. But such a centre or presence is unstable, because they are themselves subjected to linguistic play. Again, speech and writing share certain common properties as they are signifying processes lacking full presence.

Logocentric language resorts to a system of binary oppositions such as truth/error, nature/culture etc only through which it can operate. They are moreover violently hierarchical, according priority to one concept over the other. Thus, logocentric language creates a particular value-system in a culture and naturalizes it. One mode of

Derridian deconstructive criticism is subversion of binary oppositions. But centralizing the marginal term in a hierarchy would create another hierarchy. Deconstruction destabilizes both hierarchies, leaving them in a condition of undecidability. Notion of clarity, truth and definiteness hinges on absolute distinction of terms in such oppositions. By subverting both hierarchies in a dualism deconstruction denies any possibilities of an absolute distinction. It is because each concept can be seen individually, in any unique way, as it is inhabited by its opposite and cannot exist without the other. Difference inhabits every entity or concept in dualistic system of language. It is in the discovery of such moments that the textual unity and coherence established through hierarchical oppositions collapse.

It is an assumption of traditional criticism that there exists a boundary that limits a textual world, separating it from the outside world. New criticism, for instance, separates a text from extra-textual world and favored close scrutiny of the text itself. But deconstruction or deconstructive criticism deconstructs such inside/outside division. Whereas a text is implemented in a context, the context is also not free from textuality. This move was taken forward by the New Historicists who deny that history and texts are separate categories and assert the historicity of the text and textuality of history. Meaning is dispersed among innumerable alternatives as well as it is endlessly postponed. It has nothing to do with the writer's intention, because it is the inherent property of language.

How does deconstruction help modern criticism? It liberates criticism from traditional dogmas. It is because of the undecidability of meaning and 'play' of textuality, interpretive act is repeated endlessly. Moreover, it helps decenter larger discourses and

deconstruct wider concepts, as in feminist criticism and postcolonial criticism.

Decentering the text, a deconstructive principle, has been implemented by feminists who centers hitherto marginalized women writers. Critique of patriarchy in a text, is a deconstructionist move.

Paul de Man: Paul de Man asserts that contrary meanings inhabit a text. And he says that the contrary forces underlying a texts supposed unity, is grammar and rhetoric.

Grammatical and rhetorical meanings are not just different but are mutually exclusive. He cites the example of rhetorical question where the grammatical structure allows us to expect an answer to the question, but the rhetorical structure even denies the possibility of asking questions. He cites an example from Yeats's poem "Among School Children", where the poet says:

"How can we know the dancer from the dance?"

Seen as a rhetorical question, it asserts the inalienability of form and experience, of unity of the dancer and the dance. From this position, the preceding synecdochic images of the tree become metaphors of unity stated in the last line. If, on the other hand, we read the last line literally, then we presume that there exists a difference between the dancer and the dance., which would compel us to re-read the previously assumed organic metaphor of the tree, and a different interpretation will follow. It is not just a matter of choosing the correct option: it is a condition of the text. It is according to de Man not something we apply to the text but something that exists in the text itself.

From the above light, we can read Wordsworth poem "Upon Westminster Bridge" in a deconstructive mode. We will see how an irreconcilable contradiction inhabits the text by Wordsworth. The subject of the poem is the city of London, which is viewed in the

morning atmosphere from the Westminster bridge. The first quatrain articulates a sense of wonder at the majestic beauty of the city. The second quatrain employs a metaphor of dress to extol the city for which the tone is already set in the first quatrain. Now, a contradiction sets in between the metaphor used and the synecdochic images of the city. The metaphor of cloth carries a suggestion of covering a body which is bare or naked. On the other hand, the synecdochic images—ships, Thames, the fields carry an air of openness and naturalness. This naturalness is further carried over into the image of the rising sun, changing landscape and the flowing river.

Evidently, there is an overwhelming appreciation of beauty. What is the object of the poet's appreciation? If the poet appreciated the beauty of the city, where lies the essence of the city—in its outwardly projected self, which is a result of dressing, or its true, natural self? The metaphor of cloth suggests that the true, naked self of the city is probably dark and not worthy of appreciation. If we emphasize on the synecdochic images of the city, we learn that this openness and naturalness is the true self of the city, and its beauty and grandeur will gradually vanish with the din and bustle of the day.

Thus, the figurative texture of the poem allows contrary meanings to exist one alongside the other.

1. It is the appearance of the city, its covered up image or look, that the poet appreciates, while its naked self would reveal its dark, ugly face.
2. It is at this morning atmosphere that the city is more true to itself, more immersed in nature, and open to the entire world, though the people are oblivious of it.

3. What follows from these two readings of the poem is the poem is both an appreciation and an indictment. The city is both valorized and criticized.

**Stop to Consider:**

Now, from your understanding of deconstruction, attempt a critical analysis of any literary text. Apply the basic deconstructionist/poststructuralist notion of irreconcilable contradiction inhabiting the text, in your reading of the text at hand. Please be noted that deconstruction is not a formula that can be applied in any text without a close reading of the same, and without looking at the nuances of meaning embedded in the text's language.

## **2.6 Summing Up**

If we are to judge the significance and implications of Structuralism and Post-structuralism we cannot help saying that these are two valid but very dull, technical approach to literary studies. With the emergence of Post-structuralism, we enter into an area of total chaos. Because unlike Structuralism which emphasized on having a firm hold on the text, Post-structuralism came to acknowledge the text's elusive nature and the fallibility of all sorts of readings. In essence, post-structuralism emphasizes on instability, multiplicity and fluidity of interpretation and representation; it questions simultaneously authority, certainty, and objectivity in analysing texts, culture, and society.

## **2.7 References and Suggested Readings**

Seldon, Roman. *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory*. Great Britain: The Harvester University Press, 1985

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## UNIT 3

### MAJOR MOVEMENTS

#### **Unit Structure:**

#### **3.1 Objectives**

#### **3.2 Introduction - Developments in Critical Trends**

#### **3.3 Marxism**

##### **3.3.1 New Historicism**

##### **3.3.2 Cultural Materialism**

#### **3.4 Reader Response and Reception Theory**

#### **3.5 Narratology**

#### **3.6 Post Colonialism**

#### **3.7 Feminism**

#### **3.8 Summing Up**

#### **3.9 References and Suggested Readings**

#### **3.1 Objectives**

We are going to make here a brief survey of the main features of some major critical movements. You should expect that by the time you have finished working through this unit, your understanding of critical movements will enable you to

- *make connections* between literature and critical thought,
- *name* the major concepts related to a critical approach, and
- *distinguish* between critical approaches.

#### **3.2 Introduction - Developments in Critical Trends**

A very simple way of describing our present field of study would be to look at the 'contemporary' critical scene of 'theory' and make a list of all the theorists. It would then include Jacques Lacan, Roland



Barthes, Umberto Eco, Jacques Derrida, Emmanuel Levinas, Julia Kristeva, Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray, Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, Jean Baudrillard, Jean-François Lyotard, Jürgen Habermas, Charles Taylor, Pierre Bourdieu, Stuart Hall, Fredric Jameson, Ernesto Laclau, Chantal Mouffe, Richard Rorty, Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak, Gianni Vattimo, and Slavoj Žižek. This would be a simply impossible description!

What you should take care to remember is that contemporary theorists draw upon the work of precursors in the critical tradition. However, it is not fully appropriate to say that a clear dividing line can be drawn between contemporary theory and the critical tradition in the background. The thinkers in the field of philosophy have had much impact on non-philosophers in other disciplines. Also, contemporary theory has been deeply influenced by thinkers in the modern European critical intellectual tradition.

**SAQ:**

Can you identify the nationalities of the thinkers listed above?  
How many nations are represented in this list? (30 words)

.....  
.....  
.....  
.....

In the unit above you have read of many nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century thinkers whose work has been very influential. But there are even earlier thinkers whose thought show itself in contemporary thinkers. Let us look at how Jon Simons charts out the connections:

“Foucault’s earlier work is based on a familiarity with Renaissance as well as early modern thought, while his later work delves into Greek, Roman and early Christian thought and culture. Derrida’s deconstruction of Plato is as instructive as his critique of Husserl or Freud, while both he and Levinas reach back to Talmudic sources. . . . Rousseau is the central figure in Derrida’s grammatology, as is Spinoza for Deleuze’s concept of expression and Leibniz for his concept of the fold. Derrida and Foucault argued about Descartes, whose dualism of mind and matter continues to haunt contemporary theory as well as the critical tradition that preceded it.”

By this time it must be clear that ‘theory’ as a field of thought is not simple, but that it may help in simplifying abstractions. What we shall cover below is intended to give you a preliminary view of the range of thinking that constitutes it. It may spur your interest to discover more on your own.

### **3.3 Marxism**

Marxist theory, in literary terms, is intricately tied up with historicisation. However, it is certainly not limited to that alone. As a comprehensive philosophy it attempts to give a coherent understanding of the nature of our worldly existence. Thus it brings into its purview all aspects, from the economic to the aesthetic, of philosophy.

#### **Historical Materialism:**

Friedrich Engels, in the introduction to *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific* (1892), defines historical materialism; that it designates “the view of the course of history which seeks the ultimate cause and the great moving power of all important historic events in the

economic development of society, in the changes in the modes of production and exchange, in the consequent division of society into distinct classes, and in the struggle of these classes against one another.” According to William H. Shaw (*A Dictionary of Marxist Thought*), “Historical materialism is not, strictly speaking, a philosophy; rather, it is best interpreted as an empirical theory”.

Society and the nature of individuals are determined not by mere ideas but by the conditions and the activity of material production. These material relations give specific shape to laws, art, religion or morality.

The passage that is taken to clarify the Marxist conception of culture and society is from the preface of 1859 to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*: “In the social production of their existence, men inevitably enter into definite relations, which are independent of their will, namely relations of production appropriate to a given stage in the development of their material forces of production. The totality of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which arises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. This mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political and intellectual life. It is not consciousness of men that determines their existence, but, their social existence that determines their consciousness.”

Engels, in a letter of 1894: “It is not that the economic situation is *cause, solely active*, while everything else is only passive effect. There is, rather, interaction on the basis of economic necessity, which *ultimately* always asserts itself.”

**Walter Benjamin & Fredric Jameson and others** have continued to develop the insights of Marx and Engels. The Frankfurt School thinkers, as also Walter Benjamin, did important work on cultural formations in this age of technology and mass culture. Althusser, Lucien Goldmann, and Pierre Macherey brought into combination with Marxism, ideas of structuralist analysis. Fredric Jameson combines dialectical theory with literary criticism, especially in major works like *The Political Unconscious* (1981).

You may be able to understand Marxist literary theory by first considering what Fredric Jameson has to say, “Always historicise!” This can be taken to mean that cultural products (like literary texts) can be fully understood only when placed against the social relationships of their time. The problem contained herein is that if we see a cultural product as purely a result of the social relationships which gave it shape, the danger lies in not seeing it in absolutely aesthetic terms. Its aesthetic qualities may simply ‘vanish’ if we consider it only in material terms. Its form, for instance, cannot be explicable in purely material terms. We should also be aware that there can be a variety of Marxist approaches to literature. But Marxist approaches themselves are to be identified in the priority they give to the material processes which produce ‘culture’,

**Aesthetics in Marx and Engels:**

“The aesthetic views of Marx and Engels were shaped and dominated by their ideas about literature (including the texts of dramas), while the other arts scarcely drew their attention. The thoughts, opinions, and incidental comments, offered for the most

part in their correspondence, cumulate in several pungent, distinctly original contributions to literary theory (and thus criticism). But these Marxian themes do not form a comprehensive system of literary theory and they are not self-sufficient, being oriented primarily by what tradition terms the 'content' rather than the 'form' of writing."

"Class was a crucial element in Marx's thought . . . and Marxist literary thought is necessarily oriented to the value-clusters in literary production and reception that social class affects. At the same time this theme has to be seen as emerging cumulatively from the insights as well as the errors of numerous critics of specific literary works. Indeed, the key concept for a class analysis of literature - that of class *equivalents* - was provided not by Marx or Engels but by Plekhanov, who may be regarded together with Mehring, as one of the first Marxist literary theorists." (Lee Baxandall, *A Dictionary of Marxist Thought*)

Janet Wolff: "theories of the relationship between art or literature and the society in which it arises are indebted to Marx's formulation, in the 1859 Preface to the *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, of the metaphor of base and superstructure, in which the aesthetic is explicitly cited as part of the superstructure, and as one of the 'ideological forms' in which class conflict is carried out. . . . At its crudest, such an account reduces art to nothing more than a reflection of social relations and class structure, automatically produced out of these material features. More complex accounts of art as ideology can be found in the work of more recent writers, for example, Goldmann."

**Walter Benjamin:** "Scarcely any twentieth-century author rivals Walter Benjamin's influence on the contemporary understanding of art and the aesthetic implications of new media. Benjamin stated that "I have been concerned with the meaning of the

connection between the beautiful and appearance (*Schein*) in the realm of language.” . . .a cursory glance at Benjamin’s collected works will reveal that the majority of his texts explore the theory of representation in literature. . . For Benjamin . . .the study of literature addresses not only the ways in which linguistic representation must be distinguished from visual or auditory media, but the possibility that all art may constitute a negation of expression as such. . . For Benjamin, art is of crucial importance for any political project because it forces us to evaluate what we mean when we say we understand something historically.”

Marxism tries to place literature within society. The “base” is the mode of production, the economic and material infrastructure, while the “superstructure” includes the legal, the political, religious, the philosophical and aesthetic formations whose typical characteristics are decided by the base. This is only the preliminary, unrefined model which was initially used to explain the type of literature and other cultural forms. In this view, literature is assumed to ‘reflect’ a particular mode of production - as in the classic example of Christopher Caudwell’s 1937 study, *Illusion and Reality*. Much earlier, in 1890, Engels had distinguished ‘vulgar’ marxist interpretations from his and Marx’s own. The economic factor, he said, could not be taken as the *only* factor in the production and reproduction of actual life. It is the determining factor only in “the final analysis”. Marx’s own remarks in the *Grundrisse* (c.1857-58) contribute to the debate (on art, etc. as ‘reflection’) by suggesting that the economic mode of production is a consideration in the final analysis, and that the superstructure has its own relative autonomy.

**SAQ:**

Bring out the significance of the term “materialist” in Marxist approaches to art and literature. (50 words)

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Raymond Williams offers a revision of these terms of economic determinism which gives out a new scope for the materialist conception of literature. In his work of 1980, *Problems in Materialism and Culture*, shows the limits of the base-superstructure model and suggests that economic determinism should instead be looked at as setting limits and exerting pressures. Another influential Marxist critic, Lucien Goldmann, spoke of ‘social totality’ and ‘homologies’. This set up parallels and correspondences between different levels of activity. Perhaps the most sweeping revision has come from Louis Althusser who attempted to reconcile the two principles of materialist analysis and the relative autonomy of the superstructure without being reductive.

Althusser found fault with classical ‘humanist’ Marxism which located social contradictions in the economic base thus eventually providing the grounds of revolution. He preferred to theorize society as a combination of different levels of social activity with contradictions specific to each such level. These various contradictions work to either reinforce the others or counteract them. Althusser developed this conception in his major work, *For Marx* (“Contradiction and Overdetermination”), showing the extension of structuralism in his ideas. In the Althusserian conception the elements he pointed to are distinct but interrelated so

that change results not from a single cause (which is a contradiction on a particular level) but because contradictions accumulate. No single contradiction (or contradictions) can be taken as cause or even as effects. Each one determines but is also determined within the same movement. Each contradiction is determined by the levels and instance of the social formation that it activates. In principle, this is 'over-determination'. The economic level is yet the final determination of all other levels but this does not happen mechanically or immediately in particular cases as other elements in the social structure are "relatively autonomous". As you can see, Althusser's explanation is structuralist because the elements conceived are considered to be distinct from each other, but are necessarily interrelated so that none of these can be set apart as the single cause of social transformation. Thus the economic determinant may be the 'ultimate' or the 'dominant' one but that 'ultimate' stage cannot be isolated since the political and the ideological determinants will also be simultaneously evident.

**The 'materialist' perspective on literature:**

Materialist approaches to literature are likely to take into account details about a book's production including publication, printing and bookselling, and its reception by an audience. This aspect, however, is not the sole privilege of Marxist approaches. Feminist approaches and postcolonial approaches also can deploy such methods in their total analyses. While conventional Marxist analysis tends to exclude, on these grounds, more abstract concerns of the book's formal features or its metaphysical alignments, there is a deeper problem that troubles such analysis. If a book, like a human individual, is merely the *result* or the *effect* of its material circumstances, then its potential or capacity to be the agent of change cannot be explained. It may be



worthwhile to remember that Eliot's *Wasteland* was definitely the *product* of its time, —post-war society — but the extensive influence it cast on a new generation of poets who were experimenting with new forms, remains to be accounted for. What happens to English poetry thereafter cannot be explained by a “mechanical materialism”. Marx commented on the limits of the doctrine in *Theses on Feuerbach*: “The materialist doctrine that men are products of circumstances and upbringing, and that, therefore, changed men are products of other circumstances and changed upbringing, forgets that it is men who change circumstances and that the educator must himself be educated.”

We can compare this with Shelley's preface to *Prometheus Unbound*: “Poets, not otherwise than philosophers, painters, sculptors and musicians, are in one sense the creators, and in another the creations, of their age”. This is the problem of dialectics which forms the content of Marxist thought. Literary texts derive their shape from the contexts of their production and distribution but equally, they also exert a determining influence on these contexts.

#### **Check Your Progress:**

1. How do Marxist critics relate literary texts to cultural production? Give a brief sketch of typical approaches.
2. Write briefly on Althusser's incorporation of structuralism with Marxist conceptions of literary activity.
3. Explain the Marxist notion of the materiality of culture.
4. Give a brief assessment of the contribution of Lukacs to studies of realism and modernism.

The contribution of Georg Lukacs to Marxist aesthetics is of great interest in that he attempted to reinterpret the idea of determinism in the conception of historical process. For Lukacs, novels like Sir Walter Scott's for instance, could provide the basis for the historical study of literature, for the "theoretical examination of the interaction between the historical spirit and the great genres of literature which portray the totality of history". He took a consistent stand against modernism and contributed extensively to the study of realism, especially in the 1930s and 1940s. Brecht, however, thoroughly called into question Lukacs' canon of realist writers and the definition of realism that he theorised. Lukacs led a sustained attack on modernism in his *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism* (1958). Lukacs' analysis of modernism occurs through his study of Franz Kafka and Thomas Mann.

In his *History and Class Consciousness* (1923), Lukacs showed himself to be an unorthodox Marxist by claiming that Marxism is a method rather than doctrine. This work was greatly admired by the leading thinkers of the Frankfurt School, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer. It was this anti-doctrinal stance of Lukacs which eventually led them to develop the analytical method, 'Critical Theory'.

**SAQ:**

Attempt a historical comparison between 'realism' and 'modernism'. (70 words)

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Adorno and Horkheimer are most remembered for their critique of the Enlightenment, the study of totalitarian and fascistic trends in modern democracies, and their analysis of modern culture. Max Horkheimer had been director (from 1930) of the Institute of Social Research at Frankfurt, founded in 1923. Adorno's contributions to the Frankfurt School were in collaboration with Horkheimer, of which the best known is the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947). This collaboration took shape most of all during their wartime exile in America. Critical Theory combines insights from Freudian psychoanalysis (with Horkheimer) with Marxist critique of ideology. *The Authoritarian Personality* (1950) was the result of the study of anti-semitic fascism in Nazi Germany. Adorno's attempt was the exploration of a new method which could be grounded in both psychoanalysis and Marxism. The particular focus which occupied both Horkheimer and Adorno regarded the study of modernity and the space it provided to totalitarian thinking. In this connection, the two philosophers probe the darker workings of reason which, since the Enlightenment, was considered to have made social progress possible. The critique of modern cultural forms under the label of "culture industry" probes the cultural forms and the processes by which capitalism maintains its hold over society through a form of 'mass deception' cast as entertainment which is, however, the instrument ideologically slanted to reinforce capitalist economies.

**Frankfurt School:**

The most prominent members of this school of thought are, besides Horkheimer and Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, Jurgen Habermas, with other members of the Institute - Friedrich Pollock, Erich Fromm, Franz Neumann, Otto Kirchheimer, Leo Lowenthal, as also to some extent, Walter Benjamin. A most

influential line in their thought has been their critical attitude towards Marxism itself. 'Critical theory' is the name applied to the line of thinking issuing from this school but there were wide differences of opinion among the members. Among the common themes was the effort to develop a critique of ideology, to examine how social conflicts and contradictions are expressed in thought and how such unequal interests get produced and reproduced through domination. By analysing such systems of domination, critical theorists "hoped to enhance awareness of the roots of domination, undermine ideologies and help to compel changes in consciousness and action."

In the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, influenced partly by the catastrophic times through which they lived, Adorno and Horkheimer undertake an extensive critique of the Enlightenment and its assumption of 'modernity' through the stress on reason. But what the Critical Theorists investigate is how the darker side of this emphasis masks the tendency towards exploitation and the self-preservation it contains. Ideology was a sustained preoccupation of the critical theorists: "They tried to develop a critical perspective in the discussion of all social practices, that is, a perspective which is preoccupied by the critique of ideology - of systematically distorted accounts of reality which attempt to conceal and legitimate asymmetrical power relations." (David Held, *A Dictionary of Marxist Thought*)

What is to be understood by 'ideology'? Marx and Engels used the concept to put forth the idea that ideas do not develop independently of their social and political contexts. According to them, the economic base of a society or a culture consists of its mode of production (e.g.: feudal, capitalist, ancient) and the forces and relations of production (the ownership of the means of production

decides the power structures). Conflict between the classes drives history. Social change comes with the modifications to the base. Institutions and ideology belong to the superstructure of society and these confirm the relations of power that obtain among the classes. All intellectual production carries the traces of struggle at the material level. Reading, or writing, are both marked by the struggle over meaning and are thus implicated in the relations of power and knowledge. Art is also - but not exclusively - determined by economics although the question is not quite so simple.

Antonio Gramsci (1891 - 1937) uses the concept of 'hegemony' in explaining the relationship between reality and ideology. Power, in this explanation, does not take the form merely of economic or political dominance but of cultural and ethical values. This does away with the idea of coercion since power is not exerted through force alone. The world-view of the ruling classes takes the shape of cultural and ethical values which the rest of society accepts as common sense. Thus the dominance of the ruling classes appears to be a part of the 'natural' order of things and thus convincing even for those who are oppressed by such values. While 'ideology' shows us that ideas and beliefs, practices and representations hold society together, Gramsci's explanation was aimed at showing that political groupings, classes, and sections live on the basis of a social and political unity among them. This makes clear the fact that ideology takes diverse forms, is embedded in material practices, and that people also are involved in the production of their own conditions. So ideology is not arranged as monoliths restricted to a particular class but allows complex relations of forces rather than simple antagonistic struggles between different classes.

### **Literature & ideology:**

Althusser's account of ideology, indebted to Gramsci (his *Prison Writings*), has been highly influential. Like Gramsci, Althusser is concerned with analysing why people who live within capitalist societies and whose are exploited by these systems continue to support them. His essay of 1970 - 71, entitled "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" (ISA), lays out the idea that such societies require that labour power, with attendant skills, are in constant supply. This demand is met through the training and education given out to schoolchildren, and to apprentices, etc. The power of the State is extended in "repressive", or in "ideological" ways. Ideological State Apparatuses include institutions like the Church, the family, culture, the educational system, systems of communication, political systems, sport, the legal system and other forms of organisation (trade unions, for instance).

The repressive power of the state is extended through the Repressive State Apparatus (RSA) like the police, the army, the administration, the courts, the government, the prison. The main distinction between the ISA and the RSA is that one operates through ideology, the other through coercion. What this distinction projects is coercion and consent both of which are necessary to the functioning of State power.

Modern society is intricately concerned with the continuation of the capitalist mode of production. When Althusser says: "Ideology represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence", it refers back to the idea that we contribute to the continuance of an exploitative capitalist system by accepting it. This acceptance is unconscious because in capitalism we are encouraged to think of ourselves as individual even though the function to which capitalism allocates us is

absolutely replaceable and dispensable. So our perception of our relation to society is crucially different from what that relation really is. And we do not actually recognise this difference.

Althusser sees ideology as both 'material' and as something in which we live. That is to say, we cannot say - ever - that we are 'outside' ideology. Our very subjectivity is constituted by ideology. This is important for his concept of 'interpellation' which says that the subject - the individual - comes to recognise itself in language. This is one reason why Althusser has been so important for literary and cultural studies, as much as for feminist theorising.

Althusser stated that art gives us a special knowledge of ideology. Art is neither knowledge nor ideology and the knowledge that it gives us is of a special kind. Even while it remains within ideology, it gives us knowledge of ideology, a special knowledge. Both art and science allow us to know ideology; art allows us to 'see' or to perceive it while science allows us to 'know' it. Many Marxist thinkers (including Marx himself) had come up with the problem of why certain writers who held political views wrote against those very views. Althusser's suggestion seems to resolve this problem.

Pierre Macherey took up this question in his *A Theory of Literary Production* (1966, 1978) According to both Althusser and Macherey, ideology, being illusory and full of contradictions, is not embodied in a literary text. Ideology can be made visible in a text because it is made up of multiple, disconnected parts.

You may have noted by now that in order to study culture, we keep turning to the problem of history. New Historicists (of whom you

will read below) have distinguished their analytical methods from “old” historicisms. Here it is important for us to relate to what Walter Benjamin posits as a politically oriented sense of history required of Marxist analysis. Rather than view history as a determining background for literature, twentieth-century Marxist critics have “reconceived history as a field of discourse in which literature and criticism make their own impact as political forces and, in effect, participate in an historical dialectic.” In other words, Marxist historicism moves away from seeing literature purely in terms of base and superstructure with literature being shaped by the material ‘base’. “In the Marxist view of literary criticism, the critic is a member of an intellectual class that promotes cultural revolution through a political commitment expressed in literary studies.” (R.Con Davis & R.Schleifer) Contemporary Marxist work situates not only literature, but also criticism. Terry Eagleton argues in *Literary Theory* “that the history of modern literary theory is part of the political and ideological history of our epoch”. Critics like Fredric Jameson, Raymond Williams, Eagleton, Gayatri Spivak, Edward Said, Catherine Belsey, among many others, acknowledge a strong sense that criticism is itself a historically situated activity deeply involving the critic. Thus the critic cannot stand apart from the text but must recognise his or her own effect on the text being read and interpreted.

#### **Check Your Progress**

1. Elaborate on the significance of ‘ideology’ to Marxist approaches to art and literature.
2. Discuss briefly the work of Marxist critics who have contributed to the analysis of ‘culture’.
3. Write short notes on:
  - a) Ideological State Apparatuses



- b) Base and Superstructure
- c) Hegemony
- d) Culture Industry

### 3.3.1 New Historicism

Marxism is more clearly to be seen in ‘Cultural Materialism’ than in New Historicism, while anthropology makes its presence clearer in New Historicism than in Cultural Materialism, but the two sets of theories share many assumptions in common. In some senses, it has even been pointed out that Cultural Materialism is the British counterpart of American New Historicism. This is not absolutely incorrect but it does not give us the core difference between the two kinds of critical thinking.

Stephen Greenblatt says in his *Learning to Curse* (1990) that in New Historicism is combined many different trajectories: materialism, Marxist and feminist critical practices. New Historicism does, indeed, borrow from different works in theories of language and semiotics, psychoanalysis, cultural history, Marxism, as it places at the centre the work of Michel Foucault (the French historian of discourse) and Clifford Geertz (the American social anthropologist). New Historicism came as a turn to history in literary study after the period of formalism in New Criticism, structuralism and deconstruction. In 1980, Stephen Greenblatt published *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, a collection of essays to describe which he used the phrase “new historicism” (in 1982). This work bore resemblances with Foucault’s work which had shown that ‘discourses’ or language (or vocabularies) which function to organise society, sanctioned by institutions of power, constitute the body of knowledge which shapes western subjectivity. Foucault’s studies of madness, sexuality, punishment, medicine, representation, had been

conducted with a Nietzschean perspective on the congruity of knowledge and power, which exerted an influence on left-leaning critics and Marxist literary theory as evident in Mikhail Bakhtin's *Rabelais and his World* (trans.1968) and Pierre Macherey's *A Theory of Literary Production*. This helped to create a complex foundation for theorising in literary studies the operations of class, body, text, and power.

You should note certain features about New Historicism: its focus on Shakespeare and the Renaissance, and the focus on culture. New Historicist criticism brings to focus those forces, political, cultural, or textual, which stand in between past and present. The problem for this kind of historicism involves the question of what meanings are to be gleaned from the materials of literature and history. The issue at the forefront is that for history to be meaningful it must be intelligible to us. But intelligibility is not absolute — it is relative to the conditions in which interpretations are being made. Greenblatt's reading of Shakespeare's *The Tempest* discovers the language games which go beyond purely aesthetic structures into the dark history of "linguistic colonialism". As Greenblatt helps to bring to our notice, our understanding of the past and its meanings, while giving due consideration to its difference from us, is actually tied up with the conflicts of ideology, language and culture.

#### **Studying Shakespeare and the Renaissance:**

Historical studies are a relatively new development since for a long period of time historical studies of literature were considered unnecessary. . After Coleridge, and after Romantic literary theory, critics in the early twentieth century - H.H.Furness, E.E.Stoll, Mark Van Doren - regarded Shakespeare's "genius" as transcendental, beyond the contingencies of history or politics.

This sort of perception lies behind F.R. Leavis's estimates of 'great writers'. However, a different group of critics regarded Shakespeare as a 'Renaissance Man', whose works 'picture' or 'reflect' their historical background taking in the beliefs and ideas of their time. Critics like J. Dover Wilson, H.B. Charlton, Alfred Hart, E.M.W. Tillyard, and Lily B. Campbell based their readings on such a conception while maintaining, at the same time, that Shakespeare displayed distinctiveness of ability, or a permanent moral vision. Such critics also upheld a clear distinction between fact and fiction, between fiction and a historical reality that can be ascertained through objective facts.

Historicists in recent times, however, hold the idea that to think of literature as reflecting "a historical background of objective facts or moral truths" is not a reading that can give us the best interpretations. What is perhaps more informative or productive is to treat literary texts as 'plural'. That is, texts take their shape from intersecting vocabularies of diverse social discourses. The most supple form of new historicist reading searches out sometimes surprising, sometimes different, points at which historical and literary vocabulary show up the structures of power which suppress marginal voices.

In the late 1970s and the early 1980s there came out a number of readings of Tudor and Stuart literature concentrated on the contradictions, the conditions and paradoxes of power in their time. In 1982, the British critic Derek Longhurst argued for a reading of Shakespeare which took into account contemporary ideas of family, order, authority, justice, religious beliefs, and so on. In 1985, Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield edited a volume, *Political Shakespeare*, to which Greenblatt contributed the essay, "Invisible Bullets".

Feminist critics have been largely cautious in their endorsement of new historicist approaches even as they have recognised new historicist recovery of suppressed marginal voices of the oppressed in history. There were some pioneering feminist studies of the early modern period in the late nineteen-seventies and the early nineteen-eighties. Some left-wing critics have also seen New Historicism to be not properly Marxist. On the other hand, new historicism can be seen in the studies of Romanticism that followed Marilyn Butler's *Romantics, Rebels and Reactionaries* (1981). Other major studies include David Simpson's *Wordsworth's Historical Imagination* (1987), *Rethinking Historicism: Critical Readings in Romantic History* (1989; edited by Marjorie Levinson, Marilyn Butler, Jerome McGann, Paul Hamilton), and Alan Liu's *Wordsworth: The Sense of History* (1989). New historicism has also given rise to studies of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century novels.

Marilyn Butler's study of Romanticism shows the effort to break with the conventions of New Criticism, psychoanalytical and formalist criticism. This reminds us of the re-grounding of literary study that New Historicism attempted. The relationship between literature and history has been brought to the fore in literary studies. As John Brannigan tells us, "the most important achievement which we can attribute to the turn to history is the recognition that the text is an event. For new historicists, literary texts occupy specific historical and cultural sites, at which, and through which, historical forces clash, and political and ideological contradictions are played out. The concept of the text as event allows us to recognise the temporal specificity of the text, the definite and contingent function of a text in a particular discourse under particular historical conditions. It recognises also that the text is part of the process of historical change, and indeed may constitute historical change. This has shifted critics away from approaching the text as a simple

reflection or rejection of historical trends, and instead has led critics to explore what [Louis] Montrose has called ‘the historicity of texts and the textuality of history’.

### **Cultural Studies:**

If we look at the title of Matthew Arnold’s work, *Culture and Anarchy* (1869), we can see how Arnold saw ‘culture’ as providing a unifying force of shared meanings and values. Arnold’s seminal work began a tradition of literary and cultural criticism. This is known as the ‘culture and civilisation’ tradition in Britain in continuation, and in opposition, of which is to be seen the discipline of cultural studies since the 1960s in the English-speaking world. This tradition was liberal-humanist: “It both assumed the inevitability of progress in western societies towards a higher state of civilisation and stressed the inalienable right of the individual to realise him/herself to the full. It privileged the role of culture, and literature in particular, in this process of self-development.” (Chris Weedon)

The work of F.R. Leavis in Cambridge from the 1930s to the 1950s reflects the privileging of literature as the repository of shared meanings and values. Leavis’ interest in exploring the relation between culture and society - an integral part of *Scrutiny* - was linked to his conception that industrialisation led to the denigration of social values. This feeling forms the main theme of his work, *Culture and Environment* (1933), published together with Denys Thompson. The works of great literature were regarded by Leavis to be extremely crucial in the face of a stultifying mass culture (typified by Hollywood cinema) so that it became even more crucial that literature educate and perform the

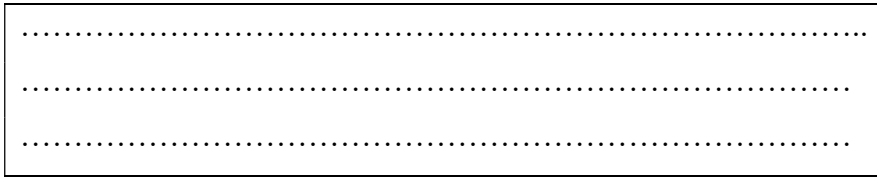
function of supplying what was absent - a healthy national culture.

The core of ideas that developed from here saw the construction of a 'canon' of literary works that could teach recognisable aesthetic and cultural values. What became later questionable was the exclusion of certain groups of writings as 'inferior' - as working-class writing, and so on. These exclusions became the centres of critiques in cultural studies. Marxist critiques of the culture and civilisation tradition as well as of mass culture became a high point in left-wing journals and cultural organisations in the 1930s.

Adult education provided a seedbed in the development of cultural studies. The most important figures of British cultural studies - Richard Hoggart, Raymond Williams, Stuart Hall - studied English literature and worked in adult education. Each one of them advocated the inclusion of texts from working-class culture and popular culture. In its early years cultural studies was discursively related to literary studies and was, institutionally, a branching off from the discipline of English literature. Cultural studies became an independent discipline within British higher education when the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies was founded at the University of Birmingham and Richard Hoggart became its first director in 1964. Stuart Hall succeeded Hoggart in 1968.

**SAQ:**

Try to analyse how literary texts can be equated with cultural artefacts. Do they reflect on culture or do they only 'reflect' culture? (80 words)



### 3.3.2 Cultural Materialism

Cultural materialism takes us into the British academy in the late 1970s and early 1980s when various critical trends (forms of Marxism, feminism, psychoanalysis, poststructuralism) came together to create a context for its emergence. European theory had been translated into English and as Stephen Greenblatt's *Renaissance Self-Fashioning from More to Shakespeare* (1980) emerged there were already urgent debates surrounding 'tradition'. With the installation of the Reagan (in USA) and the Thatcher (in UK) governments there was a political edge to these debates but simultaneously departments of English were already facing a challenge from the theoretical issues raised in influential journals like *Tel Quel*, *Screen*, and *Representations*. Unlike New Historicism which has been rigidly confined to academic circles, cultural materialism has extended into general cultural politics.

Raymond Williams used the term to define his own critical practice which he saw as being in alignment with Marxist cultural theory in the twentieth century. He did so in *Problems in Materialism and Culture* (1980) but we can perhaps agree with the notion that as critical practice, cultural materialism could be seen long before Williams' explicit statement, in works like Richard Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy* (1957) and E.P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963). Williams' long-held concern had been with the relationship of 'literary' to non-literary textual production. Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield's *Political Shakespeare: New Essays in Cultural Materialism* (1985) made

Williams' term more prominent in the context of the volume. In their foreword to the volume, Dollimore and Sinfield situated their approach within the breakdown of consensus in British political life of the 1970s and the parallel disintegration of traditional grounds of literary study. Their definition of cultural materialism said:

“Historical context undermines the transcendent significance traditionally accorded to the literary text and allows us to recover its histories; theoretical method detaches the text from immanent criticism which seeks only to reproduce it in its own terms; socialist and feminist commitment confronts the conservative categories in which much criticism has been hitherto conducted; textual analysis locates the critique of traditional approaches where it cannot be ignored. We call this ‘cultural materialism’.”

We can trace a line through the work of Richard Hoggart, Williams and then, Terry Eagleton. Their persistent concern remained a materialist approach to manifest objects of cultural production. Dollimore and Sinfield, like Williams, use the concept of ‘culture’ analytically. So they turn to those artefacts and practices which are normally brought together under ‘culture’ in an evaluative sense. Thus their analysis includes “work on the cultures of subordinate and marginalised groups like schoolchildren and skinheads, and on forms like television and popular music and fiction”. In adhering to the view that ‘culture’ is material since it is closely tied to the forces and relations of production, Dollimore and Sinfield continue with Williams’ focus on the historically specific institutions that transmit culture.

Why Shakespeare, and the Renaissance? Anthony Easthope offers the explanation that it was not surprising that “Shakespeare and Renaissance literature should become a main arena for contestation since it represents the hegemonic centre of conventional literary criticism.” We may add to this the information that in the context of



the British academy, the “English Renaissance offered a well-documented but very selectively narrativised account of the interaction of all of those social and cultural forces that led up to the English Revolution of 1642 - 60, and the subsequent birth of the ‘modern’ era.” (John Drakakis)

“New historicists typically examine the functions and representations of power, and focus on the ways in which power contains any potential subversion. Cultural materialists, to the contrary, look for ways in which defiance, subversion, dissidence, resistance, all forms of political opposition, are articulated, represented and performed. If new historicists aim to describe the operations of power in the past, cultural materialists set out to explore the historical and the contemporary possibilities for subversion.” [John Brannigan]

**Michel Foucault (1926 - 1984):**

Foucault’s central concerns have often been those of the relationship of language with social institutions. He gives the name, “discourse”, to this relationship. His attempt is to make clear the institutional rules that direct modes of signification, and thus give shape to the particular forms of knowledge. Thus we have the emergence of modern categories of knowledge as with the diagnosis of madness which Foucault surveys in *Madness and Civilization* (1961), scientific medicine and the rise of clinics in *Birth of the Clinic* (1963), the emergence of the human sciences in *The Order of Things* (1966) as well as other important works like *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969). “However, while Derrida’s work was largely directed against the disciplines of literature and philosophy, Deleuze’s against psychoanalysis, and Baudrillard’s against political

economy, Foucault's work challenged virtually all the main fields and disciplines". In the period following the second World War, French intellectual life was under the influence of phenomenology and Marxism. In the 1960s, structuralism, psychoanalytical theory, and Foucault's own work, became influential. Foucault was primarily interested in 'historicizing' knowledge. He used the concept of 'epistemes' to indicate world-views specific to particular moments (periods) in history. "By episteme, we mean, in fact, the total set of relations that unite, at a given period, the discursive practices that give rise to epistemological figures, sciences, and possibly formalized systems; the way in which, in each of these discursive formations, the transitions to epistemologization, scientificity, and formulization are situated and operate; the distribution of these thresholds, which may coincide, be subordinated to one another, or be separated by shifts in time; the lateral relations that may exist between epistemological figures or sciences in so far as they belong to neighbouring, but distinct, discursive practices." To some extent, 'episteme' echoes the Marxist idea of ideology.

Hayden White sums up Foucault's position thus: "Structuralism signals, in Foucault's judgment, the discovery by Western thought of the linguistic bases of such concepts as "man", "society," and "culture," the discovery that these concepts refer, not to things, but to linguistic formulae that have no specific referents in reality."

### **3.4 Reader-Response & Reception Theory**

The modern hermeneutic tradition runs through the work of Friedrich Schleiermacher, Wilhelm Dilthey, Martin Heidegger,

Hans-Georg Gadamer, Paul Ricoeur. Hermeneutics as a tradition goes back into antiquity but its modern form arises from phenomenological foundations. The shift in hermeneutics in the twentieth century is the work of Heidegger and his student Hans-Georg Gadamer. In its basic form, hermeneutics was rooted in the discussion of understanding and thus involved the “art of interpretation” particularly when meanings are unclear. In the past, hermeneutics was a method to deal with textual artefacts but in the twentieth century it has become allied with topics of wider philosophical implications such as ontology. Thus hermeneutics in the last century has laid stress on understanding as deciding our experience of our being-in-the-world.

**Reader-reception & Phenomenology:**

You should try to understand the links between reader-response theory and the principles of phenomenology. Roman Ingarden, a student of Husserl’s, was convinced that literary works can be seen as posing important theoretical issues in phenomenology. In Husserl’s theory “intentional objectivities” of the real world have their origins in pure consciousness. The intentional structure of the literary work of art being beyond question, it helps to question some central tenets of phenomenology. Since objects in the empirical world exist in time and space, they are real. In contrast the objects we construct are abstractions (circles or squares, for example); they have no empirical existence and are unchanging. Literary works of art lie outside this dichotomy as they have no empirical existence, but neither are they ideal as they change with each reader and even with the same reader at different moments. Problems arising from the conflict between realism and idealism can be highlighted

through literary works of art. In *The Literary Work of Art* (subtitled, 'An investigation on the borderline of ontology, logic, and theory of literature'; 1930), Ingarden draws attention to these questions. He investigates the ideal structure of a literary work on the thesis that it is a formation which is "ontologically heteronomous". That is, it is "neither determinate nor autonomous, as both real and ideal objects are, but rather dependent on an object of consciousness. Although it originates in the mind of an author, its continued existence depends on both the real word signs that make up the text and the ideal meanings that can be drawn from the author's sentences." (R. Holub)

Roman Ingarden's conception of the structure of the literary work of art is closely tied to his conception of its cognition. This is extensively elaborated in his *The Cognition of the Literary Work of Art* (1968). Real objects, in phenomenological terms, are "univocally, universally (i.e. in every respect) determined". In a literary work of art, however, the objects represented exhibit 'gaps', or 'points' or 'places' of indeterminacy. Ingarden writes, "We find such a place of indeterminacy whenever it is impossible, on the basis of the sentences in the work, to say whether a certain object or objective situation has a certain attribute". Ingarden's depiction of our process of reading shows indeterminacy and its elimination to play a central role. According to him we interact with the literary work in a number of ways and at different levels. He argues that our cognition has an active role with regard to all aspects of the work.

