

**DIRECTORATE OF DISTANCE EDUCATION  
UNIVERSITY OF NORTH BENGAL**

**MASTER OF ARTS-PHILOSOPHY  
SEMESTER -III**

**POST MODERNISM  
OPEN ELECTIVE 305  
BLOCK-1**

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## UNIVERSITY OF NORTH BENGAL

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## **FOREWORD**

The Self Learning Material (SLM) is written with the aim of providing simple and organized study content to all the learners. The SLMs are prepared on the framework of being mutually cohesive, internally consistent and structured as per the university's syllabi. It is a humble attempt to give glimpses of the various approaches and dimensions to the topic of study and to kindle the learner's interest to the subject

We have tried to put together information from various sources into this book that has been written in an engaging style with interesting and relevant examples. It introduces you to the insights of subject concepts and theories and presents them in a way that is easy to understand and comprehend.

We always believe in continuous improvement and would periodically update the content in the very interest of the learners. It may be added that despite enormous efforts and coordination, there is every possibility for some omission or inadequacy in few areas or topics, which would definitely be rectified in future.

We hope you enjoy learning from this book and the experience truly enrich your learning and help you to advance in your career and future endeavours.

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# POST MODARNISM

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# **BLOCK 1 : POST MODERNISM**

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## **Introduction to the Block**

Unit 1 deals with the Theories of Modernisation and Modernity. The theories of Modernisation inform us about how the various parts of the world developed into industrial powers.

Unit 2 deals with the Tradition and Modernity. In this unit we will take up the topics of tradition and modernity. At the very outset it is pointed out that tradition and modernity are not contradictory or competing concepts.

Unit 3 deals with Postmodernism and the purpose of this unit is to familiarize you with the basics of postmodernism. The views of two French thinkers (Lyotard and Baudrillard) and of two literary critics (Ihab Hassan and Linda Hutcheon) would also be briefly discussed.

Unit 4 deals with Post-structuralism which means it is the intellectual trend in the ontology of ideas and schools of ideas, that they are constantly superseded. The ideas or ideologies that are superseded recede into the history of ideas.

Unit 5 deals with Implications: The death of the author. In the preceding units, you prepared for Deconstruction with some preliminary concepts relating to New Criticism and Structuralism and studied Deconstruction proper as it applied to Structuralism in general and Saussure's linguistic theory in particular

Unit 6 deals with the concept and philosophy of Derrida. In this unit, we will examine Derrida's work much more closely with a view to better appreciate its implications for questions of gender identity and politics.

Unit 7 deals with the concept of Beginning Deconstruction. Structuralism flourished for talkatively short period about two decades or so the late 1960s, another movement, deriving its name from Structuralism began to emerging of Structuralism.

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# **UNIT 1: THEORIES OF MODERNISATION AND MODERNITY**

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## **STRUCTURE**

- 1.0 Objectives
- 1.1 Introduction
- 1.2 Approaches to Modernisation
- 1.3 Implication of Modernisation Theories
- 1.4 Phases in Modernisation Processes
- 1.5 Modernisation : The Asian Syndrome
- 1.6 Modernisation Process as a Whole
- 1.7 The Phenomena of Modernity
- 1.8 Approaches to Modernity
- 1.9 Let us sum up
- 1.10 Key Words
- 1.11 Questions for Review
- 1.12 Suggested readings and references
- 1.13 Answers to Check Your Progress

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## **1.0 OBJECTIVES**

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After having read this unit you will be able to,

- To define Modernisation
- To outline approaches, implications, and phases of Modernisation
- To discuss Modernisation in India
- To describe the phenomena of modernity
- To outline the approaches to mode

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## **1.1 INTRODUCTION**

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The theories of Modernisation inform us about how the various parts of the world developed into industrial powers. The approaches/theories that describe and analyse how and why this happened are the subject of the initial part of this lesson. Thereafter we will turn to modernity and see

how a presentation and analysis of the same helps our understanding of modern western society as also the social processes witnessed in some Asian societies. Thus Modernisation is an outcome of various social processes. The major events in this historical development began after the IIInd world war and these include the emergence of America (US) as a superpower in the globe which had the result of trying to stymie the rise of communism. To bring about this aim of 'containment ' the US invested greatly in the strengthening of the economic base of certain countries including Western Europe, South Korea and Japan. Modernisation also stems from the growth of the communist movements in China Vietnam, Soviet Union (now no longer existing as a communist bloc) and Cuba. The third of these processes include the factors of decolonialisation in Asia and Africa and the termination of colonies controlled by European powers. At this point of time the former colonies had to face the challenge of adopting some appropriate model of growth. In this they were assisted and helped by the US which sent vast teams of social scientists to study the ground situation in the new nations states. The idea behind this move of the US was to see how capitalist ideologies could be used in the economic growth of these nations most of whom were poor due to the long period of colonisation which had greatly debilitated their resources and has been deeply exploited. This included the export of raw materials which were turned into products and commodities and reexported to the colonies so as to make great economic profits. This strategy of supplanting capitalism and capitalist ideologies was no doubt also an attempt to the influence of communist ideology and to destroy it over a period of time. There is thus a great dimension of political maneuvers and ideology which is involved in the process of Modernisation. Thus the scholars in all fields of social science studied these societies and their findings began to be published soon after the IIInd world war. The main tools of analysis and of subsequent published included primarily the evolutionary theory and secondly the functionalist theory. Let us describe these approaches now so that the overall process of Modernisation begins to be clear. Thus evolutionary theory and theorists pointed out the several factors which comprised the view point of this approach found social change in these societies to be in

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a linear progression going from primitive to complex society. This was held to be so in all societies.

Again this theory and the theorists associated with it held that such linear progress of societies was leading to a better world and represented the good of humanity and civilization at large. Further social change was envisioned as a gradual occurrence and was dissociated from any sudden and violent chain of events eg revolution. Change was slow and steady and not sudden and violent as the communist ideology upheld. This slow change considering the situation of modern societies was felt to take enormous spans of time running in to centuries, not just decades. Thus the functionalist theorists, foremost of whom was Parsons, built up various tenets to promote its view point the main ones being the analogy of society as being an organism which had various interrelated segments in societal institutions. In this organismic entity (society) each of the various institutions performed a particular part which contributed to the whole. This theory propagated that there were four main functions which the institutions performed. These were the functions of - (a) adaptation to the environment performed by the capitalist economic system. Then was the function of. (b) goal attainment which was a government function a function which encompassed liberal aims(Rojas 1996: p1). Next came the function of integration performed by legal and religious institutions, specifically the Christian religion. Finally there is the latency function performed by the family and by educational institutions.

Modernity, a topic in the humanities and social sciences, is both a historical period (the modern era), as well as the ensemble of particular socio-cultural norms, attitudes and practices that arose in the wake of the Renaissance—in the "Age of Reason" of 17th-century thought and the 18th-century "Enlightenment". Some commentators consider the era of modernity to have ended by 1930, with World War II in 1945, or the 1980s or 1990s; the following era is called postmodernity. The term "contemporary history" is also used to refer to the post-1945 timeframe, without assigning it to either the modern or postmodern era. (Thus



"modern" may be used as a name of a particular era in the past, as opposed to meaning "the current era".)

Depending on the field, "modernity" may refer to different time periods or qualities. In historiography, the 17th and 18th centuries are usually described as early modern, while the long 19th century corresponds to "modern history" proper. While it includes a wide range of interrelated historical processes and cultural phenomena (from fashion to modern warfare), it can also refer to the subjective or existential experience of the conditions they produce, and their ongoing impact on human culture, institutions, and politics (Berman 2010, 15–36).

As an analytical concept and normative ideal, modernity is closely linked to the ethos of philosophical and aesthetic modernism; political and intellectual currents that intersect with the Enlightenment; and subsequent developments such as existentialism, modern art, the formal establishment of social science, and contemporaneous antithetical developments such as Marxism. It also encompasses the social relations associated with the rise of capitalism, and shifts in attitudes associated with secularisation and post-industrial life (Berman 2010, 15–36).

By the late 19th and 20th centuries, modernist art, politics, science and culture has come to dominate not only Western Europe and North America, but almost every civilized area on the globe, including movements thought of as opposed to the West and globalization. The modern era is closely associated with the development of individualism, capitalism, urbanization and a belief in the possibilities of technological and political progress. Wars and other perceived problems of this era, many of which come from the effects of rapid change, and the connected loss of strength of traditional religious and ethical norms, have led to many reactions against modern development. Optimism and belief in constant progress has been most recently criticized by postmodernism while the dominance of Western Europe and Anglo-America over other continents has been criticized by postcolonial theory.

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In the view of Michel Foucault (1975) (classified as a proponent of postmodernism though he himself rejected the "postmodernism" label, considering his work as "a critical history of modernity"—see, e.g., Call 2002, 65), "modernity" as a historical category is marked by developments such as a questioning or rejection of tradition; the prioritization of individualism, freedom and formal equality; faith in inevitable social, scientific and technological progress, rationalization and professionalization, a movement from feudalism (or agrarianism) toward capitalism and the market economy, industrialization, urbanization and secularisation, the development of the nation-state, representative democracy, public education (etc.) (Foucault 1977, 170–77).

In the context of art history, "modernity" (modernité) has a more limited sense, "modern art" covering the period of c. 1860–1970. Use of the term in this sense is attributed to Charles Baudelaire, who in his 1864 essay "The Painter of Modern Life", designated the "fleeting, ephemeral experience of life in an urban metropolis", and the responsibility art has to capture that experience. In this sense, the term refers to "a particular relationship to time, one characterized by intense historical discontinuity or rupture, openness to the novelty of the future, and a heightened sensitivity to what is unique about the present" (Kompridis 2006, 32–59).

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## **1.2 APPROACHES TO MODERNISATION**

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Thus Modernisation approaches distinguished between traditional societies and modern societies. Thus the traditional societies were such that they tended to have a large personal, face to face nature which was felt to be inferior in terms of market relations. On the other hand modern societies tended to be neutral and therefore much more capable of dealing with and exploiting the market and the environment. One of the key institutions in the society is the family and the nature of this differed again in traditional and modern societies. Thus the family in traditional societies was responsible for many functions. That is to say it is multifunctional and covered issues of religion, welfare, education,

reproduction also emotional scaffolding. On the other hand the modern family which the functions of the family are now the domain of the state.

In this theory social disturbances occur when any of the parts of society begin to malfunction or to fail to deliver what was expected of it to maintain the status quo. Disturbances include peaceful / violent agitation, revolution, guerilla warfare and now terrorism. However there is a disturbing side to these activities because any individual / institution that provokes the state and the status quo is deliberately and often violently desisted and resisted for doing so. These actions are deliberately viewed as action which is humanitarian. The question of human rights is a recent phenomena and organisations have be instituted to ensure that democracy is not violated at the cost of middle level disturbances whether by groups or by institutions.

*Mc Donaldization* If we equate formal rationality with modernity, then the success and spread of the fast food restaurant, as well as to the degree to which it is serving as a model for much of the rest of society, indicate that we continue to live in a modern world... While there may be other changes in the economy which support the idea of a post industrial society, the fast food restaurant and the many other elements that are modeled after it do not. (Ritzer 1996, sociological theory. P:579).

Smelser's point of view differed somewhat from what we have been pointing out. He took as his point of attention the effect of the economy and related institutions on the overall social structure. He pointed out that in Modernisation process society developed from simple technology to complex ideology. Further this was a movement away from subsistence to cash crops so far as agriculture is concerned. Again Smelser indicated that machine power begins to dominate pushing aside simply human (physical) labour. Finally there is an emphasis on urbanisation and urban structures rather than development of the rural areas. Smelser however was realistic enough to realise that these developments were not simple and linear but that these processes took place at the same time (together) but not at the same rate (Smesler, 1969). Also such changes would occur

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at a different pace at different social structure and societies. In other words there was not one single trajectory towards social change because the traditions were varied in different societies. They therefore provided different kinds of challenges. Similarly Rostow published a theory of Modernisation which took the terminology of aviation and proposed various stages of development. This theory talks of a primitive society moving on to get preconditions for the pre “take – off” onto the “take-off stage”, the drive to maturity and finally to a mass consumption society. Thus for Rostow (Rostow, 1960) economic development goes through various stages and that this is universal to all societies, and that Modernisation is a process of homogenisation, of Europeanization, irreversible progressive, evolutionary and transformative. This theory has some questionable implications. Thus following this theory it is implied that the nations which are traditional have as their ultimate model western advanced societies which they must emulate in every way to themselves reach an advanced state/modern state. This in itself implies that the capitalist state and ideology is the path to be followed by the under developed states. Thus Modernisation and theories explaining it accept without hesitation that American policies of trade and foreign policy, and that of international relations have to be accepted and subscribed to because they are at the core of the modernising process.

The Late Latin adjective *modernus*, a derivation from the adverb *modo* "presently, just now", is attested from the 5th century, at first in the context of distinguishing the Christian era from the pagan era. In the 6th century, Cassiodorus appears to have been the first writer to use *modernus* "modern" regularly to refer to his own age (O'Donnell 1979, 235 n9). The terms *antiquus* and *modernus* were used in a chronological sense in the Carolingian era. For example, a *magister modernus* referred to a contemporary scholar, as opposed to old authorities such as Benedict of Nursia. In early medieval usage, *modernus* referred to authorities younger than pagan antiquity and the early church fathers, but not necessarily to the present day, and could include authors several centuries old, from about the time of Bede, i.e. referring to the time after

the foundation of the Order of Saint Benedict and/or the fall of the Western Roman Empire (Hartmann 1974, *passim*).

The Latin adjective was adopted in Middle French, as *moderne*, by the 15th century, and hence, in the early Tudor period, into Early Modern English. The early modern word meant "now existing", or "pertaining to the present times", not necessarily with a positive connotation. Shakespeare uses *modern* in the sense of "every-day, ordinary, commonplace".