You might find it easier to grasp the rise of reader-oriented theories by looking back at what the New Critics, Wimsatt and Beardsley,

had proposed in *The Verbal Icon* as “The Affective Fallacy” (1958). They called “a confusion between the poem and its results” a ‘fallacy’ or heresy because the meaning of a literary text not being contained in the object itself but in the reactions of the reader was an idea which denied the autonomy of the text. However, this very idea or conception is fundamental to reader-response theory. The American critic, Stanley Fish, argues that the meaning of a poem, indeed, consists in its results. About the same time as Fish posed his argument, the two founders of *Rezeptionsästhetik* or ‘The Aesthetics of Reception’ at the University of Constance in West Germany, Hans Robert Jauss (1921 - ) and Wolfgang Iser (1926 - ) countered the idea that one should seek out the correct meaning of a text.

You have already learnt a little of the contribution of Hans Robert Jauss to the debate over the meaning of a text as made out by the reader (in 1.3.2, above). The essay by Jauss - ‘Literary history as a provocation to literary scholarship’ - was an effort to overcome the intrinsic-extrinsic dichotomy. Jauss’s aesthetics of reception proposed to alter the traditional perspective from which literary texts have been interpreted. On the one hand was the Marxist demand for historicity, while the Formalists had demonstrated the potency of aesthetic perception in the exploration of literary works. In meeting these conflicting demands, Jauss borrows the concept, “horizon of expectation” from several sources like Karl Popper (philosopher), Karl Mannheim (sociologist), E.H. Gombrich (art historian), Husserl and Heidegger. The concept of ‘horizon’ may have come from some of these sources, as also from Jauss’ teacher, Hans-Georg Gadamer who conceived of understanding as a process of merging of a present horizon with a past one. Jauss does not define the term, but it seems to denote a structure of expectations, a mind-set, that a reader brings to a given text. As all our readings take place against some horizon of expectation, certain texts - parody, for example -

foreground this horizon, or the ‘system of references’. According to Jauss, the literary scholar should “objectify” this horizon so that we may make an estimate of the artistic quality of the work.

Jauss reorganises the concept of literary history. Conventional histories of literature assign a place to literary works through references to authors and texts. This ensures that literary histories are little more than “a series of loosely connected biographical essays”. (R. Holub) To some extent Jauss adapts concepts taken from Russian Formalism to explain the historical process at work in aesthetic categories. From the new perspective that he works from, Jauss makes literary history take into account both the historical and the artistic significance of a work. Novelty in a literary work is seen both historically and artistically and not merely in the formalist sense of estrangement. Rather than explaining the production of literary works backwards (with hindsight) from a hypothetical final point, the evolutionary method offered by Jauss postulates “dialectical self-production of new forms”. Novelty is thus explained as both an artistic as well as an historical standard of judgment. In traditional literary history, there is always a larger general history to which it constantly refers and which is made to be basis of literature’s role of reflecting social, political or biographical concerns. Jauss, on the other hand, lays stress on literature’s function in social formations.

**SAQ:**

What is the reason for modernism’s dissatisfaction with Romanticism? (60 words)

.....  
.....  
.....  
.....

Wolfgang Iser's essay was received in a fashion similar to Jaus's writings. He came to be considered as one of the foremost theorists of the 'Constance School' largely in consequence of his lecture delivered and later translated as "Indeterminacy and the reader's response" (1970). His major work, however, appeared only in 1976 as *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response*. Iser's approach is different from Jaus in many respects despite the many common features and takes in many important concepts from the work of Roman Ingarden. But both theorists fix their revisions of literary theory through attention to the text-reader relationship. Iser sees the meaning of text as generated through the reading process. Meaning issues not simply from subjectivity or from the text but rather from the interaction between the two. Literary texts are so constructed as to allow this kind of realization. What the reader does is to fill in gaps or indeterminacies present in the given structure. Such participation completes the work and thereby meaning is finally produced. There is a strong recalling here of the work of Roman Ingarden who was a Polish phenomenologist and a student of Husserl.

**Phenomenological Criticism:**

Phenomenology in France brings together the names of Gabriel Marcel (1889-1973), Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980), Emmanuel Levinas, Maurice Merleau-Ponty. French phenomenology is more likely to take the name of 'existentialism'. The impact of French phenomenology on aesthetic theory is to be seen in the work of Mikel Dufrenne, in his major work *Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience*, (1953). Gaston Bachelard (1884-1962) provides the best example of the extension of phenomenological thought into literary criticism in works like

*The Poetics of Space* (1957), and *The Poetics of Reverie* (1961).

Phenomenology is closely associated with the Geneva School of critics including especially Marcel Raymond (1897-), Albert Béguin (1901-57), Georges Poulet (1902-91), Jean Rousset (1910-), Jean-Pierre Richard (1922-), and Jean Starobinski (1920-). Marcel Raymond's *From Baudelaire to Surrealism* (1933) is said to have helped found this school of criticism. Georges Poulet's name has become closely identified with this school of criticism.

We can find traces of phenomenological arguments in New Criticism, as in Wellek and Warren's *Theory of Literature* (1955). Phenomenological ideas are also present in Wolfgang Iser's work, particularly in his *The Act of Reading* (1976).

### 3.5 Narratology

*(From "Narratology" by Gerald Prince, CHLC)*

'Narratology' is taken from the French 'narratologie' introduced by Tzvetan Todorov in 1969, in *Grammaire du Décaméron* where he wrote: "this work pertains to a science which does not yet exist - let us say *narratology*, the science of narrative". The theory falls within French structuralism exemplifying the structuralist view of texts as rule-driven ways by which we structure our universe. Narratology also expresses the structuralist tendency to distinguish between the necessary and the contingent elements of textual structures. In this sense, it is a part of semiotics which studies those features common to signifying systems and practices.

Narratology arises systematically (studying narrative rather than narratives) as a discipline only after 1966 with the appearance of



analyses of narrative in *Communications*. Prior to that, in 1958 had appeared the English translation of Vladimir Propp's *Morphology of the Folktale*. Narratology became a critical movement spreading to several countries (USA, Netherlands, Denmark, Italy, Israel) by the late 1970s.

Narratology starts with the simple fact that narrative (or story-telling) is to be found in a great variety of media. This fact is to be seen even when a story (or a folktale) is transposed from one medium onto another (as from novel into film). This brings up the argument that narrative - or the narrative component of any narrative text - can be isolated for study from the medium in which it is embedded. One of the issues that comes up in the course of such an enterprise can be said to be that "the narratologist should . . . be able to examine the narrated (the story reported, the events recounted) independently not only of the medium used but also independently of the narrating, the discourse, the *way* in which the medium is used to present the *what*." This description can be used for Vladimir Propp's concerns in his *Grammaire du Décaméron* or in 'Les Categories' or in *Poétique*.

**"Narrative Negotiation" :**

This is the name of Chapter 12, *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative*, by H. Porter Abbott. You will find it useful to go through this chapter if you wish to come to some sort of understanding of the study of narrative. Abbott uses the story of Oedipus to make his point regarding conflict in narrative. The story of Oedipus, we are told, had at least nine known versions, if not more. The main point here that is of interest is the conflict at the heart of the story. Despite the cultural difference that separates us from the ancient Greek setting of

the story, we all relate to the narrative. Abbott tries to bring to us the question, what is narrative? If we take it up as a form of argument, then we find that as far as regards the conflict in a narrative, then “there is not necessarily any single privileged way of reading the conflict in a story”. A notable fact is that “even among highly varied readings of the same story, one almost invariably finds the same underlying orientation, *an attention to conflict of some kind and how it plays out.*” Abbott takes four famous readings of the story to show how differently these readings relate to the conflict. The first reading is from Aristotle, in his *Poetics*. The second is from Freud’s *Interpretation of Dreams* (1900) where Freud displaces one conflict with another. Vladimir Propp’s reading comes from his paper on the subject which he had written in 1944. Again, Propp relocated the conflict in the story away from Oedipus and his fate to cast it in historical terms. Propp was concerned to show the “hybrid” character of Sophocles’ version of the story. The anthropologist, Claude Lévi-Strauss used the story of Oedipus in 1955 to show the ‘mythemes’ (constituent units) that made up the narrative.

The Oedipus story is an example of a classic masterplot evident from the way it has been repeatedly used in numerous versions. What the narratologist does is to isolate the different components and analyse their functions. But this is not the work of interpretation. All four readings are “based on the view that people think through the agency of narrative”, the same narrative appeals differently to different people and that the appeal of narrative is based on the assumption that it contains the representation of some kind of conflict.

Propp's work in *Morphology* was reviewed critically by Claude Lévi-Strauss, A. J. Greimas and Claude Bremond leading later to some modifications. This showed that similar to the aim of linguistics to decide upon a grammar of language, narratology should aim at establishing the grammar of narrative. Propp's work inspired many to undertake the narratological endeavour. Roland Barthes' ideas stand as one such contribution to the narratological exercise although his famous reading of Balzac's 'Sarrasine' in *S/Z* (1970) was forwarded as his dismissal of the science of narrative as a doubtful enterprise. However, *S/Z* remains an important reference-point for narratologists.

Above, you have learnt of the importance of narratology only with regard to story, or story-telling. In this aspect, narratology focuses on the narrated rather than on the narrating. Elsewhere, narratologists have viewed narrative as a mode of verbal presentation (not as enactment, for instance). In this case, narratology has confined itself to the study of narrative discourse rather than story (the narrative). This recalls, in some ways, the difference between *mimesis* and *diegesis* which was an accepted part of the universe of Plato's and Aristotle's ideas. The reason for this was that narratologists strove to account for the many ways in which the same sequence of events could be told and which they felt was not being done in the focus on the narrated and its structure. Gérard Genette is the most prominent among this group of narratologists. Genette's discussion of narrative discourse is recognised to be outstanding.

Other narratologists regard the narrated as well as the narrating as being pertinent to narrative and the understanding of its possibilities. We can see this in Seymour Chatman's *Story and Discourse*, Gerald Prince's *Narratology*, and Jean-Michel Adam's *Le texte*. Narrative discourse is probably the area most investigated by narratologists.

We can find this in the work of narratologists like Tzvetan Todorov, Mieke Bal, Seymour Chatman, Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, among others.

### **A List of Narratological Achievements:**

The following is meant to help you gain an overall view of the extensive work done by narratologists. While we have not explained here what each term means- for lack of space - the list below will help you to summarise what narratological analysis can achieve. You must keep in mind that the narrated part of a narrative pertains to the actual story reported. Some of the terms here show you the internal parts of the narrated. Narrative discourse itself pertains to the larger structures within which narrative forms take their place. You should try to look up the meanings of the following for further understanding.

Areas of narrative that have been theorised, include:

*temporal orders* followed by a narrative text

*the anachronies* (flashbacks or flashforwards)

*the achronic (undatable)* structures

*narrative speed*, in terms of: ellipsis, summary, scene, stretch, pause

*narrative frequency* (singulative narrative, repeating narrative, iterative narrative)

*narrative distance* (the problem of narratorial mediation)

*narrative perspective* (zero focalization, internal focalization, external focalization)

*types of discourse* (narratized discourse, tagged indirect discourse, free indirect discourse, tagged direct discourse, free direct discourse)

*major kinds of narration and their modes of combination set of relations between narrator, narratee and the story narrated the minimal constituents of the narrated (goal-directed actions, etc.) the mechanisms underlying narrative suspense and surprise the nature of characters and settings how a story can be characterized semantically.*

Much criticism has been levelled at narratological analysis, some of which is justified. But in spite of these so-called deficiencies narratology has been widely accepted. Even where work does not directly deal with narrative or does not fall within narratological analysis, it is called narratological. The distinctiveness of a given narrative can be shown best through narratological analysis. Narrative has become a privileged theme due to the work of narratology. It is not an aid to interpretation, as Prince points out, but “through its concern for the governing principles of narrative and through its attempt to characterize not so much the particular meanings of particular narratives but rather what allows narratives to have meanings”. In these terms narratology is able to refute the charge brought against literary studies that they are concerned only with the interpretations of texts. Also, by examining the factors operating in all kinds of possible narratives, it has shown that many non-canonical narratives are just as sophisticated as canonical ones. Thus it has played a vital role in the ultimate shape of literary studies.

#### **Check Your Progress**

1. Write a short note on
  - a) Narratology
  - b) Phenomenology [G.U. 2005]

2. How is the historicity of the text sought to be established in terms of the textuality of history in contemporary criticism?

Write a detailed answer. [G.U. 2003]

3. Write notes on

- a) Narrative worlds
- b) Implied author (Booth)
- c) Narrative frequency
- d) Plot and Closure [ G.U. 2007]

4. How does Foucault revise or contest the traditional notion of the author and the more recent and radical idea of the disappearance of the author? Write your answer by using adequate illustrations from the prescribed text. [*This question refers to Foucault's essay, "What is an Author?"* - G.U. 2007]

5. Write a note on

- a) Marxism and Literature
- b) Narrativity and History
- c) The reader in the text [G.U.2007]

### 3.6 Post Colonialism

A defining moment for postcolonial studies was in 1978 when Edward Said's *Orientalism* was published. But prior to it, postcolonial literature and criticism had already made its appearance in 1950 with Aimé Césaire's *Discourse on Colonialism*, and *Black Skin, White Masks*, by Frantz Fanon. In 1958 came *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe, while *The Pleasures of Exile* by George Lamming came out in 1960, with Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* following in 1961. Later, important work by Gayatri C.Spivak, Homi Bhabha, Abdul JanMohamed, Benita Parry and Kwame Anthony Appiah, too, made its appearance.

Postcolonial criticism and theory is connected with the history of colonialism or imperialism which you have already studied in Paper I as part of your study of 'Literature & Social History'. In one sense, postcolonialism is part of the project of decolonization. It is difficult to pinpoint the absolute beginnings of postcolonialism. The "post-" in the term comprises a problem rather than a solution. For one thing, even though "structures of colonial control" broke up in the late 1950s and reached a climax in the 1960s, we are still left to answer, after whose colonialism? Moreover, it is widely recognised that colonialism still persists in many ways. Thus the periodization of the concept is also problematic. Said's work may be said to belong to the heightened consciousness of postcolonial critics of colonial power which underlies all postcolonial theory. Postcolonial criticism develops from theories of colonial discourses. In other words it is from the study of the operations and aims of colonial discourses that postcolonialism makes its advances. Since colonial power uses arguments to justify its domination over the colonised peoples its representations and modes of perception are important topics of analysis in postcolonial theory.

A crucial concept that lies at the heart of postcolonial theory is cultural identity. You can understand this from what Ngugi wa Thiong'o has to say:

"Language carries culture, and culture carries, particularly through orature and literature, the entire body of values by which we come to perceive ourselves and our place in the world. How people perceive themselves affects how they look at their culture, at their politics and at the social production of wealth, at their entire relationship to nature and to other human beings."

Since colonialism meant cultural encounters in an exploitative political relationship of coloniser dominating the colonised, differences of culture, race, ethnicity, community and language

become the primary zones in which the politics occurs. This is what lies at the basis of what Ngugi wa Thiong'o has to say:

“Language is thus inseparable from ourselves as a community of human beings with a specific form and character, a specific history, a specific relationship to the world.”

### **Reading English Literature after postcolonialism:**

Postcolonialism inevitably brought forth a challenge to the older ways of reading and judging literary texts. This is related to the fact that the study of English literary texts in the colonies was meant to inculcate in the indigenous peoples a sense of the *universality* of Christian moral values as manifested in *English* literature. Despite his vast analysis of ‘Orientalism’, Said’s comments regarding the status of ‘classics’ have not laid to rest the problems regarding the ‘canon’ of English literature. However, it is through the intellectual apparatus of postcolonialism that foreign readers of English literature are allowed to raise issues of cultural values for discussion.

### **Extensions of postcolonialist approaches:**

**Migrancy** - This is an important concept in the description of the relation of an individual to her/his ‘home’, community and the imagined sense of belonging. It allows the analysis of the relation that gets foregrounded in the context of the dislocations that are a necessary part of the colonial and the post-colonial world. It also relates to the cultural boundaries that tend to be drawn and re-drawn as part of the process of dislocation.

**Hybridity** - This concept has been formulated by Homi K. Bhabha to underline the ways in which postcolonial identities are



determined through border crossings and re-crossings. The 'border' is an important related concept here as it shows how cultures are not 'pure' but are intermingled.

**Subaltern studies** - A group of "left-wing historians, the Subaltern Studies Group (of whom the best-known are Partha Chatterjee and Ranajit Guha) and others in dialogue with them . . . The intention of the group is to produce historical accounts in opposition to the dominant versions, broadly categorized as colonial or neo-colonial, and nationalist or neo-nationalist, and which construe Indian history, especially the move towards independence, as the doings of the elite, . . and ignore the actions of the mass of the mass of the population"

**Nativism** - This is the topic of discussion by Benita Parry in her famous essay, "Resistance Theory/Theorising Resistance or Two Cheers for Nativism" (1994)

**Eurocentrism** relates to the assumption in postcolonial theory that the intellectual and cultural traditions developed outside the west can undo the heritage of knowledge and ideas which led to the colonised people's feeling of inferiority. 'Eurocentrism' is the term signifying the opposition to western ideologies which devalue the intellectual heritage developed outside the west. Ngugi wa Thiong'o's phrase, "decolonizing the mind" and "moving the centre" evokes the opposition to 'eurocentrism' and implies the need to dismantle the intellectual authority and dominance of Europe.

If we take up postcolonialism as the production of colonial stereotypes through which colonial power sustained itself we get involved with the problem of representation and stereotyping of the people and culture of the colonised nations. Thus there has been a

preponderance of studies of discursive practices in the context of colonial structures. It is in this respect that Edward Said's *Orientalism* constitutes a seminal piece of work. His study shows that 'Orientalism' is a discourse which reveals more about the West's fantasies of power, and assumptions regarding the culture and the people of the Orient, than the Orient itself. Orientalist representations are thus bound up with the structures of political domination.

The concept of the nation is an important one in postcolonialist study since nationalist anti-colonialism constitutes an important plank from which to investigate Orientalist assumptions. Fanon writes of "National Culture" in his *Wretched of the Earth* to conduct a critique of the cultural domination that takes place in colonialism. 'Nation' was a concept used in the political overthrow of colonial power, especially in the early phases, thus making it a discourse of great potency. This is just one example of how postcolonialist study formulates its concepts. From the idea of nation and the elements that go into discourses based on it, issues relating to language, history, and race find a place in postcolonial study. To some critics, nationalism as a discourse is said to be derived from the west thus inscribing a question-mark over the status of anti-colonial nationalism. Partha Chatterji, in *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World* (1986), raises questions of this kind. Critics like Etienne Balibar raise further questions as to how nationalism can be complicit with racism.

In the opposition to colonial rule we see the emergence of many anti-colonial thinkers as, for instance, in India the names of Gandhi and Nehru. Gandhi's early text, *Hind Swaraj*, is an important text in laying down the principles of anti-colonial resistance. The work is remarkable in presenting clearly in dialogue-form the range of topics and concepts which needed to be addressed in conducting the

struggle against colonial domination. As the attempt to chart out an alternative, in civilizational terms, to colonial domination, Gandhi makes a remarkable presentation of a vision of society as critique of a western conception of progress and development. Similarly, Nehru charts the history of the anti-colonial struggle in India and the range of issues it needed to address in his *Autobiography*. What Nehru, most perceptively, pointed out was the ‘internalisation’ of the “ideology of Empire” which tended to weaken the resistance on crucial aspects of economism and communal divisions.

The reading of literary texts in English, especially by writers of Asian or African origin, in the context of postcolonial studies has brought to the fore questions regarding literary value. Meenakshi Mukherjee, the well-known critic, explains that postcolonial study “makes us interrogate many aspects of the study of literature that we are made to take for granted”. Chinua Achebe, the Nigerian writer, denounced *Heart of Darkness* (1899), in 1975 on the grounds that Conrad was racist. Controversial, though this was, it helped in the reexamination of ‘classics’ and their relation with culturally different readers and writers. In this sense, ‘classics’ have been put to new uses different from the colonial ones of asserting colonial superiority on cultural grounds.

**Edward W. Said:**

Said adopts a Foucauldian perspective in *Orientalism* in bringing out the connections between knowledge and power. This gives him the scope to bring together a wide variety of discourses (history, ethnography, geography, politics, literature, linguistics) which produce knowledge of the Orient in their specific ways but all establishing categories of ‘truth’. Although all these different discourses (which produce knowledge about their object of study -

the Orient) might well be in contradiction with each other, they articulate congruent (or matching) forms of knowledge about the Orient. This gives rise to a meta-discourse - Orientalism - which is powerful and seems to confirm the prevailing idea that only Westerners *really know* the Orient.

In his work, *The World, the Text, and the Critic*, Said observes that representation is “one of the key problems in all criticism and philosophy”. The representation of the East in the West has been through strategies which “validate Western values, political and economic systems and structures of domination, by positing as Other anyone and anything at odds with Western institutions. The factors that make the Other especially menacing are its difference and its mysterious aura. According to Said, the strategies through which the Other is constructed are fundamentally textual, for images and stereotypes of the Orient have traditionally been enplaced through writing . . . Said underscores the textual dimension of alterity by pointing out that Orientalism’s imaginary Other first comes into being “when a human being confronts at close quarters something relatively unknown and threatening and previously distant. In such a case one has recourse not only to what in one’s previous experience the novelty resembles but also to what one has read about it.” . . . All Orientalist texts are ultimately fictional: accounts about the East, its inhabitants and its cultural traditions endeavour to present their contents as self-evident *facts* but what they invariably supply is actually a cluster of mythical presuppositions.” (Cavallaro, p.126-7)

### **3.7 Feminism**

Like some of the other major critical movements described above, it is difficult to sum up in a few words the wide spectrum of ideas

which have collectively come to be known as ‘feminism’. In the next Unit, you will read of it in greater detail. However, you should note an important point in advance: feminism is not to be confused with feminist criticism. The two, naturally, are closely related: feminism gives rise to feminist thought which, in turn, helps in the formulation of critical concepts to be labelled, “feminist criticism”. However, if you are to search for what kind of analysis it enables the critic to practise, then you should be clear that feminist criticism itself borrows concepts from different areas of thought such as Marxism, and poststructuralism. This is to say that feminist criticism has developed great sophistication and subtlety over time and has emerged as one of the most potent discourses in our time. For instance, it has led to a large-scale re-thinking in diverse areas such as in historiography where ‘women’s history’ is now considered to be productive of new meanings of the recovery of the past. As your attention will be better rewarded by your reading of the special unit on ‘Feminism’, we shall not provide you with much more details here.

#### **Check Your Progress**

1. Write on the significance of postcolonial thought in twentieth-century criticism. Bring out the importance of Edward Said’s *Orientalism* in this critical discourse.
2. Explain the importance of the concepts of nation and ‘national culture’ in postcolonial criticism.
3. Postcolonial studies often incorporate the ‘history of the Other’ - how far do you agree with this view? Give a detailed answer.
4. Write short notes on
  - a) hybridity
  - b) ethnicity
  - c) nationality
  - d) multiculturalism

e) tricontinental theory

f) *Black Skin, White Masks*

5. Comment on the frequent objection to current postcolonial theory that it indulges in excessive 'discourse analysis'. Explain the grounds for such an objection.

### 3.8 Summing Up

By now you have gained a wide-ranging survey of some of the major movements and intellectual trends that are collectively given the name of 'literary theory'. Do take enough care to note that we have, here, left out feminism, which appears as a self-contained unit elsewhere. The same goes for the formalist movements, structuralism, and poststructuralism. We have given you just a few details regarding a rapidly-expanding and developing area like postcolonialism. It means that you have to do some careful reading of your own. We have let you at least learn of some important names (like Edward Said, Foucault, Genette) so that you can follow up with your own discoveries of their work. As you are aware, this is not a "text book" which pretends to comprehensively package knowledge. You would have seen by now that we give you some names so that your interest in the work of these critics is awakened. We also mention topics which we do not fully develop here but let you find out on your own. As usual, there is no substitute for independent discovery. At the very least, you should have found your way about, by now, through a virtual mine-field of 'theoretical' knowledge! Some very basic ideas have been dealt with here so that you can appreciate their 'theoretical' worth.

The debate over the circulation and the role of 'theory' continues. Some critics aver that 'theory' is 'dead'; others contest this. Some look upon our times as 'after theory'. Again, that is debatable. This only suggests that 'theory' is not yet over and that it has not yet

reached its limits. All of this is so true that it gives us a chance to explain to you why it is difficult to sum up and tie together all the ends of 'theory' - it is a field which has not yet stopped growing.

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## UNIT 4

### FEMINISM

#### Unit Structure:

#### 4.1 Objectives:

#### 4.2 Historical Background

##### 4.2.1 First-wave feminism

##### 4.2.2 Second-wave feminism

##### 4.2.3 Third-wave feminism

#### 4.3 Feminist Theory and Literary Criticism

#### 4.4 Main Trends of Feminism

##### 4.4.1 Anglo-American Feminism

##### 4.4.2 French Feminism

##### 4.4.3 Third-world feminism

##### 4.4.4 Socialist and Marxist feminisms

##### 4.4.5 Post-structural and postmodern feminism

##### 4.4.6 Black Feminism

##### 4.4.7 Materialist Feminisms

#### 4.5 Reading Helene Cixous' "The Laugh of the Medusa"

#### 4.6 Additional Concepts- Terms/ Glossary

#### 4.7 Feminist reading of *Fasting, Feasting*:

#### 4.8 Summing Up

#### 4.9 References and Suggested Readings

#### 4.1 Objectives

By reading this unit on Feminism the students will be able to–

- *Trace* the evolution of the Feminist Movement in modern times
- *Distinguish* the difference between various trends and theories of Feminism.



- *Recognize* the role of Feminism in introducing ‘female’ perspective in the interpretation of literary texts.

## 4.2 Historical Background

Feminism, also called ‘feminist movement’ or ‘Women’s Liberation Movement’, is a social movement that seeks equal rights for women, giving them equal status with men and freedom to decide their own careers and life patterns. It comprises a number of movements, theories and philosophies that are concerned with issues of gender, and that campaign for women’s rights and interests, besides advocating equality for women.

Though the term feminism is relatively modern, yet the inequities against which the feminists protest – legal, economic, and social restrictions on the basic rights of women - have existed throughout history and in all civilizations. In Europe, a concrete account of the concern for women’s rights dates from the period of the Enlightenment. The period’s emergent ideas concerning women’s rights were fully set forth in Mary Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, published in England in 1792, which challenged the idea that women exist only to please men and proposed that women receive the same opportunities as men in education, work, and politics. In the later periods, this work had a great influence in changing the traditional roles of women as wives, mothers, and homemakers.

In addition, the Civil Rights Movement in the United States during the 1960s inspired women to try to obtain better conditions for themselves through campaigns of mass agitation and social criticism. A milestone in the rise of modern feminism was Simone de Beauvoir’s book *Le Deuxième Sexe* (1949; *The Second Sex*), which raised feminist consciousness by appealing to the idea that

liberation for women was liberation for men too. Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1929) is also considered as a precursor in feminist thinking. Woolf is what Mary Eagleton calls her, "the founding mother of contemporary (feminist) debate".

**Stop to consider:**

The French author and philosopher **Simone de Beauvoir** (1908-1986) is hailed as the feminist icon of the twentieth-century. She wrote novels— monographs on philosophy, politics, and social issues; essays, biographies, and an autobiography. She is now best known for her metaphysical novels, including *She Came to Stay* and *The Mandarins*, and for her 1949 treatise *The Second Sex*, a detailed analysis of women's oppression and a foundational tract of contemporary feminism. It sets out a feminist existentialism which prescribes a moral revolution. As an existentialist, de Beauvoir accepts Jean-Paul Sartre's precept that *existence precedes essence*; hence "one is not born a woman, but becomes one". Her analysis focuses on the concept of the Other, that is, the social construction of Woman as the quintessential Other that Beauvoir identifies as fundamental to women's oppression. She argues that women have historically been considered deviant and abnormal.

**SAQ:**

1. How would you like to define feminism? (60 words)

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2. Why, do you think, women have to fight for fundamental rights which they should enjoy naturally? (60 words)

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Generally, the history of feminism is divided into **three waves**. The first wave was in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the second was in the 1960s and 1970s and the third extends from the 1990s to the present. This classification is a useful historical summary; but it should be remembered that outside these waves there were also innumerable feminist activities, significant or otherwise.

#### **4.2.1 First-Wave Feminism**

*First-wave feminism* refers to the late nineteenth-century and early twentieth century feminist movements in the United Kingdom and the United States, that were concerned, though not exclusively, with gaining equal rights for women, particularly the right to suffrage. In Britain the Suffragettes campaigned for the women's vote and in 1918 the Representation of the People Act 1918 was passed granting the vote to women over the age of 30 who owned houses. In 1928 this was extended to all women over eighteen. In the United States first-wave feminism is considered to have ended with the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution (1919), granting women the right to vote in all states.

### **4.2.2 Second-Wave Feminism**

*Second-wave feminism* began with the resurgence of feminist activity in the late 1960s and 1970s, broadening the area of focus to family, sexuality and work. Second-wave encouraged women to understand aspects of their personal lives as deeply politicized as well as reflective of a sexist structure of power. Further, this wave of feminists saw cultural and political inequalities as inextricably linked. Carol Hanisch's slogan "The Personal is Political," became synonymous with the second wave. Thus, if first-wave feminism focused on rights such as suffrage, second-wave feminism was largely concerned with other issues of equality, such as the end to discrimination.

### **4.2.3 Third-Wave Feminism**

As a response to the perceived failures of the second wave and also as a response to the backlash against initiatives and movements created by the second wave, third-wave feminism began in the early 1990s. Also known as Post-feminism, the third-wave feminism seeks to challenge or avoid what it deems the second wave's essentialist definitions of femininity, which (according to them) over-emphasize the experiences of upper middle-class white women. A post-structuralist interpretation of gender and sexuality is central to much of the third wave's ideology. Feminist leaders rooted in the second wave like Gloria Anzaldua, bell hooks, Chela Sandoval, Cherrie Moraga, Audre Lorde, Maxine Hong Kingston, and many other black feminists, sought to negotiate a space within feminist thought for consideration of race-related subjectivities.

### 4.3 Feminist Theory and Literary Criticism

Feminist Literary Theory has evolved as a component of the women's movement and it has brought about a revolution in literary studies. Its wide range is evident from the fact that it flourishes in combination, and not in isolation, with every other critical approach from formalism to semiotics, and can be effectively applied to the literary period of every period and genre. This new approach has profoundly altered several critical assumptions. It offers a new perspective on literature and emphasizes the need for a search of new paradigms. Since antiquity, it has been taken for granted that the reader, writer, and critic of literature is male. Feminist criticism has shown that women readers and critics bring different perceptions and expectations to their literary experiences. It insists that women have also told important stories of culture.

According to Sushila Singh (*Feminism: Theory, Criticism, Analysis*), feminist criticism operates in three ways: —

- (1) It unfolds the literary representations of sexual difference.
- (2) It brings out the ways in which literary genres have been shaped by masculine or feminine values.
- (3) It shows the exclusion of the female voice from the institutions of literature, criticism and theory.

In fact, feminist criticism establishes gender as a fundamental category of literary analysis. Nevertheless, feminists can be pluralistic in their choice of literary methods and theories with advantage. They appropriate any approach if it serves their political ends. The term 'appropriation' in the sense of 'creative transformation' becomes a key word in this context for feminist critics.

**Stop to consider:**

Though the feminists are resistant to the values set forth by the patriarchy, yet it is interesting to see how they have been influenced by male writers and thinkers from time to time. Toril Moi takes rather a diplomatic stand in articulating that “all ideas, including feminist ones, are...contaminated by patriarchal ideology” (“Feminist Literary Criticism”)

Therefore, it must be accepted that Mary Wollstonecraft got her inspiration from the male-dominated ideas of the French revolution. Simone de Beauvoir wrote *The Second Sex* under the influence of Sartre’s phallogentric categories. Similarly, J.S. Mill’s efforts to analyze women’s oppression cannot be ignored simply because he was a male liberal. In this specific contest, it becomes important that whether with appropriation or specific use of available material, feminist impact can be produced. Helene Cixous and Luce Irigaray have put the philosophy of Jaques Derrida to brilliant feminist use, and Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar have recreated the literary theory of Harold Bloom.

However, several feminist critics have written on male writers revealing their fundamental sexism. Kate Millett in her revolutionary work exposes the sexist bias of writers like Norman Mailer, Henry Miller, D. H. Lawrence, etc. Mary Ellmann discusses the sexism of male literary critics and Penny Boumelha analyzes the sexual ideology in the novels of Thomas Hardy.

**Check Your Progress**

1. How one wave of feminism is different from the other?
2. What is appropriation?
3. How are feminism, feminist criticism and feminist literary criticism related?

**SAQ:**

1. How would you explain the emergence of a feminist literary theory? (60 words)

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2. What do you understand by ‘pluralistic approach’? (50 words)

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Elaine Showalter, the American literary critic and feminist, describes the phased development of feminist theory in three phases viz: feminist critique (in which the feminist reader examines the ideologies behind literary phenomena), gynocriticism ( in which the “woman is producer of textual meaning” including “the psychodynamics of female creativity; linguistics and the problem of a female language; the trajectory of the individual or collective female literary career [and] literary history”) and gender theory ( in which the “ideological inscription and the literary effects of the sex/gender system” are explored”).

## 4.4 Main Trends of Feminism

### 4.4.1 Anglo-American Feminism

Anglo-American Feminism refers to the feminist theory that developed during the 1960s in both the United States and Britain as a result of social change. Significantly, in both countries, sociopolitical concerns, more than academic subjects, organized the early feminist anthologies.

Elaine Showalter's landmark work, *A Literature of their Own* (1977), constructs a history of British women novelists' literary subculture in three phases, designed as feminine (1840-80), feminist (1880-1920), and female (continuing since 1920, with a new phase beginning in 1960). Juliet Mitchell's *Women: The Longest Revolution* (1966) examines the treatment of women's oppression in socialist theory. Another major work was *The Feminine Mystique*, published in 1963 by Betty Friedan, an American. She attacked deadening domesticity—the conditioning of women to accept passive roles and depend on male dominance. In 1966 Friedan and other feminists founded the National Organization for Women. Shulamith Firestone's *The dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* (1970) combines de Beauvoir's critiques of Freudian psychoanalysis and historical materialism with analysis of such cultural themes as romance.

Again, Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* (1970) consists of “equal parts of literary and cultural criticism” verging toward political theory. Even more controversial than her cultural criticism is her literary criticism where she targets dominating literary figures like D.H.Lawrence, Henry Miller, Norman Mailer, etc. For her radical analysis, Millett has been attacked in both popular and academic reviews and has been reviled as *ad feminam*. Again, like Showalter, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar detect historical stages of a female



literary tradition, but they ground these in male comparisons and frequently make their points through metaphors and puns, as seen in their titles - *The Madwoman in the Attic*, (1979); *No Man's Land* (1987-89), etc.

#### 4.4.2 French Feminism

Beyond the Anglo-American feminism (or 'Anglophone sphere' as some prefer to call it) is also a large and influential body of francophone writing which is known as 'French feminism.' Though it was Simone de Beauvoir, who infused a lot of seminal ideas to feminism, yet, the phrase 'French Feminism' usually refers to a branch of feminist thinkers in France from the 1970s to the 1990s and includes the works of feminists like Helene Cixous, Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva. French feminism, compared to Anglophone feminism, is distinguished by an approach which is at once more philosophical and more literary. If Anglo-American feminism is empirical, pragmatic and progressive, French feminism is skeptical, idealistic and radical.

French feminists approach feminism with the concept of *écriture féminine* (which translates as female, or feminine, writing). Helene Cixous argues that writing and philosophy are *phallogentric* and along with other French feminists such as Luce Irigaray emphasize "writing from the body" as a subversive exercise. The work of the feminist psychoanalyst and philosopher, Julia Kristeva, has influenced feminist theory in general and feminist literary criticism in particular.

According to Luce Irigaray, we cannot simply step outside of phallogocentrism so as suddenly to write and think in ways completely free of the rules of patriarchy, for language and discourse are themselves inscribed with those rules. Instead, we

have to work like a virus from within patriarchal discourses to infect and radically change them, thus “leaving open the possibility of a different language”, (*This Sex which is not One*, p.80). Not surprisingly, then, the discourses of philosophy and psychoanalysis have become prime hosts for Irigaray’s work. She proposes to ‘disrupt’ the philosophical discourse and constitute a discourse on discourse. In posing this challenge, Irigaray hopes to expose the ways in which patriarchal discourses are politically determined and disrupt altogether the power structures they hold in place. With this goal in mind, Irigaray has sought to disrupt the discourses of Sigmund Freud and Plato (*Speculum of the Other Woman*), Jacques Lacan and Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels (*This Sex which is not One*), Martin Heidegger (*L’Oubli*), Friedrich Nietzsche (*Amante Marine*), Baruch Spinoza and Emmanuel Levinas (*Ethique*), to name a few.

The French-Bulgarian linguist and psychoanalyst, Julia Kristeva’s consideration of femininity under patriarchy is somewhat different. Her consideration of femininity as marginality offers a position and not a definition. She refuses to define femininity. In Kristevan terms, it is simply that “which is marginalized by patriarchal symbolic order.” This consideration of femininity in relational perspective is as shifting as the various forms of patriarchy itself. Therefore, she is able to argue further that men can also be constructed as marginalized to the symbolic order. one more significant fact About Kristeva is that unlike Helene Cixous and Luce Irigaray, worries about the absolute rejection or acceptance of motherhood.

**SAQ:**

1. What are the differences between Anglo-American feminism and French feminism? (50 words)

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2. What is *écriture féminine*? (50 words)

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3. How does Luce Irigaray propose to disrupt the patriarchal discourse? (60 words)

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#### 4.4.3 Third-World Feminism

Throughout much of its history, most of the leaders of feminist social and political movements, as well as many feminist theorists, have been predominantly middle-class white women from western Europe and North America. However, at least since Sojourner Truth's 1851 speech to US Feminists, women of other races have proposed alternative feminisms. This trend accelerated in the 1960s with the Civil Rights movement in the United States and the collapse of European colonialism in Africa, the Caribbean, parts of Latin America and Southeast Asia.

The spokesmen of 'third- world feminism', which is also referred to as 'postcolonial feminism', argue that oppression relating to the colonial experience, particularly racial, class, and ethnic oppression, has marginalized women in postcolonial societies. They challenge the assumption that gender oppression is the primary force of patriarchy. Postcolonial feminists object to portrayals of women of non-Western societies as passive and voiceless victims and the portrayal of Western women as modern, educated and empowered.

#### **4.4.4 Socialist and Marxist Feminisms**

Socialist feminism connects the oppression of women to Marxist ideas about exploitation, oppression and labor. Socialist feminists see women as being held down as a result of their unequal standing in both the workplace and the domestic sphere. Significantly, socialist feminists concentrate their energies not just on an individual basis, but on broad change that affects society as a whole.

#### **4.4.5 Post-Structural and Postmodern Feminism**

*Post- structural and postmodern feminism* are approaches to feminist theory that incorporate postmodern and post-structuralist theory. The largest departure of this trend of feminism from other branches of feminism, is the argument that gender is constructed through language. The most notable proponent of this argument is Judith Butler. In her 1990 book, *Gender Trouble*, she draws on and criticizes the work of Simone de Beauvoir, Michel Foucault and Jacques Lacan. Butler criticizes the distinction drawn by previous feminisms between biological sex and socially constructed gender. She says that this does not allow for a sufficient criticism of essentialism. In *A Cyborg Manifesto* Donna Haraway criticizes traditional notions of feminism, particularly its emphasis on identity, rather than affinity.

#### **4.4.6 Black Feminism**

One of the key challenges to the supposedly Eurocentric and essentialist nature of some feminism has come from black feminists who have challenged white women's ability, and indeed their right, to speak for black women. A key black feminist theorist whose work has underlined this problem of feminism and racial difference

is bell hooks, who in her book *Ain't I a Woman* (1981) writes about the history of black women in the United States and their relationship to feminism.

#### **4.4.7 Materialist Feminisms**

Although feminists and socialists have engaged in continuous conversations since the nineteenth-century, those cross-currents within literary theory that might be designated “materialist feminisms” have their origins in the late 1960s with various attempts to synthesize feminist politics with Marxist analyses. Early work on this projected alliance directed itself, not to questions of literary criticism and theory, but to the problem of bringing feminist questions of gender and sexuality into some form of strategic dialogue with class analysis. In keeping with subsequent developments within the women’s movement, the materialist feminist problematic has extended to questions of race, nationality or ethnicity, lesbianism and sexuality, cultural identity, including religion; and the very definition of power. Conversations and disagreements among English-language writers framing a materialist feminist analysis in the United States and the United Kingdom sometimes acknowledge the influence of French feminists such as Christine Delphy and Monique Wittig but have yet to engage fully with the critiques of Marxist theory being constructed by feminists working in other international location.

#### **4.5 Reading Helene Cixous’ “The Laugh of The Medusa”**

French feminist critic Helene Cixous’s essay “The Laugh of the Medusa” (1975) is an exhortation towards all women to start writing themselves in order to pose a threat to the patriarchal hegemony. Like much of her theory, the argument that Cixous develops in the

essay relies heavily on Freudian psychoanalysis and Greek mythology in attempts to topple the narrative myths that dominate western culture. Medusa, as we know, is one of the Gorgons, the epitome of evil power, of destruction and manipulation. In her essay Cixous deconstructs the myth of Medusa as a female monster and tries to project her portrait after she is reincarnated as a kind woman attributed with laughter and creative thrust.

Cixous believes that in order to escape the discourse of mastery women must begin to write through the body. To Cixous, our sexuality and the language in which we communicate are inextricably linked. To free one means freedom for the other. Unless women keep this inherent link intact, their goal of winning freedom will not be achieved. To write from one's body is to flee reality, to escape hierarchical bonds and thereby come closer to what Cixous calls *joissance*, which can be defined as a virtually metaphysical fulfillment of desire that goes far beyond satisfaction. It is a fusion of the erotic, the mystical, and the political. Thus, through writing women can reclaim their rights over their own body form which they have been deprived all along; for women have been taught to look at her body as an embarrassment:

“By writing her self, woman will return to the body which has been more than confiscated from her, which has been turned into the uncanny stranger on display—the ailing or dead figure, which so often turns out to be the nasty companion, the cause and locations of inhibitions. Censor the body and you censor breath and speech at the same time.” (p.350)

The essay can be literally called a ‘clarion call’ to wage war against male chauvinism as it is strewn with phrases like “arrow”, “war”, “legion”, “empire”, “sovereign”, “new insurgent” and so on. The writer undertakes to break a new ground demolishing the age-old

patriarchal edifice—her aim is to “to break up, to destroy; and to foresee the unforeseeable...” (p.347)

Cixous is one among the French theorists who believe that language, particularly Western language, with all its components is ‘male-constituted’ and ‘male-dominated.’ Through her concept of *écriture féminine* Cixous puts an effort to undo the logocentric ideology and “self-congratulatory” phallogocentric language system. In “The Laugh of the Medusa” Cixous emphasizes that *écriture féminine* has its source in the mother during that stage of mother-child relation in which the male centered language is not yet an intervener. Cixous first metaphorizes the mother as figural product of language and then she defetishizes the mother so as to remove her from the patriarchal structures of the family.

When Helene Cixous says that ‘writing is of the body’, and that ‘a woman does not write like a man, because she speaks with the body’, it appears that she is taking sexual dimorphism—the structural difference between male and female genitals—as the source of that gendering of language and style which feminist modes of criticism try to define. By persuading a woman to write with her body, Cixous convinces her to articulate her psychological femininity, so that ‘the immense resource of her unconscious will spring forth’ and ‘the inexhaustible feminine imaginary will unfold’. The only part of the body which seems to be involved regularly in such exercises, however, are the female genitals, which are much disparaged in a Freudian psychology that regard women as castrated men suffering from penis-envy.

The main thrust of the essay is that Cixous proposes to deconstruct the traditional contrast between the ‘feminine’ and the ‘phallogocentrism’; while feminine stands as a giver, mother, emotional, connected to the body, phallogocentrism is self-admiring, self-stimulating and self-congratulatory. However, she

assures that the new woman is vibrant and militant and therefore capable of creating a subversive literature that explodes with volcanic force. This force, Cixous foresees, is going to write a new history, which is “beyond man’s imagination”. In this new era it would be possible to explore the “dark continent” for in actuality “the dark continent is neither dark nor unexplorable”, only we are made to think in that manner.

Cixous lashes attack on the capitalist publishing houses that are callously indifferent to the cause of autonomy of female voice for they are apprehensive that this would probably bring out a revolution in the cultural and literary history of mankind. She dissuades the women not to make a retreat from the field once they have started their battle:

“Write, let no one hold you back, let nothing stop you: not man, not the imbecilic capitalist machinery, in which publishing houses are the crafty, obsequious relayers of imperatives handed down by an economy that works against us and off our backs; and not *yourself*. Smug-faced readers, managing editors, and big bosses don’t like the true texts of women—female sexed texts. That kind scares them” (p.348)

Cixous concludes the essay with the same visionary and revolutionary note with which she started. She calls for an unprecedented solidarity among women shunning all their differences, “in one another we will never be lacking.” (p.361). Reading the essay we find that Cixous’ whole theoretical project is an effort to undo the logocentric ideology; to proclaim women as the source of life, power and energy. It proposes to hail the advent of a new feminine language that ceaselessly subverts the patriarchal binary schemes where logocentrism colludes with phallogentrism in an effort to oppress and silence women. Cixous’ vision of feminine/female writing as a way of reestablishing a spontaneous



relationship to the physical *jouissance* of the female body can be read positively.

However, critics like Toril Moi suggests that we can read Cixous as a utopian feminist and some of the contradictory aspects of her texts may be interpreted as structured by the conflicts between contradictory patriarchal ideology and utopian thought. Moi is of the view that Cixous' insistence on the homogenizing space of the imaginary also constitutes a flight from the dominant reality. Critics have come heavily upon Cixous for the absence of any specific analysis of the material factors preventing women from writing that constitutes a major weakness of Cixous' utopia. Within Cixous' poetic mythology, "writing is posited as an absolute activity of which all women qua women automatically partake." This vision is very stirring but it says nothing about the actual inequities, deprivations and violations that women as social beings rather than as mythological archetypes constantly suffer.

Thus in "The Laugh of the Medusa" Cixous expands the concept of feminine writing by claiming its proximity to voice. Cixous uses her poetic genius and academic savvy to create a text that is brilliantly effective in many ways. First, she succeeds in giving the reader a concept of feminine writing but convinces us that in actually defining of the term, we destroy its beauty. She also manages to give us an example of what this text might be like in her illusive and circular style, but still writes academically enough to be included in most major surveys of rhetoric, literary criticism, and feminist theory.

#### **Who is Medusa?**

Medusa is the most famous of the three Gorgons (female monsters) of Greek mythology. Homer spoke of a single Gorgon—a monster

of the underworld. The later Greek poet Hesiod increased the number of Gorgons to three—Stheno (the Mighty), Euryale (the Far Springer), and Medusa (the Queen)—and made them the daughters of the sea god Phorcys and of his sister-wife Ceto. Medusa was the only one of the three who was mortal; hence, Perseus was able to kill her by cutting off her head. From the blood that ran from her neck sprang Chrysaor and Pegasus, her two offspring by Poseidon. Medusa's severed head had the power of turning all who looked upon it into stone.

### **Stop to Consider**

Cixous was born in Oran, Algeria in 1937, which was a colony of France, and was raised in a German-Jewish household. Cixous has taught at many different universities throughout France including the University of Bordeaux (1962), the Sorbonne (1965-67), and Nanterre (1967).

In the 1970's Cixous became involved in exploring the relationship between sexuality and writing, the same kinds of work being done by theorists like Kristeva, Barthes, Derrida, and Irigaray (Shiach). In this time period she composed such influential works as "Sortie," "The Laugh of the Medusa," and "Coming to Writing."

Since the authoring of these texts in the seventies, Cixous has become even more mysterious and complex, but has somewhat lessened her radical ideology for a more inclusive exploration of collective identities. She is currently an English literature professor at the University of Paris VIII-Vincennes where she has established a center for women's studies and is a co-founder of the structuralist journal *Poetique*.

**SAQ:**

Why does Cixous put so much importance on the mother? (50 words)

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**4.6 Additional Concepts- Terms/ Glossary**

**Androcentrism:** It is the practice, conscious or otherwise, of placing male human beings or the masculine point of view at the center of one’s view of the world and its culture and history. The term androcentrism has been introduced as an analytic concept by Charlotte Perkins Gilman in the scientific debate. Perkins Gilman gave a profound description of androcentric practices in society and the resulting problems in her investigation on *The Man-Made World; or, Our Androcentric Culture*, published in 1911. Androcentrism can be understood as a societal fixation on masculinity. According to Perkins Gilman masculine patterns of life and masculine mindsets claim universality while female ones are considered as deviance.

**Androgyny:** A conjoining of masculinity and femininity. For some critics, for example, Elaine Showalter, an interest in androgyny is viewed as a deviation from the crucial emphasis on the specificity of women, their needs and achievements. For others, (for example, Toril Moi) the notion of androgyny is progressive, suggesting the deconstruction of fixed concepts of masculinity and femininity.

**Gaze and feminist theory:** The concept of ‘gaze’ was first introduced by Laura Mulvey in her essay “Visual Pleasure and

Narrative Cinema” and it is actually pointed towards male gaze that manoeuvres the narrativisation and presentation of female characters in a particular text. The defining characteristic of the male gaze is that the audience is forced to regard the action and characters of a text through the perspective of a heterosexual man; the camera lingers on the curves of the female body, and events which occur to women are presented largely in the context of a man’s reaction to these events. The male gaze denies women agency, relegating them to the status of objects. Mulvey’s essay was one of the first to articulate the idea that sexism can exist not only in the content of a text, but in the way that text is presented, and in its implications about its expected audience. This concept is extended in the framework of feminist theory, where it can deal with how men look at women, how women look at themselves and other women, and the effects surrounding this

**Gynocriticism:** Introduced by Elaine Showalter in her essay ‘Toward a Feminist Poetics’ (1979) to describe what she finds the most necessary form of feminist criticism: namely, the study of women’s writing; the relating of that writing to female experience; and the development of critical theories and methodologies appropriate to women.

**Jouissance:** A term popular in French feminism to express a sense of pleasure, abandonment, orgasmic overflowing. But it also contains the meaning of the enjoyment of rights and property. Betsy Wing, the translator of Cixous and Clement understands the term as having simultaneously sexual, political and economic overtones. The same multiple meanings are present in Julia Kristeva’s use of the term.

**Phallogocentrism:** A system which affirms the phallus as the principal signifier, the symbol of power. In terms of sexual difference

phallogocentrism seems to lead to defining masculinity as the norm and femininity as deviant.

**Queer theory:** It is a field of Gender Studies that emerged in the early 1990s out of the fields of gay and lesbian studies and feminist studies. Heavily influenced by the work of Michel Foucault, as well as by Jacques Derrida and other deconstructionists, queer theory builds both upon feminist challenges to the idea that gender is part of the essential self and upon gay/lesbian studies' close examination of the socially constructed nature of sexual acts and identities. Whereas gay/lesbian studies focuses its inquiries into "natural" and "unnatural" behavior with respect to homosexual behavior, queer theory expands its focus to encompass any kind of sexual activity or identity that falls into normative and deviant categories.

**Subjectivity:** Subjectivity attempts to capture ongoing debates and activities and to foster a discourse on subjectivity which goes beyond traditional dichotomies. The concept of subjectivity in feminist literary interpretation is a third wave phenomenon. Subjectivity serves as locus of social change with many feminist leaders. These leaders explore questions of identity mediating between artist/writer and art work and viewers of the art work. This group of feminists incorporates issues of disability and queer theory, and consider issues of Feminisms and race within the context of post-coloniality in order to contest dominant discourses.

#### **4.7 Feminist Reading of *Fasting, Feasting***

Among the contemporary Indo-Anglian writers Anita Desai's is one of the most frequently mentioned name both in India and abroad. Her concern for the feminist cause is also unquestionable. Reading *Fasting, Feasting* (1999) as a feminist text will further establish this concern; however, it must be remembered that her fame as a

feminist writer has already been established through the publication of her novels like *Cry, the Peacock*, *Where shall We Go This Summer?*, *Fire on the Mountain*, etc. which are some fine examples in her oeuvre that foregrounds the gender question.

Desai's *Fasting, Feasting* is a novel that captures the lives of three main female characters, Uma, Anamika and Aruna and shows as to what life brings them as rewards for being what they are, that is, women. Their reward is deprivation. So far as Uma's life is concerned, she is trapped in the stifling life that her parents decide for her. From her very childhood 'home' for Uma means a prison, from where she seeks refuge in school. But her happy days of going to school suddenly came to an end as she was summoned to baby sit her new-born brother, the only 'son' in the family. When Uma protests and says that Ayah can look after the baby, her mother sternly says, "You know we can't leave the baby to the servant" for he needs "proper attention". Uma again tries to point out that it was Ayah who brought up her and Aruna, her sister, her mother emphatically repeats the unalterable "Proper attention".

As Uma grows up to a young lady, she somehow fails to fulfill the criteria of an eligible bride; once she is duped after the engagement and another time she has to come back home after a deceitful marriage. Since then all the doors of escaping from home are shut and Uma becomes a burden, an eyesore, for her parents. Thus in her early life Uma remains a baby sitter while in her later life she remains an unpaid servant to her parents. If Uma's is unattractive, dull and gawky, her cousin Anamika is an epitome of perfection. She is not only beautiful but also brilliant, graceful, obedient and accomplished. Yet her life too ends in the inescapable trap set by misogynic prejudice. Though Anamika obtains a scholarship to Oxford, her parents hastily marries her off to a snob who is even much older than her. After marriage Anamika's life becomes a

traumatic experience as she has to bear the unspeakable atrocities from her husband and mother-in-law. And finally they set her ablaze and burn her to death.

Thus both Uma's and Anamika's lives bear proof to what de Beauvoir utters as a feminist maxim, "one is not born, but rather becomes a woman". In contrast to Uma and Anamika, Uma's younger sister Aruna is 'fortunate' enough to secure a married life with "the wisest ... the handsomest, the richest, the most exciting of the suitors who presented themselves" (p.101). Aruna's marriage to Arvind, her flat in Juhu, facing the beach is just like a dream come true; ironically, she is too entrapped in that insulated dream life to ignore the life outside it and the reality beyond it. Thus through the stories of Uma, Anamika and Aruna, Anita Desai portrays the life of women which is by and large self-negating and unpromising. No doubt, there are some moments in Uma's life when she gathers courage to revolt, but the iron hands of her parents make her conform to what they choose for her life.

So far as the minor female characters in the novel are concerned, for example, Mira Masi, Mamma, Mrs. Verma and Anamika's mother, they seem to be happy and contented living within the framework of patriarchy. Patriarchal values are so much imbibed, fossilized and internalized in these women that they do not hesitate to rule their female wards from the vantage point of patriarchal values. If Uma is stopped from going to school, Anamika is stopped from going to Oxford. On the other hand, Uma's only brother Arun is given the 'best education' and is sent to the U.S.A. for further education almost forcefully. Interestingly, the mothers play very important roles in accomplishing these maneuverings.

### **Stop to consider:**

While making a feminist reading of a particular text, one can look into areas like the reconstruction of female identity- whether a woman is aware of her own self; position of the women characters in the given context—whether marginal or central, her response to the repressing ideologies/values of her surrounding culture—whether rebellious or conforming; various aspects associated with female experience—motherhood, sexuality, etc.; the language used by the female author or for that matter the female characters, and so on and so forth.

### **4.8 Summing Up**

Thus, what we have found from our reading of feminism is that its history is fraught with lots of unresolved debates and arguments. Feminism raises questions upon the legitimacy of patriarchal values; besides, it also tries to reinterpret the female history and reconstruct a new one. Feminism itself is a very vast area of research and studies; however, in this unit the students are given only a brief outline regarding its evolution and its role in changing the perspective of reading or interpreting a literary text.

### **4.9 References and Suggested Readings**

Abrams, M. H.: *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, Bangalore: Prism Books Private Limited, 1993

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Eagleton, Mary: *Feminist Literary Criticism*, London & New York: Longman.

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## **BLOCK III**

**Unit 1: Introducing Ferdinand de Saussure**

**Unit 2: Ferdinand de Saussure: Nature of the  
Linguistic Sign**

**Unit 3: Introducing Michael Foucault**

**Unit 4: Michel Foucault: What is an Author?**

**Unit 5: Introducing Chinua Achebe**

**Unit 6: Chinua Achebe: Colonialist Criticism**

# UNIT 1

## INTRODUCING FERDINAND DE SAUSSURE

### Unit Structure:

- 1.1 Objectives
- 1.2 Introducing the Critic
- 1.3 Saussure's Principal Concepts
  - 1.3.1 The Concept of the Sign
  - 1.3.2 Langue and Parole
  - 1.3.3 Synchronic and Diachronic Linguistics
  - 1.3.4 Binary Oppositions
- 1.4 Contribution of Saussure's Linguistic Concepts in Structuralism
  - 1.4.1 What is Structuralism
  - 1.4.2 Structuralism in Literature
  - 1.4.3 How Saussure's Works Pioneered Structuralism
  - 1.4.4 Influence of Saussure in Different Disciplines
- 1.5 Emergence of Post Structuralism from Structuralism
- 1.6 Summing Up
- 1.7 Model Questions
- 1.8 References and Suggested Readings

### 1.1 Objectives

In this unit, you will learn about Ferdinand de Saussure, a pioneering figure in modern linguistics. We'll look into his biography and examine the key moments and influences that shaped his groundbreaking works and concepts, as well as how his pioneering linguistic theories laid the foundation for the structuralist movement. By the end of this chapter, you will be able to:

- Learn about Saussure's innovative linguistic theories which introduced a new way of analysing language structures

- Gain insight into how these theories contributed to the development of structuralism
- Assess Saussure's critical importance in the evolution of modern linguistics and the emergence of post-structuralism
- Learn how his works have been critically acclaimed

## **1.2 Introducing the Critic**

In the first half of the 20th century, a significant shift occurred in the field of linguistics. During the 18th and 19th centuries, scholars were primarily dedicated to studying the historical development and transformation of languages, particularly the Proto-Indo-European language family. This approach focused on tracing the evolution and patterns of languages over time. However, the early 20th century saw a significant shift in how language was studied, largely due to the pioneering theories of Ferdinand de Saussure. Ferdinand de Saussure is a pivotal figure in modern linguistics, often referred to as the father of the field. He pioneered structuralism and introduced various theories and methods that revolutionized the study of language. His work laid the groundwork for many contemporary theories of language and communication. His ideas not only transformed linguistics but also had a profound impact on other academic disciplines, such as literature, psychology, anthropology, cultural studies, and social studies.

Saussure was born on November 26, 1857, in Geneva, Switzerland, into a family with a rich intellectual heritage. His father, Henri de Saussure, was a noted entomologist and mineralogist, and his mother, Louise de Pourtalès, came from a prominent family. This intellectually stimulating environment fostered Saussure's early interest in languages and the natural sciences. From a young age, Saussure displayed a remarkable aptitude for languages. He began

studying Greek and Latin early in his life, quickly mastering these classical languages. When Saussure was fifteen, he wrote an essay titled "Essai sur les langues" (1872) about how languages work. This essay showed the influence of Pictet, a historical linguist and a friend of the de Saussure family. In 1875, Saussure enrolled at the University of Geneva, initially studying physics and chemistry. However, his passion for languages soon led him to switch his focus to linguistics. He continued his studies at the University of Leipzig in Germany, a leading center for linguistic research at the time. At the age of 21, Saussure published his first major work, *Mémoire sur le système primitif des voyelles dans les langues indo-européennes* (Memoir on the Primitive System of Vowels in Indo-European Languages). This groundbreaking study on the vowel system in Proto-Indo-European established his reputation as a brilliant young scholar. In this work, Saussure proposed the existence of earlier, more primitive vowel sounds, a theory that later developments in historical linguistics would confirm.

After completing his studies in Leipzig, Saussure moved to Paris, where he joined the *École Pratique des Hautes Études* as a lecturer. During his time in Paris, he focused on teaching courses in Indo-European languages and general linguistics. Saussure was known for his meticulous and rigorous approach to teaching, which left a lasting impression on his students. In 1891, Saussure returned to Geneva, where he accepted a professorship at the University of Geneva. He continued to teach and conduct research, although he published relatively little during this period. Despite this, his lectures were highly influential, and his ideas began to spread through his students and colleagues. Saussure's most significant contributions to linguistics came from his lectures on general linguistics, which he delivered between 1906 and 1911. These lectures formed the basis of his seminal work, *Cours de Linguistique*

*Générale* (Course in General Linguistics), published posthumously in 1916 by his students Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye. The *Course* compiled and systematized Saussure's ideas, providing a comprehensive overview of his theoretical framework.

### **1.3 Saussure's Principal Concepts**

#### **1.3.1 The Concept of the Sign**

Saussure's most influential contribution to linguistics is his theory of the linguistic sign. He proposed that language is a system of signs that express ideas. Each sign is composed of two parts: the "signifier" (the form of a word or expression) and the "signified" (the concept it represents). For example, the word "tree" is the signifier, and the mental concept of a tree, which includes its characteristics such as being a tall plant with leaves, branches, and a trunk, is the signified.

Saussure emphasizes that the relationship between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary. There is no inherent, natural connection between the sound "tree" and the concept of a tree. This arbitrariness is a cornerstone of Saussure's theory and emphasises on the conventional nature of language. To illustrate the arbitrary nature of signs, consider the word "dog" in different languages: English word "dog", French "chien", Spanish "perro" and German "hund". Each of these words is a different signifier for the same signified, the concept of a domesticated canine. The fact that various languages use different sounds (or written symbols) to refer to the same concept highlights the conventional and arbitrary nature of linguistic signs.

Saussure also introduces the idea of linguistic value, which depends on the differential nature of signs. According to him, words acquire meaning not in isolation but through their relationships with other words in the language system. For instance, the meaning of the word

"bat" can vary depending on context and its opposition to other words. In sports, "bat" refers to a club used in baseball or cricket, but in zoology, "bat" refers to a flying mammal. The meaning of "bat" is thus defined through its difference from words like "ball," "bird," or "racket." According to Saussure, language functions through a network of differences where each sign is defined by what it is not.

**SAQ**

What is the concept of sign in linguistics, and how does it explain the relationship between words and their meanings?  
Can you describe the key components of a sign and how they work together to convey meaning in language?

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**1.3.2 Langue and Parole**

Saussure's concepts of "langue" and "parole" were introduced in his work *Course in General Linguistics*. These terms distinguish between different aspects of language, offering a framework for understanding its structure and use.

*Langue* (French for "language") refers to the abstract, systematic rules and conventions shared by a speech community. It is the underlying structure that makes communication possible. *Langue* encompasses the grammatical rules, vocabulary, and syntactic norms that speakers of a language implicitly know and adhere to. It is a social product, existing in the collective mind of a community, and is relatively stable over time. *Parole* (French for "speech")

denotes the actual, individual use of language in concrete instances. It involves the specific utterances, expressions, and linguistic choices made by individuals during communication. Parole is the practical execution of langue, showcasing how the abstract system is realized in everyday interactions. Unlike langue, parole is highly variable, influenced by personal, contextual, and situational factors.

Langue is the system of language. It is not directly observable but can be inferred from the patterns and regularities in speech. Saussure emphasized that langue is a social phenomenon, independent of individual users. It is maintained and perpetuated by the collective agreement of a linguistic community.

### **Some characteristics of Langue**

- Langue exists within the collective consciousness of a speech community. It is a shared system that members of the community adhere to, ensuring mutual intelligibility.
- It is not tied to any specific instance of speech. It represents an abstract network of signs (words) and rules governing their combination and use.
- While not entirely static, langue changes slowly over time. It provides a stable framework that underlies the fluctuating nature of parole.
- Langue serves as a norm against which individual instances of parole are judged. It defines what is considered grammatically correct or acceptable within a language.

Parole, in contrast, is the dynamic, individual realization of langue. While langue is the system of language, parole is the use of language. It encompasses all the variations of speech that occur in everyday communication. Each instance of parole is unique, shaped by the speaker's intentions, social context, and immediate circumstances.

### **Some characteristics of Parole**

- Parole is the linguistic behaviour of an individual. It reflects personal choices, idiosyncrasies, and styles of expression.
- Unlike the abstract nature of langue, parole can be directly observed and analysed. It consists of actual spoken or written utterances.
- Parole is subject to change and variation, even within the same language community. It is influenced by factors such as region, social status, context, and the speaker's purpose.
- Parole is inherently tied to specific contexts and situations. The same speaker might use different forms of parole depending on whom they are speaking to, the setting, and the topic of conversation.

Here are some examples of langue and parole:

In English, the rule that adjectives generally precede nouns (e.g., "big house") is part of the langue. This grammatical structure is understood and used by all speakers of English. When someone says, "I saw a big, old, red house on the corner," this specific utterance is an instance of parole. It reflects the individual's choice of words and expression, applying the already existing grammatical rules of English. Another example would be, the word "tree", which represents a tall plant with a trunk and branches in the English lexicon. Saying, "The tree in my backyard is blooming", is an instance of a parole, using the word within a specific context.



**SAQ**

Discuss how 'langue' represents the social and structural aspects of language, while 'parole' refers to the individual use of language in everyday communication. how these two concepts work together to form the complete picture of how language functions?

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**1.3.3 Synchronic and Diachronic Linguistics**

Saussure’s distinctions between synchronic and diachronic linguistics provide distinct yet complementary perspectives for analysing languages, focusing respectively on language at a specific point in time and language as it evolves over time. *Synchronic* linguistics, derived from the Greek words "syn" (together) and "chronos" (time), examines language at a specific point in time. It is a static approach, analysing the structure and function of a language without considering its historical development. This perspective is akin to taking a snapshot of a language, capturing its grammar, vocabulary, phonetics, and semantics as they exist at a particular moment. Saussure emphasized that language should be studied as a structured system of signs, where the meaning of each sign (a word, for instance) is determined by its relationship to other signs within the system. This approach highlights the interdependence of linguistic elements, arguing that understanding a language involves comprehending how its components interact and contrast with one another at a given time. For instance, consider the English word

"mouse". In a synchronic analysis, we would examine its current usage, pronunciation, morphological structure, and role within contemporary English. This analysis might include its plural form "mice", how it fits into sentences (e.g., "The mouse is small"), and its various meanings (both the animal and the computer device). The focus remains solely on how "mouse" functions within the modern English language system.

*Diachronic* linguistics emerged from the Greek word "dia" (through) and "chronos" (time). It investigates the evolution and historical development of language. This approach is dynamic, and it traces changes in phonetics, grammar, semantics, and vocabulary across different time periods. Saussure posited that diachronic linguistics helps to understand how languages transform, diverge, and converge over centuries. Diachronic analysis looks at language as a living entity, subject to continuous change influenced by cultural, social, and historical factors. It reveals the processes of linguistic evolution, such as sound shifts, grammaticalization, and semantic drift. To illustrate this, consider the word "knight" in English. A diachronic analysis would trace its origins from the old English "cniht," meaning a young man or servant, to its current meaning, a mounted and armoured soldier of the medieval period. This analysis would explore phonetic changes (such as the loss of the initial "k" sound in pronunciation), morphological developments, and shifts in meaning over time. By examining historical texts, we observe how "knight" evolved both in form and function within the English language.

**Stop to consider**

During the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century, Europe was experiencing significant intellectual shifts, with emerging fields such as psychology and sociology challenging traditional approaches to

the humanities and social sciences. Saussure's work stood at the crossroads of these changes. He revolutionized linguistic study by introducing a systematic approach that emphasized the structural relationships within language rather than focusing solely on historical and philological perspectives. This shift marked a departure from the diachronic analysis, which examined language evolution over time, towards a synchronic analysis, which analysed language at a particular moment. Saussure's ideas resonated with contemporary intellectual movements, such as the formalist approach in literature and the early structuralist anthropology of Claude Lévi-Strauss. These thinkers found in Saussure's theories a robust framework for analysing cultural phenomena as systems of signs governed by underlying structures.

While synchronic and diachronic linguistics offer distinct perspectives, they are not mutually exclusive. Synchronic analysis provides a detailed view of language as a system at a specific time, while diachronic analysis contextualizes these findings within the broader narrative of linguistic evolution. For instance, the contemporary English word "broadcast" can be studied synchronically to understand its current meanings and usage. Simultaneously, a diachronic perspective reveals its origins in agriculture (where it meant to scatter seeds broadly) and its shift in meaning with the advent of radio and television. Saussure advocated for a synchronic approach, arguing that understanding the current structure of a language is essential before looking into its historical changes. This perspective shifted the focus of linguistic research from historical linguistics, which had dominated the field, to the analysis of language as a dynamic and structured system.

**SAQ**

What are the main differences between synchronic and diachronic linguistics, and how do these two approaches help us understand the structure and evolution of languages? Discuss how synchronic linguistics focus on language at a particular point in time, while diachronic linguistics looks at the changes in language over time.

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**1.3.4 Binary Oppositions**

Binary opposition is a way of understanding the world through dichotomies, or pairs of opposites. According to Saussure, meanings in language arise not from an inherent relationship between words and things, but from the differences between words themselves. In other words, we understand the meaning of a word not through what it inherently signifies, but through its difference from other words. Saussure posited that linguistic sign (words) gain meaning through their relationships with other signs. This relational approach emphasizes that words do not have standalone meanings but are defined in contrast to other words. Language is a system of interdependent terms where the value of each term results solely from the simultaneous presence of the others. For instance, the concept of "night" is understood in opposition to "day".

Here are some examples of binary oppositions:

Binary oppositions are pervasive in language and thought, serving as fundamental structures in our understanding of the world. For

instance, “light vs. dark”. This binary opposition is perhaps one of the most elemental, used not only in everyday language but also in literature, philosophy, and various cultural expressions. Light often symbolizes knowledge, goodness, and hope, while dark represents ignorance, evil, and despair. This dichotomy shapes our perception and interpretation of narratives and experiences. The binary of “male and female” is deeply ingrained in societal structures and cultural norms. It highlights how gender roles and identities are constructed and understood. Feminist theorists and gender studies scholars have critically examined this opposition to reveal how it perpetuates patriarchal power structures and limits the expression of gender diversity. Another example would be “nature vs. culture”. This opposition contrasts the natural world with human civilization. It frames debates about environmentalism, conservation, and the impact of human activities on the planet. The distinction is also crucial in anthropology, where it helps explore how different societies perceive and interact with their environments. Again, the binary of “good” and “evil” is central to moral philosophy, religion, and literature. It helps structure narratives around moral choices, character development, and the ultimate resolution of conflicts. In religious contexts, this opposition can frame cosmic battles between divine and demonic forces, influencing ethical teachings and worldviews.

Binary opposition is a foundational concept in structuralism, which seeks to understand the structures underlying human culture and cognition. Structuralists like Claude Lévi-Strauss used binary oppositions to analyse myths, language, and social systems, showing how human cognition categorizes the world through paired contrasts. These oppositions highlight the relational nature of meaning, where concepts are defined not by inherent qualities but by their differences from opposing terms.

**SAQ**

How does the concept of binary oppositions, as developed within structuralist theory, function to create meaning in language and culture? Discuss their role in shaping perception and interpretation within texts, and explore how they reveal underlying structures and cultural values in the texts.

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**1.4 Contribution of Saussure’s Linguistic Concepts in Structuralism**

**1.4.1 What is Structuralism**

*Structuralism* is a theoretical paradigm that emerged in the early to mid-20th century in France, primarily influenced by the work of Ferdinand de Saussure. It seeks to understand the underlying structures that shape human culture, thought, and behaviour. Structuralism points out that these structures are universal and can be uncovered through systematic analysis, whether they pertain to language, literature, anthropology, or other fields. The approach focuses on identifying the relationships and functions of various elements within a system rather than on the elements themselves.

The term 'structuralism' is derived from the word 'structure', which refers to anything that follows a specific pattern or set of rules. Structuralism is a theoretical approach that focuses on the study of these structures, asserting that everything adheres to certain universal patterns. These patterns are present in human thoughts and

cultures, and by understanding the rules governing these structures, we can gain deeper insights into various phenomena. For example, consider the different roles you play in life. You are a student in the classroom, a child at home, and a player on the playground. Each role represents a different structure with its own set of rules and expectations. Structuralism emphasizes that individual elements cannot be fully understood in isolation; they must be viewed within the context of the larger structure to which they belong. For instance, to comprehend the state of Assam, one must first understand the broader context of India.

#### **Stop to consider**

Structuralism is considered to have its origins in formalism. Formalism is regarded as the origin of several other literary criticism theories, including structuralism, post-structuralism, and deconstruction. Formalism is a critical approach that emerged in early 20th-century Russia, focusing on the form and structure of literary texts. It emphasizes the analysis of literary devices, language, and narrative techniques, considering how these elements contribute to the overall meaning of a work. Critics like Viktor Shklovsky and Roman Jakobson were central figures, emphasizing defamiliarization and the formal properties of language. This approach laid the groundwork for structuralism by prioritizing the analysis of internal systems and structures. Formalists believed that the meaning of a text could be understood through its intrinsic properties, which resonated with structuralism's focus on underlying structures in language and culture. Structuralism expanded these ideas beyond literature, applying similar principles to the study of broader cultural and social phenomena. By emphasizing systematic relationships and the functions of elements within a whole, formalism set the stage for the development of structuralist theory.

### **1.4.2 Structuralism in Literature**

In literature, structuralist critics analyse texts by examining the underlying structures, such as characterization or plot. Every text is seen as following universal patterns, allowing critics to draw general conclusions about both the individual work and the larger systems from which it emerges. To understand the sonnets of poets like John Donne and William Shakespeare, structuralists look at the common structure of sonnets. Typically, sonnets follow specific patterns, such as having 14 lines and a particular rhyme scheme. By understanding these general structural rules, one can better appreciate and analyse the individual sonnets. Similarly, to understand Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, it is essential to recognize the broader structures it belongs to. *Frankenstein* is a gothic novel that also incorporates elements of science fiction. By understanding the typical characteristics and structures of gothic and science fiction genres, readers can gain a deeper understanding of Shelley's work. Structuralists believe that no text can be fully understood in isolation; it must be examined within the context of the larger structural systems it is part of.

The essence of structuralism lies in understanding the structures that govern different phenomena and analysing individual elements based on these structures. Any text or cultural artifact can fit into multiple structures. For instance, a Romantic poem might also belong to other structural categories. By understanding these various structures, one can achieve a more comprehensive understanding of the particular text or artifact.

### **1.4.3 How Saussure's Works Pioneered Structuralism**

“Saussure frames a linguistic structure and finds a system, mechanism or structure in which a language works. Hence his



approach to linguistics for which he laid the ground work came to be known as structuralism”. Saussure's approach to language marked a significant departure from the methods of 19th-century philologists. During that time, scholars primarily focused on the evolution and historical development of languages, an approach Saussure referred to as diachronic linguistics. Saussure, however, introduced a revolutionary perspective by shifting the focus from diachronic to synchronic approach of studying language, which emphasizes the study of language as it exists at a particular moment in time. Structuralists sought to uncover the underlying structures that govern various systems of meaning, from language to culture. Saussure's concept of binary opposition provided a methodological tool for identifying these structures. Structuralists adopted Saussure's idea that elements within a system are defined by their differences. This approach allowed them to analyse cultural phenomena systematically. It reveals the binary oppositions that lies within human thought and social practices.

### **Stop to Consider**

Ferdinand de Saussure's theories gave rise to two distinct currents of thought that emerged independently, one in Europe and the other in America. Despite their separate origins, both currents integrated Saussure's foundational concepts, forming the core principles of structural linguistics.

In Europe, the Prague School, led by Roman Jakobson and Nikolai Trubetzkoy, embraced Saussure's ideas and expanded them to study phonology, morphology, and syntax. They focused on the functional aspects of language, examining how linguistic elements operate within a system and contribute to meaning and communication. Their work emphasized the importance of

oppositions and contrasts in understanding linguistic structures, a direct reflection of Saussure's emphasis on the relational nature of linguistic entities. Meanwhile, in America, Leonard Bloomfield became a key figure in the development of structural linguistics. Influenced by Saussure's focus on the systematic nature of language, Bloomfield sought to establish linguistics as a rigorous, scientific discipline. He emphasized the importance of empirical data and objective analysis, paving the way for the development of descriptive linguistics. His work laid the groundwork for later American structuralists, who continued to build on Saussure's principles in their study of language.

Central to Saussure's theory is his concept of the linguistic sign, which he described as comprising two parts, the signifier and the signified. The signifier is the form that the sign takes, such as a word or sound, while the signified is the concept or meaning it represents. Saussure's dyadic model suggests that meaning arises not from any inherent connection between the signifier and the signified, but from the relationship between these two components. This idea was crucial for structuralism, which focuses on relationships and structures rather than on individual elements in isolation. Saussure further argued that the connection between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary; there is no natural or necessary link between them. This arbitrariness indicates that meaning is constructed through social conventions and cultural systems. Understanding that meaning is socially constructed rather than intrinsic was a pivotal insight for structuralism, which examines how elements within a system interact to create meaning. Saussure's proposal that the meaning of signs is derived from their differences and relationships with other signs within the language system laid the groundwork for structuralist approaches across

various disciplines, including anthropology, literature, and sociology. Structuralists view cultural phenomena as parts of larger, interconnected systems where elements gain significance through their differences and oppositions. Saussure argued that the meaning of signs comes from their differences and relationships to other signs within the system of language. This concept, that meaning is differential, laid the groundwork for structuralist approaches in anthropology, literature, and other fields. Structuralists analyse cultural phenomena as part of larger, interrelated systems where elements derive meaning through their differences and oppositions. Saussure's distinction between langue and parole highlights the importance of the underlying system (langue) over individual acts of communication (parole). This influences the structuralist methodologies that prioritize abstract structures over specific instances. Saussure's theories on the nature of signs, the arbitrariness of the signifier-signified relationship, and the importance of structural relationships within language profoundly influenced structuralist thought. His emphasis on synchronic analysis and the differential nature of meaning enabled structuralists to systematically explore the deep structures within language, culture, and human cognition.

**SAQ**

Discuss how Ferdinand de Saussure's linguistic theories laid the foundation for structuralism in the field of semiotics and beyond.

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#### **1.4.4 Influence of Saussure in Different Disciplines**

Saussure's influence extends far beyond the field of linguistics, significantly impacting various other disciplines such as literature, philosophy, sociology, and anthropology. His theories brought about fundamental changes in theoretical approaches across these fields. Notable French intellectuals and scholars who are studied in different fields, including Roland Barthes, Jacques Lacan, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, and Claude Lévi-Strauss, were profoundly influenced by Saussure's work. In linguistics, Saussure's structuralist approach revolutionized the study of language. His focus on the synchronic analysis of linguistic systems laid the groundwork for developments in phonology, morphology, syntax, and semantics. Structuralist linguistics emphasized the systematic and relational nature of linguistic elements. In literature, Roland Barthes applied Saussure's principles to develop new ways of interpreting texts and emphasizes on the role of the reader in constructing meaning. He draws extensively from Saussure's concept of signs, examining how they function within society and emphasizing the arbitrariness of signs in communication systems, including texts. Jacques Lacan integrated Saussure's ideas into psychoanalysis, particularly in his theory of the unconscious structured like a language. He correlates the conscious mind with the signifier and Freud's concept of the unconscious with Saussure's signified. Michel Foucault's work in sociology and the history of ideas reflects Saussure's influence in its structural analysis of social institutions and discourses. In cultural studies, binary oppositions are analysed to understand how cultural meanings and identities are constructed and contested. Scholars examine how binaries like East/West, civilized/primitive, and colonizer/colonized are used to justify power relations and social hierarchies. Claude Lévi-Strauss, a prominent

anthropologist, applied Saussure's structuralist principles to the study of culture and society. Lévi-Strauss argued that cultural phenomena, such as myths and social structures, could be understood as systems of signs operating according to similar principles as language. He asserts that relationships within a structure, like myth, occur in binary pairs, consisting of elements that are either similar or different from each other; for example, good vs. evil. This structuralist approach transformed anthropology and shifted the focus to the analysis of underlying structures in cultural practices. In literary theory, Saussure's ideas influenced the development of structuralism and post-structuralism. Poststructuralist thinkers like Jacques Derrida later challenged these structures. Derrida's philosophy of deconstruction builds on Saussure's concept of the arbitrary nature of the sign, exploring the instability of meaning and the fluidity of language. Saussure's theories have also laid the foundation for the field of semiotics, the study of signs and symbols as elements of communication. His insight that signs operate within a system of differences influenced how scholars understand the construction and communication of meaning. Saussure's theories thus provided a foundation for critical theories that examine language, representation, and meaning.

**SAQ**

How did Saussure's ideas influence various academic disciplines beyond linguistics, such as anthropology, literary theory, philosophy, and semiotics? Can you provide specific examples of how his theories were applied or adapted in these fields?

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### **1.5 Emergence of Poststructuralism From Structuralism**

Poststructuralism emerged in the mid-20th century (around 1950s and 60s) as an intellectual movement, challenging and extending the principles of structuralism. Structuralism, a method of analysis rooted in linguistics, anthropology, and psychology, sought to understand the underlying structures governing human culture and thought. Prominent figures such as Ferdinand de Saussure, Claude Lévi-Strauss, and Roland Barthes laid the groundwork for structuralism by emphasizing the importance of underlying structures over individual elements in language and culture. However, poststructuralists critiqued and expanded these ideas, and introduced new dimensions of interpretation and analysis. Despite the profound impact of structuralism, several scholars began to critique its assumptions and limitations. They argued that structuralism's emphasis on stable, underlying structures neglected the complexities and fluidity of meaning, power, and individual agency. This critique gave rise to poststructuralism, which sought to address these perceived shortcomings.

Poststructuralists challenged Saussure's notion of fixed structures and meaning, arguing instead for a fluid and indeterminate understanding of texts and communication. Structuralism suggested that meaning resides within the structure of a text, with stable relationships between elements defining interpretation. In contrast, poststructuralism suggests that meaning is not fixed or located within any structure; it is elusive and constantly shifting. Consider the phrase "yellow dog." A structuralist might argue that, despite the arbitrary nature of the signifier and signified, the meaning of "yellow dog" is clear and fixed within the linguistic system, as it points to a specific concept. However, from a poststructuralist perspective, the meaning is highly subjective and context-dependent. When I say "yellow dog," I might imagine a Golden

Retriever, while you might think of a German Shepherd, and others might envision entirely different breeds of yellow-coloured dogs. This illustrates that individuals bring their own interpretations and associations to words, and thus, meaning cannot be precisely communicated or fixed.

According to Saussure, everything exists in binary opposition, such as day/night or men/women, and that understanding one term requires understanding its opposite. However, poststructuralist critics contend that there are no true binary oppositions and caution against excessive loyalty to any single idea. They argue that interpreting meaning through opposites privileges one term over the other. For example, in the binary opposition of rich/poor, societal emphasis is often placed on the rich, marginalizing the experiences and values of the poor. Similarly, in binaries like good/bad, man/woman or nature/culture, one term is usually valued over the other which reinforces hierarchies and power dynamics. Poststructuralists thus argue that binary oppositions do not accurately represent reality but are merely cultural constructs.

Jacques Derrida, a key figure in poststructuralism, introduced the concept of "deconstruction", a method of analysis that seeks to reveal the inherent contradictions and instability within texts. Derrida argued that meaning is not fixed but rather is always deferred through a play of differences, a concept he termed "différance". This contradicts the structuralist idea of stable, universal structures, suggesting instead that meaning is always in fluid and context-dependent. Michel Foucault, another influential poststructuralist, shifted the focus from structures to power dynamics. He examined how power operates through discourse and shapes knowledge, social practices, and individual subjectivities. Foucault's work on the relationship between power and knowledge challenged structuralist assumptions by emphasizing the contingent

and historically specific nature of social phenomena. He argued that what counts as knowledge is always tied to power relations, and that these relations are not stable but constantly evolving. Roland Barthes, initially a structuralist, also contributed to the transition towards poststructuralism. In his later work, Barthes questioned the authority of the author and the idea of a single, authoritative interpretation of texts. His essay "The Death of the Author" argues that the author's intentions and biography should not limit the interpretation of a text, and thus puts focus on the active role of the reader in creating meaning. This idea resonated with poststructuralist emphasis on the multiplicity and indeterminacy of meaning.

Poststructuralism emerged from structuralism and Saussure's linguistic theories, as a critical response to its limitations. While structuralism sought to uncover the underlying structures governing human culture and thought, poststructuralism challenged the stability and universality of these structures. By emphasizing the fluidity of meaning, the role of power in shaping knowledge, and the active participation of readers in interpreting texts, poststructuralists expanded the horizons set by their structuralist predecessors.

### **Check Your Progress**

1. How were Ferdinand de Saussure's ideas on structural linguistics received by his contemporaries and later scholars?
2. How did Saussure's concepts of the linguistic sign, the dichotomy between *langue* and *parole*, and the notion of synchronic versus diachronic analysis influence the field of linguistics?



3. What criticisms or controversies have emerged in response to Saussure's theories, and how have these debates shaped subsequent developments in linguistic theory?

## **1.6 Summing Up**

Ferdinand de Saussure's contributions to linguistics and semiotics fundamentally reshaped the understanding of language. His theories laid the groundwork for structuralism, emphasizing the systematic nature of language and its elements. By introducing the concepts of the signifier and the signified, Saussure shifted focus from the mere naming of objects to understanding the relational nature of linguistic signs. Saussure's theories have transformed the way language is studied, shifting the focus from historical and comparative linguistics to the structures underlying linguistic systems. His insights into the arbitrary and relational nature of linguistic signs, the distinction between *langue* and *parole*, and the emphasis on structure have provided a foundation for numerous theoretical developments in the humanities and social sciences. Saussure's legacy continues to influence contemporary thought, demonstrating the relevance of his work in understanding not just language, but the nature of human communication and culture.

## **1.7 Model Questions**

1. What are the key principles of Ferdinand de Saussure's theory of structuralism?
2. Explain the distinction between "*langue*" and "*parole*" in Saussure's linguistic theory.
3. What role does the concept of "binary oppositions" play in structuralist theory?