The word entered wide usage in the context of the late 17th-century quarrel of the Ancients and the Moderns within the Académie française, debating the question of "Is Modern culture superior to Classical (Græco-Roman) culture?" In the context of this debate, the "ancients" (*anciens*) and "moderns" (*modernes*) were proponents of opposing views, the former believing that contemporary writers could do no better than imitate the genius of classical antiquity, while the latter, first with Charles Perrault (1687), proposed that more than a mere "Renaissance" of ancient achievements, the "Age of Reason" had gone beyond what had been possible in the classical period. The term *modernity*, first coined in the 1620s, in this context assumed the implication of a historical epoch following the Renaissance, in which the achievements of antiquity were surpassed (Delanty 2007).

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### **1.3 IMPLICATION OF MODERNISATION THEORIES**

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As you will have noticed that there is a heavy western bias in these theories and their implications. Modernisation theory itself is mostly a western product and sets up these societies as an ideal that the less developed countries must follow without hesitation including capitalist ideology because this "works" and works best. However dependency theory takes a wider global perspective. It points out that the problems faced in development are not just those of social structure in traditional societies but in large part due to world wide structures imposed by the Western world, or the North.

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Thus Andre Gunder Frank has pointed out that relations between North and South are arranged as a chain described by him as “metropolis – satellite” relationships. Thus we can see that there is an underlying hierarchy in world relations (Foster-Coster, 1985). At the top of the chain is the metropolis (US) that has no strong dependence on other regions. We then go on to the strong dependencies but are dependent on the USA (or other well developed Western societies) for aid or any other kind of help. The downward chain continues and culminates right down to states (nations) which are very highly or even totally dependent on the nations higher up in the hierarchy of dependencies for almost everything in food, fertilizers, clothes, automobiles, machines etc. According to Frank such dependencies become a problem when a State wants to develop itself economically and socially. Thus such moves often call for sanctions against the satellite states by the metropolises on which the satellite is dependent. This means also that dependency of this sort stems the freedom to chose by the satellite states, and to try and evolve in their own way because whatever they have by way of economic wealth is consumed by the nations higher in the hierarchy.

This theory is readily witnessed in international relations and the aid to the third world by the North have the most exploitative terms and conditions, which ensure that the satellite states can never be free of the donor in economic terms. Frank opines that the dismantling of such relations can alone lead to development along the lines that the third world nations want. Thus dependency theory is opposed to Modernisation theory, but it is definitely an alternative explanation. Further such an explanation exposes some harsh realities of contemporary societies across the globe. Modernisation theory is more of an ideology whereas dependency theories expose the harsh economic international realities. Neither of them has produced any specific development just attributable to them. It may be noted however that Modernisation has since the 17th century has had an affect, beginning with the Western countries, impacted all over the globe. To give an example let us turn to the field of communication. Thus Modernisation

theories shed light on how the media is affected by these relatively recent changes both in relatively traditional and postmodern societies we may note that the Modernisation theories we have been discussing can be seen to have evolved in three relatively distinct phases. The first phase of these theories began in the 1950s and 1960s and tried to explain how Western styles of living gradually spread all over the globe (world). These was also a spread of technological innovations and the ideology of individualism

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## 1.4 PHASES IN MODERNISATION PROCESSES

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- The economic aspect where the mass media helped to spread technological innovations that were at the core of Modernisation.
- Cultural development including education and literacy rates. This too was aided by the mass media which can promote modernity.
- Identify development especially a rational identity was also helped by the media including the process of nation building and election

However a basic shortcoming of these approaches to Modernisation was their Western bias. Now the second phase of Modernisation was linked to critical theory that held away in the 1980s. These theories are in fact a critique of the western impact of Modernisation. Thus according to the media dependency theory there was a dependence of the developing countries on the mass media of the western world. That is to say the peripheral countries depended upon the core. Now we come to the third phase of the development of Modernisation theory beginning in the 1990s. These theories attempted to be neutral in their approach. Thus according to Giddens modern society (Giddens, A. 1991) and culture is marked by time space distantiation and disembbeding features or characteristics. Thus while traditional society involves much face to face interaction by those living in proximity to each other in modern cultures and societies the space across which interaction occurs using mass

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media. Thus the disembedding process such as currency, symbols, the internet and english language all help bring the North and South into a clearer focus. We now term to another area of Modernisation which has its presentation and analysis based on work in India.

### Check Your Progress 1

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer.

b) Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit.

1. Discuss about the Approaches to Modernisation.

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2. What is the Implication of Modernisation Theories?

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3. What are the Phases in Modernisation Processes?

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## 1.5 MODERNISATION: THE ASIAN SYNDROME

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Yogendra Singh points out at the beginning of his analysis that prior to Modernisation the traditions of India were based on the various principles of hierarchy, holism, continuity and transcendence. These were the basic aspects of tradition. These factors to some extent existed also in the traditional west. However as Singh notes Indian and Western tradition were in fact divergent to each other. This arose specifically from their own differing historical background their specific social and cultural heritage and overall social situation. Singh asks whether despite these differences would it lead to a universal model of Modernisation? Singh distinguishes between social change perse and Modernisation. Social change as such need not necessarily imply Modernisation. However the changes which were ortho-genetic and hetero- genetic were pre-modern. Thus the Islamic tradition in India was heterogenetic and was established by conquest. Thus endogenous change in Hinduism were confined to Sanskritisation. This in itself was based on a historical process which took many generations and was positional alone not structural. Modernisation in India commenced with its contact with the west which brought about vast changes in the Indian social structure. However it cannot be said that all contacts led to Modernisation. In fact Singh notes that in the process of contact with the west certain traditional institution also got further strengthened. Thus as Singh notes it would be misleading to think of a clear polarity between tradition and modernity, and he feels this is more theoretical than actual.

### **Changes in Traditional India**

The changes which thus occurred were confined to differentiation within the framework of traditional social structure and values; structural changes were way few, and those which took place were limited in respect of the type of roles ....Similar development in religious role structure and organisations partially followed the emergence of other traditions. But these changes by no means could be called structural, since differentiation of roles was segmental and did not alter the system as a whole. (Yogendra Singh, 1986, *The Modernisation Of Indian Tradition*: p:193).

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During the British period Modernisation was selective and sequential. It was not in synchronisation with family caste and village. These areas were not of much concern by the British, more so after the revolt of 1857. British administration felt that these structures were not dynamic and were autonomous, especially the village and caste system. Caste was considered in the army and beaurocrasy, and in the national movement of a communal electorate was introduced. Singh feels these factors influenced the post colonial Modernisation process. The process of Modernisation found expression and ground in the freedom struggle of India led by Mahatma Gandhi whose actions and mobilisation of the masses led to what Singh calls a new political culture of Modernisation. However, Gandhi was not able to avert the partition of the nation into two because the historical background of Islam and Hinduism was different. Singh asks how Modernisation can lead to an integrative pattern which is rather a complicated one whether this is overt or covert. How can a society avert a structural breakdown. From here on in the answer we are on familiar ground (discussed earlier in this unit) as Singh turns to the main theories of Modernisation, that is the structural and the evolutionary theories of Modernisation. These approaches have been adequately discussed earlier and we will not repeat them again. The student can at this point go back to the beginning of the unit before reading further.

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## **1.6 MODERNISATION PROCESS AS A WHOLE**

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In this analysis Singh now turns towards a discussion of Modernisation as a whole. He points out that Modernisation did not lead to institutional and structural breakdown because of the characteristics of society in India. One of these characteristics was the political structures. Further the caste system itself was also independent of the political system. Thus the various village areas had their own councils (panchayat) through which they attempted to solve village level problems. This type of inter structural independence was a great facilitator of Modernisation, but as pointed out earlier did not lead to societal breakdown. Thus Singh notes

that modernity developed as a sub-structure and sub-culture rather an over arching entity. Over time however this segmental presence of Modernisation became 'encompassing' and the structural autonomy was no longer the prime 'shockabsorber'. Again changes in political systems made this pervade on society and stratification cultures. In its wake there are stresses on the entire cultural system. However it is clear that Modernisation requires adaptive changes in value systems which are non traditional in terms of values and norms. Singh gives the example of the process of secularism and untouchability which are definitely part of the Modernisation process in present day India which is resisted by the traditional value system (Singh, 1986).

Singh asks again whether society in India be able to avoid "structural breakdown" in what he refers to as the "second phase" of Modernisation? Further the absence of the structural autonomy creates serious problems or "bottlenecks" for the transition to modernity? Thus Singh opines that in the cultural area legislations have altered the overall landscape since they have been made with a view to terminate social inequality and its attendant exploitation and alienation, and pave the way towards democratic rights and other commitments made in the constitution of India. Such processes have pushed society in India away from the positional changes of Srinivas's theory of Sanskritisation. In place of this process there has been a creation of new identifies, caste associations and tribes. This process in itself is speeded up by the Great Traditions of Modernisation eg education, industrialisation and urbanisation. Further Singh notes that traditional structures are being mobilised for modern objectives and protest movements. Paradoxically tradition itself is strengthened because media and transport processes spread ritual structures, and help organise further the various religious groups and activities. Again religious sects and other religious groupings employ the bureaucratic approach and this is in part responsible towards the integration of sects from the overarching religious order. However Singh is careful to point out that in the post colonial period of Modernisation there have been several structural changes. Thus caste, family, village, and community retained their traditional identity. Caste especially has

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been witnessed to be extreme fluid and adaptive to new situations and has in no way been abolished so far as the ground reality is concerned.

Further caste has adapted to the modern era in India by involving itself in many different areas such as democratic participation, politics and trade unionism, and is tenacious in its persistence more so in the area of joint family groups. Modernisation in the colonial era was relatively homogenous in the elite structures. Thus the elite from industry, military and politics came from a background in caste and class stratum. These elite had access to modern education and had similar ideologies. It is clear then that the base for such elites was fairly delimited. In the post independence era this narrow base has increased. The result of this that there is a differentiation between the elites themselves, broadly the political and the non political elite. Singh points out that the political elite is less Westernized and identify much more with traditionality and symbols related to it. Singh also notes that the federal structure of a one party system has given way to a multiparty system, with the subsequent divergence in ideologies. Further the income created by the various FYPs has mainly benefited those who are already rich rather than the poor, especially rural masses. Thus the attempt to plan has accentuated the divide between the rich and the poor. Again the fast rate of growth in population has itself created structural tensions. Thus till recently the industrialisation process India remained what Singh calls a 'rural-peasant' type of society, except for pockets such as the metropolitans of India of which there are few in India.

These structural inconsistencies arise therefore from a variety of sources; these are:

- Democratisation without appropriate civic culture
- Bureaucratisation without universalistic norms
- Growth of the mass media.
- Aspiration growth without increased resources and distributive justice.
- Stress on welfare ideology only at the verbal level.

- Over urbanisation without inadequate and proper charges in the social Strata.

ata. Singh cites Gunnar Myrdal according to whom nationalism and democracy have grown in an uneven way in Asia. In western societies an independent state, effective government and adequate law enforcement proceeded nationalism and democracy. In contrast in South Asia this was not the case and therefore this imbalance also created a economic dependence on developed countries. It also meant slow economic development and extremely tardy changes in institutions. In India especially with a larger percentage of intellectuals and middle classes which are important for a real democracy, Modernisation did not proceed unimpeded. As Myrdal notes the “soft–state” approach meant a serious blow for social change which can be “circular” or “cumulative”. Myrdal does not subscribe to evolutionary stages of growth which he feels is a teleological and conservative ideology. Thus the Modernisation process in India is moving towards a critical phase. However Singh is of the view that these stresses and contradictions will not lead to institutional breakdown. He feels that a ‘constant coordination of Modernisation’ is absolutely essential for a democracy based Modernisation in India. He is also of the view that Modernisation is not a single monolithic process and can and does differ from one society to another.

**Check Your Progress 2**

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer.

b) Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit.

1. Discuss about the Modernization : The Asian Syndrome.

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2. Discuss about the Modernisation Process as a Whole.

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## **1.7 THE PHENOMENA OF MODERNITY**

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Let us now turn to a related concept and a related process to Modernisation viz. the phenomena of modernity. Thus the term modernity is a term employed to discuss the stage of a society that is more developed than another society. This term is usually employed to describe a society that uses world wide capitalism as the model to overall world development. Thus when a society is has the characteristics of modernity it is named a modern society. On the other hand the process of becoming a modern society is called Modernisation (as we have seen earlier). The defining feature of such modern society is:

- Emergence of nation state
- Industrialisation and capitalism
- Rise of democracy
- Heavier dependence on technological innovation
- Attendant urbanisation
- The overall development in mass media

In Western Europe some of the defining features include:

- Renaissance and enlightenment
- Reformation and counter reformation
- French Revolution and American Revolution
- The Industrial Revolution.

Many attempts have been made in sociology to try and define modernity. Some of the factors used to define modernity include:

- Disenchantment of the world
- Rationalisation
- Mass society
- Secularisation
- Democratisation, and so on.

Thus modernity is often contextualised by comparing modern societies to pre or post modern societies. This in itself creates some problems in terms of being able to define modernity. This is especially difficult when we try to construct a three stage model from pre modern to modern, and then onto post modernity. The features we have noted is a movement from somewhat isolated communities to more large scale integrated societies. In this sense Modernisation could be understood as a process which is not unique to Europe alone.