4. How did Saussure's ideas lay the groundwork for subsequent developments in structuralism across other disciplines?
5. How do structuralist theories differ from post-structuralist critiques, particularly concerning Saussure's work?
6. In what ways did Saussure's structuralism challenge previous linguistic theories?

### **1.8 References and Suggested Readings**

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## **Links**

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[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Course\\_in\\_General\\_Linguistics](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Course_in_General_Linguistics)

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## UNIT 2

### FERDINAND DE SAUSSURE: “NATURE OF THE LINGUISTIC SIGN”

#### **Unit Structure:**

#### **2.1 Objectives**

#### **2.2 Introducing the Critic**

#### **2.3 Reading of the Text “Nature of the Linguistic Sign”**

#### **2.4 Other Important Ideas of Saussure**

#### **2.5 Critical Reception of Saussure’s Works**

#### **2.6 Summing Up**

#### **2.7 Model Questions**

#### **2.8 References and Suggested Readings**

#### **2.1 Objectives**

This unit is designed to introduce you to the renowned linguist Ferdinand de Saussure. While you will learn about Saussure's overall contributions to linguistics, we will place special emphasis on his seminal work, *Course in General Linguistics*, focusing particularly on the chapter titled "Nature of the Linguistic Sign." This book is widely regarded as one of the key texts that contributed to the development of structuralism as a critical theory. After reading this unit you will be able to:

- Learn about Saussure’s contribution to modern Linguistics
- Place Saussure in the context of Structuralism
- Understand the concept of Linguistic Sign
- Recognize the importance of the text

## 2.2 Introducing the Critic

Ferdinand de Saussure, a Swiss linguist, is renowned for his foundational contributions to the field of linguistics and the development of structuralism. Saussure's innovative ideas revolutionized the study of language by shifting focus from diachronic (historical) to synchronic (contemporary) analysis. His seminal work, *Course in General Linguistics*, published posthumously in 1916, laid the groundwork for modern linguistic theory. Saussure's ideas of Sign, Signifier, Signified, Langue and Parole, formed the basis of structuralism, a methodology that examines the underlying structures in cultural phenomena, and it views language as a system of interrelated elements. He argued that language is a system of interrelated elements, where meaning arises from differences and relationships between signs rather than from individual signs themselves.

Ferdinand de Saussure was born on November 26, 1857, in Geneva, Switzerland, into a family of scientists and intellectuals. His father, Henri de Saussure, was a well-known taxonomist, entomologist and mineralogist, and his mother, Louise de Pourtalès, came from a wealthy and educated family. This intellectual environment influenced Saussure from a young age. In 1870, he completed his education at Institution Martine, a private school, graduating as the top student in his class. Eager to further his studies, he aimed to enroll in Gymnase de Genève. However, his father deemed him too young for this step, as he was only fourteen and a half years old. Consequently, he was enrolled in College de Genève instead, where some of the teachers from Gymnase de Genève also taught. However, he was not satisfied with it, and considered it a waste of time as he complained, "I entered the Collège de Genève, to waste a year there as completely as a year can be wasted".

In 1875, Saussure enrolled at the University of Geneva, where he studied under prominent linguists such as Adolphe Pictet. Saussure displayed an early interest in languages and began studying Latin, Greek, and Sanskrit during his years at the University of Geneva. He later moved to the University of Leipzig, one of the leading centres for linguistic research at the time. He also spent a brief period at the University of Berlin. In 1878, at the age of 21, Saussure published his first major work, *Mémoire sur le système primitif des voyelles dans les langues indo-européennes* (Memoir on the Primitive Vowel System in Indo-European Languages). This groundbreaking work established his reputation as a promising young scholar in comparative linguistics. He studied Celtic at the University of Berlin under Heinrich Zimmer, a Privatdozent, and pursued Sanskrit studies with Hermann Oldenberg.

After completing his doctorate at Leipzig in 1880, Saussure moved to Paris, where he served as an instructor at the École Pratique des Hautes Études (School of Advanced Studies). During his time in Paris, he became associated with leading scholars such as Michel Bréal and Antoine Meillet. His lectures and research during this period significantly contributed to the field of historical linguistics. In 1891, Saussure returned to Geneva, where he took up a position as a professor of Sanskrit and Indo-European languages at the University of Geneva. He taught there until his death in 1913. Saussure's principal contribution to linguistics emerged posthumously when his students compiled and published his lectures on linguistic principles, delivered in Geneva, as the *Cours de linguistique générale* in 1916. In this seminal work, he introduced the concept of linguistic signs. During his lifetime, Saussure published two monographs and a few papers and notes.

### **Stop to Consider**

The book *Course in General Linguistics* was not authored by Ferdinand de Saussure himself. Instead, it was compiled from the notes taken by his students during his lectures at the University of Geneva. The novelty and profundity of Saussure's ideas were such that the publication of this book in 1916 marked a pivotal moment in the field of linguistics, giving rise to the linguistic movement known as Structuralism. Saussure's perspective prompted other linguists with similar viewpoints to advance the field further. Figures such as Roland Barthes, Claude Levi Strauss, and later Noam Chomsky built upon and expanded structuralist ideas, applying them to various aspects of linguistic research. Structuralism, influenced heavily by Saussure's teachings, emerged as a dominant framework in the study of language. It emphasizes understanding linguistic phenomena not in isolation but as part of a broader system of interrelated elements. Saussure proposed that linguistic entities derive their meaning and function from their relationships within this system. This approach represented a significant shift from the previously dominant diachronic methods, which focused on the historical development and evolution of languages. According to Saussure, linguistic entities are parts of a system and are defined by their relations to one another within said system.

### **SAQ**

Ferdinand de Saussure is often regarded as one of the founding figures of modern linguistics. Could you provide an in-depth overview of his life and career, including his early education, key academic positions, major works, and contributions to the field of linguistics?

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### 2.3 Reading of The Text “Nature of The Linguistic Sign”

Saussure was dissatisfied with contemporary linguists who saw language merely as a tool for denoting objects. He argued that language is shaped by the conception of things or ideas, not the things themselves. Saussure introduced a division within the language system: "langue," the idealized, abstract structure of language, and "parole," the practical, everyday use of speech. He emphasized that since a single object can be represented by various terms and names, there is no inherent rule dictating that one specific word must correspond to one particular thing. This arbitrariness highlights the complexity and fluidity of linguistic systems.

*Course in General Linguistics* by Ferdinand de Saussure is a foundational text in the field of modern linguistics, marking a paradigm shift in how language is studied and understood. The work presents a systematic exploration of linguistic theory and emphasizes on understanding language as an interrelated system of signs, rather than merely a collection of words and rules. Saussure's insights revolutionized not only linguistics but also influenced diverse fields such as anthropology, literary theory, and semiotics.

*Course in General Linguistics* consists of five parts: General Principles, Synchronic Linguistics, Diachronic Linguistics, Geographical Linguistics, and Concerning Retrospective Linguistics. The first chapter, "Nature of the Linguistic Sign," introduces the foundational concept of the linguistic sign, which Ferdinand de Saussure describes as being composed of two parts:



the "signifier" (the form of the word or phrase) and the "signified" (the concept it represents). This chapter lays the groundwork for understanding how meaning is constructed in language, emphasizing the arbitrary nature of the sign and the relationship between language and thought.

In "Nature of The Linguistic Signs", Saussure starts the discussion with how language has been oversimplified by people. Some people believe that language, in its simplest form, is merely a process of naming—essentially a "list of words" where each word corresponds directly to an object or idea. However, this view has several flaws according to Saussure-

- i) Firstly, it assumes that ideas exist independently and prior to the words that describe them.
- ii) Second, it does not clarify whether a name is fundamentally a vocal expression or a psychological concept; for example, the word "tree" can be seen either as a sound we make or a thought we hold.
- iii) Lastly, it oversimplifies the relationship between names and the things they represent, suggesting that this connection is straightforward, which is far from accurate.

Despite its simplicity, Saussure says that this perspective does touch on an important truth: the basic unit of language is a combination of two elements. Understanding language as a pairing of names and objects highlights its dual nature, involving both mental and physical components. This duality is essential to grasping how language functions beyond just naming things, as it involves complex interactions between thought and expression.

According to Ferdinand de Saussure, both components of a linguistic sign are psychological and are connected in the brain through an associative bond. Saussure explains, "The linguistic sign

unites, not a thing and a name, but a concept and a sound-image." It is essential to understand that the sound-image is not the actual physical sound, but the psychological impression that the sound leaves on our senses. The concept represents the idea or meaning associated with the sign, while the sound-image is the mental representation of the sound. For instance, when you hear the phrase "black cat," you automatically associate it with the color black and the animal, forming a mental image of a black cat. This mental image is the sound-image. Similarly, when you see a black colored cat and think of the words "black cat," you are engaging with the concept or meaning associated with the term. The sound-image and the concept are interconnected. This connection between concept and sound-image forms the basis of linguistic signs and shows the importance of psychological processes in language.

The psychological nature of the sound-images becomes evident when we observe our own speech patterns. Without any physical movement of our lips or tongue, we can internally converse or recite a piece of poetry. This internal dialogue highlights that we perceive the words of our language as sound-images. Therefore, Saussure suggests that we should refrain from using the term "phonemes" to describe the components of words, as it implies vocal activity and is relevant only to spoken words, that is the external expression of our internal sound-images. To understand it better Saussure suggests that we refer to the sounds and syllables of a word, while keeping in mind that these terms relate to the mental sound-image. By doing so, we emphasize the psychological aspect of language, distinguishing between the internal conceptualization and the external articulation.

Saussure elaborates the linguistic sign as a two-sided psychological entity, consisting of a concept and a sound-image, and each element recalls the other. When the Latin word "arbor" and its meaning in English, "tree", is considered, it is recognized that the connections

of “arbor” and “tree” established by the language acts as a guide in understanding reality, which dismisses any other potential connections. Saussure refers to this combination of a concept and a sound-image as a "sign." The term "sign" encompasses both the conceptual and auditory aspects, since the sound-image alone does not constitute a sign unless it is paired with a concept.

Saussure suggests the term “sign” to represent the whole idea, and replaces ‘concept’ with ‘signified’ and ‘sound-image’ with ‘signifier’. These terms accentuate the distinctions between the components and their relationship to the whole.

Saussure explains that Linguistic Sign has two fundamental characteristics

1. The Linguistic Sign is arbitrary
2. The Signifier is linear in nature

### **Principle 1: The Linguistic Sign is Arbitrary**

The term “arbitrary” means random, by chance or which does not follow any particular rule. Saussure opines that the connection between a signifier (the form of a word) and the signified (the concept it represents) is arbitrary. This means that there is no inherent or natural link between them. The term "sign" refers to the combination of the signifier and the signified, and Saussure says that linguistic signs are arbitrary. For instance, the signifier “cat” is not inherently connected to the actual animal (signified) that signifies it. This concept could be represented by any other sequence of sounds. The word "cat" is known by different names in various languages: in Germany, it is called "Miau!", in Japanese, it is referred to as "Neko", and in Hindi, it is termed "Billee" or "बिल्ली." This example illustrates how the same animal, a cat, is identified with different words depending on the language. These words, or *signifiers*, have

no inherent connection to the actual animal, which is the *signified*. This proves Saussure's claim that the relationship between a signifier and what it represents is arbitrary.

Saussure elaborates on the concept of the arbitrary nature of signs by extending it towards the modes of expression, such as mime. He asserts that the methods of expression used in society do not possess inherent meanings. Instead, their meanings are derived from collective social behaviors and cultural principles. For example, polite gestures, while they may sometimes seem naturally expressive, are governed by societal rules. Saussure illustrates this with the example of a Chinese person bowing down to the ground nine times to greet the emperor. Although the gesture may appear inherently respectful, it is the societal rule, not the gesture's intrinsic value, that dictates its usage. This principle highlights that expressions and signs in any form are defined by the cultural context and the agreed-upon conventions within a society. Thus, the meanings of signs are not fixed by their nature but by the social rules and collective behaviors that shape them.

Saussure further explains about the linguistic sign and the arbitrary nature of it. He says that the term "symbol", which has often been used to describe the linguistic sign, or more specifically the "signifier", is not always arbitrary. It carries meaning and is not devoid of content. According to Saussure, a symbol implies a direct relationship between form and meaning, where the connection is not entirely arbitrary. There exists some form of fundamental, natural connection between the signifier and the signified when it comes to symbols. For instance, the symbol of justice, which is a pair of scales, cannot be randomly replaced by another symbol, such as a chariot, because the scales inherently represent balance and fairness. Another example would be the symbol of a lion, which often carries

inherent cultural connotations of bravery or royalty, and these meanings are not entirely detached from the symbol itself.

However, he states that the term "arbitrary" should not be misunderstood to mean that the choice of signifiers is entirely up to the individual speaker, because an individual does not have the authority to alter a sign once it has been established within a linguistic community. In this context, "arbitrary" means that the signifier does not have an intrinsic, natural connection to the signified. The relationship between the signifier (the form of a word or expression) and the signified (the concept it represents) is based on convention rather than any natural bond. This conventional nature of linguistic signs is crucial to understanding how language functions. Once a sign has been accepted and used by a linguistic community, its form and meaning become fixed, and speakers must adhere to these established signs to communicate effectively.

#### **There are two exceptions to Principle I -**

- 1) "*Onomatopoeia* might be used to prove that the choice of the signifier is not always arbitrary. But onomatopoeic formations are never organic elements of a linguistic system. Besides, their number is much smaller than is generally supposed". *Onomatopoeia* challenges the principle that the connection between the signifier and the signified is always arbitrary, as these words mimic the sounds they describe. These words suggest a natural link between the signifier and the signified. But genuine onomatopoeic words (like "glug-glug" or "tick-tock") are limited and somewhat arbitrarily chosen since they are only approximate imitations of sounds. The prevalence of onomatopoeic words is often overestimated. In reality, their presence in any given language is quite limited. Most words do not have a direct relationship to their meanings and are instead based on social

and cultural conventions. For example, English "bow-wow" and French "ouaoua" represent dog barks differently. These words undergo the same phonetic and morphological changes as other words, losing their original imitative character and becoming conventional linguistic signs.

### **Stop to Consider**

**Onomatopoeia** refers to words that phonetically imitate, resemble, or suggest the sound that they describe. These words are unique because their pronunciation is directly tied to the sound they represent. Onomatopoeic words mimic natural sounds. For instance, words like "buzz," "hiss," and "bang" are direct representations of the sounds made by a bee, a snake, and an explosion, respectively. While onomatopoeia tends to be more universal than other words, there is still variation across languages. For example, a dog's bark is represented as "woof" in English, "guau" in Spanish, and "wan wan" in Japanese.

According to Saussure, Onomatopoeia is an exception to the arbitrary nature of linguistic sign because these words directly imitate natural sounds, creating a non-arbitrary link between the word and its referent. The phonetic structure of onomatopoeic words is designed to echo the actual sounds they represent. This imitation blur the line between the signifier and the signified, making the connection less arbitrary. Despite cultural differences, many onomatopoeic words share similarities across languages because they are based on universally recognized sounds. For instance, the sound of a cat's meow is represented as "meow" in English, "miau" in Spanish, and "nyan" in Japanese, which reflect a common auditory experience. These qualities of onomatopoeic sounds reduce the arbitrariness inherent in other types of linguistic signs.

2) “*Interjections*, closely related to onomatopoeia, can be attacked on the same grounds and come no closer to refuting our conclusions. One is tempted to see in them spontaneous expressions of reality dictated, so to speak, by natural forces. But for most interjections we can show that there is no fixed bond between their signified and their signifier”. To explain, Saussure compares languages, showing significant differences in these expressions (e.g., English "ouch!" vs. French "aïe!"). Moreover, many interjections originated from words with specific meanings, such as French "diable!" (darn!) from "diable" (devil) and "mordieu!" (golly!) from "mort Dieu" (God's death). This evolution demonstrates that interjections, like onomatopoeic words, lose their original symbolic nature and conform to the arbitrary nature of linguistic signs.

#### **Stop to Consider**

**Interjections** are words or phrases used to express sudden emotion, reaction, or feeling. They often stand alone and are not grammatically related to other parts of a sentence. Interjections can convey a wide range of emotions, including excitement, surprise, pain, joy, or disgust and are used to convey a speaker's immediate reaction or feeling. They add emotional context to language and can enhance the expressiveness of speech or writing. Interjections can be a single word, a short phrase, or even a sound. Examples include: "Wow!", "Ouch!", "Hey!", "Oops!", "Oh no!", "Good grief!", "Bless you!" etc.

Interjections are an exception to Saussure's theory of arbitrary nature of linguistic sign, because these words often express basic human emotions and reactions that are somewhat universal. For instance, expressions of pain, surprise, or disgust tend to be similar across different languages and cultures. The interjection "ah!" (or

similar sounds) can be found in many languages to express realization or understanding. This cross-linguistic similarity suggests that some interjections may have a more direct, less arbitrary connection to human experiences and expressions. Some interjections may stem from innate human vocalizations that predate structured language. For example, cries of pain or joy are natural human responses that have become conventionalized in language. The interjection "ouch!" which expresses pain, likely has roots in instinctive human vocal reactions. Many interjections, such as "ouch" or "wow", are onomatopoeic, and have a sound quality that reflects the emotion or reaction they express. This phonetic mimicry suggests a non-arbitrary link between the signifier and the signified.

Despite these aspects, it is essential to realise that not all interjections are completely non-arbitrary. Over time, some interjections might develop or change due to cultural influences, evolving similarly to other words in the language. Nonetheless, the strong association with natural sounds and universal human expressions make interjections a notable exception in the context of Saussure's theory.

Thus, both onomatopoeic formations and interjections are minor exceptions and do not conform to the overall principle that linguistic signs are fundamentally arbitrary.

**SAQ**

What are some contemporary examples or counter arguments that either support or question the degree of arbitrariness in the relationship between signifiers and signified in various languages and cultural contexts?

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**Principle 2: The Signifier is Linear in nature**

The second principle talks about the linear nature of the signifier, which means these are arranged in a sequence. According to Saussure it has two main characteristics:

- “(a) it represents a span, and
- (b) the span is measurable in a single dimension; it is a line”.

The auditory signifiers or signals, like the words and musical notes we hear, are confined to the dimension of time. One sound or word always unfolds after the other. In short, the signifiers that are linked with our sense of hearing are linear. For example, consider the word "cat." When spoken, the sounds [k], [æ], and [t] follow one another in a linear sequence over time. All three sounds cannot be pronounced simultaneously; they must occur one after the other. This linear progression is what means by the linear nature of the signifier. The sounds form a chain that can be written as "c-a-t." However, visual signifiers do not share this linear quality. Visual elements, such as flags or nautical signals, can be perceived simultaneously and in multiple dimensions. Unlike auditory signifiers, which are confined to the dimension of time, visual signifiers can be observed all at once, which allows it for a multidimensional arrangement.

The elements of auditory signifiers are presented one after the other, forming a sequence or chain. This linear quality becomes more evident when auditory signifiers are transcribed into writing, where the spatial line of written marks substitutes the temporal sequence of

sounds. For example, when writing the word "tree," the letters 't,' 'r,' 'e,' and 'e' are arranged in a line. This spatial representation mirrors the temporal sequence of sounds when the word is spoken. Each letter follows the other, maintaining the linearity of the signifier in written form.

When a syllable is stressed while speaking, it may seem like combining multiple elements at a single point. But Saussure opines that this is just an illusion, since the syllable and its stress form a single phonetic act. There is no duality within this act, only different contrasts with the sounds that come before and after. For example, when pronouncing the word "banana," the stress typically falls on the second syllable: "ba-NA-na." Even though the stress makes the second syllable more prominent, it doesn't alter the linear sequence of the syllables. Each syllable—ba, NA, and na—still follows one another in a sequence, forming a linear chain. The accentuation adds emphasis but does not change the fundamental linear nature of the signifier.

### **Check Your Progress**

1. How did Saussure's theories influence subsequent linguistic research and what legacy did he leave behind after his death?
2. Considering Saussure's arguments and the broader impact of his theory, how does the notion of arbitrariness challenge traditional views of language as a natural and transparent medium for representing reality?
3. How does the concept of the linear nature of the signifier, as proposed by Ferdinand de Saussure, influence the interpretation of language in linguistic theory?

## **2.4 Other Important Ideas of Saussure**

Saussure's idea that meaning in language arises from the differential relationships between signs rather than their intrinsic properties is another key aspect of his theory. He argued that words gain meaning not in isolation but through their distinctions from other words within the linguistic system. For instance, the word "day" has meaning in part because it is different from words like "night". This relational nature of linguistic elements implies that the linguistic system is a network of interdependent signs where the value of each sign is determined by its context within the system.

Another important distinction Saussure introduced is between *synchronic* and *diachronic* approaches to language study. The synchronic approach examines the structure of a language at a specific point in time, focusing on the relationships between elements within the system. In contrast, the diachronic approach looks at the historical development and evolution of language over time. Saussure emphasized the importance of synchronic analysis for understanding the underlying structure of a language, as it allows for a more systematic examination of linguistic relationships and rules.

Saussure also differentiated between *langue* (the abstract, collective system of rules and conventions of a language) and *parole* (the actual use of language in speech and writing). *Langue* represents the social, shared aspect of language that speakers of a language implicitly agree upon, while *parole* refers to the individual, variable instances of language use. This distinction highlights the structuralist view that the primary object of linguistic study should be the underlying system (*langue*) rather than the individual acts of communication (*parole*).

Saussure's ideas laid the groundwork for the structuralist criticism, which would go on to influence a wide range of academic disciplines beyond linguistics, including anthropology, literary

theory, and semiotics. All structures can be conceptualized as "forms of forms," where each structure represents an intricate arrangement of underlying forms. These structures are inherently unconscious to humans, governed by internal organization and laws that ensure their self-regulation and coherence. This perspective focuses on the holistic nature of structuralism, emphasizing that a structure cannot simply be reduced to the sum of its individual elements. In structuralist thought, the mind is viewed more as a repository of fixed patterns rather than an evolving product of continuous self-construction. The unconscious activity of the mind involves the superimposition of these universal forms onto various contents. These forms are identical across all human minds, suggesting a shared cognitive architecture. Consequently, every custom and institution can be understood as manifestations of these hidden structures that operate beneath the surface of human behaviour and societal norms. Structuralism, therefore, reveals the underlying frameworks that shape human thought and social systems. It posits that beneath the apparent diversity of cultures and practices lies a set of universal structures that govern how humans perceive and organize their world. By uncovering these hidden structures, structuralism provides insights into the fundamental nature of human cognition and social organization.

Structuralism, as an intellectual movement, emphasizes the relational nature of systems, whether they are linguistic, cultural, or social. It focuses on uncovering the underlying structures and rules that govern these systems, much like Saussure's analysis of language. Two distinct currents of thought emerged independently, one in Europe and the other in America, each incorporating the foundational ideas of Saussure to establish the central tenets of structural linguistics. In Europe, Saussure's concepts inspired the Prague School and linguists like Roman Jakobson, who advanced

phonological theory. In America, Leonard Bloomfield led the structuralist movement, emphasizing the systematic nature of language study and focusing on descriptive linguistics. Both schools, despite their geographical separation, integrated Saussure's principles, emphasizing the relational aspects of linguistic elements and solidifying structuralism as an essential framework in the analysis of language systems.

## **2.5 Critical Reception of Saussure's Works**

Saussure's ideas provided the methodological and theoretical foundations for structuralism, which emerged as a broader intellectual movement in the mid-20th century. Several key figures extended and adapted Saussure's principles to various fields:

Saussure's immediate influence was apparent on the works of scholars such as Roman Jakobson and Nikolai Trubetzkoy. Jakobson is considered the first linguist to use the term "structuralism". These linguists applied Saussure's concept of the linguistic system to phonology, developing theories about the formal and structural organization of sounds in languages. Claude Lévi-Strauss is perhaps the most prominent figure who extended Saussure's ideas beyond linguistics to anthropology. Lévi-Strauss applied the structuralist approach to the study of myths, kinship systems, and social structures. He argued that, like language, cultural phenomena could be understood as systems of signs governed by underlying structures. His analysis of myths, for example, involved identifying the fundamental units (mythemes) and their relationships within a system, mirroring Saussure's linguistic analysis. Roland Barthes utilized Saussure's structuralism to analyse literature and other cultural texts. In his work *Mythologies*, Barthes explored how everyday objects and practices could be understood as systems of

signs imbued with cultural meanings. He extended Saussure's notion of the arbitrariness of the sign to critique the ways in which bourgeois society naturalizes certain meanings and ideologies. Barthes' structuralist approach to literary texts involved examining the underlying structures that shape narrative and meaning. Semiotics, the study of signs and symbols as elements of communicative behaviour, also owes a significant debt to Saussure. Scholars like Algirdas Julien Greimas expanded on Saussure's ideas to develop theories of narrative structure and signification. Greimas' semiotic square, a tool for mapping out the logical relationships between concepts, exemplifies the structuralist emphasis on relational systems.

The core principals of structuralist criticism are:

1. Structuralists view elements of a system as interdependent, with meanings arising from the whole structure rather than individual parts.
2. The meaning of any element is defined by its relationships and differences with other elements within the system.
3. Structuralists focus on uncovering the underlying rules and structures that govern the functioning of systems, whether it is linguistic, cultural, or social.
4. There is an emphasis on studying systems at a particular point in time to understand their underlying structure.

Ferdinand de Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics* revolutionized the study of language by introducing a structural approach that emphasizes the relational nature of linguistic signs and the importance of underlying systems. These ideas laid the groundwork for structuralism, influencing a broad array of disciplines beyond linguistics. Structuralism's focus on systems, relationships, and underlying rules can be traced directly back to Saussure's pioneering work, demonstrating his impact on the

intellectual landscape of the 20th century. Through the efforts of scholars like Lévi-Strauss, Barthes, and others, Saussure's theories were adapted and expanded, solidifying structuralism as a key paradigm in literary criticism and social sciences.

### **Check your Progress**

1. How did his ideas shape the work of key structuralist thinkers and what are some examples of how these scholars applied Saussure's principles to fields beyond linguistics?
2. How did Ferdinand de Saussure's theories on language and semiotics influence the development of structuralism in various fields of study? Elaborate on how his concepts of the signifier and signified, the arbitrary nature of the sign, and the idea of language as a system of differences were foundational to structuralist thought.

## **2.6 Summing Up**

Ferdinand de Saussure's conceptualization of the linguistic sign in his work, *Course in General Linguistics*, represents a foundational shift in the study of language. Central to his theory is the notion that the linguistic sign consists of two inseparable components: the *signifier* and the *signified*. The signifier refers to the "sound image" or the form that a word takes, while the signified denotes the concept or meaning that the word represents. Crucially, Saussure posited that the relationship between signifier and signified is arbitrary; there is no intrinsic or natural connection between the form of a word and its meaning. This arbitrariness suggests that linguistic signs are products of social conventions and collective agreements within a linguistic community.

Saussure's conceptualization of the linguistic sign fundamentally transformed the study of language, shifting the focus from the intrinsic properties of words to their relational dynamics within a linguistic system. By positing that the relationship between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary and that meaning arises from differences between signs, Saussure laid the foundation for a structural approach to language. His distinction between synchronic and diachronic analysis, along with the differentiation between *langue* and *parole*, further emphasized the importance of studying underlying structures and systems. These ideas were essential in the development of structuralism, an intellectual movement that has had a profound impact on various academic fields. Through his groundbreaking work, Saussure not only redefined linguistics but also influenced the broader landscape of various academic fields, establishing principles that continue to resonate in contemporary theoretical discourse.

## **2.7 Model Questions**

1. What does Saussure mean by the "arbitrariness of the sign" in linguistic theory?
2. How does Saussure define the relationship between the signifier and the signified?
3. How does Saussure's concept of the linguistic sign challenge previous notions of language?
4. In what ways does the arbitrary nature of the sign impact meaning in language?
5. How does Saussure's theory of the linguistic sign influence modern semiotics and structuralism?
6. How does Saussure's principle of linearity interact with non-linear modes of communication, such as visual languages (e.g.,



sign language) and what challenges does it present for translating these forms into linear spoken or written language?

## 2.8 References and Suggested Readings

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### **Links**

<https://www.literatureandcriticism.com/nature-of-the-linguistic-sign/>

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ferdinand\\_de\\_Saussure](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ferdinand_de_Saussure)

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/learn/glossary-terms/structuralism#:~:text=Structuralist%20critics%20analyzed%20material%20by,systems%20from%20which%20they%20emerged.>

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Course\\_in\\_General\\_Linguistics](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Course_in_General_Linguistics)

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## UNIT 3

### INTRODUCING MICHEL FOUCAULT

#### **Unit Structure:**

#### **3.1 Objectives**

#### **3.2 Introduction**

#### **3.3 A Short Biographical Sketch**

#### **3.4 Foucault's Intellectual Career**

#### **3.5 Key Ideas**

#### **3.6 The Legacy of Foucault**

#### **3.7 Summing Up**

#### **3.8 References and Suggested Readings**

#### **3.1 Objectives:**

By the end of this unit, the learner will be able to-

- *Learn* about the life of Michel Foucault
- *Assess* the intellectual career of Foucault
- *Identify* the basic concepts developed by Foucault
- *Write* about the theoretical insights of Foucault and their legacies

#### **3.2 Introduction:**

In the following unit, we will discuss Michel Foucault's essay *What is an Author?* Before delving into the text, it will be helpful to familiarize yourself with the life and works of Michel Foucault and the basic concepts he explores. This unit introduces one of the seminal minds of the twentieth century, whose legacy continues to influence a wide range of disciplines, including but not limited to literary studies. Foucault is recognized as an original thinker and philosopher and has been a central figure in critical theory since the

1960s. His work significantly impacts academic disciplines, especially in the humanities, with his concepts of power, discourse, knowledge, and subjectivity gaining widespread acceptance. The critical climate since the 1960s has been quite sceptical of concepts and theories that flourished under the aegis of the Enlightenment and humanism. Foucault's thought has been instrumental in cultivating this necessary scepticism within critical theory, enabling the development of diverse critiques related to politics, culture, gender studies, and language.

Foucault's relevance may be explained in multiple—and necessarily incomplete—ways, but one reason for his broad acceptance is worth noting. He engages with the social and historical evolution of ideas and institutions but does not provide conventional social history in a positivist manner. Instead, his analysis focuses on changes within the conceptual frameworks themselves—the evolution and transformation of the categories rather than their content. Conventional academic discourses function through fixed scaffolding of categories such as madness, civilization, author, literature, and so on. Foucault offers a 'genealogy,' so to speak, of these categories. Simultaneously, his historical analyses and critiques promote emancipatory politics, further advanced by feminists and postcolonial thinkers. However, Foucault is often difficult to comprehend; he remains somewhat detached from emancipatory missions, despite his own activist engagements against authority and power. His conscious resistance to reducing his discourse to explicit political agendas partly explains why Foucauldian thought resists co-optation by forces of power and hegemony. Indeed, Foucault's enduring legacy lies in fostering critiques of various forms of hegemony and repression through discursive practices, rather than advocating holistic and utopian goals.

Evaluating an utterance or discourse through exclusive categories of truth and falsity, or moral categories of good and evil, as Foucault demonstrates, means accepting the discourse and its implicit power dynamics. Instead, the objective is to expose the historical contingency of discourse and bring to light the framework that allows discourse to exist. The outcome is often subversive. For example, in *Madness and Civilization*, Foucault illustrates that the notion of reason is not sovereign or central but contingent upon the concept of madness. This subversion of commonsense makes Foucault especially relevant to scholars and thinkers committed to critical practice. As Daniel Clayton aptly states about this remarkable thinker of the twentieth century: “There are thinkers who you think with to such an extent that they become part of you but are barely mentioned by name. For me, that thinker is Foucault” (quoted in Mills, *Foucault*, 6).

**Check Your Progress**

On the basis of this introduction, formulate your ideas about Michel Foucault and his relevance to critical theory. (60 words)

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**3.3 A Short Biographical Sketch**

Michel Foucault was born in Poitiers, France, in 1926. His father, a successful doctor, was also known to have an authoritarian personality, which caused Foucault "emotional trouble" during his childhood (Gutting, *Foucault*, 2). In 1936, Foucault enrolled at Lycée Henri-IV, an outstanding high school in Paris, where he met the prodigious Hegel scholar Jean Hyppolite, who taught

philosophy. He later won entrance to the École Normale Supérieure. Excelling as a student, Foucault studied philosophy under Louis Althusser, among others. At the École Normale Supérieure, he earned three degrees: the *licence de philosophie* (1948), the *licence de psychologie* (1949), and the *agrégation de philosophie* (1952). He also gained practical experience at the Sainte-Anne Asylum and taught psychology for two years at the University of Lille. In 1952, he received a diploma in psychotherapy from the Institut de Psychologie, Paris.

Foucault held multiple academic positions across Europe. From 1955 to 1958, he taught at the University of Uppsala in Sweden. He served as the director of the French Centre at the University of Warsaw, Poland, but was forced to resign due to allegations of homosexuality. He then moved to the French Institute in Hamburg in 1957, serving as its director. In 1960, he began teaching psychology at the Université de Clermont-Ferrand, where he remained until 1966. That year, he was appointed as a visiting professor at the University of Tunis in Tunisia, where he taught for two years. He later returned to Paris and became the chairman of the philosophy department at the University of Vincennes.

The early 1970s were politically volatile in France and elsewhere. Foucault's political activism began during this period, spurred by concerns about the prison system. He founded the 'Prison Information Group' and developed a close association with Gilles Deleuze. (He also wrote a foreword to Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus*.) It was prison revolts in France and the United States that prompted Foucault's activism for prison reform, leading to several arrests. His activism also extended to protesting General Franco's atrocities and criticizing the communist regime in Poland. In Tunisia, he showed solidarity with striking students in 1966. During the events in Paris in 1968, though Foucault was in Tunisia, he

maintained a keen interest in them and was arrested during a student occupation of the university. He participated in demonstrations against racism, the Vietnam War, and signed numerous petitions.

Throughout his academic career, Foucault travelled internationally, delivering lectures in places like South America, Japan, and the United States.

Foucault passed away in June 1984.

**Stop to Consider**

The 1960s and 1970s marked a heyday for Marxism in Europe, with the anti-authoritarian and egalitarian ethos of 1968 deeply intertwined with Marxist thought. Foucault himself was associated with a Maoist intellectual group in Paris and was once a member of the French Communist Party. However, Foucault’s engagement with Marxism was short-lived; he eventually distanced himself from both the party and Marxist ideology. This departure significantly influenced his theoretical insights. For instance, in his early work on madness, he was initially drawn to Pavlov’s behaviourist theory, which aligned with Soviet Marxism. Over time, Foucault moved away from Pavlov’s approach, developing a more nuanced understanding of the phenomenon (Gutting, *Foucault*, 25).

**Check Your Progress**

Give an outline of Foucault’s biography. Which aspect of his life interests you? (80 words)

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### 3.4 Foucault's Intellectual Career

Foucault's doctoral dissertation at the École Normale Supérieure in 1961, titled *Folie et déraison: Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique* (later translated into English as *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*), won critical acclaim. He wrote other monographs during his tenure at the University of Clermont-Ferrand, but they received limited readership. It was the publication of *Les Mots et les choses* (*The Order of Things*) that brought him wider recognition as an original thinker. In 1969, he published *L'Archéologie du savoir* (*The Archaeology of Knowledge*), and in 1970, he was appointed to the chair in the history of systems of thought, a position that allowed him to conduct intensive research. In 1975, he wrote *Surveiller et punir: Naissance de la prison* (*Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*). He also published *The Birth of the Clinic* in 1963. In 1976, he began publishing the three volumes of *The History of Sexuality*.

The historical setting of the 1960s and 1970s had a significant impact on shaping Foucault's thought. His political activism, previously mentioned, was deeply intertwined with this period. The events of 1968 were more than just student protests and general strikes that toppled governments; their implications were global and multifaceted. The late 1960s ethos was anti-authoritarian and opposed the political status quo. Criticism of America's neo-imperial policies, protests against governments, anti-racist sentiments, a growing political awareness of the mundane and everyday life, and a rejection of bourgeois culture were all part of this zeitgeist. Foucault emerged from this complex, often contradictory, political-intellectual milieu. For instance, his relationship with Marxism was anything but simple, as noted earlier. His membership in the French Communist Party was temporary, but his association with Marxist thought left its mark. His understanding of unequal power relations



in society aligns with Marxism's focus on inequality and oppression. Yet, Foucault also diverged from the Marxist framework by asserting that power is not confined to class divisions, economic exploitation, or the state's role.

The connection between Foucault's political activism and his intellectual work is clear. His activism for prison reform, including an arrest outside La Santé prison, inspired his exploration of punishment and incarceration in *Discipline and Punish*.

Foucault's focus on knowledge production and discourse circulation, with its anonymous character, emerged before the 1960s. While conventional historical and political thought revolves around the axes of the individual and society, Foucault's analysis of knowledge opened a new pathway beyond individualism and collectivism. For Foucault, neither the social is a foundational category nor the individual the locus of meaning; instead, discourses, circulated through specific practices within a historical period, construct both the social and the individual. After the 1960s, Foucault's analyses began to emphasize the inner structures of discourses and their power dynamics, which also marked an increasing concern with history. However, Foucault's historical projects were distinct from traditional historiography, which is largely based on principles of continuity and individual agency. (We will further illustrate Foucault's historical method later.) Traditional history posits a sacred origin point of events and a continuous unfolding of historical reality toward the present. In contrast, Foucault views history as disjointed, discontinuous, contradictory, and lacking a definitive point of origin. Sara Mills highlights this shift from the larger, impersonal structures of discourse to the operations of power within a web of discourses, reflecting Foucault's move from archaeology to genealogy (Mills, *Michel*

*Foucault*, 25-26). This shift also marks Foucault's transition from structuralism to poststructuralism.

During his structuralist phase, Foucault associated with the *Tel Quel* group, which included Roland Barthes, Julia Kristeva, and Philippe Sollers. Structuralism was a radical intellectual movement that deconstructed the basic tenets of humanism, decentering the author and emphasizing the structures of texts, both literary and non-literary. This anti-humanism was fundamentally political, as Foucault himself stated: “Our task at the moment is to completely free ourselves from humanism, and in that sense, our work is political work... all regimes, East and West, smuggle shoddy goods under the banner of humanism” (cited in Mills, 26).

*The Archaeology of Knowledge* represents Foucault’s structuralist phase, where he examines the operations of discourse over long periods, positing *episteme* as a body of knowledge and modes of knowing that circulate over time. However, later analyses reveal the intricate operations of power, challenging the notion of fixed and intrinsic structural principles within discourse. The power/knowledge dynamic further destabilized the structuralist conception of knowledge.

Let us now move on to Foucault's key ideas.

**Check Your Progress**

Wrote a note on the main works and ideas of Michel Foucault. (100 words)

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### **3.5 Key Ideas**

#### **Archaeology**

In a sense, Foucault can be seen as a historian of ideas: he wrote histories of madness, medicine, the human sciences, punishment, and discipline. Archaeology is a metaphor for his historical project, which involves digging beneath the surface of history to uncover the rules and constraints that shape thinking in a given historical period. Beneath the immense edifice of human thought and its products lie the conditions and restrictions that determine what is thinkable and what is not. This is where Foucault's archaeological project diverges from traditional historiography. In conventional history, a subject (or consciousness) is seen as evolving through a process of historical continuity directed toward a goal. Hegel's explanation of history as a mode of development (of the Spirit) through the unfolding of reason toward a final goal is prototypical. Each stage of human history, from Hegel's perspective, culminates in the previous stage and transitions toward a more rational society. Archaeology, by contrast, is synchronic, focusing on the deeper structure of historical knowledge. Foucault's project is political in that it reveals how our ethical and political practices are governed by a deeper conceptual framework, making them historically contingent.

#### **Genealogy**

Foucault does not offer a consistent, positivist methodology but instead develops ideas about historical sense, origin, and the uses of history that differ from the principles of traditional historiography. The idea of genealogy is derived from Nietzsche's *Genealogy of Morals*. Genealogy, first and foremost, opposes the search for origins, a distinctive feature of traditional history. The pursuit of origins implies a search for an identity assumed to exist in a pure, static form at the beginning. Nietzsche illustrates how the origin of

specific moral values reveals their antithesis. (For example, 'goodness' is presumed to exist in any altruistic act. Nietzsche argues that it originates from a hierarchical society, where the aristocrats deemed themselves 'good.' Thus, 'goodness' is a value created by the aristocrats, reflecting power dynamics.) Traditional history celebrates origins as solemn, sacrosanct moments, imbuing them with a quasi-religious and metaphysical aura.

In contrast, Foucault argues that beginnings are lowly, mundane, insignificant, and obscure. His view of history opposes Darwin's evolutionism, which sees present diversity as evolving from a single origin. While we can discuss beginnings, 'origin' is a loaded term, suggesting creation or identity formation. It also implies a site of truth. However, Foucault contends that truth is a fleeting articulation—a poststructuralist insight. History captures it, lending it an immobile form, making the concept of original truth a-historical. Foucault emphasizes the temporality or transience of truth, demonstrating its historicity. Truth manifests through discourse, develops, and is eventually rejected within its limited trajectory.

The search for identity is linked to notions of historical continuity and tradition. An identity that originates in a specific space-time is believed to persist through history's trials to the present. Foucault rejects historical continuity because identity—whether of a subject, event, or idea—is fractured and dispersed. It is impossible to trace the pure features of an individual, sentiment, or idea, as traits are distributed across networks. An event, upon closer analysis, reveals not a pure identity but dispersed elements or multiple identities, formed through myriad events. Additionally, many events are dispersed, lost, or disrupted in historical trajectories by accidents, deviations, and breaks, marking discontinuity between past and present.

Foucault prefers the idea of descent to that of origin, but he detaches it from metaphysical foundations. Descent is connected to the body. Traditional history, steeped in metaphysical habits, emphasizes the power of the soul in various forms (personality, psyche, subjectivity, consciousness), while marginalizing the materiality of historical reality. Power subjugates the body through the soul. Foucault subverts this hierarchy, arguing that the body bears traces of immediate experience, making it central to historical study. It is not merely instincts and desires, properties of the body, that are implicated in events; this approach broadens historical analysis to cover marginalized areas.

Foucault's concept of historical sense rejects any supra-historical perspective. Traditional history posits the historian as a sovereign consciousness, standing outside history and hence immortal. It assumes mastery over historical reality, imposing order and reconciling displacements. This presumed apocalyptic objectivity masks subjectivity, as it fails to capture the singularity of events. In contrast, historical sense analyzes, separates, liberates divergence, and exposes marginal elements, making it fundamentally anti-identitarian.

Historical sense suggests a principle of historicity for all things deemed immortal—body, instincts, emotions, and so on. This principle of historicity is based on a philosophical insight: there is no permanent foundation for self-recognition or the recognition of others. There are no constants, no repetition in history, no stable ground for knowledge. There is no stable origin, goal, or essence sustained through tradition; only random events and forces operate through them. Events do not follow a rational, causal relationship. Forces attempt to master chance, generating even more chance. The past becomes a confused mass of disconnected, divergent events and facts.