***Cultural Crystallisation** One of Germany's leading social philosophers in the Adenauer period following the second world war, Gehlen (1963) proposed the theory of "cultural crystallisation" to describe the modern situation. According to Gehlen in a famous phrase, "the premises of the Enlightenment are dead, only their consequences remain". In his view the institutional complexes of modern society have separated themselves from cultural modernity which can now be discarded... cultural ideas are no longer able to produce the "new" that was central to modernity (Genard Delanty 2000, *Modernity and Postmodernity*,*

p:73). Thus large scale integration implies that there is a vibrant economy which reaches out to all parts of a nation state. This in itself is possible when mobility in the society has increased. Further these developments imply specialisation with is a society and linking up of sectors. However these processes can sometimes appear to be paradoxical. Thus a unique local culture loses its identity by these increasingly powerful influences of cultural factors eg. Folktales, popular

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music and homogenisation of cultures, food recipes. These factors are found to exist in a greater or lesser extent in all local cultures, and helps to diversify them. This is found to a greater extent in the metropolitan towns where mobility is higher. Thus bureaucracy and hierarchical aspect of governments and the industrial sector are the areas which grow in power in an unprecedented manner. However the role of the individual still exists in such a society where there is dynamic competition and individualism, both exist side by side. This is then quite different from societies where the role of the individual is ascriptive. That is to say the individual in modern societies is influenced by more than family background and family preoccupations. Now it is necessary to point out that such social changes are found at different levels of social integration, and are not simply the features of European society at any particular point of time. These changes can happen when two communities merge together. Thus when two individuals develop a relationship the division of roles also tends to merge. Again in the process of globalisation we find the international flows of capital change the ground situation. Thus while it can be said that modernity has some apparently contradictory elements in reality these can be reduced to several simple concepts related to social change. How then does this view of modernity explain the world wide influences of West European and American societies since the Renaissance. Initially, we can say that the internal factor is that only in Europe, that rational thinking began to substitute intellectual activities that were shrouded in superstition and religion. Secondly, there was an external element as well, and this was the factor of colonisation, which created an exploitation nexus between these societies, which were exploited and others which exploited the societies. However we find that there are many traces of ancient societies which coexist within the umbrella of modernity. This includes joint families, small scale enterprise, vast income diversity and so on. It has however been argued that features many in fact be regarded as aspects of modernity itself rather than any threat to it. Modernisation was very beneficial to society in many ways, especially in the field of health and in the field of nutrition. Thus fatal diseases were controlled or eliminated, and the values of egalitarianism began manifesting themselves. However some



drawbacks are also there and the picture is not just positive. This not only did technological advantages breed greater economic wealth but also developed nuclear bombs two of which were dropped on Nagasaki and Hiroshima. Nuclear technology still evokes negative responses, when it is proposed to be used for military purposes. Similarly the degradation of environment and overall pollution are well known. However decreasing biodiversity, climate change all result from a hyper individual society. Psychological problems and laxity of morals also create problems of modernity.

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## **1.8 APPROACHES TO MODERNITY**

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Thus as Taylor points out there are at least two approaches for the comprehension of how modernity came into being. These are ways of comprehending what makes the existing society so very different from that which enveloped man before modernity arose. One method looks at the differences in contemporary western society and culture and medieval Europe as similar to the difference between medieval Europe and medieval India. So we can think about and analyse difference between civilizations, and their attendant culture. On the other hand the situation can be looked at from the viewpoint of change involving the end of one type of traditional society and the coming into being of modern societies. The latter perspective is the more influential one and it provides an analysis that gives a different perspective. The approach mentioned first is a cultural approach and the second an a-cultural approach. In the cultural approach there are many cultures, which have in them language and cultural practices that help us to understand the self the other psychological sets, religion, morality and so on. These factors are specific to a culture and are often non comparable. Keeping the above in view a cultural theory of modernity outlines first and then analyses the transformation into the new culture. The present day world can be seen as a culture with specific comprehension of the self and morality. Thus this model of modernity can be seen and used analytically to contrast with the earlier aspects of civilization (Taylor, 2004). On the other hand, an acultural theory describes the entire process in terms of some culture neutral analysis. This implies that the entire process is not analysed in

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terms of culture that existed and then transformed into modernity. Rather it is considered too general an approach that can be seen as the process any traditional society would undergo. Thus acultural theory conceives of modernity as the rise of reason in different ways such as the growth of scientific consciousness, development of secular thought ways, instrumental rationality, fact finding and evolution. Modernity can also be explained and accounted for in socio-cultural terms and also intellectual shifts. Thus transformation social, cultural, individual can be seen to arise from increased mobility, demographic changes, and industrialisation and so on. In such cases as mentioned above modernity is conceived of as transformations which all cultures can go through and will undergo in due course of time. Such changes are not defined in terms of individualism, morality, good and evil. They are instead talking of cultures and civilizations as a whole.

*Explanations of Modernity ...Explanations of modernity in terms of reason seem to be the most popular. Even social explanations tend to invoke reason. Social transformations, like mobility and industrialisation are thought to bring about intellectual and spiritual changes because they shake people loose from old habits and beliefs — religion or traditional morality — which then become unsustainable because they lack the kind of independent rational grounding that the beliefs of modernity — such as individualism or instrumental reason — are assumed to have (Charles Taylor, 2004, Two Theories of Modernity).*

Thus any culture would be impacted by the increase in scientific consciousness, secularisation of religion and the growth of instrumental thinking. Modernity then, in this approach/theory issues from rationality which is culture-neutral. This is despite the fact that the theory can account for why modernity arose in one society rather than another; or why it arose in some societies first and other later. In fact the theory does not lay down specific points or stages into modernity but as something general that can take any particular culture as its input. So this operation/transformation is not to be seen as a perspective about human values or shared meanings. In the case of social explanations, causality is

assigned to developments like industrialisation that do impact on values. Considering then the explanations in terms of rationality, this is thought to be the exercise of a “general capacity” which was ripe for maturing and unfolding. Given specific conditions, people see scientific thinking as having a place in society. They will also see that instrumental rationality is beneficial. Again religious beliefs are by no means universal or undisputed, and require a leap of faith. Finally facts and values are separated.

Now these transformations are facilitated by the presence of certain values and understandings and are hindered by other types of cultural values if they happen to be the dominant ones. These transformations are defined by the whole social and cultural context existing at any point of time. We can see then that the dominant theories of modernity over the last few centuries have been of the acultural type. Modernity also involves a shift in the individual and community perspective. This is because until the viewpoint changes the society concerned cannot move from a pre-modern to modern and onto post modernity. On the other hand Weber paradoxically argues that the rationalisation (an important aspect of modernity) is a steady process, which was cultural general rather than culture specific. Similarly the process of pre- modern to modern in society was explained by Durkheim in terms of the transformation from mechanical to organised forms of social solidarity. This is an also the aspect of Tocqueville’s concept of “creeping democracy” in which there was a move towards greater sense and actualisation of equality among the various strata of society. These are all different but at the same time related activities.

**Check Your Progress 3**

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer.

b) Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit.

1. Discuss about the Phenomena of Modernity.

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2. What are the Approaches to Modernity?

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## 1.9 LET US SUM UP

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Given all these types of explanations Taylor still feels that explanations and analyses of modernity focusing on reason are the most accepted ones. Explanations focusing on the social still tend to talk of reason transformations that are social. Thus the factors of mobility and industrialisation are felt to bring about intellectual and spiritual changes since they tend to create new layers of conditioning which bypass the old layers. That is they loosen old habits and beliefs, whether religion or the old morality including individualism and instrumental reason. There is however the question of negative theories of modernity which do not have the positive or beneficial view of modern developments and see society going into a decline with the onset and the maturing of modernity. Thus rather than seeing modernity as having unleashed many capacities in different directions, negative theories see it as a dangerous development. These too are essentially acultural theories. Thus modernity is characterised by a loss of perspective, an erasure of roots, dependence on history or even God. Thus the negative theories of modernity see it as a loss of the previous state of overall well being. That is to say that the arrival of modernity and all its various facets has to be seen as a mixed blessing. On one side are the positive socially relevant areas and technological development. On the other are the problems associated with the arrival of and settling down of modernity. Here the negatively oriented theorists' point of that modernity has its own problems created by a fast developing technology that has its impact on

the overall life of the people. Thus while modernity began in the sixteenth century at the time of Enlightenment, it continued to develop until the beginning of the 20th century. In other words modernity has its “discontents” as well. Let us briefly mention what these are. Firstly we must realise that modernity does have problems as we pointed out. The belief in development and progress, forward looking attitude, the dependence on rationality and reason have also given rise to optimism that was betrayed by doubts raised by post traditional thought. However we must note that modernity achieved a lot of social structural changes. Thus the routine behavior on day to day basis alters and changes as technology develops. This is because technological innovations and inventions since Enlightenment have altered the entire fabrics of the world, restricting itself to large well developed towns, cities, and metropolitans. It is capitalism which has basically been the power behind the innovations and inventions. The airplane and motor car have from an initial slow start become integral parts of daily life the world over. Thus time and space have conceptually receded and nothing can be done in the modern world with precise timing and adequate space. Thus mechanical solidarity has given way to organic solidarity to use the terms coined by Durkheim. Weber’s concept of rationalisation has pervaded the modern world and given rise to precise type of thinking. Further urbanism saw large scale migrations. Discipline, secularity, alienation, anomie and the iron cage of bureaucracy are all parts of the organic structure of bureaucratic organisation in the modern world.

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## 1.10 KEY WORDS

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**Paradox:** A paradox is a statement or group of statements that leads to a contradiction or a situation which defies intuition or common experience.

**Bureaucratic:** Bureaucracy refers to both a body of non-elected government officials and an administrative policy-making group. Historically, a bureaucracy was a government administration managed by departments staffed with non-elected officials.

**Modernity:** Modernity, a topic in the humanities and social sciences, is both a historical period, as well as the ensemble of particular socio-cultural norms, attitudes and practices that arose in the wake of the

Renaissance—in the "Age of Reason" of 17th-century thought and the 18th-century "Enlightenment".

**Rationalization:** In psychology and logic, rationalization or rationalisation is a defense mechanism in which controversial behaviors or feelings are justified and explained in a seemingly rational or logical manner to avoid the true explanation, and are made consciously tolerable—or even admirable and superior—by plausible means.

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### 1.11 QUESTIONS FOR REVIEW

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1. Discuss about the Approaches to Modernisation
2. What is the Implication of Modernisation Theories?
3. What are the Phases in Modernisation Processes?
4. Discuss about the Modernisation : The Asian Syndrome
5. Discuss about the Modernisation Process as a Whole
6. Discuss about the The Phenomena of Modernity
7. What are the Approaches to Modernity?

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## **1.13 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

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### **Check Your Progress 1**

1. See Section 1.2
2. See Section 1.3
3. See Section 1.4

### **Check Your Progress 2**

1. See Section 1.5
2. See Section 1.6

### **Check Your Progress 3**

1. See Section 1.7
2. See Section 1.8

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# UNIT 2: TRADITION AND MODERNITY

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## STRUCTURE

- 2.0 Objectives
- 2.1 Introduction
- 2.2 Tradition Society and Culture
- 2.3 Tradition and Modernity
- 2.4 Modernity as a Juggernaut
- 2.5 Ontological Insecurity and Modernity
- 2.6 Modernity Rationality and Norms
- 2.7 Let us sum up
- 2.8 Key Words
- 2.9 Questions for Review
- 2.10 Suggested readings and references
- 2.11 Answers to Check Your Progress

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## 2.0 OBJECTIVES

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After reading this unit you will be able to:

- To describe the concept of tradition
- To define modernity
- To outline the “juggernaut” of modernity
- To discuss modernity and rational.

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## 2.1 INTRODUCTION

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In this unit we will take up the topics of tradition and modernity. At the very outset it is pointed out that tradition and modernity are not contradictory or competing concepts. Rather they represent different faces of meaning and are in fact symbiotically related to each other. As such tradition (s) is the ground from which all manner of modernity arises. Further we may point out that as it stands tradition has to be qualified, which it is to say it could be a local tradition or an all-society tradition. Thus these are many different strands to the thinking on tradition and there are very many differing interpretations. Thus tradition is a live and vital factor in many cultures and could:

- Tradition of food and edibles
- Tradition of music and dance
- Scriptural tradition
- Artistic tradition
- Martial arts tradition
- Sociological tradition
- Tradition and attire.