Traditional history offers a distant view and endorses grand abstractions, focusing on 'great' events. It ascribes greater explanatory power to general, abstract ideas. Foucault subverts this hierarchy, favoring the analysis of lesser-discursive objects, as exemplified by Foucauldian history. Although genealogy examines things closely, it maintains a distant perspective to mark its difference, akin to a doctor examining a patient's body—close, yet discerning its distinctiveness. The therapeutic value of this historical method is evident, even if the theorist does not explicitly state it.

### **Power**

Power is typically conceptualized as an inherent property of institutions and authority, often epitomized by the state. It is seen as moving unidirectionally, repressing and exploiting people. Foucault, however, argues that power operates through the dynamics of relations between individuals and society. It is not simply a top-down force but moves fluidly through localized forms, situating individuals within a circular network of power. In other words, power circulates through subjects, characterized by multiplicity and fluctuations. The individual is not merely an object of power but also an active agent. Moreover, power permeates all areas of human interaction—family, workplace, state, culture, discourse, etc. Foucault does not envision a space beyond power; rather, he conceptualizes resistance as integral to power's operation. Without resistance, power cannot exist. Foucault links power not only to the subject but also to forces beyond it, such as discourse. In *Discipline and Punish*, he shows how shifts in punishment from medieval to modern times correspond to changes in power forms.

### **Discourse**

The term 'discourse' is often used fluidly. At one level, it refers to a body of statements with meaning and effect; at another, it denotes a

set of interconnected statements within a domain, such as postcolonial or feminist discourse. Foucault's primary aim, however, is to uncover the rules and structures producing a specific set of utterances. The rules governing production and circulation also exclude other utterances. This mechanism of repression and exclusion is crucial to discourse. Discourse is thus linked to power relations. However, it is not merely subservient to power; it can also undermine it, enabling resistance. Discourse is not simply a transcription of reality into language but a system structuring perception. The regularities we perceive (e.g., time divisions or colour distinctions) are effects of discourse regularities. Foucault does not deny the existence of a non-discursive reality; rather, he argues that we cannot understand it without engaging with discourse. Awareness of discursive structures enables resistance against hegemonic power. For example, the dominant discourse of sexuality governs which forms of sexuality are acceptable. Similarly, distinctions between true and false are not benign categories; they are dictated by institutional mechanisms like schools, offices, scientific societies, and the state, making truth an effect of power

**Check Your Progress**

Explain the following ideas as expounded by Foucault: (a) Foucault's use of the term 'archaeology' (b) the genealogical project (3) power

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### 3.6 The Legacy of Foucault

Foucault's thought not only unravels the *otherness* of history—challenging the present-centered values of traditional historiographers—but also illuminates the condition of modern society. In *Discipline and Punish*, he develops the idea of the *panopticon* to explain how modern societies exercise power and control. The panopticon is a metaphor for a new form of surveillance where individuals survey themselves and regulate their behaviour without apparent external dictates or state intervention. In modern society, subtler forms of unacceptable behaviour than crime are formulated, and self-modification of behaviour becomes a primary means of social control. In fact, Foucault's ideas of such pervasive social control resonate strongly with our contemporary digital life, where the space for individual freedom has drastically shrunk, and a pervasive mechanism of self-modification is constantly set in motion. Today's world characterized by digital surveillance, data tracking, and algorithms that condition human behaviours speaks volumes of the relevance of Foucault's thought. Individuals internalize standards of conduct through interaction with technology, adapting their actions and choices, often unconscious, exemplifying how digital panopticon operates in subtle ways today.

Totalitarianism of the past (and wherever it exists today) operates as a system of governance through the excessive power of the state. However, contemporary liberal democracies employ no less degree of power by activating surveillance mechanisms in the name of rationality and transparency. Foucault describes how modern governance operates not only through laws but through a network of practices that target the body and everyday life, rendering individuals 'docile bodies'—manageable and productive. This critique extends beyond the state to include private corporations that wield similar power in shaping human behaviour.



Most poststructuralist theoretical movements, whether feminism, postcolonialism, or new historicism, are deeply indebted to Foucault's influence. In feminism, critiques of patriarchy or heterosexual normativity are largely woven around the concepts of the body and discourse. The body is no longer seen as an inferior entity vis-à-vis the mind, nor as a neutral space, but as a crucial site of power. The entire idea of performing the body—a notion theorized by Judith Butler—is linked to the emancipatory project of feminism: it is through performance that one can articulate gender identity or subvert one. Performance opens up the possibility of performing differently. Butler also explains why focusing on the constitution of gender is crucial for feminist politics. She draws heavily from Foucault's conceptualization of power relations, highlighting how gender identity is not a pre-given essence but an effect of regulatory discourse, continuously created and maintained by repetitive acts. Any program aimed at transforming women's oppressive conditions might prove futile if the conceptualization of the category of *women*, or the constitution of gender itself, remains unexamined. It is through the constitution of gender categories or identities that heterosexual culture reproduces its repressive mechanisms to sustain itself. Even the pursuit of equality between men and women might maintain this heterosexual normativity. Conversely, conceptualizing an essentialist, universalist woman fails to represent the concrete lives of real women. Therefore, the constitution of gender as performative acts becomes central to feminist politics.

Postcolonialism's debt to Foucault is most conspicuous in Edward Said's discourse on the construction of the Orient. While critics like Benita Parry and Frantz Fanon emphasize the coercive nature of power behind colonialism, Foucault inaugurates a broader critique through the power/knowledge equation. Said illustrates how the

privileged position of the West allows it to construct the Orient as a civilizational 'Other' through discourse that perpetuates stereotypes over time. As Said elaborates, colonialism is not only a process of physical conquest and violence but also one of epistemological violence, where discourses produce enduring stereotypes about the colonized. Moreover, the emphasis on discourse as a vehicle for epistemic control shows how colonial power is sustained not only by military and economic domination but also by cultural representations that structure the West's perceptions of the East, reinforcing hierarchical relationships. Ashis Nandy, in his book *The Intimate Enemy*, extends Foucault's notion of power to elaborate on the psychological effects of the colonial encounter, examining how colonization affects both the colonizer and the colonized (Gandhi, 15).

The notion of power and discourse is also crucial to new historicism, which has reconceptualized the literary text. A text is situated within the totality of culture, comprising institutions, practices, values, and discourses. It is not just a product of culture; it interacts with cultural elements as both a producer and a product of meaning and energy. New Historicists, therefore, examine the power relations underlying the textual world. This approach acknowledges that a text, like other cultural texts of its time, emerges from interaction with the mechanisms of power associated with institutions, practices, and discourses. This operation of power is central to the conceptualization of culture itself. Foucault's analysis of texts as cultural artifacts that engage with and challenge prevailing power dynamics offers a model for new historicist readings, which often focus on how literature both reflects and contests the ideological structures of its time. New Historicists have thus used Foucauldian ideas to demonstrate that literary texts do not

merely mirror culture but actively participate in shaping cultural norms and social hierarchies.

In sum, Foucault’s impact on contemporary thought is pervasive and multifaceted. His work reshaped the understanding of power, knowledge, and discourse, offering new perspectives on the workings of culture, history, politics, and identity.

**Check Your Progress**

1. Write a note on the contribution of Michel Foucault to the contemporary scene of critical theory. (100 words)

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2. Explain Foucault’s concept of ‘power’. How does it operate in modern society? (150 words)

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**3.7 Summing Up**

In this unit, we have discussed the life, work, ideas, and legacy of Michel Foucault, a central figure in twentieth-century thought. Beginning with his biography, we explored how his early life in Poitiers, France, and subsequent education at the École Normale Supérieure shaped his intellectual trajectory. Foucault’s academic career, marked by positions in France, Sweden, Poland, Tunisia, and other locations, provided a diverse platform for his evolving thoughts. His engagement with various fields—psychology,

philosophy, and history—led to groundbreaking contributions that transcend conventional academic boundaries. His works, such as *Madness and Civilization*, *The Birth of the Clinic*, *Discipline and Punish*, and *The History of Sexuality*, are milestones that reflect his unique approach to analysing the intersections of power, knowledge, we have examined Foucault's innovative methodologies, particularly *archaeology* and *genealogy*. Archaeology, as explained here, involves unearthing the underlying rules that govern thought in a specific historical period, moving beyond traditional historiography's linear view. Genealogy, influenced by Nietzsche, rejects the notion of a sacrosanct origin, emphasizing instead the messy, contingent, and fractured beginnings of ideas, practices, and institutions. These methods reveal how history is not a smooth, continuous development but rather marked by breaks, accidents, and power struggles.

We have also looked closely at Foucault's analysis of power, which fundamentally redefines the concept. In this unit, you learned how Foucault shifts the focus from a top-down, centralized model of power to a more dispersed, networked, and relational one. As discussed, power permeates all levels of society, operating through various mechanisms—disciplinary institutions, surveillance practices, and self-regulation. Foucault's metaphor of the *panopticon*, introduced in *Discipline and Punish*, exemplifies this shift, showing how modern societies control individuals by making them internalize surveillance and adjust their behaviour accordingly. This concept remains highly relevant in today's digital age, where pervasive surveillance and data tracking continue to shape personal behaviour, shrinking the space for individual freedom.

Foucault's influence on major critical movements, such as feminism, postcolonialism, and new historicism have also been briefly discussed. Feminist thinkers, like Judith Butler, have drawn

upon his theories of discourse and power to conceptualize gender as performative and to critique heterosexual normativity. Postcolonial scholars, especially Edward Said, have used Foucault's ideas to analyse how colonialism not only involves physical domination but also epistemological violence, constructing the 'Other' through sustained discourses of power/knowledge. New historicists, too, have applied Foucault's insights to understand how literary texts interact with the cultural power dynamics of their time.

In sum, this unit has provided an overview of Foucault's contributions to critical theory, demonstrating his profound impact on our understanding of history, power, and society. By challenging traditional ideas of continuity, sovereignty, and essential identity, Foucault's thought not only critiques existing systems but also offers tools for individual and collective resistance. His enduring legacy lies in fostering critical awareness of how knowledge and power shape human experience, making his work essential for contemporary analysis of social, cultural, and political phenomena.

With this prelude, we can now move on to our next unit which is Foucault's essay "What is an Author?"

### **3.8 References and Suggested Readings**

Gutting, Gary. *Foucault: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford, 2005.

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## UNIT 4

### MICHEL FOUCAULT: “WHAT IS AN AUTHOR?”

#### Unit Structure:

#### 4.1 Objectives

#### 4.2 Introduction

#### 4.3 Reading “What is an Author”

#### 4.4 The Basic Arguments

#### 4.5 Summing Up

#### 4.6 References and Suggested Readings

#### 4.1 Objectives

By the end of this unit, the learner will be able to

- Analyse the essay
- Tease out the basic arguments in the essay
- Write about the notion of author function as expounded by Foucault

#### 4.2 Introduction

Foucault’s essay “What is an Author?” dwells on the concept of ‘author’. Our received idea of the author is quite clear and unproblematic: the author is the person who is accredited to as the originator of a literary work. A legal system of copyright is built around the authorship of a work that can exist in various formats—printed text, digital text, audiobook and so on. An author is conceived as one having intellectual and imaginative powers responsible for the literary work which is distinctively their own. M. H. Abrams offers the conventional definition of an author as follows: “authors are individuals who, by their intellectual and imaginative powers, purposefully create from their experience and

reading a literary work, which is distinctively their own” (20). In other words, the attributes possessed by an author are usually seen as natural and universal. Foucault intervenes, in interesting ways, into this conventional discourse of authorship by historicizing the ‘event’ of the author and influenced a number of studies including new historicism. The pivotal text in this context is the essay we are discussing here.

After poststructuralism, the notion of the author as the originator of literary text is hardly tenable in critical discourses. What remained a sacrosanct point of origin is now seen as a space in which various discourses and ideologies collide and contest. In the recent development of sociology of literature, the conditions of production of the text and the external conditions that the author is obliged to negotiate are explained. But the ground was, to a certain extent, prepared by Michel Foucault.

In this unit, we will discuss and analyse the essay. This will be followed by the basic arguments of the essay.

### **4.3 Reading “What is an Author?”**

Foucault’s analysis focuses on the relationship between the text and the author, particularly how the text points to the author as existing outside or preceding it. The contemporary notion of writing as something incomplete and as a practice illustrates an indifference to the author as one of its principles. Writing is no longer viewed as expressive of internality but rather as a play of signs configured according to the signifier. Within this semiotic plane of writing, the writer disappears. This disappearance of the author is a recurrent feature in modern literature, standing in stark contrast to the pre-existing notion of writing as an instrument for achieving immortality.

Foucault's first contention is that contemporary critical discourses have not fully examined the implications of the disappearance of the author. Structuralism, for instance, ostensibly de-centers the author and focuses on the structure, intrinsic forms, or internal relationships within a literary text. However, the notion of a literary work having an implicit structure is itself problematic because it involves a larger process of attribution, exclusion, and inclusion of various instances of writing created by the author. Furthermore, there is no comprehensive theory addressing the constitution or conditions of a literary work. Secondly, designating a piece of writing as a "work" is equally problematic because it raises issues of exclusion regarding other kinds of writing. Thus, the idea of the "work" and its unity is as problematic as the concept of the author.

Foucault further argues that the "current" notion of writing only effaces the visible sign of the writer on the surface, while the primal notion of writing as something sacred persists. Writing, subject to oblivion and repression (as in the case of John Donne, who was forgotten for a long time before being revived by T.S. Eliot), fosters the idea of hidden meaning and implicit signification. The text becomes part of an inalterable tradition, repeating itself and perpetuating beyond the author's death. This notion of hidden meaning and implicit signification grants writing its *a priori* status. Through the unearthing of these implicit significations and hidden meanings, the author re-emerges on the scene. The idea that an author intends to convey a particular hidden or implicit meaning within a text sustains the notion of the author. Therefore, Foucault contends that the disappearance of the author is only half-heartedly understood (Lodge 177).

First, the author's name is not a fixed designation for a specific body of writing; rather, it serves a particular set of functions. The discovery of new traits of the historical person (such as minor



physical traits) does not alter the author-function. However, the discovery of previously unknown works or works attributed to another author as belonging to them can modify the author-function. Thus, the author's name performs significant social functions. The author's name is not merely the designation of a discourse's producer, emerging from the interiority of the discourse itself. Instead, it classifies a particular set of texts. The author's name establishes relationships among texts, grouping, defining, and differentiating them from others. In this way, an author's name consecrates a specific type of discourse, distinguishing it from ordinary speech, and characterizes "a certain mode of being of discourse" (Lodge 178). It designates the status of this discourse within a society and culture. Here, Foucault draws attention to the subtle distinctions between the author and the writer. The writer is a technical term that refers to the person who physically creates a given text, such as a contract, a private letter, and so on. In contrast, an author performs a crucial discursive function linked to the production, circulation, and functioning of certain discourses within society.

#### **Stop to Consider**

In France the 1551 Edict of Chateaubriant made it compulsory to affix the name of the author in all printed texts/works. In this period the number of authors multiplied in France and England (Sapiro 55).

Historically, affixing an author's name to a discourse was linked to the fact that discourse could be made subject to punishment. Before the concept of the author emerged, discourse was essentially viewed as an act positioned between the sacred and the profane. Between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, transgression became a

possibility within writing. Thus, alongside the status the author gained as the "owner" of writing, there arose the possibility of transgression, which carried the potential for danger.

The author-function does not affect all discourses in a universal way. In the case of literature, anonymity was common, and ancientness was a key criterion for the status of texts we now classify as "literary." In contrast, during the Middle Ages, authorship was the criterion for establishing the truth of scientific texts. However, in the seventeenth or eighteenth century, this dynamic reversed: anonymity became the marker of scientific truth, while the question of authorship was relegated to the background.

#### **Stop to Consider**

The discursive force of the author is so deeply ingrained that it manifests even in hypothetical situations. Imagine coming across a poem somewhere—an anonymous one—that you find appealing. What would be your first question? Wouldn't it be about the identity of the author? Now, envision a scenario where all literature is strictly anonymous. How might authors respond to such a condition? And what about critics? Just think about it!

Third, the attribution of a discourse to an individual is not a spontaneous process. It involves complex operations that certain types of texts are subjected to, such as establishing their interconnections and continuities, creating pertinent traits, practicing exclusions, and assigning positive attributes to the author, such as

deep motives. These methods and operations vary across disciplines and historical periods.

Foucault observes that literary criticism's definition of the author, or its construction of the author figure, is rooted in the Christian principle of "proving the value of a text by its author's saintliness" (181). Referring to the Christian textual tradition, Foucault enumerates textual procedures for determining authorship and demonstrates how these practices echo the modern criticism of the author-function:

1. Among several books attributed to an author, those deemed inferior to others are excluded.
2. Texts that contradict the author's doctrines, as expounded in other works, are excluded.
3. Texts stylistically different from the author's established works are excluded.
4. Texts referring to or describing events that occur after the author's death are treated as interpolated texts.

Modern criticism authenticates authorship in much the same way as earlier practices, positing unity among all writings attributed to an author, excluding contradictions, ensuring stylistic uniformity, and conducting similar exclusive textual operations. These practices reinforce the notion of the author as a historical figure (182).

Foucault enumerates several traits or features of the author-function:

1. The author-function is linked to the institutional **system** that determines and articulates discourses.
2. The effect of the author-function on discourses varies depending on time and place. For instance, in modern criticism, the notion of the author remains immensely important, even if the author is no longer always seen as the custodian of a unitary meaning. Conversely, in medieval

times, the authorship of the Bible was not central to religious discourses because the Bible was considered divinely inspired.

3. The significance of the author-function evolves over time. In Shakespeare's era, the authorship of plays was relatively less important than their performance. Over time, however, the author-function attached to Shakespeare transformed his works into cultural artefacts.

#### **Stop to Consider**

The variable status of the author can be observed in the realm of music. According to Foucault's argument in *What is an Author?*, the status and recognition of the author depend on historical and cultural contexts, which define what is valued in a creative work. In music, this variability is evident in how lyricists are often marginalized, with their contributions overshadowed by the singers who perform their words. In certain cultural and historical moments, the singer becomes the dominant figure associated with a song, reflecting a specific societal focus on performance and charisma over textual creation. This phenomenon underscores Foucault's claim that the 'author function' is a construct influenced by the dynamics of time and place, rather than a fixed role tied to the act of creation.

However, Foucault extends the concept of authorship itself. The author is not merely a person to whom the production of texts, books, or a work can be attributed. There can also be authors of theories, traditions, or even entire disciplines. Foucault refers to these as "transdiscursive positions."

In this context, he introduces another kind of author, whom he calls "founders of discursivity." These authors generate possibilities for discursive practices. A literary author does not necessarily produce discursivity. Instead, their works may serve as models or principles that inspire others. For instance, a pioneering writer of realist novels might inspire analogous works, where future novels reuse the structure, style, and form introduced by that writer.

Here, Foucault refers to Marx and Freud as "founders of discursivity." Unlike literary discourse, Marx and Freud did not create analogies in subsequent works but rather fostered divergences within psychoanalytic and Marxist discourses themselves. In other words, Marx and Freud created possibilities for discourses through principles of difference. In the trajectories of the discourses they established, differences and divergences function as key features.

Foucault raises a related problem: founders of science also create a legacy of discourse through difference. For example, he suggests that if Saussure is the founder of linguistics, "it is because Saussure made possible a generative grammar radically different from his structural analyses" (184). However, there is a crucial distinction between "founders of discursivity" and "founders of sciences."

In science, the founding act remains integral to subsequent transformations and remains embedded in the discourse. Future modifications are not separable from the original founding act; rather, they are possible only because of the conceptual groundwork laid by the founder. Every new discovery reinforces the relevance of the founding act. For instance, Newton's laws of motion and gravity are central to classical mechanics. Einstein's theories of relativity do not negate Newton's principles but redefine and expand them, demonstrating their limitations under specific conditions. Thus, in the discursive trajectory of modern physics, both Newton and Einstein remain equally relevant.

To limit psychoanalysis as a type of discursivity is to isolate, within the founding act, a restricted set of propositions. To grant the event of founding a value is to uphold this set of propositions and accord them an originary status, so that concepts and theories relevant to the field are considered as derived from them. These propositions are located in the founding works. However, there may be other propositions that are not pertinent to the discourse, which are subsequently set aside. In such cases, the validity of a proposition is defined in relation to the founding work.

In science, by contrast, the evaluation of a proposition does not depend on the founding work but is assessed in relation to the ontology of the specific discipline—for instance, the foundational principles of what physics is.

(Here, Foucault refers to the intrinsic structure or normativity related to the ontology of scientific disciplines. He does not, however, elaborate on how this intrinsic structure facilitates inquiries, analyses, and, above all, scientific experiments.)

What is clear, nonetheless, is that in the realm of discourses, the validity of a statement must be examined with reference to the original work of the founder of discursivity. In science, however, it is not necessary to return to the originary work of the founder.

This dynamic unleashes a "return" to the origin. However, this return also modifies the discursive field itself. In the trajectory of the development of Marxism as a discourse, every modification or transformation introduced involves a return to the works of the founder. A re-examination of Marx's works, for instance, transforms Marxism itself. But consider the works of Galileo: does a re-examination of his works transform mechanics? It does not.

Foucault highlights this distinction to illustrate the scope of the author-function as a "founder of discursivity." The author-function

is not limited to a text or a set of books but extends to discourses, disciplines, and even the possibilities of new discourses.

Foucault underscores the importance of the author-function as part of his broader focus on discourse—its modes of existence, including its circulation, valorization, attribution, and appropriation. For Foucault, the articulation of a discourse is not understood exclusively through themes and concepts within the discourse itself but also through the activity of the author-function and its transformations.

It also enables a reconsideration of the question of the subject in relation to discourse. Stripped of its privilege, the subject no longer holds the status of an originator of discourse. Instead, it allows us to examine how the subject functions and inscribes itself within a discourse, analyzing it as a "variable and complex function of discourse."

Another reason for focusing on the author-function is to destabilize the ideological status of the author. Despite claims to the contrary—such as defining the author as a generous entity that unleashes significations—the author actually imposes restrictions on meaning, functioning as a principle of exclusion and setting limits on signification.

### **Check Your Questions**

1. Explain the concept of the "author-function" as described by Foucault. How does it differ from the traditional understanding of the author as the originator of a literary work? (150 words)

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2. How does Foucault differentiate between the validation of statements in scientific disciplines and discursive practices? Why is the return to foundational texts significant in discursive practices like psychoanalysis? (150 words)

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#### 4.4 The Basic Arguments

Foucault contends that the notion of the author persists in modern writing and criticism, even as it appears to have disappeared. Modern writing exhibits an indifference to the author, having shifted away from the idea of literature as an expression of an interior reality. (This shift can be understood in contrast to the Romantic notion of art as self-expression. For instance, T.S. Eliot, in his famous theory of the impersonality of poetry, advocates for the effacement of the authorial self. Similarly, New Criticism focuses on the literary text as an autonomous entity, deeming the biography of the author irrelevant to its existence or interpretation. This marks a significant transition from viewing literature as self-expression to viewing it as an impersonal work governed by intrinsic rules.) Structuralism furthers this decentering of the author, emphasizing the intrinsic structure of the text. However, this intrinsic structure often requires a principle of unity, which paradoxically reintroduces the question of the author. Moreover, even if we retain the concept of the author, there is no universally agreed-upon method for defining the scope of an author’s work. Can we, for instance, consider all traces of an author’s pen as constituting their ‘work’?



On the other hand, to decenter the author and grant writing a primal, autonomous status elevates the sacred and creative character of writing itself. Foucault argues that while the explicit gesture of contemporary critical discourse is to decenter the author, the author inevitably returns in various forms. Conferring writing with an a priori status, as Foucault suggests, implicitly acknowledges the persistence of the author, albeit in a transformed guise. For Foucault, the critical task is to elaborate on the consequences of the ‘death of the author.’

Foucault now explores certain aspects of the author. First, he defines the author’s proper name as having a unique discursive function, distinct from other proper names. The author’s name is not merely a label but is associated with a specific set of texts. This association is fairly straightforward. However, the author’s name also serves as a unifying principle among these texts. Changes in biographical information about an author do not significantly alter our perception of the author. In contrast, any changes in the body of work attributed to the author can profoundly impact the way we perceive them. For instance, if a previously unknown text were discovered to have been written by Shakespeare, our understanding of Shakespeare as an author would shift. This indicates that the author’s name does more than identify the creator of a text—it functions as a principle of connection, classification, and coherence among a set of texts. As Foucault argues, the author is “characteristic of the mode of existence, circulation, and functioning of certain discourses within a society” (179).

Foucault, in discussing the discourses circulating in society concerning the author, enumerates the functions of the author. The author, he argues, is not merely a neutral designation but performs a set of discursive functions. First, as the concept of the author emerged historically, it also became subject to conditions of

punishment. Discourse operates within the bipolar realm of the sacred and the profane, and while the author gains status within this framework, they are also exposed to the dangers and risks inherent to discourse. Secondly, the attribution of literary discourse to an author is not a neutral or spontaneous act. It involves complex critical operations that subject texts to processes such as exclusion, establishing continuities, projecting certain texts as relevant, uncovering the author's supposed motives, and linking diverse texts to a single creative force. These operations differ from those involved in attributing a philosophical text to a philosopher and also vary over time.

For instance, Foucault notes that modern criticism constructs the figure of the author in a manner similar to how religious texts construct the sanctity of a saint. Referring to this discursive process, he invokes St. Jerome's principles of textual attribution, such as excluding from an author's body of work any text deemed inferior to the rest, stylistically inconsistent with the majority, or contradictory to the established canon. Modern criticism similarly perpetuates the notion of the author by emphasizing unity, continuity, and the evolution of the author's artistic consciousness over the trajectory of their work. These practices often overlook ruptures, discontinuities, or contradictions within the body of work, illustrating the persistent operations of the author-function.

Another, more subtle aspect of the author-function is found within the text itself. This is evident in the way a distinction is drawn between the author and the narrator or characters, and how their identities or differences are analyzed. Foucault demonstrates that all discourses inherently involve a plurality of selves. In this way, the author-function not only establishes connections but also contributes to the emergence of a multiplicity of selves within the discourse.

Beyond the limited notion of the author as the originator of a literary work, Foucault discusses other types of authors, whom he describes as occupying "transdiscursive" positions or as "founders of discursivity." Authors in transdiscursive positions are those who inspire subsequent authors to imitate their models or artistic principles. In contrast, "founders of discursivity" are rare individuals who generate possibilities for entirely new discourses, creating scope for difference and divergence among later writers.

Foucault uses these varying statuses and functions of the "author" to distinguish between scientific endeavours and discursive practices. Founders of discursivity enable the development of later divergences and differences, a condition that appears analogous to the progression in science, where an "author" establishes a domain through foundational principles, and their successors introduce modifications and variations (e.g., Newton's mechanics and Einstein's relativity).

However, the dynamics differ fundamentally between science and discursive practices. In science, the founding act and its "future transformations" are placed on an equal footing. In discursive practices, by contrast, the founding act is selectively interpreted: certain statements are isolated and granted significance, while others are disregarded as irrelevant. For example, in developments of Marxism, theorists often focus on specific aspects of Marx's work—such as the "young Marx" with Hegelian influences or Marx as a critic of capitalism and a theorist of political revolution—rather than his oeuvre as a whole. In such domains of discursivity, the value of a statement is measured through reference to the original work of the founder. In other words, a discourse validates itself by appealing to a form of authorship. In science, this is not the case. A statement is examined and validated not with reference to a foundational text

but based on its alignment with the principles and standards of the discipline itself.

Foucault also observes another critical difference between science and discursive practices. In physics, for example, one does not necessarily re-examine Galileo's texts today because they no longer influence the current understanding of mechanics. In contrast, within discursive practices such as psychoanalysis, a return to foundational texts can actively modify and reshape the discursive field itself.

Another critical aspect of understanding discourse lies in the function of the author. Foucault asserts that by extending the concept of the author-function from the limited realm of individual texts to the broader domain of a discipline, we can better comprehend the very mode of existence of a discourse. The essence of a discourse is revealed more through the activity and transformations of the author-function than through the specific content of the discourse itself.

**Check Your Progress**

1. What distinguishes the role of a "founder of discursivity" from that of an "author" in transdiscursive positions? Provide examples to illustrate the distinction. (150 words)

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#### 4.5 Summing Up

In *A History of Literary Criticism and Theory*, M.A.R. Habib offers a critical observation on Foucault's notion of discourse. While Foucault makes the author "disappear" and instead elevates discourse as the foundational category, he risks attributing a transcendental status to discourse itself. Habib writes: "Foucault seems dangerously poised on the very precipice at whose edge he envisaged Derrida's notion of writing: the notion of 'discourse' is happily invoked in his text as the new throne of the transcendental" (769). This critique invites reflection, suggesting that Foucault's attempt to decenter the author might paradoxically result in re-centering the discourse as an ultimate authority.

However, despite this potential contradiction, the originality and significance of Foucault's thought cannot be overlooked. This essay is particularly important for its reconfiguration of the concept of the author. Foucault not only expands the notion of the author but also demonstrates its persistence in modern critical discourse, even in contexts where its presence is ostensibly denied. Moreover, Foucault's exploration of the relationship between the author and discourse is a crucial contribution. By identifying the various "author-functions," he shows how these are less about the individual creator and more about the mode of existence, circulation, and functioning of discourse itself. The author becomes a principle of classification, attribution, and connection within discursive fields, shaping how texts are understood, valued, and interpreted over time.

Ultimately, Foucault's essay invites us to reconsider not only the role of the author but also the very foundations of how meaning, authority, and knowledge are constructed within discourse. It remains a pivotal text for understanding the shifting dynamics of authorship and its implications in critical theory.

#### **4.6 References and Suggested Readings**

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## UNIT 5

### INTRODUCING CHINUA ACHEBE

#### **Unit Structure:**

#### **5.1 Objectives**

#### **5.2 Introduction**

#### **5.3 African Literature: An Overview**

#### **5.4 Life and Career of Chinua Achebe**

#### **5.5 Notable Works**

#### **5.6 Writing Style and Narrative Techniques**

#### **5.7 Summing Up**

#### **5.9 Suggested Readings and References**

#### **5.1 Objectives**

By the end of this unit, the learner will be able to-

- *Develop* a general understanding of African Literature
- *Learn* about the life and writing career of Chinua Achebe
- *Appreciate* the writing style of Achebe
- *Identify* the notable works of Achebe

#### **5.2 Introduction**

Chinua Achebe (born November 16, 1930, Ogidi, Nigeria—died March 21, 2013, Boston, Massachusetts, U.S.) stands as one of the most influential literary figures of the 20th century, renowned for his powerful explorations of African identity and post-colonial reality. His works offer unsentimental portrayals of the societal and psychological disorientation that African communities experienced with the imposition of Western customs and values. Achebe's particular focus was on the transition of traditional African societies as they faced the complexities brought by colonialism, examining

the impacts of these changes on both the individual and collective psyche.

Achebe's novels range from the depiction of an African village's initial contact with European colonizers to the representation of the educated African's struggle in urban centres of Africa. His first novel, *Things Fall Apart* (1958) depicts the Igbo society in great detail and the profound changes triggered by colonial rule. Achebe's narratives are not merely stories; they are profound commentaries on the cultural clash between indigenous African traditions and the invasive forces of Western ideology.

His critical essays, including influential works like "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*" and "The African Writer and the English Language" exemplify his postcolonial perspective and ideological location. Issues of representation, colonialism and cultural identity were his constant critical focus articulated in his fiction and non-fiction. Achebe's relentless socio-political critique and his art of storytelling as well as his ability to transmute Western form of the novel into a distinctively African form of literature, make him a preeminent voice for emergent Africa and a representative figure of postcolonial African literature.

Before delving into the life and work of Achebe, let us have a glimpse of the African literature.

**Stop to Consider:**

The essay prescribed in this paper of your course is "Colonialist Criticism". However, you will do well to read Achebe's fiction, at least his most remarkable novel, *Things Fall Apart*. It will enable you to understand the unity of Achebe's mind, and see how his postcolonial thought articulated in his critical essays (including "Colonialist Criticism") is in sync with his creative consciousness.



### 5.3 African Literature: An Overview

Evolution of African literature can be seen in three main stages: precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial literature. African literary tradition is diverse with notable contributions from different regions and cultures. For instance, Ethiopian literature, exemplified by the *Kebra Negast* ("Book of Kings"), stands as a significant part of the precolonial era, along with the rich oral traditions like the "trickster" tales of Anansi, Ijápá, and Sungura, which embody the wit and wisdom of African folklore. The historical manuscripts from Timbuktu and the literary contributions of North African scholars like Ibn Khaldun further enrich the narrative of Africa's precolonial literary achievements.

During the colonial period, African literature began to take on new forms, as illustrated by the slave narratives like Olaudah Equiano's *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano* (1789). This era also saw the emergence of African writers such as Joseph Ephraim, Casely Hayford and Herbert Isaac Ernest Dhlomo, who laid the foundations for African literature in English. The period marked a crucial shift toward exploring themes of race, identity, and resistance, culminating in significant works like Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, which gained international acclaim for its portrayal of African societies under colonial rule.

Themes and styles of African Literature expanded and diversified in the post-colonial phase, driven by the political, cultural, and social transformations following independence. Writers like Wole Soyinka, the first post-independence African Nobel laureate in literature, and the influential *négritude* movement led by figures such as Léopold Sédar Senghor, addressed themes like liberation, identity, and resistance to colonial narratives. A return to indigenous storytelling, blending oral traditions with modern literary forms are noticeable traits of this period. The narrative acknowledges the

profound connection between African oral traditions and written literature, emphasizing that African literature's development is not a simple evolution but rather a dynamic interaction between these two traditions. It highlights how the structures and imagery of oral storytelling continue to influence contemporary African writers, enabling them to blend ancient traditions with modern literary techniques. Early writers like Amos Tutuola, D.O. Fagunwa, and others built on this legacy, transforming oral narratives into literary forms that resonate in today's literature.

In this exploration of African literature, the interaction between oral traditions and written texts remains a fundamental aspect, shaping the distinct voice of African storytelling. The text emphasizes that this creative exchange is what continues to define and enrich African literature, highlighting its originality, diversity, and relevance in both traditional and contemporary contexts.

**Check Your Progress**

1. Discuss the impact of African oral traditions on the development of modern African literature. (60 words)

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2. How did African writers address issues of identity, cultural conflict, and resistance in their works during and after the colonial period? (100 words)

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#### **5.4 Life and Career of Chinua Achebe**

Chinua Achebe was born in Nigeria in 1930 and was raised in the large village of Ogidi, one of the first centres of Anglican missionary work in Eastern Nigeria. His early exposure to both the traditional Igbo culture and Western Christian influences shaped his understanding of cultural duality, which later became a significant theme in his literary works. He pursued higher education at University College, Ibadan, where he studied English and literature, marking the beginning of his journey into the world of letters.

After completing his studies, Achebe taught for a short period before joining the Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation in Lagos, where he eventually rose to the position of Director of External Broadcasting from 1961 to 1966. His engagements in media enriched him, giving him a profound understanding of storytelling's power to influence public opinion, skills he would later use in his creative and critical works. His work in media during the political turbulence of Nigeria's post-independence years gave him new insights into the complexities of Nigerian society.

In 1967, Achebe co-founded a publishing company in Enugu with the poet Christopher Okigbo, who tragically lost his life in the Nigerian Civil War fighting for Biafran independence, a cause Achebe strongly supported. Achebe's support for Biafra was at once a political stance and a profound statement of his belief in the right to self-determination and cultural preservation. These beliefs and values would resonate throughout his literary and academic pursuits. His involvement in this conflict deepened his commitment to addressing political issues in his work.

In 1969, Achebe toured the United States with fellow writers Gabriel Okara and Cyprian Ekwensi, and gave lectures at various universities. Upon his return to Nigeria, he was appointed as a research fellow at the University of Nigeria, where he later became

a professor of English. He remained in that position from 1976 to 1981, becoming professor emeritus in 1985. His academic career was marked by his efforts to elevate African literature as a serious discipline, ensuring that African voices and perspectives were given their due recognition in the global literary canon.

Achebe also served as the director of two Nigerian publishers, Heinemann Educational Books Ltd. and Nwankwo-Ifejika Ltd., from 1970 onwards. These roles allowed him to influence the publication and promotion of African literature, giving a platform to other emerging African writers. His editorial work helped in nurturing a generation of African writers, and fostering a literary culture that focused on the complexities and diversities of African experiences against the challenges of western stereotypical thinking about Africa.

In 1990, Achebe was involved in a serious automobile accident in Nigeria that left him partially paralyzed. Following this incident, he moved to the United States, where he began teaching at Bard College in Annandale-on-Hudson, New York. In 2009, he joined the faculty of Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island, as a professor in the Africana Studies department. During his time in the United States, Achebe continued to engage actively with the global academic community, mentoring students and contributing to the discourse on African literature and postcolonial studies. His presence at these institutions helped to internationalize African literary studies and brought a critical African perspective to the Western academic sphere.

Today, Achebe's contributions to literature and his impact on global intellectual thought are widely recognized. He received numerous honours from around the world, including the Honorary Fellowship of the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and honorary doctorates from more than 30 colleges and universities. He was also

the recipient of Nigeria's highest award for intellectual achievement, the Nigerian National Merit Award, and in 2007, he won the Man Booker International Prize.

Achebe's novels, including *Arrow of God* (1964), *A Man of the People* (1966), and *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987), are renowned for their deep explorations of African society's encounters with colonialism and postcolonial issues. *Arrow of God* examines the complexities of traditional authority in a village under British administration, while *A Man of the People* and *Anthills of the Savannah* tackle themes of political corruption and moral decay in post-independence Africa.

Chinua Achebe passed away on March 22, 2013, leaving behind a legacy that continues to inspire writers, scholars, and readers around the world. His life's work not only provided a voice to African stories in global literature but also challenged stereotypes, reshaping the way African narratives are perceived and studied.

**Check Your Questions**

1. Analyze the influence of Chinua Achebe's early life and education on his literary themes and narrative style. (100 words)

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2. How did his support for Biafra and his experiences during this period influence his literary works and critical writings? (80 words)

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## 5.5 Notable Works

Chinua Achebe wrote more than 20 books, including novels, short stories, essays, and collections of poetry. His most notable work, *Things Fall Apart* (1958), has sold over 10 million copies worldwide and has been translated into more than 50 languages. His other major novels include *Arrow of God* (1964) and *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987), which was shortlisted for the Booker Prize for Fiction. Achebe's poetry collection *Beware, Soul Brother and Other Poems* (1971) won the Commonwealth Poetry Prize. He also wrote *Christmas in Biafra* (1973) and *Another Africa* (1998), which combines his essays and poems with photographs by Robert Lyons.

Achebe published several collections of short stories and children's books, such as *How the Leopard Got His Claws* (1973), co-authored with John Iroaganachi. His notable books of essays include *Morning Yet on Creation Day* (1975), *Hopes and Impediments: Selected Essays* (1988), *Home and Exile* (2000), *The Education of a British-Protected Child* (2009), and his autobiographical work *There Was a Country: A Personal History of Biafra* (2012). In 2007, Achebe was awarded the Man Booker International Prize.

### Stop to Consider

- 1958 - *Things Fall Apart*
- 1960 - *No Longer At Ease*
- 1964 - *Arrow of God*
- 1966 - *A Man of the People*
- 1966 - *Chike and the River*
- 1971 - *Beware, Soul Brother and Other Poems*
- 1972 - *How the Leopard Got His Claws*
- 1972 - *Girls at War and Other Stories*
- 1975 - *Morning Yet on Creation Day*
- 1977 - *The Drum*

- 1977 - *The Flute*
- 1984 - *African Short Stories*
- 1984 - *The Trouble with Nigeria*
- 1987 - *Anthills of the Savannah*
- 1988 - *Hopes and Impediments: Selected Essays*
- 1992 - *The Heinemann Book of Contemporary African Short Stories*
- 2000 - *Home and Exile*
- 2005 - *Collected Poems*
- 2010 - *The Education of a British-Protected Child*

Some of the major fictional works of Achebe are discussed below.

#### 1. *Things Fall Apart* (1958)

*Things Fall Apart*, first published in 1958, is a seminal work in African literature. The novel focuses on traditional Igbo life at the time of the arrival of missionaries and colonial government in Nigeria. It chronicles the life of Okonkwo, a proud Igbo warrior, as he struggles with the changing dynamics in his community. Achebe masterfully captures the cultural richness of Igbo society, its customs, traditions, spirituality, and social structures. The arrival of European colonizers disrupts this way of life, symbolizing the broader impact of colonialism on African societies. The novel explores the clash between tradition and change, reflecting on the consequences of cultural imperialism. *Things Fall Apart* critiques European and American colonial narratives that marginalized African perspectives, and it has become a classic in global literature, addressing themes of identity, power, and the enduring legacies of colonialism.

## 2. *No Longer at Ease* (1960)

Published in 1960, *No Longer at Ease* is the second book in Achebe's African Trilogy, following *Things Fall Apart* and preceding *Arrow of God*. The novel tells the story of Obi Okonkwo, the grandson of Okonkwo, who returns to Nigeria after studying in England. Obi faces a psychological conflict as he navigates the corruption he encounters in the colonial administration. Achebe examines themes of cultural clash, the effects of colonialism, and the tension between tradition and progress. Unlike Okonkwo's physical struggle in *Things Fall Apart*, Obi's conflict is internal, caught between traditional values and Western ideals. Achebe's narrative highlights the social and moral decay in Nigeria during colonial rule, symbolizing the confusion and lack of cultural roots in the African educated youth of the time.

## 3. *Arrow of God* (1964)

Set in the 1920s, *Arrow of God* focuses on Ezeulu, the chief priest of six Igbo villages in Umuaro, as he struggles with the encroaching influence of British colonialism and Christianity. Achebe portrays Ezeulu as a complex character who attempts to balance tradition with the new political and religious changes imposed by the colonizers. His philosophical opposition to the colonizers, unlike Okonkwo's physical rebellion, represents a deeper struggle with modernity and adaptation. As Ezeulu's stubbornness leads to famine and discontent in his village, many villagers convert to Christianity, symbolizing the erosion of traditional beliefs. *Arrow of God* explores themes of pride, power struggles, and cultural disintegration, providing a nuanced look at the impact of colonialism on traditional African societies.



#### 4. *Beware, Soul Brother and Other Poems* (1971)

It is a collection of 30 poems by Chinua Achebe, most of which were written between 1968 and 1971, during and after the Biafran War. This period was marked by intense conflict and suffering in Nigeria, particularly in Achebe's homeland. The poems in this anthology poignantly capture the emotional and physical devastation of the war. Many of the poems touch upon the themes of violence, loss, and resilience. The poems are brief yet replete with powerful imagery, with snapshots of the pain and sorrow experienced during this tumultuous time. Achebe's use of vivid and evocative language ensures that these images linger in the reader's mind long after the poems are read. During the years of the Biafran War, Achebe did not write any novels, turning instead to poetry as a means to cope with the overwhelming situation. Poetry became his vehicle for expressing the anguish and despair that words alone could scarcely contain.

#### 5. *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987)

*Anthills of the Savannah* is a political novel that dwells on the complexities of military rule and the challenges faced by Nigeria after gaining independence. The narrative explores the dynamics of power in a fictional West African nation under a dictatorial regime, highlighting the political instability plaguing many African countries during the postcolonial era.