Thus the terms 'tradition' and 'modernity' do not exist in isolation of each other but are in fact related to each other. While these terms concepts and processes exist, they exist and function dialogically. Thus modernity is an economic force while tradition is fundamentally cultural and social. What is the role of tradition is a pertinent point here. Tradition is basically a series of attitudes, languages, music, art, scholarship and so on been developing since ages past. Over the passage of time tradition becomes more or less entrenched in the body politic and we have even traditional law and scriptures in any case are an aspect of tradition. Now why is tradition so important to the individual and society? This is because it provides a continuity to social process and garners the creative and improvisational and transmits these traditions to the forthcoming generations of the members of a given society and thereby assuring survival of the society itself. Tradition is, therefore, a repository of survival mechanisms without which a society would fail to cohere. It would set fragmented and break up, the result of which would be anomic. Let us consider the music tradition in India. In this particular tradition of classical music there are "gharanas" or groupings, and each of these has a lineage comprising the singers who had commenced or inaugurated the gharana and all those who have passed their talent down the line producing maestros who would take over charge once the older musicians went on into retirement. Now, once there is an example to work upon we can see that tradition also implies a life-style, a way of living. As such the training in music, art, drama is very rigid and within the confines of tradition which often passes by rote and repetition of movement, notes, or other exercise which any particular training may

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require. Usually with the teaching of traditional music and dance are an endless series of do's and don'ts which is what tradition is all about. Thus tradition refers to a body of knowledge that has a structured inventory of actions and ideology that comprise its legitimate domain. Thereafter it is a question of pinpointing what area of tradition is it that we are referring to. Thus on examination we find that tradition itself has a reasonably long duration for which it has established itself; further there are many different strands or what we may call "varieties of tradition." Then to continue with the example of music gharanas in India we find that there is a basic division between north Indian classical music and South Indian classical music. Each of these two basic divisions has numerous subdivisions and so on. It is, therefore, a misnomer to treat the concept of tradition as a term which covers everything in society and culture. Thus if it is held that the tradition of music is very strong in India, it may also be asked "what type of music tradition is it that is being referred to?" Clearly then tradition also represents a rubric under which all little traditions can be assimilated. If it is considered in depth tradition can be seen to involve various different types of activities within it which would need some brief elaboration. Tradition thus encompasses and embodies:

- a particular process or legacy
- sub traditions which from the field from which required contributions
- can be made
- a historical aspect, either oral or scripted
- a certain concept of the supernatural
- economic structures of sustenance
- aspects of indigenous art
- facts of architecture
- scholarship in all areas of social concern
- literature both scriptural and others
- technological structures
- military for self defense

Thus tradition is clearly a type of structure and ideology that has a past and changes over time to absorb developments in that field so that tradition remains itself, but at the same time recreates and expands itself. The title of this ambitious contribution to the interpretation of our times is carefully chosen: "discourse" here means the reflective schematization of an issue that is up for critical discussion; "philosophical discourse" refers to an ongoing debate among philosophers; and "modernity" indicates the topic of this discourse: the status of Western culture since the Enlightenment. Furthermore, Habermas distinguishes philosophical modernity from modernism in the arts and from a more casual sense of modern times. The occasion for Habermas' assessment of the history of philosophical reflection about modernity is the emergence of a cluster of movements in contemporary French thought that consider themselves to have gone beyond modernity in proclaiming and celebrating a post-Enlightenment or post-modern age. Habermas responds to postmodernism in philosophy with an account of the modernist ancestry of philosophical postmodernism. He shows that the critique of modernity has always been an integral part of philosophical modernity itself and that the radical disjunction between postmodernism and modernity is predicated on a reduced and inadequate understanding of philosophical modernism's self-critical potential. In what follows, I will recapitulate the main points of Habermas' account of the philosophical discourse of modernity, then summarize his metacritique of philosophical postmodernism as it reflects Habermas' own theory of modernity, and finally assess the importance of Habermas' contributions for the wider debate on postmodernism.

In his theory of modernity, Habermas closely follows Hegel's analysis of the Enlightenment (23-44). Tracing the origins of philosophical modernity as far back as the Renaissance and the Reformation, Hegel had insisted that the extent of our emancipation from religious and secular traditions did not become evident until late in the eighteenth century, particularly in Kant's radical critique of the metaphysical tradition. For Hegel, Kant was the first to fully articulate the modern principle of "subjectivity" (Hegel's term), with its doctrines of individualism (the

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infinite worth of the individual), criticism (the problematic status of traditions), autonomy (the independence of human agency from external moral authority), and idealism (the omnipresence of reason in the world). The immediate reaction to Kant's philosophy revealed the ambivalent character of modernist philosophical accomplishments. Enlightened reason provided freedom from traditional authorities but left as their only replacement abstract rational principles of theoretical, moral-practical and aesthetic knowledge with no significant integrative cultural force. Reason as systematized by Kant appeared one-sided and irrevocably separated from what it excluded from its domain. Post-Kantian philosophy was thus based on opposition, "Entzweiung" as Hegel put it, and called for some new form of unification. Among the various innovative proposals for an emendation of Kantian philosophy, Hegel's own theory of the absolute as all-encompassing, self-realizing spirit emerged as the most influential and challenging contribution to the post-Kantian philosophical debate. According to Hegel, what was called for was not an abandonment of the Kantian project of a critique of reason but rather its radicalization. Enlightenment reason ("Verstand") with its insistence on abstract opposition had to be integrated into a more comprehensive, speculative, form of reason ("Vernunft") that could even unify the opposition between unity and difference. Through his notion of speculative reason, Hegel was thus able to think of what Enlightenment reason excluded as other than reason as reason's own other. For Habermas, the idea of including otherness within absolute reason provides the starting point for three distinct movements in nineteenth century thought: Hegelian orthodoxy with its conservative insistence on the rationality of the actual (Right Hegelians), the revolutionary transformation of speculative philosophy into a philosophy of concrete, human, political practice (Left Hegelians), and Nietzsche's utter rejection of the very concept of autonomous reason governing either the actual world or a possible, unalienated world (51-74). In Habermas' reconstruction, Nietzsche emerges as the "turning point" at which the philosophical discourse of modernity enters its postmodern phase (83-105). Before Nietzsche, the main participants in that discourse shared Kant's and Hegel's belief in reason's potential to provide its own justification through cri

tique. Nietzsche provides an alternative concept of rationality, replacing the subjective genitive in the phrase, "critique of reason," with an objective genitive. Reason no longer enacts its own critique but is critiqued from without instead. No longer self-sufficient, reason becomes a function of the other, the non-rational. The two main lines of contemporary philosophical development that Habermas traces to Nietzsche are Heidegger's *History of Being* together with Derrida's *Grammatology*, on one side, and Bataille's rehabilitation of the ecstatic together with Foucault's *Theory of Power*, on the other (131-293). In Heidegger, the overcoming of "subjectivity" takes the form of a neo-mystical philosophy of unscrutinizable origins ("Ursprungsphilosophie"), a direction continued by Derrida's emphasis on writing as opposed to speech and on the unidentifiable as opposed to what can be repeated identically. In Bataille, the authority of practical reason as it appears in the rationalization of modern life, is critiqued in the name of the suppressed and marginalized erotic experience. Foucault's critique of modernity, finally, dislocates the human being from its position as the subject of history to a resultant in a depersonalized field of institutional forces. Habermas thus articulates the two phases of the philosophical discourse of modernity in terms of two competing conceptions of reason: the Hegelian notion of reason qua spirit as substance and subject of everything actual and the Nietzschean concept of a merely instrumental rationality that stands in the service of some other force, such as life, Being, or power. Even the neo-Marxist critique of reason presented by the Frankfurt School is subsumed under this bipartite scheme (106-130). For Habermas, Horkheimer's and Adorno's work on the relapse of reason into mythical irrationality ("dialectic of Enlightenment") and their insistence on the necessary distortedness of reason follows Nietzsche's reductionist project of a natural history of culture ("genealogy of morals").

In Habermas' presentation, the analyses of the various stages in the philosophical discourse of modernity always include a principal critique of the position under consideration. As regards Hegel and the Right and Left Hegelians, Habermas agrees with the postmodernist rejection of the

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meta physical view of history as the self-realization of some supra-human rational spirit. He does not, though, endorse the absolute rejection of the centrality of reason in human self-understanding. Habermas' metacritique of the postmodern critique of rationality employs three distinct arguments that he mobilizes in various combinations against each of the thinkers under discussion. In an argument that draws on the long-standing tradition of refuting the skeptic, Habermas points out the precarious status of a position that totally rejects privileging any position and thus cannot account for the alleged validity of itself, except by way of contradiction (276ff.). The second argument charges the contemporary detractors of reason with collapsing the ineluctable Kantian distinction between genesis and validity, between questions concerning the factual origin of some claim and its possible justification on grounds that cannot be reduced to its de facto origin (119ff.). The third anti-postmodernist argument, also Kantian in origin, amounts to the charge that Nietzsche and his successors are blurring the principal distinction between the three equiprimordial spheres of claim and adjudication: the cognitive sphere in which claims concerning factual correctness are raised and adjudicated, the moral-legal sphere in which claims concerning normative correctness are raised and adjudicated, and the aesthetic-critical sphere in which claims regarding artistic authenticity are raised and adjudicated (1950). For Habermas, these three arguments against philosophical postmodernism constitute a minimalist theory of rationality that attempts to replace the unacceptable substantialist notion of reason as universal subject with a conception of rationality based on reason as the necessary standard of interaction between subjects that rely on each other for the recognition and adjudication of their claims (294-326; 336-367). What Habermas proposes is a paradigm shift away from the notion of reason as centered around an isolated individual (either a concrete Ego or a world spirit) towards a concept of reason as centered around supra-subjective, though not supra-human communicative interaction. Habermas sees himself inspired to this paradigm shift by indications of the foundational role of intersubjectivity that he identifies at various stages of the philosophical discourse of modernity. However, Habermas concedes that neither Hegel nor Marx nor Husserl nor



Heidegger pursued the idea of communicative rationality to the theoretical radicality that he himself had taken it in his earlier two volume opus, *The Theory of Communicative Action*. Given that *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* employs the new theory of rationality as the standard for competing views on the nature of the modern in general and the rational in particular, the anti-postmodernist argument of the book is predicated on Habermas' conviction that the universality of rational standards can be maintained in a theory that no longer invokes metaphysical guarantees.

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## **2.2 TRADITION                      SOCIETY                      AND CULTURE**

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Tradition then is “accreted” over time and its boundaries become increasingly well defined. This means that tradition expands or contracts depending upon the social and cultural situation. Further it would be wrong to assume that traditions constantly expand and that progress is always linear. It is quite possible that there is non linear retrogression as well. A third situation arises when tradition develops an entropic tendency and stagnates for some time before once again addressing progression (linear forward movement) or retrogression. Thus tradition begins when a particular action or activity is seen to be of significance to the society. However, as we have pointed out that there are many types of tradition (music, art, architecture) and many strands within each one of them. As such it is possible to study some of these strands but to study them in totality would imply many years of research and might still be lacking sufficient data to be able to come to a holistic and synoptic point of view (Rojas, 1966). Thus what we are talking about is the fact that there is no such thing as a total vision of any society which is pluralistic, since members from different races and ethnicities will have different traditions. Thus the tradition that peoples and societies inherit from their forefathers is available to them in various forms. Any process over several generations becomes by itself a particular tradition or a sub tradition.

## Notes

The Accretion of Tradition Thus tradition: accumulates over decades/centuries. Consider for e.g. the scriptural tradition of India which is itself a plurality. Thus in the shift from oral tradition to the scripting tradition there is a formalisation of knowledge and as this process goes on the society that is subjected to it develops not just one but pluralist traditions. the field of art and architecture is replete with the traditions that have emerged from it. Thus in India there are several traditions in art and architecture including. The (i) Classical (ii) medieval and, (iii) traditiona

In each of these areas artists and architects have been responsible for development of classical medieval and traditional art and architecture. These traditions developed in India over centuries of accretion. Further the economic structures are such that they begin from centuries earlier and tend to be well fixed until Industrialisation begins in the 1800's. In the Indian tradition the exchange of goods and services commenced and worked in terms of physical exchanges of services which could be provided to the landlords by the hoi polloi. This was a traditional system and exploited the landless labourers by underpaying and making them work for long hours. For doing this the sharecroppers as they were known, were given at the end of the agricultural season a certain amount of grains to help them to subsist. Such examples can be found globally and feudalism was yet another iniquitous system. The point is that it is rather difficult to say with any degree of certainty that tradition(s) are 'good' or 'bad.' On examination, however, it is clear that though Indian tradition has sanctity yet sati and dowry is part of this very same tradition. Thus it is a weeding of tradition which alone c make it work efficiently and not flow over into negative directives. Over a span of time (usually centuries) any specific tradition begins to coagulate into a specific conglomeration of beliefs and rites. These beliefs and rites are specific to any tradition and apply equally to sub traditions within and subordinate within it. Traditions then cover the entire ideological gamut and are also applicable to the material culture. What then is tradition? Tradition is a particular approach to social reality which it influences and provides a direction to individual and social reality. Thus it would be

better to talk in terms of the plural traditions than to mention some overarching condition which would be a false construct as reality is not entirely apprehended under it. Traditional technology is another area which has been extensively used and improved upon. Thus in agriculture the use of the tractor or combine harvester has brought matters to a confrontation. Thus while the situation (harvesting) has changed, the attitudes are still traditional, both in the family and at work. Thus at a particular time in the flow of tradition non-traditional, modern machines, are used. This means now that there is a contradiction between the technology and the attitudes of the workers and their beneficiaries. Age old customs and tradition's often get non functional and sometimes changes have to be introduced to make the two compatible. Tradition then is what holds a society together. However, there are factors within a tradition which may go out of circulation. Thus in some metros in India the scriptural and popular level of celebrating festivals, like Holi, Diwali, and so on is such that tradition battles with culture and many changes have occurred in these festivals in cities including plastic lighting on the house and a few burning candles to observe traditional candle lighting in Diwali.

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## **2.3 TRADITION AND MODERNITY**

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In such and other activities tradition comes head on with the whole concept of modernity. The question of course is in which way modernity relates to tradition. Is modernity a different type of tradition? Do tradition and modernity have anything in common and how are they related to each other? Tradition has a tendency to become entropic and inward looking. This is true of many local level traditions and sub traditions are stamped out and disappear without leaving much of a trace. The pertinent question here is why does tradition disappear, change, ameliorate or attempt to coexist with modernity? The fact of the matter is that the vectors or chief characteristics of a tradition are themselves set to develop, change, or become stagnant. Thus tradition has many sub traditions and it is these that often linger on, indefinitely, in various geophysical territories within a specific culture area.

## Notes

At some point in the development or spread of a tradition tends to become less influential and is capable of dealing only with local traditions. At the same time tradition sees the necessity of dynamism and various religious traditions themselves find it difficult to sustain themselves. Thus when a tradition becomes entropic it becomes clear that the tradition is now stagnant and in being so is quite capable of calcifying and becomes superficially related to rites, rituals, ceremonies while the essential communication remains obfuscated and confused. Thus tradition is dynamic and records accretive changes. We must also keep in mind that social changes are part of the process of society. However, it is equally clear that beyond a point tradition is not able to deal with a new set of situations and the new institutions, At this point if the society is not to become anarchic, it will require that traditions ameliorate and try to change. Yet a tradition can only follow its ontology and find itself as inadequate in the face of modernity. Thus the forces of modernity tend to choke tradition or at least make it relatively insignificant and even innocuous. However, tradition though it becomes quiescent it is not really banished by modernity because modernity is evidenced only in the advanced countries of the West and in the metropolitans of the East. This is made clear when we compare architecture of the North and the South. Thus a luxury hotel in metropolitan of a developing country is virtually no different than that of an advanced country. Thus tradition is never really banished but is pushed back as the forces of modernity take root.

### Aspects of Modernity

Some aspects of modernity include:

- emergence of nation-state and nationhood
- industrialisation and capitalism
- democracy
- increasing influence of science and technology
- the phenomena of urbanisation
- expansion of mass

There are, however, other defining characteristics of modernity which include

- disenchantment with the world
- secularisation
- rationalisation
- commodification
- mass society

Modernity, however, means different things in the North and the South. Thus modernity indicates a type of society that is more developed relative to other societies. So, a society characterised by modernity is described as a modern society. We can compare modern society with societies that are pre-modern or those that are post-modern. However neither of these approaches is fully satisfactory. The social structure of modernity is such that it defines the transition from isolated communities to mass scale society. Referred to in this manner modernity is found, therefore, not just in the West. This process can be seen as working all over the world rather than just in the advanced nations. Thus mass society implies: large scale movement of goods, people, and information among separate areas standardisation of many aspects of society which are helpful increased specialisation and interdependence of different parts of the society.

Thus modernity can be apparently contradictory, but these features listed above are different parts of the overall ontology of this process. When the elements or products of modernity “invade” another culture through popular processes such as various cultural aspects such as folktales and cinema there is a widespread ‘overhaul’ of cultural and social ontology and these tend to change a society and prepare it for further changes. This results in a homogenisation of culture and creates widespread diversification at the local level. There are other features, such as democratic government and the hierarchical structures within it. So also does the private sector grow greatly in influence (Genard Delanty, 2000).

## Notes

This sometimes creates a friction and modernity can be perceived as being totalitarian. However, the individual in modernity belongs to those subsystems, and is part of the competition, liberty, and individualism. This is all the more true for comparisons of modernity with societies that are traditional. Modernity brought with it many blessings to the people including much better health and economic prospects. However, there are also some problems which have emerged with modern society e.g. the nuclear bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki during world war II; and the arms race thereafter. Other problems include environmental degradation e.g. air and water pollution. Modernity also creates great stress on people and alienation or being without specific interest in anything (malaise). At the present point the debate is still on whether modernity is socially positive or not, whether it has proved beneficial or not to world society.

### Check Your Progress 1

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer.

b) Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit.

1. Discuss the Tradition Society and Culture.

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2. Describe the Tradition and Modernity.

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## 2.4 MODERNITY AS A JUGGERNAUT

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Giddens position conflicts with the contention that society has entered into a post modern world. Thus modernity witnesses tremendous increases in the scope, pace and depth of change relative to systems that preceded it. Further the path or trajectory of change is not linear, going forward step by step. For Giddens modernity implies

- capitalism
- industrialism
- surveillance programs and activities
- military power.

Giddens theory of structuration and its basic components adequately describe modernity. These elements are:

- distanciation, or separation in of time and space
- disembedding
- reflexivity

While in pre-modern societies time and space were totally interconnected. However, with the onset of modernity time and space were no longer closely linked, and this interconnection became very weak. Now, this fact is important so far as modernity is concerned. Distanciation helps in the establishment of organisations and bureaucracy, and makes possible the nation-state which is international. That possible to connect local and global arenas. Again the modern society is within the matrix of history and it takes from that to influence the present. Finally such distanciation makes possible the second of Giddens factors of modernity that is disembedding. Disembedding itself is the process of transcending the local context and it's reorganising itself along indefinite stretches of time and space. According to Giddens there are two varieties of disembedding factors. These are: symbolic tokens e.g. money. This allows for time-space distanciation and allows money transactions with those who are widely separated in time and space. systems of professional expertise. These are very useful because they help create the environment. Some such experts include doctors and

lawyers. Other experts affect everyday commodities and even property. Thus expert systems provide reassurance across time and space. Again in abstract systems, trust is fundamental not only to modern societies also because the symbolic tokens and expert systems serve to disembody the society in the modern world. Thus an economy based on monetary transactions and the legal system work because the members have trust in them. Again another basic characteristic of modernity is the phenomena of reflexivity. Thus all social and psychological aspects, processes, events, can be reflected upon, understood better and working as an activity which influences the further development of a phenomenon. The fact of disembodiment indicates the need for trust the need for expert systems Trust according to Giddens is socialised into children and then reinforced by behaviour that conforms to this expectation of mutually reliable behaviours. However, this is also accompanied by destabilising factors, risk factors that threaten trust and create ongoing lack of security in people. Thus the risk of nuclear wars are neither fought nor won. The risk factor in global or local war is such that several danger points have arisen and disarmament of military of nuclear warheads could easily be one of the international projects to increase the sense of security for the subjects. Giddens points out that the risk factor extends into the material environment and what can be done to prevent its degradation (forests, rivers, rural and urban habitats). Again global investments existing in institutional settings are also risky. The subjects take notice of risks while taking action. Religion receded and only those facts are believed in which the subjects can realise and turn into reality. The awareness of the different risk factors is increasing in the modern world and is one of the facts of modernity. Again the subjects and the 'public' are aware that even experts cannot handle certain risks and risk-situations.

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## **2.5 ONTOLOGICAL INSECURITY AND MODERNITY**

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According to Giddens ontological insecurity has been created within modernity itself and suggests



- design faults in the construction of the modern world
- operator failure of those who run the modern
- unintended consequences
- reflexivity of the modern society

Thus according to Giddens in modern society 'control' becomes an important issue because new knowledge is continuously cropping up and superceding the old, and giving it a different direction altogether. As an answer to this Giddens suggests utopian realism. That is utopian ideals and social reality should be taken together as a single unit rather than aim for just the one or the other. Giddens is critical of the postmodern theories and feels that were systematic knowledge impossible the intellectual activity/academics would come to a standstill. He feels that postmodernism would involve a world in which

- there are post scarcity systems
- multilayered democracy
- demilitarisation
- humanisation of technology

However, it is clear that post modernity cannot be predicted in such simple parameters which need not appear at all. Giddens notes that the reflexive modern world pushes the self into becoming a "reflexive project." Thus the self becomes an area to be reflected upon with a view to ameliorating it and bringing it into tune with itself and society. Thus he points out that the subject is a result of inner search and also the body must be controlled and socially projected in a specific manner in the relevant physical spaces. There are formulas how which define we interact. In fact reflexivity has led to a body-obsession and a social neurosis. Modernity and modern society are also characterised by setting apart some areas of deviance from the normal day to day living. This has been termed the "Sequestration of experience" by Giddens. Thus phenomena like madness, sickness, death and sexuality are sequestered and delineated as areas that should be hidden from the attention. The reason that the phenomena of sequestration comes about is because abstract systems have controlled large segments of society. Though

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sequestration brings with it a sense of penaciling security it is quite clear that there is an avoidance of basic truths, such as the processes of death, sickness, madness etc. Thus modernity has brought with both positive and negative consequences. One of the negative consequences is that there tends to be a sort of malaise or what Giddens terms “personal meaninglessness.” This is because important areas of daily life have been sequestered, and repressed. The light at the end of the tunnel is reflexivity of modern life which as it increases will ensure that such sequestration does not take place and processes that have been swept under the carpet will one day be the most significant and important. While Giddens is concerned with modernity we find that Beck is interested in the new modernity. Thus Beck and Giddens feel that we are living in a modern world rather than a post modern one. What is the risk that accompanies the new modernity? Beck labels the new modernity as “reflexive modernity.” Beck feels that relationships in such a society are increasingly reflexive and individuals are forced to make wide range of individual decisions so far as relationships are concerned, and how they can be begun and maintained. Tradition and Mod 186 According to Beck, within modernity itself there is a change from industrial society to the risk society which is different from industrial society but not totally. Thus the classical modernity was centred on producing wealth and equal distribution of the same. On the other hand the advanced modern societies the main issue is the reduction and canalisation of risk. Thus the main concern in classical modernity believed in equality, the concern of advanced modernity is a safety. These risks come from wealth produced in industry. This includes the nuclear industry and bombs whose effects and side effects can be devastating.

The Risk Factor Even industrial pollutants are themselves a source of risk and have most dangerous effects on health. This kind of risk, including nuclear annihilation, is not simply localized but global. Again risk and class intermesh to some extent. Thus in industrial society it is clear that the wealthy classes can avoid risk or reduce it simply because they have the wealth to purchase safety. And this helps to strengthen the class society. On the other hand poverty is full of risks. Beck extends his

analysis and states that the truth about social classes applies to the nation-states as well.

Thus the rich nations are able to minimize risks, the poor or poorer nations find that risk is centred in and around them. Again richer nations make further wealth and profit by catering to the poorer nations in order to build technology that will help to control the risks in poor nations and try to ameliorate them to some extent. It is pointed out, however, that no nation is completely safe from risks, nor are individuals. However, the nations that profit from the risk factor in poor nations find that there is a 'boomerang effect' and factors associated with risk tend to become proactive and try to eliminate or control the areas where risk reduction technologies are being made in the wealthy nations. However, though advanced modernity creates risks we find that accompanying these risks is reflexivity and makes those that produce risks themselves begin to think about the situation and how to alter it. But this is also in the case of those nations that are poor and face these risks. According to Beck it is science and the scientists that are responsible and a protector of global "contamination" of nature and culture, and accuses science and scientists for being illogical.

Again in classical industrial society we find that nature and culture were separate entities in the case of advanced modernity they go hand in hand and are deeply interlinked and interrelated to each other. This linkage means that changes in either nature or culture feedback onto each other. Thus Beck points out that nature and society are related to each other almost symbiotically. This has led to the facts of nature being made political and so scientists, including social scientists are now in the domain of and being effected by politicisation. According to Beck the governments are losing their powerful control because of sub political bodies like research institutes. Subgroups of people are more responsive relative to the government. We can say advanced modernity has generated both hormones risks and also ways to deal with it. Ritzer evaluates modern society using the concepts of hyperrationality, Mcdonaldization and Americanization. Let us begin with Issues of Modernity 187

hyperrationality. Ritzer points out that the concept of hyperrationality draws heavily on rationality as conceptualised by Weber. For Weber we live in an increasingly rational world. Formal rationality is seen to be used for system usage than Weber's other types of rationality: Substantive, theoretical and practical. Thus we see that formal rationality implies the increasingly felt need and importance of institutions which force members to adhere to a strict code of behaviour and conduct.

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## 2.6 MODERNITY RATIONALITY AND NORMS

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On the other hand, substantive rationality implies dominance of norms and values in making of rational choice. Thus theoretical rationality deals with intellectual apprehension. On the other hand practical rationality defines the context/situation so far as daily decisions are concerned. Now, we can say that hyperrationality goes beyond formal rationality. Thus a hyperrational system combines Weber's forms of rationality which include,

- formal rationality
- substantive
- intellectual
- practical

The reason such a system is called hyperrational because it uses and combines all four of Weber's forms of rationality. Formal rationality has four aspects which are:

- efficiency
- predictability
- quantity rather than quality
- Substitution of non human for human technologies.

The Irrationality of Rationality Thus this form of rationality is also accompanied by the "irrationality of rationality." In this schema we find that efficiency is always with a view to an end. And how we can use the best means to a goal. In fact food restaurants the delivery system is made so convenient and automatic that there are drive in facilities to help

accelerate the process of food distribution and consumption. Now, the next factor in formal rationality is that there is a standardisation of processes and events and there are “no surprises”, and the branches of fast food restaurants are very similar even across nations. They all proceed along the assembly line, mechanised approach to food. Further fast food restaurants pay greater attention to quantity rather than quality. Such a formally rational system has intrinsic to it the generation of “irrationalities”, such as making the “dining experience” most bizarre, demystifying and dehumanizing. Ritzer indicates that this is the trend all over the modern world where the emphasis is on quick turnover for business. Examining credit cards Ritzer feels that each of the factors applied to McDonaldization are true for the credit card industry. Loans are processed quickly. Again the credit card makes consumption predictable. Credit cards come with different credit limits and the transactions are relatively dehumanizing. Thus both the credit the fast food restaurant can be seen to be an intrinsic aspect of the modern world. Ritzer also argues for the “Americanization” of modern society which was evident in our discussion of fast food restaurants and credit card usage. Thus America is perceived as practicing/living in a modern world and engaged in the construction of the American way of life. Thus credit card usage is part of Americanization. The major credit cards companies are based in America. The Visa, MasterCard, and American Express are major cards relative to those based in Britain (Barclay Card) and Japan (JCB). The credit card companies are making a concerted effort to ‘globalize’ the credit cards. It is noted, however, that credit cards are and can be used for indigenous purchases. This both the credit cards and fast food restaurants have become part of the modern world and is in part a reflection of a specific world era. Let us now turn to some of the main ideas in the social theory of Jurgen Habermas, concerning modernity. Habermas feels that modernity has yet to play itself out and that there are many modern areas that can be developed further, before thinking of a postmodern world. According to Habermas modernity does have a number of paradoxes. Thus rationality that is a part of the overall social system is contradictory and conflictual with the rationality of the life-world as a whole. On the one hand social systems have multiplied their

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complexity and use instrumental reason. Again the life-world has also multiplied its diversity in terms of secularisation and the processes of reflexivity. Thus a rational society according to Habermas is one where the system and the life-world exist together living an intermeshed but parallel existence. This conjoining and interaction leads to a stage in society of abundance economically, and environmental control due to rational systems being present and employed to their optimum. The problem of the modern world is that now the system begins to exercise power or to 'colonize' the life-world. This leads to a situation where the rational system denies the freedom to the life-world, a freedom that is necessary to allow the life world to grow to further maturity. Thus for Habermas the 'colonization' of the life world in modernity is its basic marker, and is, therefore, that he regards modernity as an 'unfinished project.' To Habermas the fully rational society where the rational system and the Life world(s) can exist and express themselves satisfactorily. At the moment such a situation does not exist and the life-world is greatly subdued and impoverished. This is the obstacle that has to be crossed over. It does not mean a violent destruction of systems economic or administrative, since they help life worlds to rationalize their existence and ontology. How is this to be done? This requires that we examine the relationship between system and life-world.