Unlike Achebe's earlier novels, which primarily focus on traditional communities and the impact of colonialism on everyday lives, *Anthills of the Savannah* focuses on the highest social strata of society, depicting ministers and other elites as they interact with the dictator. The novel begins with a coup and concludes with another, emphasizing the cycle of political turmoil and the difficulty of achieving true stability and democracy. Here Achebe critiques the

corruption, betrayal, and moral decay that characterize the leadership in newly independent nations, and sheds light on the enduring struggle for justice, governance, and societal progress in postcolonial Africa.

**Stop to Consider**

Chinua Achebe's work exemplifies a distinct postcolonial consciousness and stands as a significant representation of African postcolonial literature. Although he chose to write in English, the language inherited from the colonizers, Achebe skilfully employs this language in a strategy akin to Caliban's, using it to articulate African identity and resist the stereotypes created and disseminated by the West. If you look at the first novel *Things Fall Apart*, it is a direct response to Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* which denies the Africans their language and identity. *No Longer at Ease* is set during the period of self-governance before Nigeria's independence, showing how the promise of post-colonial emancipation is betrayed because of the continuing after-effects of colonial culture, education and modernity. Obi's self-conscious tirade against corruption is blunted as he is himself caught in the trap, and his experience of the alien, absurd world is transfigured into a discovery of a strangeness within. As there is no point of return to a cultural place of origin, the narrative deliberately avoids moments of catharsis and self-realization.

**Check Your Progress**

Write about Achebe's major concerns articulated in his works. (100 words)

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## 5.6 Writing Style and Narrative Techniques

Chinua Achebe's stylistic features evolve across his body of work, demonstrating a deliberate and sophisticated use of language that sets his novels apart. One of the most notable aspects of Achebe's style is his increasing use of diverse verbs, which enriches the narrative and drives the action forward. This focus on verbs, rather than relying heavily on descriptive adjectives and adverbs, creates a dynamic and vivid storytelling experience that prioritizes movement and clarity over an elaborate description. Further, sparseness in the use of adjectives and adverbs lends a certain precision and sharpness to his prose.

One of Achebe's distinctive stylistic devices is his frequent use of cleft constructions and extrapositions. These structures help to emphasize specific elements of a sentence, guiding the reader's attention to key ideas or actions within the narrative. Achebe also makes extensive use of introductory demonstratives to create a sense of continuity and cohesion in his narrative. This technique, combined with sentence variations and the strategic use of sentence connectives, contributes to a writing style that feels both cohesive and engaging, reflecting the interconnectedness of the characters' lives and events.

Another hallmark of Achebe's style is his use of specification, where he carefully delineates details to provide clarity without overwhelming the reader with excessive description. This method aligns with his tendency to focus more on the fictional past than the present in his later novels, creating a layered narrative that delves into history, tradition, and the evolution of society. By shifting his focus toward depicting the past, Achebe explores the cultural and historical roots of his characters' identities, enriching the reader's understanding of the broader social and political context in which the stories unfold.

Achebe's novels are replete with vivid scenes that are often central to his storytelling. His scene construction is meticulous, allowing readers to visualize the setting and action with clarity while maintaining a focus on the thematic elements of the narrative. As his novels progress, there is a notable shift towards depicting the fictional past, reflecting Achebe's deepening engagement with historical and cultural narratives as a means to explore the complexities of African identity and postcolonial reality.

Achebe is deeply conscious of the significance of storytelling, viewing it as a powerful tool to create history and shape collective memory. He perceives the storyteller's role as crucial in defining cultural identity, a belief reflected in the narrative strategies he employs in his works. Achebe's storytelling approach is rooted in the oral traditions of African societies. In *Things Fall Apart*, he utilizes an omniscient narrator who resembles a wise elder who is familiar with the socio-cultural lives of the Ibos. This narrative voice maintains a tone of empathy and understanding while the discourse maintains assumption of objectivity. Thus, Achebe balances an insider's view with a detached perspective, establishing credibility without indulging in sentimentalism. The stability seen in *Things Fall Apart* disappears in the narrative of *Arrow of God*. Here, struggles of people as they adapt to changing circumstances are depicted, reflecting a society in crisis and suggesting crisis in meaning and authority. The narrative technique in *No Longer at Ease* helps in depicting the dilemmas between tradition and modernity, morality and materialism against the backdrop of Nigeria's imminent independence. In *A Man of the People*, Achebe further diversifies his storytelling by shifting to a first-person narrative. The protagonist, Odili Samalu, serves as an unreliable narrator, reflecting the moral degradation and corruption of the society he critiques. This technique allows Achebe to explore the

flaws of post-independence politics from an ironic perspective, making the narrator a mirror to the corrupt environment rather than a moral authority. In *Anthills of the Savannah*, Achebe's narrative becomes even more intricate, employing multiple narrators, both first-person and third-person. This polyphonic narrative includes voices like Christopher Oriko, Ikem Osodi, and Beatrice Okoh, alongside an omniscient narrator. Each narrator provides a unique perspective, adding layers to the story and emphasizing the need to view contemporary postcolonial reality from diverse angles.

### Check Your Progress

1. Write a short note on the narrative features of Achebe's novels. (100 words)

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2. Write briefly on Achebe's writing style. (70 words)

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### 5.7 Summing Up

Amos Tutuola, Cyprian Ekwensi, Sol Plaatje, Peter Abrahams published important novels in English well before Achebe; but it is only through Achebe that African literature entered the world scene, registering his contribution to world literature. Publication in 1958 of *Things Fall Apart* was a momentous event in the context of the

status of African Literature in the world stage. Millions of copies of the novel were sold in the English speaking world; translated over the years into many languages and finds space in university curriculum across the globe. Writers like Ngugi wa Thiongo and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie were influenced by Achebe's work.

The English language plays a crucial role in the historic shift he makes for globalizing African literature. English, to him was a "gift" that, despite its ties to colonialism, was essential for African self-expression and self-fashioning. He believed that the crucial question was not whether Africans could write in English, but whether they should use it as a medium for articulating their own experiences. For Achebe, the language and literary conventions of English provided a way to challenge Eurocentric views and to reshape literature to include the African perspective. So, Achebe saw English as an opportunity rather than a constraint. Like Caliban in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, who turns the colonizer's language against him, Achebe used English to create a new African literary sensibility, thereby bringing African subjects and narratives into the broader realm of world literature. His encounter with the colonial library, especially European novels set in Africa, motivated him to undo the portrayal of Africa as merely a "setting and background" that excluded Africans as human factors. Through his work, Achebe sought to reclaim and redefine African identity within the literary tradition that once marginalized it.

Chinua Achebe's work reflects a deep engagement with European modernism. He adopted key elements of modernism—such as fragmentation, the crisis of the subject, and the rhetoric of failure—not just as literary devices but as tools to critique and reinterpret the colonial condition. Achebe's debt to modernism is evident in his use of titles and epigraphs drawn from canonical modernist poets like W.B. Yeats and T.S. Eliot. For example, the title *Things Fall Apart*

is derived from Yeats's poem "The Second Coming," while *No Longer at Ease* takes its inspiration from Eliot's "The Journey of the Magi." Achebe strategically incorporates these references to reflect African realities. His modernism and realism are not mutually exclusive categories: rather, they merge to form an expression that and challenges Eurocentric depictions of Africa.

### **5.8 References and Suggested Readings**

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## UNIT 6

### CHINUA ACHEBE: “COLONIALIST CRITICISM”

#### Unit Structure:

#### 6.1 Objectives

#### 6.2 Introduction

#### 6.3 Reading “Colonialist Criticism”

#### 6.4 A Critical Review of the Essay

#### 6.5 Summing Up

#### 6.6 References and Suggested Reading

#### 6.1 Objectives

By the end of this unit, the learner will be able to-

- Analyse Achebe’s text
- Tease out the main arguments in the essay
- Assess the essay as a post-colonial critical text

#### 6.2 Introduction

An important feature of modern critical theory is its view of knowledge as a problematic category. Modern theory does not aim to formulate a positivist epistemology; instead, it critically examines claims to knowledge, which have become highly contentious. This issue is perhaps most evident in the domain of postcolonial studies. Centuries of colonial oppression, exploitation, and domination of the non-Western world by Western powers taught the colonized people a crucial lesson: knowledge is not a neutral or objective category but an instrument of power. Edward Said’s *Orientalism* compellingly demonstrates that behind the universalist façade, the West repeatedly reproduces the Orient as a stereotype, designed to subjugate and control it.



Colonialism, beyond its distinctive political and economic structures, also has a critical epistemological and representational dimension. The West positions itself as the privileged subject of knowledge about the non-West, thereby empowering itself to represent the non-West. Claims and assumptions made by Western writers about Africa—or India, for that matter—are often regarded as ‘objective’ or ‘universal’ knowledge. A key aim of postcolonial thought is to resist such universalist claims. Simultaneously, it is essential to recognize how colonial discourses operated effectively by enslaving the minds of the colonized. Consequently, postcolonial criticism does not merely refute the discourses of the colonizer but also employs a framework of self-criticism.

To illustrate this framework of self-criticism, we can turn to another African writer, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o. As Thiong’o explains, one of the most significant consequences of Africa’s colonization was the colonization of the mind, achieved through the near-total linguistic domination by the West. Colonialism not only exploited Africa economically and politically but also launched an aggressive assault on African languages. In *Decolonising the Mind*, Thiong’o makes a passionate plea for the celebration of African languages and literature, highlighting the need for cultural and linguistic reclamation. This postcolonial self-awareness is a hallmark of postcolonial thinking.

With this context in mind, let us now read and analyze Chinua Achebe’s essay *Colonialist Criticism*.

### **6.3 Reading “Colonialist Criticism”**

At the outset, Achebe provides the context for his essay. It was prompted by a review of his first novel, *Things Fall Apart*, written by a British woman, Honor Tracy. In her review, titled “Three

Cheers for Mere Anarchy,” Tracy critiques Achebe with a perspective steeped in colonialist thinking. While questioning the rationale behind Achebe—and writers like him—discussing African culture, she reveals her deep-seated colonial biases and prejudices. Tracy relies on colonial stereotypes and ideologies, such as Africa’s so-called “inglorious past” and Europe’s purported “gift of civilization” to Africa. She further articulates a colonial ethic, suggesting that writers like Achebe should express gratitude to Europe for this supposed gift of civilization.

As you will see at the beginning of the third paragraph (starting with “Before I go on to more advanced varieties...”), Achebe undertakes an exposition and critique of various forms of colonialist criticism, ranging from the crude to the more sophisticated. Achebe’s task in this essay is not merely to assert the position of postcolonial African writers but to refute the claims and assumptions embedded in critiques of Africa by British and European scholars. He references a passage from Iris Andreski’s *Old Wives’ Tales: Life Stories from the Ivory Coast*, noting with surprise its recent publication despite its reliance on colonial perspectives. Andreski claims that African writers nostalgically writing about their rural past ironically depend on the records left by Victorian British anthropologists, who, she asserts, operated within a liberal tradition. Achebe critiques this by addressing two key assumptions: that the so-called liberal tradition of British anthropologists allowed them to acquire a deeper understanding of Africa, and that this tradition positioned Europe as the harbinger of civilization and culture for Africa. Achebe demonstrates how this framing relies on a crude colonial rhetoric that contrasts the alleged monstrosity of Africans with the supposed enlightened liberality of colonizers, revealing the complicity of Victorian anthropologists in the colonial project. Far from being objective, their work constructed Africa as a site of savagery and

backwardness, justifying European domination under the guise of a civilizing mission. Through this critique, Achebe exposes the contradictions inherent in such colonialist narratives, even when they appear in seemingly sophisticated forms, highlighting their reliance on reductive binaries that perpetuate stereotypes and marginalization.

Achebe further critiques the colonizer's claims to knowledge about Africa, highlighting how these claims are rooted in a simplistic and stereotypical view of Africans, intertwined with an element of control that is dialectically related to knowing and understanding. Native unrest was both militarily suppressed and superficially investigated, reflecting the colonialists' utilitarian approach to governance. In response to the emergence of a section of native people educated in European systems, the colonialists devised two counterarguments. First, they argued that natives could not fully absorb European education. Second, they contended that exposure to European education alienated these individuals from their communities, rendering them a peculiar group of pretentious and disconnected beings. This colonial assumption about the precarious state of the so-called "half-educated natives" permeates colonial literature and rhetoric. In contrast, the simple natives depicted in colonial discourses are portrayed as grateful recipients of the supposed gifts of civilization. Such imagery is pervasive in European travel writing, which frequently depicts natives as simplistic, submissive figures who readily acknowledge the colonizer as a benevolent harbinger of progress and culture.

Achebe critiques another pervasive idea in colonial discourse: the notion of universalism. In this context, he references Charles Larson's *The Emergence of African Fiction*. Larson, discussing Lenrie Peters's novel about Africa, argues that although the novel is set in Africa, its story is so universal that it could work in any

setting—French, American, and so on. Achebe’s response to this claim is both sharp and thought-provoking. “Does it ever occur to these universities,” he writes, “to try out their game of changing names of characters and places in an American novel, say, a Philip Roth or an Updike, and slotting in African names just to see how it works?” (59). Achebe questions whether the same yardstick of universality would apply if the process were reversed. In no uncertain terms, Achebe denounces the Western notion of universalism, criticizing it as a means to mask the “narrow parochialism of Europe.” It is important to note that Achebe does not reject the concept of universality itself; rather, he advocates for a genuine universalism—one whose horizon extends to include all the world.

Philip M. Allen, in his review of Yambo Ouologuem’s *Bound to Violence* (1968), argues that the novel achieves an extraordinary feat by imposing “moral universality on African civilization,” suggesting that this morality transcends racial and cultural boundaries. However, Allen attributes this achievement to the novelist’s mastery of style and philosophy acquired through French literary traditions, implying that exposure to European discourse enables the African writer to rise above Africa’s so-called “obsession with racial and cultural confrontation.” Chinua Achebe critiques this perspective, highlighting a prevalent tendency among critics, particularly within colonialist criticism, to resist direct confrontations between Africa and the West. Achebe finds it troubling that some African writers are drawn into this colonialist mode of thinking, despite the horrors of Africa’s recent history and the ongoing atrocities committed against millions of Africans by racist minority regimes. Achebe condemns this internalization of colonialist narratives, remarking that any African who adopts such a stance, ignoring the continued suffering of their people, “deserves a lot of pity” (60-61).

### Stop to Consider

Yambo Ouologuem's *Bound to Violence* (1968) is one of the most debated novels in African literature. Many critics have praised the novel for breaking away from the romanticized depiction of pre-colonial Africa, as it explores themes of power, violence, and exploitation. However, the most significant point of controversy is its depiction of violence and the way it appears to reinforce colonial stereotypes. The novel's reception in Western circles has been more favorable, as its portrayal of African complicity in violence aligns with a typical colonial framework for understanding Africa. On the other hand, some critics have highlighted that the narrative's representation can be deeply damaging to Africa's self-representation.

There is also an indictment of the novelist. The representation of Africa and its civilization as something that urgently requires redress is what the novelist resorts to. He portrays Africa's history as one of inherent violence and chaos. While Allen's review reinforces stereotypes about African societies, Ouologuem's narrative, by highlighting violence as the quintessential character of African society, aligns itself with colonial narratives that depict African societies as primitive and brutal. Here, Allen offers appreciation for an African text, but only because the text conforms to European norms and Europe's preconceived ideas about Africa. Regarding the novelist, Achebe says, "One who chooses to see violence as the abiding principle of African civilization...[should] not pass himself off as a restorer of dignity to Africa" (61).

Another crucial gesture of colonialist criticism is the dismissal of the genre of the African novel itself on the grounds that the novel is a Western genre. This dismissal reflects a broader denial of literary

sensibility and artistic forms outside the European tradition. Here, Achebe's retaliation is clear. An African writer, born into the African experience and language, will create an African novel, which is not necessarily inferior. Achebe references the musical tradition of jazz, created by Black people who had no other instruments except the trumpet and trombone. Though Achebe does not elaborate on the African novel itself, he emphasizes that Western standards and frameworks are not the ultimate measure of artistic value. Cultural expressions originating outside Europe or the West can achieve global recognition and respect.

The final paragraph of the essay raises an important issue: Achebe points out that outsiders often dominate African literary criticism because of the absence of robust critical practices from within Africa itself. He cites an African proverb: Africans scorn outsiders whose mourning overpowers the grief of the bereaved. The task of mourning (i.e., criticism) must be undertaken by Africans themselves.

The essay is both a scathing attack on Western criticism of African literature and a clarion call for African literary criticism that springs from the native soil of Africa.

**Check Your Progress**

1. Write about the main arguments of Chinua Achebe regarding the Western assessment of African literature. (150 words)

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2. Which points do you think has Achebe not elaborated (or touched upon) in the essay—western criticism of African literature, the case of African novel, the problem of language? (100 words)

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#### 6.4 A Critical Review of “Colonialist Criticism”

It is important to note Andreski’s critique of African writers’ romanticization of Africa’s rural past, which underscores the need for a realistic depiction of the continent’s history and society. Writers like Yambo Ouologuem, for instance, are often credited with presenting an ‘authentic’ picture of African civilization, a perspective attributed in part to their exposure to the liberal traditions of the West. European scholars frequently highlight the liberating influence of European thought and culture on African writers, revealing an ideological agenda that shapes much of their critical discourse. Achebe, in this essay, exposes and critiques this agenda, challenging its underlying assumptions and implications. Secondly, what is the reality of African society that African writers—often accused of romanticizing their past—are allegedly failing to address? Ngugi wa Thiong’o, in his text *Decolonising the Mind*, argues that the dominant discourse about Africa emphasizes conflicts among its various tribes. Similarly, in *Bound to Violence*, Yambo Ouologuem portrays “violence as the abiding principle of African society.” Edward Said, as you know, has extensively analyzed how Europeans have stereotyped Oriental peoples as

deceitful, treacherous, violent, and savage, while depicting their rulers as ruthless and despotic. In contrast to this stereotypical representation of Africa perpetuated by the West, writers such as Achebe, Thiong'o, and others have offered a more nuanced and authentic portrayal of African realities.

Achebe's refutation of the European representation of Africa is grounded in a profound historical awareness. Persistently mindful of the "continuing atrocities committed against millions of Africans in their own land by racist minority regimes," Achebe remains deeply sceptical of a colonialist narrative that avoids confronting the fraught relationship between Africa and the West, opting instead for an abstract ideal of universalism. This critique aligns with a politically conscious strand of postcolonial thought that foregrounds the tangible oppression wrought by colonialism.

However, critics like Benita Parry have raised concerns about the dominant textualist tendencies in postcolonial studies. Parry argues that these increasingly textualist interpretations often neglect the historical and social contexts of colonialism, reducing it to a cultural event. While this approach avoids being labelled apolitical, it redefines political questions of power, domination, hegemony, and marginalization within the framework of 'discursive practice.' This shift, risks sidelining the very real oppression, violence, torture, and subjugation, inherent in the colonial encounter. The brutal conflict and violence of the colonizer-colonized relationship are often relegated to the background in favour of a more conciliatory exploration of an 'in-between' space, diluting the historical realities of colonial oppression.

Within This overtly anti-colonial framework of thought, writers like Achebe and Thiong'o illustrate distinctive positions. A comparative reading of Achebe's *Colonialist Criticism* and Thiong'o's *Decolonising the Mind* reveals their nuanced differences. In



*Colonialist Criticism*, Achebe does not explicitly advocate for a distinctively African novel, whereas Thiong'o critically interrogates the very category. While Achebe affirms the value of an African novel that would, in many ways, differ from European forms, Thiong'o places central emphasis on language in the discourse of the African novel.

Thiong'o critiques African writers who use European languages, viewing this as a form of conformity to colonial hegemony. He highlights that language was a crucial battleground in the struggle between imperialist powers and indigenous peoples, and the choice of language—whether to write in the imperialist language or native tongues—is inherently political. Thiong'o disagrees with Achebe not on the capacity of English to convey African experiences but on its political implications. He argues that Achebe's celebration of 'African English' reflects, in his view, a lingering desire to maintain a connection to the imperialist tradition, revealing a deeper ideological divergence between the two thinkers

#### **Stop to Consider**

Read Thiong'o's *Decolonising the Mind* and compare it with Achebe's essay. How do their articulations of post-colonial thought differ? Thiong'o's central thesis argues that the discourse of African literature in European languages is inherently reductive and exclusive. For instance, African literature written in English excludes a vast body of works in African languages, thereby conceptualizing the very idea of African literature in a fundamentally narrow and limiting way. In contrast, while Achebe acknowledges the importance of preserving African cultural identity, he takes a more inclusive stance, viewing the use of European languages, particularly English, as a practical medium to articulate African experiences to a global audience. This difference highlights

the ideological divergence in their approaches to post-colonial thought, particularly in their views on language and cultural representation.

Ngũgĩ waThiong'o champions the cause of African languages and literatures in his seminal work *Decolonising the Mind*. Unlike many postcolonial critics and theorists with poststructuralist leanings, Ngũgĩ adopts a defiant, assertive, and overtly anti-colonial stance, akin to the political temperament of Frantz Fanon. As an activist-writer, Ngũgĩ faced imprisonment by the state multiple times, underscoring the political edge and urgency of his writings and assertions.

Ngũgĩ's central argument is stark and unequivocal: Europe colonized Africa not only through economic and political domination but also by establishing near-total linguistic and cultural hegemony. This dual colonization ravaged African languages, enslaving its people linguistically—a legacy that persists well into postcolonial times. Ngũgĩ calls for a radical dismantling of this Eurocentric dominance, emphasizing the need to focus on the creative and cultural base of the masses. However, he cautions that anti-Eurocentrism should not devolve into native elitism, advocating instead for a more inclusive and egalitarian approach.

At the core of Ngũgĩ's argument lies a principle of linguistic assertion and identity. Language, he asserts, is crucial for representation and self-expression, making it a fiercely contested site in postcolonial discourses. In *Decolonising the Means of Imagination*, he highlights the precariousness of representation when a peasant, thrust into the alien environment of a colonial court, is forced to defend themselves in an unfamiliar language. Unable to represent themselves effectively or trust the role of a linguistic mediator, the peasant is doubly disenfranchised.

For Ngũgĩ, language serves as both a means of communication and a carrier of culture, embodying moral, ethical, and aesthetic values. Thus, control over language becomes fundamental to the economic, political, and military control intrinsic to the colonial process. Reclaiming native languages, in Ngũgĩ's view, is akin to reclaiming territory lost to colonizers. It is not only a symbolic act of resistance but also a crucial step toward establishing a more egalitarian and democratic society, and ultimately achieving self-determination.

### **6.5 Summing Up**

Chinua Achebe's essay *Colonialist Criticism* is a powerful critique of the ways in which Western critics approach African literature. Achebe examines the tendency of colonialist criticism to undermine African literary works, often dismissing them as derivative or inferior because they do not conform to European standards and frameworks. In cases where African writing is appreciated, this appreciation also shows how the writer is exposed to the European ideas and style. He highlights how critics, like Philip M. Allen in his review of Yambo Ouologuem's *Bound to Violence*, perpetuate colonial stereotypes by celebrating African texts only when they align with European norms or reinforce reductive narratives about Africa. Achebe condemns such perspectives, arguing that they fail to acknowledge the validity and richness of African cultural expressions.

Achebe also takes issue with African writers who internalize colonialist perspectives, portraying Africa's history as inherently violent or primitive. He stresses that such narratives neither restore Africa's dignity nor challenge the colonial frameworks they claim to critique. Additionally, Achebe challenges the dismissal of the African novel as a legitimate genre, emphasizing that African

writers, rooted in their own experiences and traditions, can create art forms of global significance, much like the evolution of jazz in the musical world.

Finally, Achebe calls for the development of a robust African literary criticism that originates from within the continent. He argues that the task of interpreting and critiquing African literature should not be dominated by outsiders who lack the cultural and historical context. Instead, this responsibility lies with African critics who can approach their literature with a deep understanding of its nuances and significance. The essay serves as both a critique of colonialist criticism and a rallying cry for the establishment of an authentic, independent African literary discourse.

## 6.6 References and Suggested Readings

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## **BLOCK IV**

**Unit 1: Introducing Stuart Hall**

**Unit 2: Stuart Hall: Cultural Studies and its  
Theoretical Legacies**

**Unit 3: Introducing Susan Sontag**

**Unit 4: Susan Sontag: Against Interpretation**

**Unit 5: Introducing Pierre Macherey**

**Unit 6: Pierre Macherey: Borges and the  
Fictive Narrative**

# UNIT 1

## INTRODUCING STUART HALL

### **Unit Structure:**

- 1.1 Objectives**
- 1.2 Introduction**
- 1.3 Stuart Hall: Life and work**
- 1.3 Key Works and Themes**
- 1.4 Hall's Philosophy**
- 1.5 Legacy**
- 1.6 Summing up**
- 1.7 References and Suggested Readings**

### **1.1 Objectives**

After going through this unit you will be able to-

- learn about the life and work of Stuart Hall,
- develop a general understanding of his critical theories,
- learn about Hall's philosophy,
- identify notable works by Hall,
- understand Hall's legacy and appreciate his influence.

### **1.2 Introduction**

Stuart Hall (1932-2014) was a cultural theorist, sociologist, and influential public figure who left an indelible mark on the fields of cultural studies, media studies, and sociology. Commonly known as the "patriarch of cultural studies," Hall devoted his contributions to exploring the interplay between culture, power, identity, and social constructs. He is renowned for his pivotal role in founding British cultural studies. His theories have offered invaluable insights into themes like race, ethnicity, class, and media representation,

providing essential analytical tools for comprehending modern society's intricacies. Beyond his academic successes, Hall's legacy spans his political activism and dedication to addressing the pressing socio-political challenges of his time.

### **1.3 Stuart Hall: Life and Work**

Born in Kingston, Jamaica in 1932, Stuart Hall was a Jamaican-British scholar, author, and pioneer in cultural studies. He passed away in London in February 2014 at the age of 82. Stuart Hall was born in a middle-class family of African, European, and Asian heritage. Growing up in a colonial society, Hall's experiences of race, migration, and inequality were formative influences on his intellectual journey. In 1951, he moved to the United Kingdom as a Rhodes Scholar to study English at Merton College, Oxford. During this time, Hall became involved in leftist politics and was deeply influenced by anti-colonial movements and the civil rights struggles emerging globally.

Stuart Hall was a professor of sociology at the Open University, the director of the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, and a Rhodes scholar at Merton College in Oxford. He appeared on several television shows, such as the BBC series *Redemption Songs* and numerous Open University broadcasts. He served on the Runnymede Commission on the Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain and as President of the British Sociological Association. Additionally, he served as the chair of Autograph ABP and Iniva, two arts organizations. In addition to founding the journal *Soundings* and serving as the first editor of *New Left Review*. Stuart Hall is the author of numerous books and articles on politics and culture, such as *Policing the Crisis* and "The Great Moving Right

Show" (for *Marxism Today*), in which he is credited with coining the term "Thatcherism".

Hall co-founded the well-known publication *New Left Review* in the early 1960s, which served as a forum for critical debates on politics, culture, and Marxism. In 1964, he went on to work as the director of the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS), a position he held from 1968 to 1979. The CCCS developed into a centre for the growth of cultural studies as an interdisciplinary field under his direction. The groundwork for examining culture as a dynamic and contested space was established by Hall's work during this time. He criticized traditional Marxist methods that emphasized the influence of ideology, language, and representation in forming social realities rather than reducing culture to economic determinism.

Hall's ground breaking essay, "Encoding/Decoding" (1973) presented a framework for comprehending the creation and interpretation of media messages. He maintained that audiences are active participants who understand media texts in ways that support, contradict, or compromise prevailing meanings rather than being passive consumers. Theorizing Representation: Hall's research on representation examined the ways in which cultural practices create identities and generate meaning. He emphasized how stereotypes are frequently reinforced by media portrayals, especially of marginalized groups, and urged critical analysis of these depictions.

Hall highlighted in his writings that identity is relational, fluid, and fragmented. He presented the formation of identity as a process; a 'production' always in the process of becoming rather than being. Identity changes continuously in response to changing circumstances.



### **Stop to Consider**

#### **Objectives of Stuart Hall's Work**

Stuart Hall's intellectual pursuits were driven by several key objectives:

1. **Understanding Culture as a Site of Power:** Hall sought to analyze how culture operates as a site of negotiation and struggle over meaning, ideology, and power relations.
2. **Critiquing Media Representations:** He aimed to deconstruct the ways media constructs and disseminates ideas about race, class, and gender, often reinforcing societal hierarchies.
3. **Exploring Identity and Diaspora:** Hall's work delved into questions of identity formation, emphasizing the fluid and constructed nature of identities shaped by historical and cultural contexts.
4. **Challenging Dominant Ideologies:** He was committed to exposing the ideological underpinnings of societal norms and structures, particularly those perpetuating inequality and marginalization.

### **1.3 Key Works and Themes**

#### **Key Works**

- ***Policing the Crisis (1978)*:** Co-authored with colleagues from the CCCS (Chas Critcher, Tony Jefferson, Brian Roberts and John Clarke), this book examines the moral panic surrounding "mugging" in 1970s Britain, linking media narratives to broader anxieties about crime, race, class, social change, and state authority.

In the early 1970s, the term "mugging" was imported from American discourse to describe a surge in violent crimes in Britain.

Hall et al noted that since “mugging” was not a legally defined crime in the UK, statistical validation of its purported rise was problematic. Their analysis revealed that the rate of actual incidence of violent street crimes was not as high as portrayed in the media and in political narratives. The authors argue that the media’s sensationalist covering of such crimes had led to moral panic in the citizenry; the level of panic was disproportionate to the actual level of threat. ‘Moral panic’ here refers to exaggerated reporting and the portrayal of young Black men as the primary perpetrators. This led to reinforcement of racial stereotypes.

Hall and his team situated this ‘moral panic’ within a greater “crisis of hegemony” (Hall). The contemporary period in Britain was characterized by economic downturns, rising unemployment, and social unrest that challenged the existing social order. The state was facing a legitimacy crisis and sought to re-establish control. By exaggerating the threat of street crime, authorities justified increased policing and the implementation of stricter law enforcement. Through this, the people attention was diverted, and state authority reinforced.

- ***The Hard Road to Renewal (1988)***: This collection of essays critiques Thatcherism, analyzing its ideological strategies and impact on the British Left as well as on British society. Hall unpacks how neoliberal policies reshaped class structures and cultural values.

Hall analyses Thatcherism not merely as a political ideology but as a hegemonic project that reshaped British society. He argues that Margaret Thatcher’s government successfully combined free-market economics with a conservative social agenda, appealing to the larger section of the populace. With such an ideological blend, Thatcher was able to secure widespread consent and dominate the political discourse. A significant part of Hall’s analysis focuses on the role of

culture and ideology in political struggles. Political reform is achieved not only through economic or institutional reform, but also through cultural and ideological reform.

The book also discusses the challenges faced by the British Left in responding to Thatcherism. Hall argues that traditional Leftist strategies, rooted in class-based politics and Keynesian economics, were inadequate to counter the new conservative hegemony. He critiques the Left's failure to adapt to changing social and economic conditions, including the decline of industrial labour, the rise of consumer culture, and the increasing importance of identity politics. Hall, therefore, calls for a renewal of the Left through the development of a "new politics" that transcends traditional class boundaries. The Left must embrace modernity and construct an alliance capable of challenging conservative hegemony. It must rethink socialist principles so as to resonate with the experiences of diverse social groups.

- ***Questions of Cultural Identity (1996)***: Co-edited with Paul du Gay, this book explores the concept of identity in the context of globalization, migration, and postmodernity, emphasizing its dynamic and constructed nature. The collection of essays is authored by various scholars' with each author exploring the different facets of cultural identity, its formation, and its implications in a rapidly changing world.

The contributors challenge the notion of identity as a fixed essence, proposing instead that identities are dynamic and continuously shaped by historical, cultural, and social contexts. Further, the essays examine how globalization influences cultural identities, leading to hybridization, the emergence of new forms of identification, as well as the creation of novel cultural expressions. The collection also explores how power dynamics and

representational practices influence identity formation. Discourse is significant in constructing and contesting identities; therefore, the way in which groups are portrayed can affect their self-perception and societal status. The collection also focuses on intersectionality: identities are multifaceted, intersecting across lines of race, gender, class, sexuality, and other social categories. These intersections shape individual experiences and societal interactions, and hence, when analysing identity, we need to consider its multiple dimensions.

One of the prominent essays in the collection is Hall's "Who Needs 'Identity'?", where he examines the concept of 'identity', arguing that while it remains a useful tool for understanding social positions, it should be viewed as a "production" that is never complete. Identities are constructed within discourse, and remain subject to the continuous interplay of history, culture, and power. The anthology has influenced cultural studies, sociology, and related fields. It is an important text for those seeking to understand the complexities of cultural identity in contemporary society.

***Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices (1997)***: This seminal text examines how representation functions in culture, with a focus on media, language, and power dynamics. It examines how meaning is constructed and communicated through various representational systems. In this collection of essays, Hall and other contributors argue that representation is not a passive reflection of reality but an active process that involves the production of meaning. This perspective challenges the notion of a direct relationship between representation and reality, stressing instead on the interpretive nature of the construction of meaning. Three approaches to understand representation are given:

- Reflective Approach: Language functions as a mirror, reflecting a meaning that already exists in the world.
- Intentional Approach: Meaning is viewed as being imposed on language by the speaker or author, reflecting individual intent.
- Constructionist Approach: Hall argues in favour of this approach, suggesting that meaning is constructed through language and is shaped by cultural and social contexts. Thus, there is an emphasis on the role of shared codes and conventions to the production of meaning.

The contributors further use semiotics, visual media and discourse analysis to explore how signs and symbols operate within cultural contexts to generate meaning. For example, the portrayal of marginalized groups in media can perpetuate stereotypes or, conversely, serve as a medium of resistance and identity-formation. The book further includes case studies, illustrations and discussion questions to facilitate a deeper understanding of the concepts discussed.

***Cultural Studies 1983: A Theoretical History (2016)***: Published posthumously, this book provides a detailed account of Hall's lectures on cultural studies, offering insights into his theoretical approaches and the evolution of the field. The text is a compilation of eight foundational lectures delivered by Hall at the University of Illinois in 1983. Hall traced a comprehensive overview of the evolution of cultural studies, starting from the foundation of the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in the 1960s and 1970s. He reflects on the intellectual and political contexts that shaped cultural studies, thus focusing on the interdisciplinary nature of the field.

The major issues explored by Hall in these lectures include:

- the importance of interdisciplinarity in analysing cultural phenomena. This allows for a more nuanced understanding of the process of production of cultural meanings.
- the relationship between theoretical frameworks and practical analyses. Hall focuses on the need for cultural studies to remain relevant.
- engaging critically with Marxist theory, especially its economic determinism. Hall argues for a more flexible approach that considers cultural factors as integral to understanding societal structures. He draws on the concept of hegemony by Gramsci to explain how dominant groups maintain power through cultural means.
- Hall's earlier model of encoding and decoding. This model suggests that media messages are encoded with particular meanings by producers and decoded by audiences in various ways, leading to different types of readings of the same material.
- How cultural identities are constructed and represented; the fluid and contested nature of identity is debated on. Hall explores the role of media and cultural institutions in shaping perceptions of race, ethnicity, gender, and class.

#### **Check Your Progress**

Why is Stuart Hall considered a foundational figure in cultural studies?

## **Key Themes**

### **Cultural Studies and Power**

Hall was a founding figure of the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS), where he emphasized the relationship between culture and power.

- He drew on Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony to analyze how dominant ideologies are maintained and resisted.
- His work focused on how cultural practices and media shape and are shaped by power dynamics.

### **Race, Ethnicity, and Post-colonialism**

Hall's personal experience as a Jamaican immigrant in Britain deeply informed his scholarship.

- He examined how race is a social construct, shaped by historical and cultural processes.
- His work interrogated the intersection of race and class and challenged Eurocentric narratives in academia.

### **Identity and Hybridity**

Hall rejected fixed or essentialist notions of identity, proposing instead that identity is:

- Constructed through discourse and shaped by history and context.
- Often hybrid, particularly in diasporic and postcolonial contexts, where individuals navigate multiple cultural influences.

## **Media and Representation**

Hall's work on media emphasized:

- The role of representation in constructing meaning and reinforcing ideologies.
- How media reproduces social inequalities and stereotypes, especially concerning race and class.

## **Globalization and Cultural Change**

- Hall explored how globalization transforms culture and identity.
- He argued that globalization leads to deterritorialization of culture, fostering hybridity but also exacerbating inequalities.

## **Marxism and Hegemony**

- Hall's theoretical foundation was influenced by Marxism, but he adapted it to include the role of culture and ideology.
- He integrated Gramsci's hegemony theory to explain how consent is manufactured through cultural institutions and practices.

### **1.4 Hall's Philosophy**

In order to produce a complex understanding of culture and society, Hall work combined critical theory, Marxism, and postcolonial thought, challenging established academic paradigms. Hall's dedication to examining the ways in which power functions in culture—particularly through media, representation, and identity—lays the foundation of his philosophy. This essay explores Hall's main points and highlights his contributions to cultural studies as well as his ongoing significance in the current discourse on globalization, media, and race.



The foundation of Hall's philosophy is the notion that culture is a constitutive space where power dynamics are negotiated and challenged rather than merely reflecting society. Drawing on Antonio Gramsci's idea of hegemony, Hall maintained that dominant groups shape cultural norms and ideologies to gain consent in addition to using coercion to hold onto power. According to this theory, culture turns into a battlefield where opposing ideologies fight for supremacy.

According to Hall, the media is essential to this procedure. His groundbreaking essay "Encoding/Decoding" (1973) presented a ground-breaking communication paradigm. He disapproved of linear models that presumed media producers' messages were passively received by audiences. Rather, he contended that audiences interpret media messages differently based on their social and cultural contexts, even though they are encoded with specific meanings. This model highlighted how audiences actively interpret media and the possibility of defying prevailing ideologies. Hall demonstrated how culture both supports and undermines power structures by highlighting the intricacy of communication.

Hall's critical examination of race and postcolonialism was influenced by his experiences as a Black intellectual in post-war Britain. He maintained that race is a social construct influenced by historical processes, especially colonialism and its after-effects, rather than a biological fact. Hall investigated how racialized discourses are used to uphold power structures in publications such as "Policing the Crisis" (1978), which he co-authored with colleagues. The moral panic surrounding "mugging" in Britain was examined in the book, which also showed how state institutions and the media criminalized Black youth in order to uphold social hierarchy.

Hall expanded his understanding of race and identity by examining globalization. He explored in "The Question of Cultural Identity" (1992) how globalization promotes cultural fluidity and hybridity, upending conventional ideas of identity. Hall warned against the homogenization of culture and the continuation of neo-colonial inequalities, pointing out that globalization presents opportunities for new forms of cultural expression but also highlights its unequal power dynamics.

Hall's philosophy is deeply influenced by Marxist thought, though he critiqued its deterministic tendencies. Unlike classical Marxists, who focused on economic structures as the primary drivers of social change, Hall emphasized the role of culture and ideology. Drawing from Gramsci, he argued that cultural hegemony is central to maintaining power. His approach expanded Marxism to include the complexities of race, gender, and identity, demonstrating how these factors intersect with class in shaping social realities.

### **Stop to Consider**

#### **Encoding/Decoding Model**

Stuart Hall challenged conventional, linear models of communication with his Encoding/Decoding Model (1973), revolutionizing media studies. In his view, media messages are encoded by producers with particular meanings that are influenced by ideological and cultural frameworks. But audiences don't just passively absorb these messages; they interpret them in different ways depending on their own cultural and social backgrounds. This model highlights the active role of audiences in interpreting media, emphasizing the dynamic relationship between media, ideology, and power. It remains foundational in understanding how media operates in society.

## 1.5 Legacy

Cultural studies, sociology, media studies, and postcolonial theory have all been profoundly impacted by Hall's philosophy. His writings are still relevant in discussions about racism, identity politics, and media representation today. Hall provided a dynamic framework for comprehending culture and power in a world that is changing quickly by eschewing essentialism and embracing complexity.

Hall's observations are still incredibly pertinent in a time of growing globalization, digital media, and socio-political divisions. His focus on how people and communities actively interpret and reshape culture gives hope for opposing oppressive structures and envisioning more inclusive futures. Hall was a thinker who connected theory and practice, and his philosophy challenges us to view the world critically and acknowledge the power of culture to change.

### Check Your Progress

- What does Hall discuss in the essay “Encoding/Decoding”?
- How does Hall view ‘identity’ as a concept?
- What does Hall say about globalization and homogenization in the essay “The Question of Cultural Identity”?

## 1.6 Summing Up

Thus, from the above discussions we come to conclude that Stuart Hall's life and work are a testament to his dedication to comprehending and changing the political and cultural forces that influence society. He made tools for critical analysis and social change available by questioning prevailing ideologies and drawing

attention to the power structures within culture. Because of his enduring legacy as a social justice activist and cultural studies pioneer, his contributions are just as important now as they were when he was alive.

His philosophy is proof of the value of critical analysis and interdisciplinary thinking. He offered fresh perspectives on social life and questioned established paradigms by examining the connections between culture, power, and identity. His art celebrates the potential for resistance and change while also shedding light on the mechanisms of dominance. Hall's theories continue to be an essential tool for activists, academics, and students navigating the intricacies of modern society.

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## **UNIT 2**

### **STUART HALL: CULTURAL STUDIES AND THEORETICAL LEGACIES**

#### **Unit Structure:**

#### **2.1 Objectives**

#### **2.2 Introduction**

#### **2.3 Stuart Hall and the Emergence of Cultural Studies**

#### **2.4 Cultural Studies and its Theoretical Legacies**

#### **2.5 Themes**

#### **2.6 Summing Up**

#### **2.7 References and Suggested Readings**

#### **2.1 Objectives**

After going through this unit you will be able to –

- understand Hall's role in the development of Cultural Studies,
- understand the text and its legacy,
- analyse the different themes and philosophies studied in the text,
- get a brief summary of the concept of theory.

#### **2.2 Introduction**

In the previous unit we discussed about Stuart Hall and his philosophy. As we know, Stuart Hall remains a pivotal figure in the development of cultural studies as an academic discipline. Hall's intellectual contributions were significantly impacted by his experiences with colonialism, migration, and diasporic identity. He was instrumental in forming the theories, methods, and concerns of

British cultural studies, and is frequently recognized as its intellectual founder. Hall is a theorist whose legacy cuts across academic disciplines and cultural boundaries because his work embodies the intersection of critical race theory, post-structuralism, and Marxism.

Hall's theoretical contributions, his function in cultural studies, and the wider enduring influences his work has had on modern academic thought are all examined in this chapter. It looks at his ideas about representation and identity, his approach to culture as a site of struggle, and his contributions to discussions about hegemony, race, and ethnicity. Hall's impact is still felt today, providing resources for comprehending current cultural and socio-political issues.