According to Habermas

- "restraining barriers" should be erected to reduce colonisation of life world
- "sensors" should be used to make a greater impact of life world on the System

In this manner the two areas that is life world and system benefit each other greatly. Habermas feels that until the above facts assert themselves modernity's project will take long to complete. Thus Habermas is squarely of the view that modernity has much to offer and that we are not in a postmodern society as yet.

**Check Your Progress 2**

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer.

b) Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit.

1. Write about: Modernity as a Juggernaut.

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2. What is Ontological Insecurity and Modernity?

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3. Discuss about Modernity Rationality and Norms.

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## **2.7 LET US SUM UP**

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Finally to put the last word in Habermas has criticized postmodernism on several grounds. Since our next unit is on post structuralism/postmodernism this unit would serve also as a precursor of our discussion on the same. Thus for Habermas: It is very difficult to objectively evaluate the postmodernists because one is not sure whether what one is reading is social theory or literature. In the former case the problems arises in postmodernists erecting a formidable fascade of jargon which is not in the mainstream of sociological knowledge. Hence, one doesn't know where to classify such theory. Normative sentiments are concealed from the reader, but nevertheless they offer normative critiques of contemporary society. However, these are not exactly grounded and, therefore, not effective. It has a totalising tendency despite the fact that postmodernists themselves are against this phenomena. Post modernists ignore the facts of daily life. In short postmodernists are shut off from the very sphere (life-world) of activity from which they deprive themselves. As such the source of social data and the area of expression, that is everyday life is, cut off from them. Thus in this unit we have

examined and presented several theoretical positions on tradition and modernity. We have covered the approach of Giddens to modernity as also that of Beck and Ritzer. Finally, we considered the ideas of Habermas. All this has set the stage for our next unit. To fully understand and appreciate the units on post structuralism and postmodernism the background provided in this unit will be of great use.

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## 2.8 KEY WORDS

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**Tradition:** A tradition is a belief or behavior passed down within a group or society with symbolic meaning or special significance with origins in the past. Common examples include holidays or impractical but socially meaningful clothes, but the idea has also been applied to social norms such as greetings.

**Theory:** A theory is a contemplative and rational type of abstract or generalizing thinking about a phenomenon, or the results of such thinking. The process of contemplative and rational thinking often is associated with such processes like observational study, research. Theories may either be scientific or other than scientific (or scientific to less extent). Depending on the context, the results might, for example, include generalized explanations of how nature works. The word has its roots in ancient Greek, but in modern use it has taken on several related meanings.

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## 2.9 QUESTIONS FOR REVIEW

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1. Discuss the Tradition Society and Culture.
2. Describe the Tradition and Modernity.
3. Write about: Modernity as a Juggernaut.
4. What is Ontological Insecurity and Modernity?
5. Discuss about Modernity Rationality and Norms.

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## 2.10 SUGGESTED READINGS AND REFERENCES

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- Bauman, Z(1989), Modernity and The Holocaust. Cambridge:Polity
- Baudrillard, J (1994) The Illusion of The End. Cambridge:Polity
- Castells, M (1996), The Information Age, Vol-1:The Rise of The Network Society. Oxford Black

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## **2.11 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

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### **Check Your Progress 1**

1. See Section 2.2
2. See Section 2.3

### **Check Your Progress 2**

1. See Section 2.4
2. See Section 2.5
3. See Section 2.6

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## **UNIT 3: POSTMODERNISM**

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### **STRUCTURE**

- 3.0 Objectives
- 3.1 Introduction
- 3.2 Departures from Modernism
- 3.3 Jean Francois Lyotard and Jean Baudrillard
- 3.4 The View from within Literary Criticism
- 3.5 Midnight's Children as a postmodernist text.
- 3.6 Points of Convergence with Poststructuralism
- 3.7 Implications for Us
- 3.8 Let us sum up
- 3.9 Key Words
- 3.10 Questions for Review
- 3.11 Suggested readings and references
- 3.12 Answers to Check Your Progress

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### **3.0 OBJECTIVES**

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The purpose of this unit is to familiarize you with the basics of postmodernism. The views of two French thinkers (Lyotard and Baudrillard) and of two literary critics (Ihab Hassan and Linda Hutcheon) would also be briefly discussed. The postmodernist features of Salman Rushdie's novel *Midnight's Children* will be touched upon as also postmodernism's points of convergence with poststructuralism. Special attention will be paid to the mood of skepticism that has been brought about by the cumulative impact of these two critical approaches.

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### **3.1 INTRODUCTION**

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In this unit we shall examine the major characteristic features of postmodernism. We shall first of all examine the concepts of the human self advocated by the proponents of postmodernism and then try to understand the different approaches adopted by some of the postmodern thinkers. Stuart Sim observes in *The Routledge Companion to Postmodernism*: In a general sense, postmodernism is to be regarded as a

rejection of many, if not most, of the cultural certainties on which life in the West has been structured over the last couple of centuries.

It has called into question our commitment to cultural 'progress' (that economies must continue to grow, the quality of life to keep improving indefinitely, etc.), as well as the political systems that have underpinned this belief. [p.vii] We may observe that, it is easier to give an account of what postmodernism is not, rather than positively articulating what it is. It is not just a philosophical school or system but refers to various developments that happened in culture in general and particularly in the realms of literature, film, architecture, art etc. To highlight its negative features, it is characterized by scepticism, antifoundationalism and a dislike of authority. It radically questions the Enlightenment project and its associated notions of progress and emancipation based on reason. In this sense, it can be conceived as a reaction to modernism. Postmodernism raises its voice against the liberal humanist ideology that had dominated culture since the eighteenth century.

### **General Features of Postmodernism**

As mentioned above, the term postmodernism refers primarily to a variety of responses towards life, culture and values and therefore, it is easy to conceive it as a reaction against and rejection of some long established assumptions, particularly those which became prominent with the advent of modernity. It questions the enlightenment concept of progress and affirms a disbelief in the purity of knowledge. It proposes to examine the goals and aspirations of modernity and is visibly anti-authoritarian. As Jean-François Lyotard says, it is a reaction against the universalizing theories or grand narratives/metanarratives. In his influential book *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* Lyotard opposes the totalizing nature of metanarratives and their reliance on some form of transcendent and universal truth. He defines postmodernism as incredulity toward metanarratives. [p. xxiv] As Hugh J. Silverman observes, postmodernism tries to marginalize, delimit, disseminate, and decenter the primary (and often secondary) works of modernist and premodernist cultural inscriptions. [p. 1] Postmodernists

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thus attempt to re-read the texts and traditions that have made premodernist and modernist writing possible. They thus oppose the basic assumptions of modernist thought. Mary Klages has listed out a few premises which are central to humanism/modernism. We shall examine some of them. There is the concept of an autonomous self with its ability to know itself and the world through reason. Based on this assumption, modern philosophy had tremendous faith in the power of science. It believes that science provides unbiased, objective and universal truths that lead us toward progress. Reason is here taken as the ultimate judge that decides what is true, what is right, and what is good and language, which is the distinctive human capacity, is considered as the representation of the world.

The philosophical modernism at issue in postmodernism begins with Kant's "Copernican revolution," that is, his assumption that we cannot know things in themselves and that objects of knowledge must conform to our faculties of representation (Kant 1787). Ideas such as God, freedom, immortality, the world, first beginning, and final end have only a regulative function for knowledge, since they cannot find fulfilling instances among objects of experience. With Hegel, the immediacy of the subject-object relation itself is shown to be illusory. As he states in *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, "we find that neither the one nor the other is only immediately present in sense-certainty, but each is at the same time mediated" (Hegel 1807, 59), because subject and object are both instances of a "this" and a "now," neither of which are immediately sensed. So-called immediate perception therefore lacks the certainty of immediacy itself, a certainty that must be deferred to the working out of a complete system of experience. However, later thinkers point out that Hegel's logic pre-supposes concepts, such as identity and negation (see Hegel 1812), which cannot themselves be accepted as immediately given, and which therefore must be accounted for in some other, non-dialectical way.

The later nineteenth century is the age of modernity as an achieved reality, where science and technology, including networks of mass

communication and transportation, reshape human perceptions. There is no clear distinction, then, between the natural and the artificial in experience. Indeed, many proponents of postmodernism challenge the viability of such a distinction tout court, seeing in achieved modernism the emergence of a problem the philosophical tradition has repressed. A consequence of achieved modernism is what postmodernists might refer to as de-realization. De-realization affects both the subject and the objects of experience, such that their sense of identity, constancy, and substance is upset or dissolved. Important precursors to this notion are found in Kierkegaard, Marx and Nietzsche. Kierkegaard, for example, describes modern society as a network of relations in which individuals are leveled into an abstract phantom known as “the public” (Kierkegaard 1846, 59). The modern public, in contrast to ancient and medieval communities, is a creation of the press, which is the only instrument capable of holding together the mass of unreal individuals “who never are and never can be united in an actual situation or organization” (Kierkegaard 1846, 60). In this sense, society has become a realization of abstract thought, held together by an artificial and all-pervasive medium speaking for everyone and for no one. In Marx, on the other hand, we have an analysis of the fetishism of commodities (Marx 1867, 444–461) where objects lose the solidity of their use value and become spectral figures under the aspect of exchange value. Their ghostly nature results from their absorption into a network of social relations, where their values fluctuate independently of their corporeal being. Human subjects themselves experience this de-realization because commodities are products of their labor. Workers paradoxically lose their being in realizing themselves, and this becomes emblematic for those professing a postmodern sensibility.

We also find suggestions of de-realization in Nietzsche, who speaks of being as “the last breath of a vaporizing reality” and remarks upon the dissolution of the distinction between the “real” and the “apparent” world. In *Twilight of the Idols*, he traces the history of this distinction from Plato to his own time, where the “true world” becomes a useless and superfluous idea (1889, 485–86). However, with the notion of the

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true world, he says, we have also done away with the apparent one. What is left is neither real nor apparent, but something in between, and therefore something akin to the virtual reality of more recent vintage.

The notion of a collapse between the real and the apparent is suggested in Nietzsche's first book, *The Birth of Tragedy* (Nietzsche 1872), where he presents Greek tragedy as a synthesis of natural art impulses represented by the gods Apollo and Dionysus. Where Apollo is the god of beautiful forms and images, Dionysus is the god of frenzy and intoxication, under whose sway the spell of individuated existence is broken in a moment of undifferentiated oneness with nature. While tragic art is life-affirming in joining these two impulses, logic and science are built upon Apollonian representations that have become frozen and lifeless. Hence, Nietzsche believes only a return of the Dionysian art impulse can save modern society from sterility and nihilism. This interpretation presages postmodern concepts of art and representation, and also anticipates postmodernists' fascination with the prospect of a revolutionary moment auguring a new, anarchic sense of community.

Nietzsche is also a precursor for postmodernism in his genealogical analyses of fundamental concepts, especially what he takes to be the core concept of Western metaphysics, the "I". On Nietzsche's account, the concept of the "I" arises out of a moral imperative to be responsible for our actions. In order to be responsible we must assume that we are the cause of our actions, and this cause must hold over time, retaining its identity, so that rewards and punishments are accepted as consequences for actions deemed beneficial or detrimental to others (Nietzsche 1889, 482-83; 1887, 24-26, 58-60). In this way, the concept of the "I" comes about as a social construction and moral illusion. According to Nietzsche, the moral sense of the "I" as an identical cause is projected onto events in the world, where the identity of things, causes, effects, etc., takes shape in easily communicable representations. Thus logic is born from the demand to adhere to common social norms which shape the human herd into a society of knowing and acting subjects.

For postmodernists, Nietzsche's genealogy of concepts in "On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense" (Nietzsche 1873, 77–97) is also an important reference. In this text, Nietzsche puts forward the hypothesis that scientific concepts are chains of metaphors hardened into accepted truths. On this account, metaphor begins when a nerve stimulus is copied as an image, which is then imitated in sound, giving rise, when repeated, to the word, which becomes a concept when the word is used to designate multiple instances of singular events. Conceptual metaphors are thus lies because they equate unequal things, just as the chain of metaphors moves from one level to another. Hegel's problem with the repetition of the "this" and the "now" is thus expanded to include the repetition of instances across discontinuous gaps between kinds and levels of things.

In close connection with this genealogy, Nietzsche criticizes the historicism of the nineteenth century in the 1874 essay, "On the Uses and Disadvantage of History for Life" (Nietzsche 1874, 57–123). On Nietzsche's view, the life of an individual and a culture depend upon their ability to repeat an unhistorical moment, a kind of forgetfulness, along with their continuous development through time, and the study of history ought therefore to emphasize how each person or culture attains and repeats this moment. There is no question, then, of reaching a standpoint outside of history or of conceiving past times as stages on the way to the present. Historical repetition is not linear, but each age worthy of its designation repeats the unhistorical moment that is its own present as "new." In this respect, Nietzsche would agree with Charles Baudelaire, who describes modernity as "the transient, the fleeting, the contingent" that is repeated in all ages (Cahoone 2003, 100), and postmodernists read Nietzsche's remarks on the eternal return accordingly.

Nietzsche presents this concept in *The Gay Science* (Nietzsche 1974 [1882], 273), and in a more developed form in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (Nietzsche 1883–1891, 269–272). Many have taken the concept to imply an endless, identical repetition of everything in the universe, such that nothing occurs that has not already occurred an infinite number of times

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before. However, others, including postmodernists, read these passages in conjunction with the notion that history is the repetition of an unhistorical moment, a moment that is always new in each case. In their view, Nietzsche can only mean that the new eternally repeats as new, and therefore recurrence is a matter of difference rather than identity. Furthermore, postmodernists join the concept of eternal return with the loss of the distinction between the real and the apparent world. The distinction itself does not reappear, and what repeats is neither real nor apparent in the traditional sense, but is a phantasm or simulacrum.

Nietzsche is a common interest between postmodern philosophers and Martin Heidegger, whose meditations on art, technology, and the withdrawal of being they regularly cite and comment upon. Heidegger's contribution to the sense of de-realization of the world stems from oft repeated remarks such as: "Everywhere we are underway amid beings, and yet we no longer know how it stands with being" (Heidegger 2000 [1953], 217), and "precisely nowhere does man today any longer encounter himself, i.e., his essence" (Heidegger 1993, 332). Heidegger sees modern technology as the fulfillment of Western metaphysics, which he characterizes as the metaphysics of presence. From the time of the earliest philosophers, but definitively with Plato, says Heidegger, Western thought has conceived of being as the presence of beings, which in the modern world has come to mean the availability of beings for use. In fact, as he writes in *Being and Time*, the presence of beings tends to disappear into the transparency of their usefulness as things ready-to-hand (Heidegger 1962 [1927], 95-107). The essence of technology, which he names "the enframing," reduces the being of entities to a calculative order (Heidegger 1993, 311-341). Hence, the mountain is not a mountain but a standing supply of coal, the Rhine is not the Rhine but an engine for hydro-electric energy, and humans are not humans but reserves of manpower. The experience of the modern world, then, is the experience of being's withdrawal in face of the enframing and its sway over beings. However, humans are affected by this withdrawal in moments of anxiety or boredom, and therein lies the way to a possible



return of being, which would be tantamount to a repetition of the experience of being opened up by Parmenides and Heraclitus.

Heidegger sees this as the realization of the will to power, another Nietzschean conception, which, conjoined with the eternal return, represents the exhaustion of the metaphysical tradition (Heidegger 1991a, 199-203). For Heidegger, the will to power is the eternal recurrence as becoming, and the permanence of becoming is the terminal moment of the metaphysics of presence. On this reading, becoming is the emerging and passing away of beings within and among other beings instead of an emergence from being. Thus, for Heidegger, Nietzsche marks the end of metaphysical thinking but not a passage beyond it, and therefore Heidegger sees him as the last metaphysician in whom the oblivion of being is complete (Heidegger 1991a, 204-206; 1991b, 199-203). Hope for a passage into non-metaphysical thinking lies rather with Hölderlin, whose verses give voice to signs granted by being in its withdrawal (Heidegger 1994 [1937–1938], 115-118). While postmodernists owe much to Heidegger's reflections on the non-presence of being and the de-realization of beings through the technological enframing, they sharply diverge from his reading of Nietzsche.

Many postmodern philosophers find in Heidegger a nostalgia for being they do not share. They prefer, instead, the sense of cheerful forgetting and playful creativity in Nietzsche's eternal return as a repetition of the different and the new. Some have gone so far as to turn the tables on Heidegger, and to read his ruminations on metaphysics as the repetition of an original metaphysical gesture, the gathering of thought to its “proper” essence and vocation (see Derrida 1989 [1987]). In this gathering, which follows the lineaments of an exclusively Greco-Christian-German tradition, something more original than being is forgotten, and that is the difference and alterity against which, and with which, the tradition composes itself. Prominent authors associated with postmodernism have noted that the forgotten and excluded “other” of the West, including Heidegger, is figured by the Jew (see Lyotard 1990 [1988], and Lacoue-Labarthe 1990 [1988]). In this way, they are able to

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distinguish their projects from Heidegger's thinking and to critically account for his involvement with National Socialism and his silence about the Holocaust, albeit in terms that do not address these as personal failings. Those looking for personal condemnations of Heidegger for his actions and his “refusal to accept responsibility” will not find them in postmodernist commentaries. They will, however, find many departures from Heidegger on Nietzsche's philosophical significance (see Derrida 1979 [1978]), and many instances where Nietzsche's ideas are critically activated against Heidegger and his self-presentation.

Nevertheless, Heidegger and Nietzsche are both important sources for postmodernism's critical de-structuring or displacement of the signature concept of modern philosophy, the “subject,” which is generally understood as consciousness, or its identity, ground, or unity, and designated as the “I.” Where Nietzsche finds in this concept the original metaphysical error produced by morality and the communicative needs of the herd, Heidegger sees in it the end and exhaustion of the metaphysical tradition, inaugurated by the Greeks, in which being is interpreted as presence. Here, being is the underlying ground of the being of beings, the *subiectum* that is enacted in modern philosophy as the subject of consciousness. But in *Being and Time* Heidegger conceives the human being as *Dasein*, which is not simply a present consciousness, but an event of ecstatic temporality that is open to a past (*Gewesensein*) that was never present (its already being-there) and a future (*Zu-kunft*) that is always yet to come (the possibility of death). The finitude of *Dasein* therefore cannot be contained within the limits of consciousness, nor within the limits of the subject, whether it is conceived substantively or formally.

In addition to the critiques of the subject offered by Nietzsche and Heidegger, many postmodernists also borrow heavily from the psychoanalytic theories of Jacques Lacan. Lacan's distinctive gesture is his insistence that the Freudian unconscious is a function, or set of functions, belonging to language and particularly to the verbal exchanges between the analyst and analysand during the analytic session (see Lacan 1953–

55). For Lacan, the subject is always the subject of speech, and that means speech directed toward an other in relation to whom the subject differentiates and identifies itself. On this view, language is a feature of the “symbolic order” of society, which is constituted as an economy of signifiers, through which animal need becomes human desire, whose first object is to be recognized by the other. However, desire ultimately aims for something impossible: to possess, to “be,” or to occupy the place of the signifier of signifiers, i.e. the phallus. Insofar as the phallus is nothing but the signifying function as such, it does not exist. It is not an object to be possessed, but is that through which the subject and the other are brought into relation to begin with, and it thus imposes itself upon the subject as a fundamental absence or lack that is at once necessary and irremediable (Lacan 1977, 289). Hence the subject is forever divided from itself and unable to achieve final unity or identity. As the subject of desire, it remains perpetually incomplete, just as Dasein in Heidegger exists “beyond itself” in temporal ecstasis.

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## **3.2 DEPARTURES FROM MODERNISM**

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Modernism is a cover term for certain tendencies in early twentieth century art and literature. The motivating slogan at the back of these tendencies was 'make it new'. You have already looked at texts like *The Waste Land* (T.S. Eliot) and *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (James Joyce) as part of your British Poetry and British Novel courses. That should give you some idea as to how texts such as these looked different and 'new' as compared to those written earlier. Experimentation was always looked upon favourably. The heyday of Modernism was the period between 1910 and 1930. Postmodernism fully came into its own in the late 1950s and the early 1960s. What marks it is a mood of radical indeterminacy and a tone of self-conscious skepticism towards previous certainties in personal, intellectual and political life. Modernism also has skepticism but of a less absolute kind. Also, postmodernism is satisfied with surfaces whereas Modernism did strive for a certain kind of 'depth'. Postmodernism's fascination is with popular art forms and its mood is less elegiac than that of Modernism. Postmodernism does not fully abandon modernism's mood of alienation. However, whereas the

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modernist writer was more keen on trying to wrest a meaning from the world through myth, symbol or formal complexity, the postmodernist writer greets absurdity or meaningless existence with an indifference which combines resignation, fatigue and playfulness. Most postmodernist narratives have great self-reflexivity which means that they double back on their own presuppositions, assumptions and ways of telling the story.

### **The Modern and the Postmodern**

Modernity was a reaction against the inadequacies of traditional worldviews. The modernists contended that all the traditional ways of understanding the world and society have become obsolete and there was an urgent need to come up with new moral, philosophical, cultural or political principles to understand and deal with the changing world. The (re)emerging idea of reason had provided them the hope for building a new world on universally objective foundations. The postmodernists in turn have argued that these modern attempts to reinvent humanity are insufficient and futile. They have contended that reinventing new and absolute principles amount to newer forms of authoritarianism and have concluded that all such hopes are false. In this context the postmodernists have urged the abandoning of all metanarratives that are foundational principles. This they thought would expose the infinite field of differences within humanity. The idea of constitutive otherness is derived from this insight. Through their critical approaches, the postmodernists have attempted at exposing the mistakes of modernity and have declared that modernity has come to an end. The two most important features of postmodernity are their opposition to the idea of progress and their rejection of metanarratives. By opposing the idea of progress they have questioned the modernists' conviction that reason and science would lead to progress. Based on this optimism all the so-called modern institutions aim at this rational ideal. The idea of universal rationality itself is a metanarrative and modernity has many such metanarratives which consume different local narratives. For instance, with its notion of universal rationality, modernity has its idea of human welfare, which it

blindly applies to all possible situations and all human communities. In this process it neglects the ideas of welfare nourished by different societies and communities in relation with their local surroundings. It thus pretends to send out a universal message and often forcefully suppresses or consumes the local narratives. By advocating the idea of a concept of universal knowledge, the modern West committed a major mistake. It contended that such a notion of value-neutral, objective knowledge could be discovered by the human mind and the modern West did possess it. Correspondingly, it had assumed the possibility of a disinterested knower who possessed such knowledge. It also believed that the entire humanity was benefited by this knowledge. The postmodernists assert that this supposition is a myth. They thus proclaim that modernity has ended. In one sense, ruptures were already present in the Enlightenment concept of rational modern society. Kant's rational project had exposed the fragmentation of the modern society and self into three different and autonomous domains of reason; pure, practical and aesthetic rationalities. Kant had attempted to reunite this with aesthetics, but the problem of fragmentation persisted. This has been recognized as a problem of the Enlightenment project in general; the central unity underlying all aspects of human experiences Vs. fragmentation of the self and of society. Hegelian idealism and many other philosophies of modernity tried to find a solution to this problem, but had failed to achieve complete success. In Nietzsche's writings we find an ultimate proclamation of this fragmented society that was devoid of any universal sacred values and meanings. Nietzsche's Zarathustra preaches the death of God and the coming of the Superhuman. As Sim observes: Postmodernism has drawn heavily on the example set by antifoundationalist philosophers, perhaps most notably the iconoclastic nineteenth-century German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, whose call for a 'revaluation of all values' constitutes something of a battle-cry for the movement. [p. 3] Different philosophies like Marxism, existentialism, Phenomenology and psychoanalysis also depict the estrangement of the individual from his or her authentic modes of experience and being and the experiences of fragmentation and meaninglessness in an increasingly technologizing and industrializing

world. The post World-War II France had witnessed the emergence of many new philosophical approaches like structuralism and poststructuralism. Thinkers like Deleuze, Derrida, Foucault and Lyotard, who have later contributed significantly to the postmodern philosophy, initially belonged to the structuralist tradition.

### **The Roots of Postmodernism**

The term postmodernism was first used by the German philosopher Rudolf Pannwitz in 1917, while he was referring to the nihilism of twentieth-century Western culture. In literary criticism it appears as a reaction against aesthetic modernism during 1950s and 60s and in philosophy it was associated with French poststructuralist philosophy. The important 19th and 20th century intellectual and philosophical movements like Marxism, existentialism and Phenomenology and their methods consider the notion of self as central to their framework. They all consider the alienation of the self as an important philosophical problem and have discussed the possibilities of authentic and inauthentic human existence. What is common to these philosophical approaches is their dislike toward abstract theorization. As we have seen in some previous chapters, existentialism particularly stresses on the individual man and his/her problems in the world. Structuralism on the other hand, focuses on culture and hence on structures like language, ritual and kinship that creates the self. But this does not amount to a natural scientific enquiry of the individual subject. Yet, it does not adopt a purely subjective approach, but concentrates on language which is thought to exhibit a relative stability in the production of meaning. Structuralism holds that culture decides the nature of language-world relationship. Hence the word—object connection is arbitrary and conventional. Nevertheless, it is not merely subjective. They maintain that language is a system of signs, which induce a predictable response on the part of the linguistic community. But the stress on language and the attention it gives to the aspects of conventions and customs make structuralism a unique philosophical approach that is different from many modern philosophies. Poststructuralism, on the other hand rejects

structuralism and its methods. Like structuralism, here too language is considered philosophically significant, but the poststructuralists have opposed the scientific pretensions of structuralism. Their approaches were influenced by the idea of constructed self. They have adopted a more radical approach to the conceptualization of language and have challenged the possibility of rational inquiry into truth. They have opposed the idea that the world is knowable with the methodology suggested by structuralism. Poststructuralism was a reaction against modern rationalism and all forms of foundationalism. It originated in France in the 1960s and rejected many fundamental intellectual pillars of modern Western civilization. The poststructuralists have challenged the conceptions of objective knowledge of the real world. They have opposed the idea of one single textual meaning and have challenged the conceptions of a historical human subjectivity. In this sense, the poststructuralists vehemently criticized the notion of universal truth. The influence of this anti-foundational approach was visible in the fields of art, literature, politics and culture in general. The emphases on multiculturalism, feminism, identity politics etc., which are features of postmodern scenario, reflect this poststructuralist temperament. Following these insights, the post-modern period witnesses an opposition to all concepts of a unified self. The postmodernist thinkers criticize the concepts of objective and unquestionable meaning. They too emphasize the importance of language, culture and discourse, but categorically assert the decentered aspect highlighted by many others. As mentioned above, postmodernism is not just an intellectual reaction against modernity or a philosophical school that opposes modernism. It is a movement which has contributed to the evolution of a cultural and intellectual environment which stresses decentering, opposes all kinds of metanarratives and criticizes the conception of a unified self and the idea of a common rational ideal for all men. Along with philosophers, writers, artists, painters and architects have participated in this radical reaction against and rejection of modernism. With postmodernism, art became more and more eclectic. The postmodernists have challenged all traditional distinctions in art are like high-low, fine-commercial, truth-seeking modern avant-garde-superficial, classical-popular etc. Hence the