### **2.3 Stuart Hall and the Emergence of Cultural Studies**

During his time at Oxford University, Hall encountered British intellectual traditions and wrestled with the colonial underpinnings of Western thought, marking the beginning of his intellectual journey. Hall was instrumental in establishing cultural studies as a demanding and vibrant field in 1964 when he became a founding member of the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS). The strict limits of conventional disciplines were rejected by Hall and his contemporaries in their conception of cultural studies. Rather, an effort was made to examine culture in its widest context, as a space where ideologies, meanings, and power dynamics are continuously negotiated and challenged.

Hall highlighted the value of studying popular culture, which he saw as an essential location where opposing and dominant forces converge rather than as unimportant or incidental. A methodological framework for cultural studies has been developed by Hall and the CCCS by combining ideas from structuralism, semiotics, and

Marxism. Early research by the group concentrated on figuring out how culture either supports or undermines power structures, especially when it comes to gender, race, and class.

## **2.4 Cultural Studies and its Theoretical Legacies**

Originally published in *Cultural Studies* (edited by Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson and Paula Triechler), this conference on cultural studies and its theoretical legacies provides us with an opportunity for a moment of self-reflection on cultural studies as a practice, on its institutional positioning, and what Lidia Curti so effectively reminds us is both the marginality and the centrality of its practitioners as critical intellectuals. Inevitably, this involves reflecting on, and intervening in, the project of cultural studies itself.

In his work on cultural studies, Hall examines how culture shapes people's identities. According to him, culture is a power dynamic in which the public has less control over ideology than the media unwittingly does. Additionally, he thought that cultural identity is a function of "becoming" rather than "being" and that identities are always changing.

Cultural studies, according to Hall, developed as a subfield of classical Marxism, which broke down in the 1950s and held that the cultural superstructure is determined by the economic base. He discusses the two disruptions that the cultural studies fields encountered: racism and feminism. What remains constant in cultural studies, however, is the conjunctive knowledge that is founded on Gramsci's theory. It is defined as knowledge that is relevant to and situated within particular, recent political and historical contexts. The understanding that the representational framework that creates the alphabet and grammar of culture are tools of social power that need to be critically examined is also

important. One of his tasks is to document the evolution of cultural studies. He accomplishes this by citing theoretical moments such as racism and feminism as well as theoretical legacies like the New Left.

### **Stop to Consider**

#### **Context of the Paper**

The article was published at a time when Cultural Studies was undergoing a great deal of discussion, especially about its theoretical underpinnings and connection to Marxism.

Hall was reflecting on the intellectual journey of Cultural Studies, its interdisciplinary nature, and the challenges it faced in maintaining relevance.

He presented the paper as part of a broader attempt to grapple with the evolving role of theory in understanding culture, power, and ideology.

## **2.5 Themes**

The theoretical and intellectual evolution of Cultural Studies is covered in Stuart Hall's 1983 paper, "Cultural Studies and Its Theoretical Legacies," which was given at the Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture conference. It considers how the field has developed, how it critically interacts with different theoretical traditions, and how it can be used to analyze culture as a site of resistance and power. The paper's primary themes are listed below.

### **The Nature of Cultural Studies as a Field of Inquiry**

- Hall describes Cultural Studies as a “field of inquiry” rather than a unified theory or discipline.



- According to him, it is interdisciplinary and draws from diverse theoretical traditions, including Marxism, structuralism, post-structuralism, feminism, and postcolonial studies.
- Again Hall argues that, Cultural Studies is inherently critical and dynamic, adapting to shifting cultural and historical conditions.

This openness prevents Cultural Studies from becoming rigid or dogmatic, allowing it to evolve as a critical, political practice. Hall argues that cultural studies resist rigid definitions, instead thriving on theoretical openness and adaptability. He focuses on the importance of engaging with various theoretical frameworks, such as Marxism, feminism, and post-structuralism, to critically analyse cultural phenomena. He acknowledges the field's political commitment to addressing power structures and social inequalities, advocating for a praxis-oriented approach that bridges academic inquiry with social activism. Hall also highlights the significance of historical context in understanding cultural practices, urging scholars to understand the temporal and spatial specificities that shape cultural expressions. He cautions against the institutionalization of cultural studies, warning that it may lead to intellectual stagnation and a departure from its radical roots. Ultimately, he envisions cultural studies as a transformative project, continually evolving to interrogate and challenge dominant ideologies and to contribute to social change.

### **Marxism**

Hall acknowledges Marxism as a foundational theoretical framework for Cultural Studies, particularly its analysis of:

- Class struggle
- Ideology
- Material relations of power.

Hall, however, criticizes classical Marxism for its propensity to reduce culture to a mere reflection of economic forces and its economic determinism (the "base-superstructure" model). He critically examines the relationship between cultural studies and Marxism, highlighting both the foundational influence and the limitations of traditional Marxist theory within the field. He acknowledges that cultural studies emerged, in part, from a critique of classical Marxism's economic determinism and its neglect of cultural, ideological, and symbolic dimensions of social life.

Hall points out that classical Marxism's focus on the economic base and class struggle often overlooked critical areas such as culture, ideology, language, and race—domains that became central to cultural studies. He argues that these "great evasions" necessitated a theoretical expansion beyond Marxism to adequately address the complexities of cultural formations and power relations.

Despite these critiques, Hall does not advocate for a complete abandonment of Marxist theory. Instead, he suggests a rearticulation of Marxist principles to incorporate the analysis of culture and ideology. This involves recognizing the relative autonomy of cultural practices and understanding how cultural meanings are constructed and contested within specific historical contexts. Hall emphasizes the importance of hegemony, a concept derived from Gramsci, to explain how dominant groups maintain power through cultural and ideological means rather than through economic determinism alone.

Furthermore, Hall highlights the significance of race and ethnicity in cultural studies, areas that traditional Marxism often marginalized. He argues for an intersectional approach that considers how race, alongside class and gender, shapes cultural identities and power structures. This perspective broadens the analytical scope of cultural

studies, allowing for a more nuanced understanding of social dynamics.

### **Gramsci and the Concept of Hegemony**

- Hall draws extensively on Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony to address culture's role in the maintenance of power.
- Hegemony refers to the process by which dominant groups secure consent through cultural leadership and the production of common-sense ideas.
- Hall views culture as a contested terrain where dominant ideologies are not only imposed but also challenged and resisted.

This perspective enables a more nuanced understanding of how power operates in society, beyond direct coercion. Hall interprets hegemony as the process by which dominant groups in society maintain their power not merely through coercion but by securing the consent of subordinate groups. This consent is achieved by making the prevailing power structures appear natural and inevitable, thus embedding them within the cultural and ideological fabric of society. Hall argues that culture is a critical site where power relations are both established and contested. He suggests that cultural studies should focus on the ways in which cultural forms and practices are implicated in the maintenance or subversion of hegemonic power. By analysing cultural texts and practices, scholars can uncover the underlying power structures and ideologies that shape societal norms and values.

Furthermore, Hall highlights the fluid and contingent nature of hegemony. He states that hegemonic power is never absolute or static, it is constantly being negotiated and renegotiated through cultural practices. This perspective focuses on the importance of

understanding the dynamic interplay between culture and power, as well as the potential for cultural resistance to challenge and transform hegemonic structures.

### **The Influence of Structuralism and Post-Structuralism**

Hall engages critically with structuralist and post-structuralist theories, particularly in relation to language, discourse, and power:

- Structuralism (Saussurean Linguistics).
- Culture operates through language and signification.
- Meaning is not inherent but constructed within a system of signs.

Post-Structuralism (Foucault):

- From Michel Foucault, Hall adopts the idea that power is dispersed and operates through discourse.
- Discourse produces knowledge, truth, and subjectivities, shaping how individuals understand the world and themselves.
- Power is not static or centralized; it works through systems of representation and cultural practices.

Hall acknowledges that structuralism introduced a critical shift by emphasizing underlying structures in cultural phenomena, moving away from purely empirical analyses. This perspective allowed for a deeper understanding of how a meaning is constructed within cultural systems. However, Hall critiques structuralism for its rigidity and determinism, particularly its tendency to view cultural structures as static and universally applicable. He argues that such an approach overlooks the dynamic and contested nature of cultural meanings, which are often influenced by historical and social contexts.

Post-structuralism, according to Hall, offers a more nuanced approach by challenging the fixed binaries and universal truths proposed by structuralism. It emphasizes the fluidity of meaning and the role of power in the construction of knowledge. Hall appreciates post-structuralism's focus on discourse and its recognition of the instability of meaning, which aligns with cultural studies' interest in the complexities of cultural representation. Despite valuing these contributions, Hall warns against an overreliance on post-structuralist theory, cautioning that it can lead to excessive textualism and a neglect of material conditions and social practices. He advocates for a balanced approach that incorporates the insights of both structuralism and post-structuralism while remaining attentive to the lived realities and power dynamics that shape cultural experiences.

### **Theory as Provisional and Contextual**

- Hall challenges the idea of theory as universal or totalizing.
- He insists that theory must be understood as “a practice in context”, always provisional and responsive to historical, cultural, and political circumstances.
- Theoretical frameworks should not be imposed rigidly but used as tools to analyze specific cultural and social phenomena.
- Hall advocates for a “conjunctural analysis”, which examines the relationships between various forces (economic, cultural, and political) at specific moments in time.

Hall argues that theory should not be viewed as a fixed set of universal principles but as a dynamic, evolving framework responsive to specific historical and cultural contexts. He contends that theories are tools to address particular problems and should be

adapted or even discarded as those problems change. This perspective challenges the notion of theory as an authoritative, unchanging doctrine, advocating instead for a pragmatic approach that prioritizes relevance and applicability. By treating theory as provisional, Hall encourages readers and scholars to remain open to new ideas and methodologies, fostering a discipline that is flexible and responsive to the complexities of culture and society. This approach shows us the importance of situating theoretical work within the specificities of time and place, ensuring that cultural studies remain pertinent and engaged with the real-life issues it seeks to understand and critique.

**Check Your Progress**

1. What are the concepts through which Hall explores cultural studies and its evolution in the text? (60 words)

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2. Discuss cultural studies as a field of inquiry with reference to Hall. (60 words)

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## 2.6 Summing Up

In "Cultural Studies and Its Theoretical Legacies," Stuart Hall reflects on the evolution and challenges of cultural studies as an academic discipline. He emphasizes that cultural studies lack a singular origin or fixed methodology, describing it as a "discursive formation" shaped by various intellectual currents.

Hall acknowledges the significant influence of Marxism on cultural studies, particularly its focus on the relationship between power and culture. However, he critiques traditional Marxism for its economic determinism and calls for a more nuanced understanding of cultural dynamics. He also highlights the importance of incorporating perspectives from feminism and race studies, noting that these frameworks have enriched cultural studies by addressing issues of gender and racial inequality.

Hall warns against the institutionalization of cultural studies, expressing concern that it may become overly academic and detached from its political roots. He advocates for maintaining its critical edge and commitment to social justice.

In conclusion, Hall envisions cultural studies as an evolving field that must remain open to new theoretical influences and responsive to changing social contexts. He underscores the necessity of ongoing critical reflection to ensure its relevance and transformative potential. Thus from the above discussions we come to conclude that, Stuart Hall examines the intellectual evolution of Cultural Studies in "Cultural Studies and Its Theoretical Legacies," highlighting its dedication to critical, multidisciplinary, and politically engaged analysis. He argues for a flexible, contextual approach to comprehending culture as a site of struggle and transformation while criticizing theoretical rigidity and essentialism. Hall's contributions continue to be crucial in establishing Cultural

Studies as a living, breathing discipline that connects theory to practical cultural analysis.

## 2.7 References and Suggested Readings

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- Gilroy, Paul. "Cultural Studies and Ethnic Absolutism." *Cultural Studies*, edited by Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, and Paula Treichler, Routledge, 1992, pp. 187–198.
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## **UNIT 3**

### **INTRODUCING SUSAN SONTAG**

#### **Unit Structure:**

#### **3.1 Objectives**

#### **3.2 Introduction**

#### **3.3 Susan Sontag: Life**

#### **3.4 Key Works and Themes**

#### **3.5 Sontag's Philosophy**

#### **3.6 Summing Up**

#### **3.7 References and Suggested Readings**

#### **3.1 Objectives**

After going through this unit you will be able to-

- learn about the life and work of Susan Sontag,
- develop a general understanding of her philosophy,
- learn about Susan Sontag's writing career,
- identify the notable works of Sontag,
- understand Sontag's legacy and appreciate her influence.

#### **3.2 Introduction**

Susan Sontag (1933-2004) was an American writer, critic and intellectual who remains best known for her essays on modern culture. Sontag's essays focused on a wide variety of contemporary cultural figures and issues, which she treated with academic rigor and a philosophical bent of mind. She made her debut with an essay titled "Notes on Camp," in 1964, in which she explores the 'camp' aesthetic, a style that emphasizes on theatricity, and fuses high and popular culture; it is a style predominantly associated with queer

culture. She authored texts on theatre, photography and cinema, as well as on authors like Francis Bacon, Robert Bresson, and Nathalie Sarraute. She worked as editor to some of Roland Barthes' and Antonin Artaud's works. She also wrote screenplays, and wrote theoretical texts on fiction and criticism. The book *at the Same Time: Essays and Speeches* was published as a compilation of her later works in 2007. She wrote extensively on war, illness, human rights, and suffering. Through first-hand accounts of the suffering in areas like Sarajevo and Vietnam, she brought attention to the resilience of survivors in these areas.

#### **Stop to Consider**

We are reading about Sontag's contribution as a critical theorist to the fields of media and culture. However, it would help you understand Sontag better as a theorist if you read about her activism focused on human rights, war, illness, and left-wing politics. Refer to works such as *Looking at War: Photography's View of Death and Destruction*.

### **3.3 Susan Sontag: Life and work**

Sontag was born in New York City to Mildred and Jack Rosenblatt, who were Jews of Polish and Lithuanian descent. Her father was a fur trader who died of tuberculosis in China when Susan was five years old. After her father's death, the family moved to Los Angeles, as its milder climate was beneficial for Susan's asthma. She graduated from high school at the age of fifteen, and attended the University of California at Berkeley for one year before shifting to the University of Chicago, whose core curriculum attracted her scholastic fervour. She married writer Philip Rieff at 17, and had a son with him. After her bachelor's degree from the University of

Chicago, Sontag earned her master's degrees in English and philosophy from Harvard University, and continued postgraduate work at Oxford and Sorbonne.

### 3.4 Key Works and Themes

Sontag's essays gained prominence in the 1960s with "Against Interpretation" (1966), where she discusses and critiques the modern tendency to overanalyse art and its meaning. She advocates for the appreciation of art's sensuous aspects. This essay was originally published in 1964, and was later included in Sontag's 1966 collection of essays, *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*. Sontag states that placing focus solely on the content of art can limit the freedom of the viewer's subjective approach; this will distance the viewer from any immediate enjoyment of the art. In the 1966 collection, subjects such as Sartre, Camus, Simone Weil, Godard, Beckett, Lévi-Strauss, science-fiction movies, psychoanalysis, and contemporary religious thought.

Her seminal essay "Notes on 'Camp'" (1964) popularised and celebrated the aesthetic of camp as a serious cultural phenomenon. The camp aesthetic is stylistically theatrical and extravagant, and Sontag's text helped break the boundaries between high and low culture. Camp is characterised by a love of the unnatural, a combination of the superficial and the profound, and an appreciation of failed seriousness. The camp style favours style over substance, and this essay provided 'camp' with serious cultural currency, and influenced subsequent studies of popular culture.

The book *On Photography* (1977) explores photography's history, role, and ethics, critiquing how photography mediates reality. The book is a collection of essays originally published in the *New York Review of Books* between 1973 and 1977. Sontag discusses how

photography can create a voyeuristic relationship with the world, and thereby diminish the meaning of events. She also discusses the tension between recording and intervention, as well as the relationship between photography and politics. Sontag argues that 'reality' and 'image' are changeable concepts, and that in an industrial capitalist society, images can supersede actual experiences of reality.

*Illness as Metaphor* (1978) dissected societal attitudes toward illnesses such as cancer and AIDS. Sontag challenged the language used in describing diseases and the afflicted, calling it victim-blaming in tone. She talks about how diseases like tuberculosis and cancer are romanticised for comprehension. According to Sontag, metaphors used for illnesses shame patients. So, the most honest way of describing diseases is without resorting to metaphor. Using symbolic language for diseases causes stigma for patients, and negates the biological realities of the illness.

"On Style" is an essay in which Sontag noted that to understand a work of art, one must analyze its style. Sontag states that style and content are seen as distinct entities by critics, and this hampers the attempt to understand the relation between them. A work of art is shaped by the stylistic choices the author makes when creating it, and so, style can never be divorced from content and authorial intent. She further discusses the creation of styles, stating that artists are rarely aware of the fact that they are creating a new style. She notes the same about literature, where the novel is made significant not only by its meaning, but also by its style and form.

**SAQ**

1. Discuss the main ideas discussed by Sontag in her essay “Against Interpretation”.

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2. How does Sontag break the boundaries between high culture and popular culture through her texts?

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**Novels and Fiction:**

Even as Sontag gained fame for her essays, she identified herself as a fiction writer. Through themes such as identity, exile, and artistic passion, Sontag shapes her fiction with respect to her larger philosophical concerns.

*In America* was published in 1999. It is a fictionalized account of the life of the 19th-century Polish actress Helena Modrzejewska, who is renamed Maryna Zalezowska in the novel. Historical fact and imagination are fused to create a text which delves into ideas of identity, exile, and reconstruction of self. Sontag's work explores not only the life of its protagonist but also probes into themes of art, fame, and the American Dream. A short synopsis of the novel is given below:

Set in 1876 Poland, the novel's protagonist Maryna is a celebrated actress who becomes disillusioned with her career

and the limitations caused by her fame. She leaves her life in Poland behind to start a new life in America, inspired by the idealism of her husband Bogard and her lover Ryszard. Along with a group of compatriots, they set out to establish a utopian commune in California, embodying the era's fascination with the promise of the New World. With a group of fellow Polish travellers, she sets out to establish a utopian commune in California. Here, Sontag embodies the era's fascination with the New World. The commune idealises self-sufficient living, but this venture quickly fails. However, Maryna reinvents herself and returns to her theatrical roots on the American stage. She rises to fame in a foreign land, further showing adaptability and resilience.

Sontag's narrative focuses on language, cultural dislocation, and the immigrant experience. The novel also meanders into philosophical musings and detailed descriptions. Through Maryna, Sontag examines the nature of performance on both the stage and in life itself. Maryna constantly re-invents herself, making her the perfect example of the unlimited possibilities of the American Dream.

*In America* is, however, also a commentary on the contradictions of the American Dream. It celebrates the country's potential while exposing the flaws inherent to its system. In America, idealism clashes with pragmatism, and personal sacrifices are required to achieve success. With meditative and lyrical prose, Sontag combines historical realism with intellectual depth, which invites readers to understand the nexus between art, identity and culture. The novel won the National Book Award for Fiction in 2000, and solidified Sontag's reputation as a novelist.

Another novel, *The Volcano Lover: A Romance* (1992) is a historical fiction that combines romance, politics, and philosophy. Set in the late 18th century, the narrative focuses on the lives of Sir

William Hamilton, his wife Emma, and her lover Admiral Horatio Nelson, against the backdrop of the Enlightenment and the upheavals of the French Revolution. The “Volcano Lover” is Sir Hamilton, a British diplomat who is stationed in Naples and is known for his passion for collecting antiquities and his scientific obsession with Mount Vesuvius. The author presents him as “The Cavaliere,” – a cultured but detached figure whose love for collecting reflects his desire to impose order and meaning on the chaotic world around him.

Emma Hamilton was initially a servant and artist’s muse, and she rises to prominence through her beauty and charisma. Her transformation into “Lady Hamilton” is marked by her marriage to “the Cavaliere” and her later affair with Nelson, a historical figure and England’s naval hero. Emma represents ambition, desire, and the constraints placed on women by society. Her story is romanticised, and through Emma, Sontag reflects on her sacrifices as a celebrated muse versus the power required of her to be a self-determined individual. Horatio Nelson represents the archetype of “The Hero,”; he embodies duty and sacrifice. His relationship with Emma and his military exploits brings into focus the tension between public and private lives. Through Nelson’s character, Sontag critiques the glorification of heroism and war.

Sontag’s novel is not just a love triangle; it probes the nature of ownership and history itself. The Cavaliere’s collection of art and artifacts is a metaphor for the imperialist urge to possess and dominate, while his fascination with Vesuvius shows the human desire to take ownership of nature’s unpredictability. Stylistically, the novel is representative of Sontag’s style – intellectual and experimental. It alternates between third-person omniscient narration and a more subjective, fragmented approach. The narrative is interspersed with Sontag’s characteristic philosophical digressions

and reflections on history, while also critiquing 18th-century Enlightenment ideals. *The Volcano Lover*, therefore, reflects on human passion in various forms—romantic, artistic, and intellectual, while also exploring how individuals navigate the forces of history, desire, and mortality. It is a profound historical narrative shaped by Sontag’s philosophical leanings.

#### **Stop to Consider**

*In America* is stylistically dense and is philosophically meditative, thereby challenging some readers. *The Volcano Lover*, on the other hand, examines history, war, and imperialism. Reading the novels, however, will strengthen your understanding of Sontag, who as previously mentioned, considered herself primarily a fiction writer.

### **3.5 Sontag's Philosophy**

Sontag's work is characterized by an ethical responsibility, aesthetic rigor, and intellectual engagement. She felt that art should provoke and challenge, and encourage critical reflection. She promoted diverse outlook on culture, media and society; while opposing the oversimplification of complicated phenomena. Related to her activism, she stressed the significance of bearing witness without being exploited or detached in her writings about suffering and war. Sontag challenged readers to close the gap between human compassion and intellectual knowledge. Her philosophy, both as an activist and a critical theorist, was deeply rooted in a commitment to questioning dominant ideologies and encouraging intellectual engagement with the complexities of contemporary culture and politics.



As a critic of culture, Sontag's critical theory centred on challenging the ways culture and media shape perceptions of reality. In "Against Interpretation" (1966), Sontag argued for a more experiential engagement with art, and urging critics to move beyond reductive, simplistic interpretations that took away from the enjoyment of the art. She advocated for a focus on art's aesthetic experience, believing that intellectualizing art diminished its emotional and sensory impact. *On Photography* (1977) critiqued the role of photography in modern society. Sontag argued that images, while powerful, often remove the suffering from its context and turn it into a commodity for popular consumption, which dulls the viewer's moral response. In *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003), Sontag reflects on the ethics of viewing images of war and suffering. Readers are made to confront their complicity in the passive consumption of media, and Sontag urges them to engage actively with the human reality behind such depictions.

Sontag's activism was closely tied to her intellectual pursuits. She was outspoken against U.S. foreign policies, particularly during the Vietnam War. In her 1967 essay, "Trip to Hanoi", she attempted to humanize the North Vietnamese perspective and populace, and criticized American imperialism. Her stance attracted criticism, but it demonstrated her commitment to exposing the human costs of war and challenging dominant ideologies. During the Bosnian War in the 1990s, Sontag moved to Sarajevo to direct a production of *Waiting for Godot*, expressing resilience and solidarity with the city's besieged inhabitants. Her work in Sarajevo highlighted her belief in the moral responsibility of intellectuals to act, and not just comment, during crises.

Sontag's philosophy is primarily committed to engagement with the world and its issues. She saw intellectual and aesthetic pursuits as intrinsically connected with political and moral concerns. Her essays

and activism emphasized the importance of bearing witness and resisting apathy. Readers are encouraged to confront discomforting truths and rethink their positions in structures of power.

### **3.6 Summing Up**

Sontag insisted on the transformative power of art, the ethical responsibilities of intellectuals, and the importance of dissent in the face of injustice. As a public intellectual, she harnessed critical theory to foster a more conscious and humane society. Her work continues to inspire debates on representation, morality, and the role of culture in shaping collective consciousness. Her writings continue to be a fundamental part of modern philosophy. Her reflections on art, photography, illness, and her criticisms of cultural practices are influential in how we negotiate the nexus of politics, ethics, and aesthetics. She is an intellectual who approaches the world with sensitivity, curiosity, and by refusing to simplify complexity. Her legacy lies in her incisive analysis of culture, art, and politics, as well as her ability to synthesize complex ideas into accessible, evocative prose. Sontag challenged conventional modes of thought and championed intellectual engagement as a means of understanding the human condition. She focused on the experience of art itself rather than its symbolic or ideological interpretation. Her call to "recover our senses" reshaped critical discourse, emphasizing the importance of form, texture, and direct engagement over reductive analysis.

Sontag was also a passionate advocate for experimental and avant-garde art. Her essays introduced American audiences to European filmmakers like Jean-Luc Godard and novelists such as Roland Barthes. She celebrated works that pushed boundaries, works that combined intellectualism with creative risk-taking. She explored the

aesthetics of camp, elevating it to a serious critical concept and influencing queer theory and cultural studies. Sontag's essays often addressed the intersections of culture and politics; they showed how she was acutely sensitive to global injustices. She examined how photography shapes perception, commodifies suffering, and influences power dynamics. She also interrogated how images of violence are consumed in modern media. Her texts remain relevant in understanding contemporary visual culture and the ethics of representation. As a public intellectual, Sontag was unafraid to confront contentious issues, from the Vietnam War to the AIDS crisis. She argued for intellectual integrity and against complacency. She was a vocal critic of American foreign policy. Her controversial remark following the 9/11 attacks—calling the events a consequence of America's geopolitical actions—sparked debates about patriotism and dissent. Though best known for her essays, Sontag was also a novelist and filmmaker. Her fiction complemented her critical work, demonstrating her belief in literature's power to illuminate complex truths.

Sontag's work continues to influence fields ranging from literary theory to media studies. Her insistence on engaging with difficult, uncomfortable questions makes her relevant in contemporary discourse. As a thinker who discussed both high art and popular culture, Susan Sontag was intellectually curious, fearless, and had aesthetic passion. Her legacy remains not only in what she wrote but in how she inspired others to think more deeply and critically about the world.

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## UNIT 4

### SUSAN SONTAG: “AGAINST INTERPRETATION”

#### Unit Structure:

#### 4.1 Objectives

#### 4.2 Introduction

#### 4.3 “Against Interpretation”: Themes and Techniques

#### 4.4 “Against Interpretation”: Summary

#### 4.5 Critical Analysis of “Against Interpretation”

#### 4.6 Summing Up

#### 4.7 References and Suggested Readings

#### 4.1 Objectives

After going through this unit you will be able to

- understand the themes and techniques in “Against Interpretation”,
- understand the legacy of the essay,
- do a thorough analysis of the text,
- understand its positive and negative aspects,
- understand the contemporary relevance of the text.

#### 4.2 Introduction

We have already discussed Susan Sontag in Unit 3. In this unit, we will discuss one of her works “Against Interpretation”. In “Against Interpretation”, Susan Sontag critiques the traditional practice of interpretation in literary criticism and art and challenges its dominance, which Freudian and Marxist frameworks have reinforced. Freudian psychoanalysis, established by Austrian psychologist Sigmund Freud (1856–1939), studies the subconscious to uncover hidden psychological causes behind physical symptoms.

Marxist ideology, developed by German economist Karl Marx (1818–1883), reinterprets global history through the lens of class struggle, and puts emphasis on the power dynamics between the working class ‘proletariat’, and the owners of production or the ‘bourgeoisie’. Both concepts are heavily reliant on symbolic interpretation, i.e., they treat events, dreams, and works of art as carriers of hidden meanings.

Sontag argues that the aforementioned interpretive tradition has created an ambiguous world where everything is viewed as a symbol of something else, which obscures the direct experience of art and literature. Freudian psychology links subconscious symbols to deeper psychological truths, while Marxism discusses cultural and historical events as expressions of class conflict. By relying on these symbolic interpretive methods, both theories have contributed to the pervasive tendency to seek concealed meanings rather than engage with art on its own terms. Sontag’s work calls for a shift from over-interpretation, advocating for a more immediate and sensory approach to experiencing art and literature.

In her essay, Sontag discusses the long-standing tradition of interpretation in critical thought with respect to its role in art rather than the general meaning of the term. Interpretation, she explains, involves selecting specific elements from a work. She traces this practice back to philosophers like Plato (428–348 BC) and Aristotle (384–322 BC), who studied human artistic expression. For Plato, art was justified if it served a higher purpose, because he considered it inherently trivial. Sontag argues that the need to defend art continues, “The task of defending art is left to us from now until the end of consciousness.” (Sontag 5) Her text examines the persistent challenge of justifying art’s value beyond mere interpretation.

### **4.3 Against Interpretation: Themes and Techniques**

A classic work of cultural criticism, Susan Sontag's "Against Interpretation" (1966) questions conventional wisdom regarding literature and the arts. The essay's title, "Against Interpretation," challenges the prevalence of interpretive frameworks that deprive art of its immediacy and sensory impact and reduce it to nothing more than symbols. Sontag makes the case in this essay for a fresh approach to art appreciation that puts form, emotion, and presence ahead of critical analysis.

Susan Sontag's "Against Interpretation" (1966) is a seminal text of cultural criticism that questions traditional knowledge of literature and art. She discusses dominant interpretative traditions that prioritize interpretation over direct experience. She argues that such approaches strip art of its immediate impact, reducing it to mere symbols. Sontag promotes a new way of engaging with art, focusing on form, emotion, and presence rather than relying only on critical analysis. She focuses on a more immediate and sensory appreciation of artistic expression.

#### **4.3.1 Themes**

**Over-interpretation of Art and Literature Rejected:** Susan Sontag criticizes the practice of intellectualized art interpretation wherein critics search for hidden meanings within works. She argues that this approach diminishes the richness and vitality of art by confining it within rigid frameworks. Instead of treating art as a puzzle to decode, Sontag advocates for embracing it as a direct, experiential encounter.

**Sensory Experience Emphasized on:** Central to Sontag's argument is the call for an "erotics of art," which prioritizes emotional and sensory engagement over analytical dissection. Sontag emphasizes

the importance of art's ability to evoke deep emotional and aesthetic responses, and asserts that this experiential power is what gives art its true value.

**Platonic and Aristotelian Traditions Critiqued:** Sontag critiques the dominant interpretive traditions which are rooted in ancient philosophy, particularly Plato's view of art as mere imitation and Aristotle's focus on catharsis. She challenges these views, and stresses on an approach that allows art to exist in its pure form, free from moral or didactic constraints.

**Autonomous Existence of Art:** Sontag stresses on the autonomy of art and rejects its subservience to external ideologies or agendas. She argues that art should not serve as a vehicle for political, cultural, or moral narratives but should be valued as an independent entity; it should be appreciated for its intrinsic qualities and its ability to stand on its own terms.

#### 4.3.2 Techniques

**Argumentation through Provocation:** Susan Sontag employs a provocative style to challenge conventional thinking in readers, using bold statements like, "In place of a hermeneutics, we need an erotics of art," (Sontag 14) to prompt readers to reconsider their relationship with art.

**Historical Contextualization:** By framing her text in historical context, Sontag examines the limitations of traditional interpretations, through the analysis of influential figures like Plato and Marx while questioning the lasting impact of their ideas.

**Use of Examples:** Her interdisciplinary approach strengthens her argument: she draws on examples from various art forms, including theatre, painting, film, and literature. This broad perspective shows



her belief that art should be appreciated as a unified experience rather than divided into rigid categories.

**Concise and Persuasive Style:** Sontag's writing is distinguished by its clarity and precision. She avoids dense academic language in favour of concise, persuasive prose. This accessible yet intellectually rigorous style ensures that her arguments resonate with a wide audience while maintaining their depth and impact.

### **4.3 Legacy of “Against Interpretation”:**

Susan Sontag's “Against Interpretation” significantly influenced postmodern and poststructuralist art criticism by questioning the intellectual norms of her time. Her emphasis on valuing the aesthetic and sensory dimensions of art remains relevant to contemporary debates about art's role in society. While some argue that Sontag's dismissal of interpretation may oversimplify the complexities of artistic creation, her essay focuses on the importance of balancing appreciation with analysis.

Readers are invited to rethink their engagement with art; Sontag encourages them to experience and inhabit it rather than merely try to understand it. Her vision redefines the way art is approached because she emphasizes on art's transformative potential. This perspective continues to challenge and inspire, solidifying Sontag's reputation as one of the most innovative and provocative thinkers of the 20th century.

### **4.4 “Against Interpretation”: Summary**

#### **Sections 1–3**

In “Against Interpretation”, Susan Sontag critiques the longstanding dominance of interpretation in literary criticism and art, a tradition

shaped heavily by Freudian psychology and Marxist ideology. Karl Marx (1818–1883), a revolutionary German economist, reframed global events through the lens of class struggle, focusing on the conflict between the working class and the owners of production. Sigmund Freud (1856–1939), the Austrian founder of psychoanalysis, introduced a method of exploring the subconscious to uncover the hidden psychological causes behind external symptoms. Both Marxist and Freudian thought treat historical events, dreams, and artwork as symbolic representations of deeper meanings, creating a shadowy realm where meaning remains symbolic and ambiguous.

Sontag begins her essay by introducing this centuries-old interpretative tradition, particularly with reference to art. She defines "interpretation" in a specific sense: the process of isolating select elements within a work to understand its broader meaning. Sontag traces this practice to the philosophical roots of Plato (428–348 BCE) and Aristotle (384–322 BCE), who debated about how human artistic expression could be understood. Plato argued that art required justification through a higher purpose because he viewed it as otherwise trivial. Sontag notes, "The task of defending art is left to us from now until the end of consciousness."

While Sontag acknowledges the historical necessity of interpretation in preserving art's relevance, she critiques its modern excesses. She observes that interpretation in antiquity was performed to renew interest in artistic works and introduce their content to new audiences. By examining a work's deeper "content," interpretation could offer fresh insights beyond the work's form and style. However, Sontag argues that modern interpretation has become excessive, influenced by the pervasive influence of Freud and Marx. Their ideas treat all aspects of life—dreams, wars, and art—as repositories of hidden meanings waiting to be deciphered.

Sontag laments that this overemphasis on uncovering meaning has detracted from the vitality of art, reducing it to a series of symbols. She calls for a shift away from this interpretive dominance, advocating instead for a more direct and immediate experience of art, one that celebrates its form and sensory impact rather than its presumed hidden content.

### **Sections 4–7**

Susan Sontag argues that art is diminished when its interpretation relies on the questionable notion that a work of art is primarily composed of its content. She critiques the tradition of critical interpretation, which focuses on dissecting a work's content to uncover supposed hidden meanings. This approach, Sontag suggests, undermines the intrinsic value of art and reduces it to something to be deciphered rather than experienced.

Sontag explains how certain modern art forms have reacted to the dominance of interpretation. She believes interpretation stretches the material to emphasize elements that harm art's essence, describing it as the intellectual's way of "taming" art by assigning hidden meanings. Critics often claim that artists intend for their works to be interpreted, but Sontag highlights how this mindset has degraded art. For instance, critics psychoanalyzed Austrian writer Franz Kafka (1883–1924) through his novels, misrepresenting his work, which explored the existential anxieties of modern life. Such criticism, Sontag argues, has driven contemporary art toward an attempt to escape interpretation altogether.

Art movements like pop art, abstract painting, and French New Wave cinema of the 1950s and 1960s have resisted interpretive frameworks by prioritizing form and style over content. These art forms, rather than inviting analysis of deeper meanings, emphasize their aesthetic and sensory aspects. By doing so, they challenge the

traditional interpretive lens and reclaim art's vitality, offering experiences that are more direct and less burdened by analysis.

### **Sections 8–10**

In her conclusion, Sontag emphasizes that insightful criticism can help audiences appreciate art without neglecting its content. However, she argues that interpretation often prevents art from existing on its own terms. To address this, she advocates for shifting the focus from uncovering hidden meanings to understanding form and style. Sontag asserts, “The best criticism, and it is uncommon, is of this sort that resolves considerations of content into those of form.”

She cites the work of French critic Roland Barthes (1915–1980), who applied formal analysis to literature, as an example of this approach. Similarly, descriptive criticism, which highlights art's sensory surface without distorting it, offers a way to engage with art more authentically. Sontag calls for criticism to focus on form, enabling viewers to fully experience the sensory and aesthetic dimensions of art. She urges both critics and audiences to focus on the beauty and structure of art, celebrating its immediate form and experience.

### **4.5 Critical Analysis of “Against Interpretation”**

Earlier interpretative methods may have preserved lost texts, but Sontag argues that they distort the true purpose of art. Imposing new and distinct meanings undermines a work's inherent value, suggesting it is not worthy of existing on its own terms. Critics have historically infused art with their interpretations to make it appear more valuable, implying it lacked significance initially.

In the 20th century, the rise of mass production overstimulated audiences, making the subtleties of art harder to appreciate. To address this, critics layered additional meanings onto artworks, aiming to make them seem more profound and thought-provoking.

Susan Sontag's "Against Interpretation" critiques these traditional approaches, advocating instead for a shift toward appreciating the sensory and experiential aspects of art. While her argument is transformative and challenges established norms, it has also sparked discussions about its practical limitations and the balance between critical analysis and aesthetic engagement.

#### **4.5.1 Strengths of "Against Interpretation"**

**Challenge to Reductionism:** Susan Sontag critiques reductionist tendencies in art criticism by rejecting the dominance of "hidden meanings" in interpretive practices. She views art as a holistic, embodied experience, emphasizing its accessibility beyond academic analysis. This approach democratizes art, making it relatable and engaging for a wider audience.

**Call for an "Erotics of Art":** Her call for an "erotics of art" focuses on the immediacy of form, character, and emotional resonance. This perspective aligns with contemporary theories of beauty that prioritize sensory and instinctive experiences over intellectual dissection, valuing intention of creation and the emotional impact.

**Historical and Philosophical Insights:** Sontag provides a strong historical foundation by tracing interpretive traditions to Plato and Aristotle. She critiques the enduring influence of these frameworks, highlighting their limited capability to foster a deeper appreciation of art.

**Relevance across Media:** The essay's insights extend beyond literature to include performance, visual art, and film. In today's era of digital and multimedia art, Sontag's interdisciplinary approach remains highly relevant, encouraging broader engagement with diverse artistic forms.

#### **4.5.2 Limitations and Criticisms**

**Dismissal of Interpretation's Value:** While Sontag critiques interpretation as overly simplistic, her outright rejection of it may be seen as extreme. When applied thoughtfully, interpretation can illuminate historical, cultural, and psychological dimensions that enrich understanding. Feminist, postcolonial, and queer readings, for instance, reveal marginalized perspectives that Sontag's approach risks overlooking.

**Overemphasis on Sensory Experience:** Sontag's focus on sensory experience might neglect art's symbolic and intellectual depth. While form and experience are essential, meaning-making remains a fundamental way in which people engage with art. Critics argue that a purely experiential perspective risks rendering art shallow or overly subjective.

**Elitism in Practice:** Although Sontag aims to free art from rigid intellectualism, her complex and sophisticated prose could alienate the broader audience she seeks to engage. This raises the irony that her critique of academic elitism may itself reflect the same elitist tendencies.

**Context of the 1960s:** When "Against Interpretation" was published, mid-20th-century art criticism was largely dominated by formalist and Marxist theories. Sontag's critique was revolutionary in that context, but in today's pluralistic critical environment, which embraces diverse interpretive approaches, some of her arguments

may feel less urgent. Nevertheless, her work remains a pivotal contribution to discussions about the balance between form, meaning, and experience in art.

#### **4.5.3 Contemporary Relevance**

Sontag's essay remains relevant in today's media-saturated world, where art is often consumed quickly and superficially. Her call to engage with art challenges tendencies to overanalyze or commercialize it. However, contemporary critics and academics often blend Sontag's focus on sensory experience with interpretive approaches, creating a more balanced and comprehensive understanding of art.

#### **4.6 Summing Up**

“Against Interpretation” is a groundbreaking work that reshaped art criticism by challenging traditional interpretive methods. While its dismissal of interpretation remains debated, its focus on form and sensory experience remains highly influential. Sontag's legacy lies in urging a rethinking of our relationship with art, advocating a balance between analysis and direct experience. Her work continues to inspire debate, securing its place within the critical theory canon.

#### **4.7 References and Suggested Readings**

1. Rollyson, Carl. *Reading Susan Sontag: A Critical Introduction to Her Work*. Ivan R Dee, Inc, 2001.
2. Moser, Benjamin. *Sontag: Her Life and Work*. Ecco Pr, 2020.
3. Sontag, Susan. *Susan Sontag: Essays of the 1960s & 70s*. David Rieff, ed. Library of America, 2013.

4. Sontag, Susan. *At the Same Time: Essays and Speeches*. Paolo Dilonardo and Anne Jump, eds. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007.

5. Sontag, Susan. *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*. Penguin Classics, 2009.

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## UNIT 5

### PIERRE MACHEREY: INTRODUCTION

#### Unit Structure:

#### 5.1 Objectives

#### 5.2 Introduction

#### 5.3 Pierre Macherey: Life and Work

#### 5.4 Intellectual Context

#### 5.5 Marxist Literary Criticism: An Introduction

#### 5.6 From Althusser to Macherey

#### 5.7 Summing Up

#### 5.8 References and Suggested Readings

#### 5.1 Objectives

By the end of this unit, the learner will be able to-

- *learn* about the life and work of Pierre Macherey,
- *place* Macherey in the intellectual context of his time,
- *situate* Macherey in the domain of Marxist criticism,
- *evaluate* Macherey's theoretical lineage to Louis Althusser.

#### 5.2 Introduction

A central concern in literary theory is understanding a text and the various ways it can be read. Consider the conventional practice of reading religious texts: because these texts are revered as holy and seen as divine revelations, their reading is shaped by this reverence. Followers of a particular religious tradition approach their sacred texts accordingly.

In the 1960s, literary theory underwent a significant transformation in the West, eventually spreading to academic circles worldwide. At the heart of this theoretical revolution was the concept of the text

itself. When a literary text is viewed as a unified whole, seamlessly organized around a central idea, the primary mode of reading aims to uncover this unity. However, if a text is marked by internal fractures and contradictions, the approach to reading must shift to reveal and engage with these discontinuities.

It is in this context of exploring a text's inherent contradictions that Pierre Macherey's ideas become particularly relevant. While Macherey's thought was shaped by the structuralist and poststructuralist milieu of 1950s and 1960s France, his work was equally influenced by Marxist theory. Today, Macherey occupies a significant place in the canon of Marxist literary criticism. Terry Eagleton's *Marxism and Literary Criticism* offers a detailed discussion of Macherey's theoretical contributions, and it would be beneficial to consult that text for further insights.

This unit aims to introduce you to Macherey's intellectual background and his theoretical position within Marxist discourse. It will serve as a foundation for reading and analyzing his essay *Borges and the Fictive Narrative*, which will be the focus of the next unit.

### **5.3 Pierre Macherey: Life and Works**

Pierre Macherey was born in 1938 in Belfort, France. He completed his MA at the École Normale Supérieure in 1961, working under the supervision of Georges Canguilhem on a project exploring the philosophy and politics of Spinoza. In 1962-63, Louis Althusser organized a seminar in which Macherey played an active role. This collaboration laid the foundation for their friendship and intellectual partnership. Alongside fellow students Étienne Balibar, Michel Pêcheux, and Jacques Rancière, Macherey contributed to the seminal *Reading Capital* after a year-long study of Marx's *Capital*.

Macherey's intellectual influences include Hegel, Spinoza, and Marx, with his fascination for Spinoza dating back to Dina Dreyfus's 1958 demonstration on the philosopher's enduring relevance. Althusser further emphasized Spinoza's importance, arguing that Spinoza represented a crucial turning point in philosophy. This interest was deepened by the teachings of Gilles Deleuze, which fuelled Macherey's engagement with Spinoza's work. During this intellectually charged period, marked by the Algerian War, Macherey was politically active and, together with Balibar, proposed the organization of a Marxist study circle under Althusser's guidance. This initiative culminated in a series of seminars, eventually leading to the publication of *Reading Capital*. Despite this focus, Spinoza remained a persistent influence, culminating in Macherey's 1979 work, *Hegel or Spinoza*.

Pierre Macherey's significant works span several decades, reflecting his deep engagement with philosophy, literature, and politics. His major publications include:

- *Pour unethéorie de la production littéraire (A Theory of Literary Production, 1966)*
- *Hegel ou Spinoza (Hegel or Spinoza, 1979)*
- *À quoi pense la littérature? Exercices de philosophielittéraire (What is Literature Thinking? Exercises in Literary Philosophy, 1990)*
- *De l'utopie! (On Utopia!, 1999)*
- *Introduction à l'étude de la dialectique de Hegel (Introduction to the Study of Hegel's Dialectic, 2002)*
- *Le Sujet des normativités (The Subject of Normativities, 2004)*
- *La Parole universitaire (The University Speech, 2009)*

- *Petits Riens: Ornières et dérives du quotidien (Small Things: Ruts and Drifts of the Everyday, 2012)*
- *In a Materialist Way: Selected Essays (1998)*

In *A Theory of Literary Production*, Macherey proposes a radical approach to literature. He suggests that literature does not merely reflect philosophical thought; instead, it provokes it. According to Macherey, reading literature is not about identifying philosophical ideas in texts but about understanding how literary production generates new ways of thinking. Literature acts as a "machine" to stimulate thought. He argues that literature provokes thought through imaginative content and narrative fiction. These elements resist the control of rational logic, sparking philosophical reflection. Further, literature is deeply embedded in ideology but also distances itself from it, engaging in a playful yet critical relationship with ideological structures. This ongoing activity of reading, Macherey claims, has no fixed endpoint, as literature continually generates new insights.

*Hegel or Spinoza* is Macherey's significant philosophical work revisits Hegel's interpretation of Spinoza. Macherey challenges Hegel's critique, arguing that Spinoza's philosophy is more dynamic and dialectical than Hegel acknowledged. Despite their differences, Macherey reveals a profound connection between the two thinkers, especially in their influence on contemporary political philosophy. Thinkers like Alain Badiou and Slavoj Žižek draw on Hegel, while Gilles Deleuze and Antonio Negri align with Spinoza. When *Hegel or Spinoza* was published in 1979, it profoundly impacted French philosophy, particularly among Marxist and structuralist thinkers in the post-1968 period. Macherey's work was pivotal in moving beyond the humanism and teleology associated with Hegel, offering Spinoza's ideas as a more materialist and anti-humanist framework to critique capitalism.

In *On Utopia*, Macherey turns his attention to utopian writing as a unique genre. Unlike his other works, this book focuses solely on the form and function of utopian literature. He argues that utopian writing inherently blends philosophical and literary elements, making it unnecessary to separate the two. Macherey draws on both classic and modern texts, referencing Karl Mannheim's *Ideology and Utopia* and Pierre-François Moreau's *Le Récit Utopique*. He also examines major utopian works, including: Thomas More's *Utopia*, Francis Bacon's *New Atlantis*, Tommaso Campanella's *City of the Sun*, and Charles Fourier's writings.

Macherey's most extensive analysis focuses on Fourier's unique vision. Unlike earlier utopias centered on the state and its political institutions, Fourier's utopia emphasizes dynamic social relations, labour, and emotions. Fourier's work offers a utopia that balances individual passions with collective social organization, challenging critics who view utopias as inherently repressive. Macherey links utopian thought to everyday life, showing how utopian visions, though seemingly unattainable, shape social relations and individual subjectivity. Utopias give voice to real desires and conflicts, influencing history and societal transformation.

**Check Your Progress**

Write a note on the works and thoughts of Pierre Macherey. (100 words)

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**5.4 Marxist Literary Criticism: An Introduction**

Macherey's *A Theory of Literary Production* explains how literature does not merely reflect ideology but negotiates it through its formal

mechanisms. The notion of production is relevant here, evoking the idea of material production central to Marxist theory of society and history. Let us, then, explore some of the basic tenets and trends of Marxism and Marxist literary criticism.

Marx and Engels did not formulate a systematic theory of literature. However, their scattered yet profound observations on literatures from various historical periods and their analyses of the conditions of writing offered later Marxist critics room to identify key elements in Marx's conception of literature. Marx's work primarily revolves around a critique of capitalism, addressing concepts such as the exploitation of surplus value, the emergence of the proletariat, the contradictions between capital and labour, and the development of a global market as a necessity of capitalism, shaping the world in its own image. Adapting Hegel's dialectic as a principle of social progress toward freedom, Marx drew on Ludwig Feuerbach's materialist philosophy to provide a natural basis for the evolution of history. The forces and relations of production, encompassing the historically evolving implements of production and class struggle, drive historical development. History is not solely propelled by forces beyond the individual; rather, the concrete practices of individuals are integral to this vast historical process. Material production, at a certain stage, led to the division of labour, which, in turn, created corresponding edifices of law, philosophy, literature, and morality, all grounded in an economic base. This division eventually generated divides between manual and intellectual labour, town and village, individual and society, and even social roles of men and women. It also fostered social alienation, as the labourer became estranged from the product of their labour.

Some key presuppositions of Marxist literary criticism are summarized here. Literature does not exist in an autonomous sphere; it is part of a much wider reality and must be understood

within specific contexts of history, society, culture, economy, and ideology. While various interpretations of the link between literature and its contexts exist, the notion of literature as a sovereign realm is now outdated. Society is a sum total of relations and practices, encompassing both material and mental productions. However, it thrives on material production, which in turn generates a particular kind of ideological production. The dominant ideology in any society is that of its ruling class. The perception of reality and truth in a historical society is constituted through ideology.

Engels introduced the concept of typicality as a mode of representing reality, a notion later developed by Georg Lukács in his influential theory of realism. According to Lukács, art should depict what is typical of a class as a “peculiar intersection of ideological circumstance” (Habib 53). The implications of this for literature are significant. Literature is often regarded as a representation of reality or a depiction of life’s truths. However, reality is not directly accessible; it is mediated by ideology, which individuals are often unaware of. As noted earlier, the dominant ideology of an era arises from its economic structure and serves as an expression of the class interests of the ruling class. Therefore, a Marxist critic studies literature not through timeless artistic criteria but as a product of economic and ideological forces.

There are, however, divergences within Marxist discourse regarding the status of literature. While dogmatic Marxists view literature strictly as a product of ruling ideology, more flexible approaches grant it a degree of autonomy, suggesting that literature employs formal mechanisms to negotiate ideology. Georg Lukács exemplifies this more nuanced view in his theory of realism. Drawing on Engels’s concept of typicality, Lukács argues that realist novels portray a concrete and total human personality distinct from everyday reality, often contrary to the author’s own ideological

biases. Realist works encapsulate the contradictions of a historical period in their most developed form.

From this perspective, Lukács critiques modernism for portraying humanity as passive and alienated, reflecting a fragmented reality. Conversely, the Frankfurt School of German Marxists valued modernist literature for its critique of the “dehumanizing institutions and processes of society under capitalism” (Abrams 206). Within Marxist criticism, reflectionist theories of literature have been interrogated in various ways. Bertolt Brecht stands out as a key figure whose influence extends beyond Marxist circles. Brecht endorsed modernism and proposed an interventionist aesthetic in place of Lukácsian totality. He developed the alienation effect (*Verfremdungseffekt*), which distances the audience from characters and theatrical action, encouraging critical reflection on the action itself to foster a broader politics of social intervention. While artistic and narrative self-consciousness are hallmarks of postmodern literature, Brecht anticipated this self-reflexivity for political purposes, aiming to inspire active engagement with forces of change.

Walter Benjamin, another influential critic, examined the impact of changing material conditions on art. He argued that modern technologies, such as photography, undermined the aura of traditional art by making it mechanically reproducible. The aura, which conferred autonomy and authority as products of high culture, was subverted, opening radical new possibilities for artistic expression.

Structuralism also left its mark on Marxist criticism, particularly through the work of Louis Althusser. While a detailed discussion of Althusser will follow, it is pertinent to note here that his concept of ideological state apparatuses offers a more complex view of society.



These apparatuses possess relative autonomy, moving beyond the simplistic base-superstructure model proposed by Marx.

### **Stop to Consider**

Marxist criticism has traversed a long way since the time of Marx and Engels. During the Soviet era, Marxism degenerated into a set of dogmatic doctrines, stalling its potential for meaningful literary criticism. The base-superstructure model often creates problems due to its inherent determinism. The intellectual product of a particular historical period can become a material force of intellectual production in subsequent times. If we persist in exploring the economic basis of every ideological formation in an age, the result will be more or less the same. In that case, we are not truly examining the distinctive traits of that product; instead, we are merely seeking to establish similarities among diverse works of art and literature based on a shared economic foundation.

It is like reading Dickens and Hardy on the same economic footing and claiming they are essentially identical. This approach denies an intellectual formation its relative autonomy, ignoring the complex interplay of numerous factors that shape a work to varying degrees. Consequently, a literary scholar would have little substantial work to do, their sole task being to relate a text to a specific economic system. All Victorian literature would simply be seen as the intellectual product of capitalism, reducing critical analysis to this singular conclusion.

This, then, would mark the end of criticism. However, significant and enduring work of Marxist criticism, such as those of Raymond Williams and Walter Benjamin, for instance, strongly refute this determinist tendency of Marxism. Look at Pierre Macherey. He is claiming something similar to the poststructuralists, and he offers such a nuanced study of Borges, as you will learn in the next unit.

### 5.5 Pierre Macherey: Intellectual Context

Structuralist Marxism, a significant intellectual tradition, is represented by three prominent figures: Louis Althusser, Lucien Goldmann, and Pierre Macherey. These thinkers departed from the Hegelian emphasis on human agency, focusing instead on signifying systems, institutional structures, and the question of ideology. Structuralism, as a movement, contests the foundational tenets of humanism, which underscores the agency and possibilities of the human being, positioning humanity as the source of meaning and authority.

The Marxist notion of social transformation, traditionally grounded in the active historical agency of individuals, shares a fundamental principle of humanism. However, Marx himself, in his later works, diverged from this emphasis on individual agency, turning instead to the broader issues of social processes and conditions that underpin human consciousness. Althusser's influential essay *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses* illustrates this shift. He expounds on how ideological forces operate to generate subjectivity, focusing less on individual agency and more on the structural processes that shape human experience. We will have occasion to discuss Althusser later.

Lucien Goldmann, another key figure, posits that texts are products of larger mental structures, which in turn represent the mentality of specific social classes. Goldmann finds a parallel between the doctrines presented in literary texts and the operations of broader, extra-textual forces. He highlights a reciprocal relationship between artistic and social forms, and emphasizes that literature is deeply embedded within the socio-economic contexts from which it emerges.

Pierre Macherey, building on Althusser's theoretical framework, offers a nuanced view of the relationship between literature and ideology. In his seminal work *A Theory of Literary Production*, Macherey argues that writers do not merely reflect or reproduce dominant ideologies; rather, they reconfigure the linguistic and ideological materials available to them. Through their creative processes, writers reveal the fissures and contradictions inherent in the ideologies that seek to shape their works. According to Macherey, the idea of a literary text as a coherent and unified entity is a fallacy. This perceived coherence is imposed by the ideology that informs the text, yet this ideology itself is refracted and fragmented within the text's structure.

Macherey's work arrived in England at a time when Marxism was experiencing a renaissance, and it was met with great enthusiasm. As Terry Eagleton notes, British Marxists were searching for an alternative to the literary theories of Georg Lukács, and Macherey provided them with a compelling new approach (Macherey vii). Lukács emphasized the realist tradition and viewed literature as a reflection of social reality. Realism, according to him, amplifies in a dramatic fashion the basic contradictions inherent in a given historical period, and this contradiction is played out in the characters. Macherey rejected both the romantic notion of literature as an expression of an inner core and the orthodox Marxist view of literature as a mirror of pre-existing reality.

Instead, Macherey's theory emphasizes that literary texts do not have a singular origin, depth, or center. He draws on Althusser's key concepts, such as production, ideology, and scientific knowledge, to demystify the literary text. Literature, in Macherey's view, is a site of production, where the interplay of linguistic, ideological, and social forces creates a complex and multifaceted artifact. The task of literary criticism, therefore, is not to seek a hidden meaning or a

unified message but to uncover the ideological contradictions and silences that shape the text.

Macherey's approach revolutionized Marxist literary criticism by challenging the liberal-humanist assumptions that dominated earlier traditions. He situates literature within the broader framework of ideological and social processes, and offers a powerful critique of the notion of literary autonomy. His work not only expanded the scope of Marxist literary theory but also provided a critical methodology that remains influential in contemporary literary studies.

In sum, we can say that Pierre Macherey's contribution lies in the way he synthesizes structuralist and Marxist insights, and offers a framework that moves beyond traditional notions of literature as either a reflection or an expression of reality. His theory invites readers to engage with the complexities of textual production, highlighting the ways in which literature both reveals and contests the ideological forces that shape human experience.

**Check Your Progress**

1. How does Pierre Macherey challenge the traditional Marxist and liberal-humanist approaches to literature? (80 words)

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2. In what ways do Althusser, Goldmann, and Macherey differ in their understanding of the relationship between ideology and literary texts? (80 words)

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### **5.6 From Althusser to Macherey**

While Marx and Engels define ideology as a force of superstructure that corresponds to an economic base, the concept of ideology itself was central in Marxist discourse. Althusser's theory of ideology is important, and it influenced a number of later critics and thinkers. Althusser expounds the operation of state through material-administrative and ideological means - the larger institutional forces such as the administrative, political and repressive forces. On the other hand, ideological apparatuses (such as family, education, religion, culture) produce and perpetuate ideology to reproduce the condition of existence.

Althusser's concept of ideology had a significant influence on the subsequent Marxist tradition. He moves beyond viewing ideology as merely a product of the superstructure, emphasizing its necessity for reproducing the conditions of production. While bourgeois economists focus on the point of view of economic production, Althusser calls for a broader, more inclusive perspective. The reproduction of the conditions of production involves not only the reproduction of the means of production but also the maintenance of an entire economic network and order. Crucially, this includes the reproduction of productive forces. For production to sustain itself, these forces must be consistently made available, which highlights the critical role of institutions such as the church, schools, and other organizations. Ideology, and its reproduction, thus becomes one of

the essential modes for maintaining the conditions of production. Althusser elaborates on the role of the state in this context, distinguishing between Repressive State Apparatuses (RSAs) and Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs). While these apparatuses do not operate on exclusively repressive or ideological principles, these are their predominant functions. As the ruling class holds state power, it simultaneously exerts control over the ideological apparatuses, with ISAs playing a pivotal role in reproducing the relations of production. Drawing from the socio-political history of France, Althusser argues that education functions as a major ISA, illustrating how the church-family combination of earlier times was replaced by the school-family combination as the dominant ideological force shaping individuals. Schools impart know-how within the framework of a ruling ideology, embedding this ideology through teachings on morality and ethics. Althusser then shifts from the question of ideological apparatuses to the nature of ideology itself, proposing a general theory of ideology as fundamentally ahistorical. While the Marxist tradition often views ideology as a form of false consciousness, Althusser argues that ideology exists materially within various apparatuses and manifests through material practices. Most importantly, he asserts that the subject does not pre-exist ideology; rather, ideology interpellates individuals as subjects. The process of ideological operation involves recognizing individuals as subjects, analogous to hailing someone on the street. This operation appears almost instinctive, natural, and non-ideological.

Lucien Goldmann was Georg Lukacs's chief disciple. He examines how a text's structure embodies the structure of thought of the class the writer belongs to. More complete the articulation in the text of that vision, greater is the artistic merit of the work. A text, to Goldmann, is not the creation of an individual, as Macherey also

demonstrates. This is Goldmann's "genetic structuralism". In fact, Goldmann seeks to find a set of structural relationship between text, world-vision and history. Basically, historical situation of a social group is transposed into the structure of a work. His kind of criticism requires a dynamic and dialectical relationship between these elements. Here Eagleton calls him not dialectical. Because world view is supposed to be the direct expression of a social class, which the text directly expresses. Complexities, discontinuities, ruptures are overlooked in this symmetrical study. In other words, he holds a rather mechanical view of literature's relation to society and ideology.

This mechanistic view, as well as totality-centred view expressed by Lukacs are refuted by Macherey, saying that a text is bound to ideology "through what it does not say" (Eagleton Criticism 32). The gaps and silences are for a critic to make speak. The author cannot speak everything because of ideology.

Building on Althusser's framework, Pierre Macherey dwells on how a literary text negotiates ideology. It is Althusser's notion that great literature is not merely a product of ideology because it creates distance with the reader. A literary text through its fictional content and form distances itself from ideology. But it also exposes the contradictions of that ideology through textual absences and silences. (To know more about the gaps you may go through Wolfgang Iser's essay "The Phenomenology of Reading"). A text has certain hidden elements that have meaning beyond the author's intentions. The text has gaps, inconsistencies and ambiguities, suggesting what the text suppresses, but they speak which may contradict the author's ideology or move beyond his ideological framework. An author, for instance, may leave out certain aspects of social realities which clashes with his worldview. The critics go beyond what is explicitly given in a text to look for the unspoken

meanings. Therefore, Macherey calls for a Marxist criticism that reveals “the text’s unconscious content—that is, its repressed awareness of the flaws, stress, and incoherence in the very ideology that it incorporates” (Abrams 208).

**Check Your Progress**

1. What is Ideological State Apparatus? (50 words)

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2. How does Pierre Macherey envisage literature’s relation to ideology? (60 words)

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**5.7 Summing Up**

In this unit, we have briefly discussed Pierre Macherey’s life and works. It is important to situate Macherey’s thought as a new synthesis of Marxist criticism, as he demonstrates a novel mode of engaging with literary works within a Marxist framework. Notably, the notion of literature as merely an expression of the ruling ideology has been contested by Macherey, who offers a more nuanced understanding of how a text refracts ideology through its language and formal-technical devices. The formal and technical



aspects of literature have allegedly received scant attention in orthodox Marxist literary criticism.

The dangers of criticism are twofold: it may veer towards pure formalism, which regards content as little more than a formal necessity; alternatively, an exclusive focus on the 'political' content of a text assumes that its formal and linguistic dimensions are merely external. Macherey's discourse navigates a path between these extremes. Poststructuralism, by opening up the possibility of multiple readings of a text, parallels Macherey's call for a nuanced and perceptive reading of literature, aimed at unearthing the uncertainties and gaps concealed within a text.

In this context, you may also find Wolfgang Iser's essay *The Phenomenology of Reading* relevant. Iser discusses the reader's engagement with the text and their role in concretizing it through processes of anticipation and retrospection, as well as by bridging the gaps in the narrative. An illustration of Macherey's understanding of the reading process can be found in his essay *Borges and the Fictive Narrative*, which we will now move on to discuss in the next unit.

## 5.8 References and Suggested Readings

- Macherey, Pierre. *A Theory of Literary Production*. Routledge, 2006.
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- Althusser, Louis and Étienne Balibar. *Reading Capital*. Aakar Books, 2013.

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## UNIT 6

### PIERRE MACHEREY: “BORGES AND THE FICTIVE NARRATIVE”

#### Unit Structure:

- 6.1 Objectives
- 6.2 Introduction
- 6.3 Reading the Essay “Borges and the Fictive Narrative”
- 6.4 The basic arguments
- 6.5 Summing Up
- 6.6 References and Suggested Reading

#### 6.1 Objectives

By the end of this unit, you will be able to-

- Understand Pierre Macherey’s reading of Borges’s fiction,
- Analyse the text under discussion,
- Find out the basic arguments of the essay.

#### 6.2 Introduction

By now you have gained an understanding of Macherey’s thought and intellectual culture which shaped him as a critic and theorist. “Borges and the Fictive narrative” is a short critical essay by Macherey. This essay will enable you not just to gain an understanding of Macherey’s position with respect to Borges but also of the world of Borges itself. Here Macherey does not intend to elaborate the themes of Borges’s fiction. He basically reads Borges’s stories, especially those in *Fictions*, as metanarratives, that is, narratives that focus on the nature on narrative itself. While a narrative is generally viewed as a fictional discourse that focuses on

human experience and human condition, Borgesian narratives do not conceal their fictional character or carry out pretensions about authentic description of the real. We often talk about the singularity of narratives. Borges's notion of narrative goes against the conventional claims about the originality, authenticity or singularity of the narrative. Throughout the essay Macherey's post-structuralist position is evident. One can note the basic agreement between conceptualization of Borgesian narrative's self-conscious internal contradictions and the larger claim of the book *A Theory of literary Production* that a literary text does not simply mirror an ideology but in its act of representation necessarily exposes its inner contradictions.

### **6.3 Reading "Borges and the Fictive Narrative"**

Jorge Luis Borges does not offer any theoretical discourse on narrative. However, his preoccupation with the idea of narrative is reflected in his narratives themselves. In other words, rather than using a certain narrative strategy to depict themes of the human condition, human nature, or experience, 'narrative' or 'fiction' itself becomes a common theme in his work.

Pierre Macherey contends that Borges addresses issues of narrative through plot elements in his stories. A key idea that informs his work *Fictions* is that a book (a narrative, that is) is part of a totality of books and a reflection or duplication of other books. "The Library of Babel" depicts the systematic organization of books in an infinite library. As you go through the story, you will see how the idea of duplication persists: all of these books are of equal length, with the same number of pages, the same number of lines on each page, and even the same number of letters in each line. Again, the mirror in the vestibule "faithfully duplicates appearances" (*Fictions*

65). Despite this sameness or doubling, each book is a unique combination of letters, and the difference between two books might come down to a single space. This paradox of similarity and difference between books is a key feature of the story “Library.” Even each book is “deeply different from itself,” as Macherey says. Each book is a repository of infinite meaning and interpretation. The sameness or similarity of books—the infinite duplication—never implies sameness or limitation in interpretations but, to the contrary. Limited orthographic symbols give rise to endless permutations and combinations in an infinite series of books.

Apart from this similarity-difference paradox, Macherey also brings in notions of reading and writing in the context of Borges’s idea of narrative. You must be familiar with Roland Barthes’s concept of readerly and writerly texts. Borges illustrates the writerly operation of the reader of the book. The reader does not merely receive a given meaning but participates, along with the writer, in the act of writing, producing meanings and interpretations from their own perspective. Hence, reading mirrors writing. The self-contradictory nature of narrative (“each book remains deeply different from itself,” as Macherey writes) is evident when the reader’s writerly function in the construction of meaning is considered.

Because of the bifurcation or self-division in each book (going against the idea of narrative as an indivisible unity), each narrative reveals self-contradiction. The text contradicts itself in some way or another, allowing a retrospective re-reading and creating space for newer interpretations. Macherey refers to how Borges illustrates this point in the story “A Survey of the Works of Herbert Quain.” This trait, indicated by Macherey, of retrogressive movements in Borges’s narrative in a way that opens up newer interpretations, can be better understood with concrete examples. We have a unit on Borges’s “The Circular Ruins” in Paper 3036. You may go through

the unit to gain a better perspective on the subject being dealt with here. “The Circular Ruins” is about a man arriving at a desolate temple to dream a youth and to insert him into reality. The ‘dreamed’ youth is sent to another place to the North, while the dreamer realizes that, like his dream-child, he too is no other than a product of someone else’s dream. This final discovery allows the reader to construct an endless narrative of an infinite series of antecedent acts of dreaming. *The Circular Ruins* is, in retrogressive perspective, essentially an endless series of circular ruins.

The narrative, then, is a labyrinth that does not work progressively but backward. Macherey illustrates this fact with the story “Death and the Compass.” It is pertinent to mention here Wolfgang Iser’s essay “The Phenomenology of Reading.” Here, Iser describes anticipation and retrospection as two key features of the process of reading a text. Macherey, however, points out the retrogressive mechanism of Borges’s narrative. “Death and the Compass” involves a detective who sets out to solve a murder mystery. The story unfolds linearly through crime and investigation, culminating in a point of discovery. The detective spots the criminal by pursuing certain clues left by the criminal, finally finding a geometrical pattern among the crime spots. But the retrospective interpretation of the plot provides the reader with a counter-narrative. In the retrospective move, the certitude of the first narrative disappears, leading to the killing of the detective by the criminal. (To know more about the story, you may now go through the Stop to Consider section here.)

**Stop to Consider:**

In *Death and the Compass*, Detective Erik Lönnrot investigates a series of murders and unravels, in the course of his investigation, a mysterious pattern. The first crime occurs in a hotel, where a Jewish

scholar is murdered. A cryptic line referencing the revelation of the name of God intrigues Lönnrot, prompting him to delve into the scholar's books for clues.

The second crime takes place in the western suburbs of the capital, where a man named Azevedo is found dead beside a wall with a similar cryptic message. In the third case, another victim, Gryphius, is stabbed to death in a tavern, and once again, the same cryptic message is discovered.

Shortly after, Lönnrot receives an envelope containing a message stating that there will not be a fourth crime on March 3rd. The letter also hints that the locations of the three murders form a triangle. In a flash of intuition, Lönnrot deduces the location of a supposed fourth murder, predicting that it will occur at a specific spot to complete a geometrical pattern.

Confident in his deductions, Lönnrot arrives at an abandoned house, expecting to catch the perpetrator. However, he is confronted by Red Scharlach, Azevedo's friend and the mastermind behind the entire scheme. To Lönnrot's shock, his deductions were entirely fallacious. Red Scharlach reveals that the series of murders and the apparent pattern were deliberately orchestrated to lure and trap Lönnrot. The story concludes with Lönnrot realizing his mistake as Scharlach enacts his revenge.

Though Edgar Allan Poe also exhibited this retrogressive structure of the narrative directed from the end, in Borges, the end and beginning of the narrative turn out to be uncertain. (This point needs to be illustrated from the *Death and the Compass* story.)

An important aspect of Borges's narrative art is mentioned by Macherey when he says that Borges's stories are not simply riddles, leading to discovery or revelation that brings the narrative to a

standstill. Rather, his stories carry the reader and push him/her within a certain labyrinth of thought—an infinite universe, yet one sealed off. Here, the stories do not necessarily push the reader into a terrain of alternatives to enable her to choose from. Here we can bring in some reference to John Fowles’s novel *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*. In this novel, the author provides multiple endings, allowing the reader to choose from them. This postmodern technique is, therefore, liberating to the reader, who can acknowledge the multiplicity of possible realities within the text. (Let us, again, briefly discuss Fowles’s novel in the *Stop to Consider* section here.)

#### **Stop to Consider**

##### **Open-endedness in John Fowles’ *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*:**

John Fowles’s *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*, first published in 1969, is set in 1860s, which is both a homage and a critique to Victorian literature. The plot revolves around Charles Smithson, a gentleman engaged to Ernestina Freeman, a wealthy but conventional woman, and is equally fascinated with Sarah Woodruff, an enigmatic woman ostracized for her alleged affair with a French sailor. The enigma surrounding Sarah’s personality intrigues Charles and through relationship with her, he undergoes personal transformation. Challenging the conventions of Victorian realism and authorial omniscience, the novel offers three alternative endings:

1. In a traditional ending Charles marries Ernestina fulfilling expectations of a conventional Victorian narrative.
2. In the second ending Charles reunites with Sarah and achieves personal happiness, fulfilling the reader’s romantic expectations.



3. In the third and the most ambiguous ending, Charles and Sarah are estranged, with Charles being more aware of his individuality and freedom and accepting uncertainty of his future, and Sara remaining enigmatic and motivations unclear.

In contrast, even as Borges dramatizes the multiplicity of meaning and interpretation, he confines the reader to a specific labyrinth and conditions of infinite regress, guiding the reader towards a singular, often unsettled truth. In that sense, opening up narrative alternatives for a liberatory effect on the reader is not characteristic of Borges's narratives. If you familiarize yourself with the world of Borges, you will learn that the limits of human knowledge and the myriad paradoxes of existence are typical Borgesian obsessions.

This sealed-off world of Borges's stories is exemplified by Macherey through reference to *The Garden of Forking Paths*. This story keeps the reader shut in between a problem and its solution. The mystery is resolved at the end, but the story concludes in such a way that, rather than giving the reader the relaxed equanimity of finality, it pushes her towards a perception of the bizarre and towards confusion. In a retrospective view of all preceding events recounted in the narrative, this confusion traps the reader. (For a better understanding of the story, see *Stop to Consider*.)

**Stop to Consider:**

**“The Garden of the Forking paths”:**

The story starts with the impersonal tone of a report before switching to a personal account of an offensive and a pursuit filled with suspense, fear, and anxiety. A text by one Liddell Hart

mentions an offensive by British divisions that was postponed until morning due to rain. Following this mention is a statement by Dr. Yu Tsun, a former professor of English.

The statement begins with a suspenseful account involving Richard Madden. The narrator, presumably Dr. Yu Tsun, is a secret German agent who knows the exact location of the British artillery park. The reason behind his involvement in this murderous investigation is not due to loyalty to a nation but rather to prove his worth to his leader, who looks down upon the Germans. This unexpected motive offers a twist, emphasizing personal validation over ideological commitment. The use of the present tense suggests that the narrator is alive. He starts off in search of his adversary, Richard Madden, traveling by train to a place called Ashgrove. Some boys guide him, instructing him to turn left at every crossing to reach Dr. Stephen Albert's house.

The narrator is the great-grandson of Ts'uiPên, who supposedly wrote a novel and constructed a labyrinth in which people would lose their way. Ts'uiPên was murdered. The sheer irrationality of war and its reckless disregard for identity are demonstrated. A man with a lantern, later revealed to be Stephen Albert, intercepts the narrator and mentions *The Garden of Forking Paths*. This was the garden of Ts'uiPên. Albert conducts the narrator to a library, where a manuscript by Ts'uiPên is found, rife with contradictions. Furthermore, Ts'uiPên constructed a labyrinth of symbols. Albert, a Sinologist, speculates that the manuscript could be a cyclical volume with identical first and final pages. He draws parallels to *One Thousand and One Nights*, where there is a continual return to the night on which Scheherazade tells a story. Albert contends that "forking" might imply forking in time rather than in space. He suggests that Ts'uiPên's novel captures all possible outcomes by following both alternatives in a choice, leading to parallel, even

contradictory temporal trajectories. This creates, as the reader might think, a complex maze of interminable possibilities and paradoxical results. At this point, *The Garden of Forking Paths* seems to be the novel by Ts'uiPên, as indicated by the italicized typeface. Albert studies, translates, and speculates on the novel, finding that its central theme is time, though time is never explicitly mentioned in the text. Albert argues that Ts'uiPên believed in an infinite series of time, a bizarre maze of divergent and parallel timelines. This fabric of time contains all possibilities.

At this moment, the narrator becomes acutely aware of a range of bizarre possibilities, including the multiple identities of himself and Albert looming in the garden. The story ends abruptly with a series of happenings: the narrator kills Albert, is arrested by Madden, sentenced to be hanged, and successfully communicates to Berlin the name of the city to be attacked.

In *The Garden*, a solution is offered at the end, and the solution closes off the plot. Here, the problem is to find out the name of the exact location of the British division to destroy the enemy in the city's name. The city is bombarded, and the story comes to an end. But still, the content remains inexhaustible. The plot is concluded, but the story—that involves making sense of everything that happens in the story—remains inexhaustible. The interpretations offered do not invite the reader to make a choice. Thus, meaning remains centered on the problem of writing itself, as exemplified in the use of footnotes. Footnotes destabilize the narrative rather than clarify it. The technique of profuse allusions similarly complicates the reader's search for singular meaning. Macherey, therefore, contends that Borges does not write but indicates the story. Besides being intelligently sceptical, Borges's stories (narratives) are self-

critical as well. This self-consciousness and self-reflexivity are an important aspect of his narratives.

### **Stop to Consider**

#### **What is Self-reflexivity in Fiction:**

In a self-reflexive fictional narrative, the text consciously reflects on its own nature as a work of fiction. It does not trap the reader in the illusion of reality depicted within the story. Instead, the narrative draws attention to its own fictional nature and foregrounds the artifices that construct its fictional reality. Self-reflexivity is a hallmark of postmodern narratives. An obvious contrast would be the classic realist novels of the Victorian period, which strive to create a seamless illusion of reality.

Macherey's observation that Borges indicates his stories is significant. Borges is occupied with the question of writing stories. A story suggests an infinite possibility of variations. Borges chooses among the various forms of stories one that does not claim or prove to be authentic but rather unstable and artificial, fraught as it is with contradictions. The story Borges presents among myriad possibilities is presented at the end as artificial or contradictory. In this context, Macherey refers to the story "The Shape of the Sword." Here, Borges uses a method typical of detective novels, such as the use of the narrator's false assumption of a false identity, finally revealing his true identity—a discovery linked to the deciphering of a sign. But this sign assumes its full meaning only within a discourse that establishes its own artificiality. The story is woven around the theme of betrayal and guilt, framed as a conversation between Borges, the narrator, and an Englishman. The Englishman, who operates as the principal narrator of the story as well as the

protagonist, during a revolutionary upheaval in Ireland, saves a wounded fellow-revolutionary, Moon, and helps him recover. But finally, Moon betrays his comrade to the British authorities in exchange for his own safety. At the end of this narrative, the narrator, hitherto known as the Englishman, exposes the artificiality of his own narrative and reveals that he himself is Moon, the betrayer. The scar on Moon's face is a crucial token of true identity, but the physical sign of the scar would mean nothing if it were not integrated into the discourse. The truth is revealed not just through a discourse, which many detective narratives employ, but by bringing the discourse into question and deceiving the reader.

While the notion of a narrative is grounded on following a pathway leading to a point of discovery or truth, *The Garden* apparently does the same because a problem is solved: the German spy keen to discover and communicate the name of the town that locates the British army finally commits a crime against Albert to signal the name of the town (which is the same) to the Germans. This simple unravelling of the mystery is insignificant, but it leads to another meaning that is crucial to the text. Going back to the idea of the labyrinthine novel in the story, we learn that the narrator finds a secret though he is not looking for it. This apparently unrelated discourse on the labyrinth is, in fact, crucial for understanding Borges's idea of an ideal, if impossible, narrative. The labyrinthine novel of *Ts'uiPên* allows the writer to pursue all directions of narrative choice, all narrative pathways, leading to a harrowing network of contradictions and ambiguities surrounding reality and identity.

The idea of a labyrinthine narrative, where the artifice of the labyrinth is used, allows all choices and allusions to co-exist, forming a bizarrely impossible totality. Normally, a narrative chooses one pathway and pursues one trajectory of solution, giving

it an air of truth. An objective narrative that embraces all possibilities is an impossibility because it is ‘condemned’ to conceal all the forkings. But these absences and exclusions determine the real narrative.

Borges uses the concept of the labyrinth across his stories to explore complex ideas of human reality, narrative, and identity. The labyrinth represents the infinite, the unknowable, and the multiplicity of possible outcomes and interpretations. Each of Borges’s stories reflects the idea of the labyrinth. Macherey contends that though the story may hint at the complexity or multiplicity of a labyrinth, the narrative itself offers a singular, readable path—a path the reader can follow, but with a hint that many other potential narratives remain hidden or inaccessible. Borges’s stories recurrently acknowledge the infinite complexity of the labyrinth but still provide a finite, coherent narrative that the reader can grasp.

Macherey, in this essay, examines the limitations and possibilities of narrative. The objectives in the essay are two-pronged: to comment on the specific qualities of Borges’s narrative and to offer an exposition of the general points about the nature of narrative itself. Borges’s work serves as an effective example of how narrative works. In a real narrative, unlike the fictive labyrinth in Borges, the absence of all alternatives or all possible narratives shapes the real one. Therefore, a narrative contains infinite absences of other narratives and is hence endlessly self-contradictory. While referring to absence, Macherey refers to the story *Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius* and the theme of the lost book, which survives only in rudiments and traces. A total book, a comprehensive narrative, is a myth, and therefore it is practicable to write a necessarily incomplete narrative that can highlight its insufficiency and absences.

A central theme in Macherey's book is that texts are not mere reflections of reality or ideology. They are sites of active production of meaning—a poststructuralist idea. How literature engages the reader in the production of meaning is a key concern in the essay on Borges. Literary texts contain hidden, contradictory meanings. The idea of the labyrinth resonates perfectly with this condition of textual production of meaning. While it is true that literary texts are shaped by ideological structures, the text is not a mere reflection of ideology. Literary texts inscribe the inherent contradictions within a given ideology. Further, Macherey's other preoccupation is the active role of the reader in the construction of meaning in a text.

Macherey's work fundamentally critiques the basic axiom of conventional literary criticism that a text has a single, unified meaning or a determinate set of meanings. On the other hand, Macherey also points out the limits of interpretation. No literary text can be exhaustively explained or interpreted, nor can an interpretation exhaust the meaning of a text.

**SAQ**

1. What is Borges's fictive narrative? How is this fictive idea of narrative depicted in his stories? (100 words)

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How does Macherey illustrate the fundamental problems of narrative with reference to Borges's fiction? (150 words)

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#### 6.4 The Basic Arguments

Borges is obsessed with the idea of narrative, but he does not provide a theory of the same (in the way Aristotle did, for instance). With references to stories in the collection *Fictions*, Macherey argues that narrative is a persistent theme in Borges, and his stories often depict the idea of a 'fictive' narrative. To illustrate this claim, let me state that in one of the stories, the central theme is a mysterious novel, and in another, an impossible library.

In *Fictions*, narratives exist as a necessity and in duplication. Let me make it clear that this is not Aristotelian necessity where beginning, middle and ending are logically and necessarily inter-connected. In Borges, a narrative exists as a part in a totality of narratives. Similarly, duplicity is also a property of narrative. All narratives (in a given language) resort to the same limited set of verbal and orthographic signs, albeit in varied combinations. Multiplicity and duplicity lead to paradoxical possibilities in *The Library of Babel*, as we have discussed. A book (or a narrative) is also internally multiplied; it is structured like a library. In conversation with Osvaldo Ferrari, Borges remarks that "the Bible is a library" (Conversations 24). In explanation he writes that "they are clearly works that correspond to quite different minds and quite different localities, and, above all, to different centuries, to diverse periods of



thought” (24). However, Macherey here stresses the internal bifurcation of narrative. A book is read by the reader. Readings and interpretations differ from reader to reader. Thus, the physical image of proliferation of books in the fictive Library of Babel illustrates the endless possibilities of meaning and interpretation.

Macherey contends that Borges’ narrative are internally so divided that it provides within the narrative a space for retrogressive movement, opening up possibility of interpretation. While explicating the retrogressive character of Borgesian narrative, Macherey distinguishes Borges from Edgar Allan Poe. Borgesian retrogression confounds the notion of ending and beginning and does not provide the reader the certitude of closure nor does beginning indicate the origin of the problem being narrativized. Macherey further argues here that Borgesian narrative is not structured like a riddle. A riddle, once cracked, is no longer a riddle. Rather, the narratives construct a world which is sealed off for the reader. Here we can make a difference between postmodern fiction that allows the reader to choose on from among multiple narrative pathways. (We have illustrated this point in the previous section.) Macherey writes: “The meaning does not follow from the possible choice between several interpretations.”(282). In “The Shape of the Sword” the narrator tells the story of a betrayal. When the identity of the betrayer is revealed through deciphering a sign (which is a scar on the face of the betrayer), all explanations become superfluous, as the scar tells the real truth. But here the scar itself is not self-sufficient; it is an ordinary physical sign that acquires meaning through a narrative discourse: the Englishman’s narrative provides the necessary context that gives the scar its significance. But here the revelation also brings the discourse (that is, the Englishman’s narrative) into question. We now know that the Englishman’s narrative, though at first seems objective and

detached, is indeed highly questionable, as he himself turns out to be the traitor that he rails against.

While it is true that in Borges the ending resolves a problem; but nevertheless, it propels one for a retrogressive movement in which the ending is not seen as the closure of the story. In “Garden of Forking Paths” a problem is resolved towards the end; the name of a town is communicated through an act of killing—the victim and the town share the same name. but this is an unimportant fact in the narrative. It is only a culmination of a certain narrative pathway chosen by Borges in the story. The real problem of the narrative is epitomized in the more central theme of the labyrinthine narrative composed by Tsui Pen. The problems of narratives are resolved by this fictive narrative in the sense that while a real narrative is obliged to choose one narrative pathway from among multiple choices, in this fictive narrative all solutions are pursued, forming a bizarrely intricate and impossible maze of paradoxical possibilities.

Thus, Machery defines the ‘real ‘narrative (as contrasted with the ‘fictive one, as you now understand), as ‘the absence of all other possible narratives from among which it could have been chosen. Borges invents various allegories to illustrate the nature of narrative—be it the allegory of the Library or of the Garden, or of the “lost book” in the story “*Tlön , Uqbar, Orbis Tertius*”.

### **Check Your Progress**

Write about the retrogressive character of Borgesian narrative, with reference to any short story of Borges that you have read. (200 words)

## 6.5 Summing Up

Borges's approach to narrative challenges conventional notions of originality, authenticity, and singularity. A key aspect of Borges's perspective is the paradox of similarity and difference inherent in all narratives. This raises critical questions: How do we understand the sameness of narratives? How do we perceive their differences? How can a text be different from itself? The perception of meaning, order, and uniqueness in a narrative reflects the reader's effort to impose coherence in a context where meaning is endlessly disseminated across an infinite number of texts. This aligns with the concept of intertextuality, which posits that the meaning of a text is distributed across other texts, rejecting the idea of a self-contained narrative.

This plurality of narratives also emphasizes the role of the reader. In Macherey's poststructuralist framework, meaning is not passively received from a text but actively produced in the act of reading. The self-contradictory nature of narrative, as Macherey identifies, requires active reader participation to uncover meaning. This dynamic resonates with Borges's self-reflexive narratives, which reveal truths not through conventional discourse but by exposing the artificiality of discourse itself. Macherey's analysis highlights how this self-contradictory character is central to understanding the structure and function of Borgesian narratives.

Ultimately, Macherey uses Borges's narratives to illustrate the broader possibilities and limitations of narrative as a form. His essay, while a critical commentary on Borges, is also a profound exploration of narrative theory. It reflects Macherey's view of the literary text as a site of active meaning production, capable of subverting established ideologies by exposing their internal contradictions. This approach positions the literary narrative as a space where meaning is constantly negotiated and redefined.

## 6.6 References and Suggested Readings

Borges, Jorge Luis. *Fictions*. Translated by Andrew Hurvey. Penguin Books, 1998.

Borges, Jorge Luis and Osvaldo Ferrari. *Conversation Volume 2*. Translated by Tom boll. Seagull Books, 2015.

Macherey, Pierre. *A Theory of Literary Production*. Translated by Geoffrey Wall. Routledge Classics, 2006.

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