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impact of postmodernism is felt more intensively in the domain of art and culture and the difference between the two approaches of modern and postmodern can be brought out by highlighting how modern and postmodern artists have approached their profession. The modern artist is a person who has materialized a break with tradition and with the past. He offers a critique of the conditions of his own culture and society, as he takes a privileged view of the social and the psychological concerns of the day. The example for such a modern artist is Charlie Chaplin in the movies *Modern Times*, and *The Great Dictator*. In these movies we see the artist as a visionary, who has a grand dream for the entire humanity. He is critical about certain practices of the industrial society. He has a universal message to all humans, which ensures humankind emancipation. On the contrary, the postmodern artist does not have any privileged status. He never claims to be an authority of meaning and value. Unlike the modern art, the text in postmodernism is decentered. It has no intrinsic value or meaning, but it acquires value in its intertextual relations with other texts. Several social and political developments witnessing 20th century have significantly contributed to the development of the postmodern condition. It was a period that has witnessed the end of European colonialism. The development of mass communications and media culture has suggested drastic changes in the ways humans perceive things in the world and live in it. Changes in the global economic sphere and the growth of international marketing have suggested radical changes in culture. The end of cold war has opened up the possibilities of new alliances in international politics and trade, but has also led to the possibilities of new hostilities and polarization. The decline and fall of Marxism was arguably the most significant political event of post WW II Europe. All these developments have created new global equations at the economic, political and social realms, which ultimately led to the emergence of a post-industrial society, which made old meanings and values irrelevant. The post-industrial society is characteristically different from the modern industrialized world, as with its emergence, knowledge and information have become crucial for economic and cultural survival. This period had witnessed a revolt against many existent forms of authority and it challenged the



rationalism and liberal individualism that were the hallmarks of modern societies. As Sim would put it: One of the best ways of describing postmodernism as a philosophical movement would be as a form of scepticism-scepticism about authority, received wisdom, cultural and political norms, etc.-and that puts it into a longrunning tradition in Western thought that stretches back to classical Greek philosophy. [Sim. 3]

### **Some Postmodern Themes**

Let us now discuss some important postmodern themes. We shall focus on four of them here.

1. Presence or presentation Vs. representation and construction
2. Origin Vs. phenomena
3. Unity Vs. plurality
4. Transcendence of norms Vs. Immanence of norms.

#### **1. Denial of Presence**

The idea of presentation refers to what is directly and immediately given in experience. For example, the epistemological tradition of modern philosophy has treated the perception or sensation or sense data as the directly given, which is more reliable or certain. Countering this, the postmodernists have emphasized the notion of representation and affirm that everything is mediated by the human factor. We employ the mediation of linguistic signs and concepts in order to construct them. They thus argue that nothing is immediately present.

#### **2. Denial of the Notion of Origin**

Both traditional and modern philosophies have subscribed to this notion of origin. In the modern period we have a rational and secular interpretation of this notion of origin. This refers to the idea of the ultimate source of meaning, of selfhood, of life, of reality found by reason. There is an attempt to understand the deeper realities of the phenomenal world. Many philosophies and theoretical approaches that

were dominant during the first half of 20th century like existentialism, psycho-analysis, phenomenology and Marxism attempt to discover the origin of the self. In early hermeneutics, particularly in the works of Schleiermacher and Dilthey we find an approach that tries to locate the meaning of the text in the author's intentional life, which they believed was an historical sphere from where it needed to be discovered using a method. Contrary to this postmodernism has proclaimed the death of the author.

### **3. Denial of Unity**

The postmodernists have challenged the idea of unity manifested in the notions of meanings and conceptions of self. They assert that all cultural elements like words, meanings, experiences, human selves, societies etc. are constituted by relations to other elements. They maintain that nothing is simple, immediate or totally present. They also oppose the possibility of a complete analysis of anything and therefore argue against the idea of absolute meaning.

### **4. Transcendence of Norms Vs. Immanence of Norms**

The postmodernists have opposed the notion of transcendence of norms and have argued that values like truth, goodness, beauty, rationality, etc. are not independent but are products of and are immanent in the processes they find application as norms. Every such norm is conditional to the time and place and serves certain interests. They depend on certain social contexts. From this radically different idea about meaning, the postmodernists have derived another important theoretical insight; the idea of constitutive otherness. They categorically affirm that all normative claims are problematic and hence there are no fixed norms or guidelines to decipher the meaning of the text. In this context, the postmodernists suggest textual analysis through constitutive otherness. As Cahoon says: The apparent identity of what appear to be cultural units — human beings, words, meanings, ideas, philosophical systems, social organizations — are maintained in their apparent unity only

through...an active process of exclusion, opposition, and hierarchization. A phenomenon maintains its identity...only if other units are represented as foreign or "other" through a hierarchical dualism in which the first is privileged or favored, and the other is deprivileged or devalued in some way. [p. 11 ] They deny the idea of textual unity and argue that every text needs to be understood in terms of the dependency of its elements to others. They then emphasize on the excluded or "marginalized" elements of the text and argue that it is the margins that constitute the text. Accordingly, we must be sensitive to the elements that are not mentioned or devalued in the text explicitly. In other words, they claim that every text implies a repression and the privileged theme of the text depends on the marginalized, which will be brought out in the analysis.

### **The Postmodern Subject**

Since the postmodernists oppose all kinds of unity, they reject the idea of a unified subject with a self-sufficient agency. They refuse to identify anything universal or ahistorical in the conception of the self. They also deny the idea of one-dimensionality associated with the notion of self and argue that the subject is necessarily fractured and indefinite due to the complex social relationships it enters into and the multiple ways it interacts with the world. This idea of a fractured self is directly in contradiction with the idea of self, advocated by modern philosophers. The modern self is the autonomous knowing subject for whom the world is an object of knowledge. They have contended that the perceptions of the self are representations of an external world and knowledge is based on representations. The Cartesian-Kantian ideals of the self posit a rational, universal, knowing subject as the human self. Contrary to this, the postmodern view of the subject is conditioned by several factors. As Foucault observes, our subjective experience is socially and historically constituted by factors that we unconsciously internalize. He emphasizes the social aspect of discourse in which the self is situated and formed. Fredric Jameson presents another very interesting idea of the self. He presents the picture of a subject that lacks cognitive maps, which allow us to position ourselves in this world and to know where we are. The

post-industrial postmodern scenario forces us to have serious rethinking about subjectivity from the context of humans-technology interfacing. This is because science and technology have drastically altered the subject, its interactions, its potentials and its self-conceptions. It is a fact that certain drugs can significantly alter our behaviour and thereby our subjectivity. As Deleuze and Guattari observe in *A Thousand Plateaus: Cybernetic and informational machines form third age that reconstructs a generalized regime of subjection: recurrent and reversible "humansmachines systems" replace the old nonrecurrent and nonreversible relations of subjection between the two elements; the relation between human and machine is based on internal, mutual communication, and no longer on usage or action.* [p. 458] This novel conception of subjectivity has very important social and political implications. With its rejection of universalizing theories, it opposes oppressive ideologies like Fascism and Communism. Various political initiatives like the feminist movement, racial equality movements, homosexual rights movements, peace movements, anti-globalization movement etc., have also gained importance with the postmodern era. Here too, like its theoretical position, postmodernists do not postulate any ideal for all humanity, but criticize and oppose the existing structures that are oppressive and exploitative.

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### **3.3 JEAN FRANCOIS LYOTARD AND JEAN BAUDRILLARD**

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Jean Francois Lyotard and Jean Baudrillard have provided the philosophical framework for postmodernism. Lyotard's book *The Postmodern Condition* has proved to be the major text for debates on postmodernism. Baudrillard's book *Simulations* (first translated into English in 1983) theorized the 'loss of the real'. Lyotard's main argument is that the 'truth claims' and assumed consensus on which a lot of history and its 'grand narratives' stand are an illusion. The 'grand narratives' (talk in terms of progress through rationality) are untenable and repressive. They lack credibility. They impose restrictive boundaries on an otherwise pluralist cultural formation. They delimit discourse and exclude or marginalise voices that do not suit the dominant groups.

Baudrillard's main contention is that 'the real' is now defined in terms of the media in which it moves. The pervasive influence of images from television and advertising has led to a loss of the distinction between the real and the imagined. The same is true of the distinction between reality and illusion and between surface and depth which have also disappeared. To help us make better sense of these developments Frederic Jameson offers the phrase 'the cultural logic of late capitalism' for the cultural and social condition prevailing in advanced capitalist societies since the 1960s the period in which capitalism entered a new phase of crisis. One related danger is 'commodity fetishism'. By this is meant the continuous celebration of the products of late twentieth century capitalist society. That attitude almost approves of our inability to break free from the great communicational networks encompassing the world in which we find ourselves caught as 'subjects' (the term 'subject' points not only to individuality but also to the fact of being subjected or subordinated to non-subjective determinants).

**Check Your Progress 1**

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer.

b) Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit.

1. Discuss about the Departures from Modernism.

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2. Discuss the Jean Francois Lyotard and Jean Baudrillard.

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### **3.4 THE VIEW FROM WITHIN LITERARY CRITICISM**

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At present, two literary critics can be considered important chroniclers of postmodernism. The first is Ihab Hassan. His 1975 book *Paracriticisms* equates postmodernism with anti-elitism and anti-authoritarianism. He visualizes art as becoming communal, participatory, optional and irony becoming self-consuming play. The writer he had in mind most of the time was Samuel Beckett. The theme of the absent centre is crucial to Hassan's work. The second critic is Linda Hutcheon, the author of *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (1989) who sees postmodernist fiction as subversive and complicit at the same time. She places a lot of value on its parodic and self-critical mode. She makes a lot of the play she finds in novels like the Canadian, Robert Kroetsch's *The Studhorse Man* and sees postmodernists using irony in ways different from the way the modernists do. Her use is clearly more inclusive. Hutcheon sees postmodernist fiction as "historiographic metafiction" and envisions it as a mode which self-consciously problematizes the making of fiction and history. Conventions are used, abused and subverted in postmodern literature through the use of irony and parody.

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### **3.5 MIDNIGHT'S CHILDREN AS A POSTMODERNIST TEXT.**

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Salman Rushdie's novel *Midnight's Children* (1983) which is concerned with the 'life' of Saleem Sinai who was born at midnight on August 15, 1947 is a good example of a postmodernist text. Rushdie seeks to challenge the conventional narrative through blurred boundaries of discourse, through textual play, through explicit or implicit parody and through the hybridization of language. Chaotic multiplicity and plurality is celebrated as are creative tensions between personal and national identity. The narrator's self is subject to fluidity. His dealings with Padma are sometimes mocking and sometimes loving. He keeps mocking his own self all the time. The hold of realism is loosened through fantasy. The 'local' is celebrated as we find in the loving care which Rushdie bestows on details of Bombay life. Irony is playful and liberating. The

family's fortunes and the nation's fortunes are subjected to the same flippancy. Most of the lineages, origins, cultural and religious practices, political manipulations and the working of media all are subjected to a playful treatment. Mimicry also has an important role in the proceedings. Ideas about origins, centre, presence and historical explanation itself are undetermined all the time.

More than this, an element of the mock-heroic is also at work. Exaggerations of various kinds and the element of bathos (anti-climax), introduced at crucial points in the narrative are all part of the overall playful thrust. Desire and nostalgia merge in such a way that the 'subject' caught in their net emerges as quite fluid and provisional. Events of the Emergency period and of the war of Bangladesh liberation are given a playful treatment and the parodic element is ever-present. Dreams mingle with reality, mystery with magic and truth with fantasy. Some other notable postmodern texts also need to be mentioned. Allen Ginsberg's poem 'Howl', Samuel Beckett's play *Waiting for Godot*, Gunter Grass's novel *The Tin Drum* and Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* all have a palpable presence of postmodern features in them. Sometimes the name given to fiction of this kind is 'magic realism'. This term refers to the techniques of combining the realistic depiction of events and characters with elements of the fantastic often drawn from myth, dreams and fairy tales. Mostly there is a lot of comment on the way the narrative itself got made and on the status (reliability or otherwise) of the narrator himself/herself.

### Check Your Progress 2

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer.

b) Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit.

1. Write about the View from within Literary Criticism.

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2. Discuss the *Midnight's Children* as a postmodernist text.

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### **3.6 POINTS OF CONVERGENCE WITH POSTSTRUCTURALISM**

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The major point of convergence between poststructuralism and postmodernism is that both are seen as part of the 'logics of disintegration', (the title of Peter Dews's 1987 book) where he sees Lyotard, Derrida, Foucault and Lacan together as being the major figures putting forward these logics of disintegration. So some of those who do not look favourably on both postmodernism and poststructuralism take the sweeping position that there is little to choose between the two. They say that in 1979 (the year of the publication of Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition*) poststructuralism changed names and found its act replaced by postmodernism. That may not be a very accurate way of putting it but the validity of this common criticism of the two trends remains. The common criticism is that both contribute to the logics of disintegration. Here we need to know a little about 'modernity'. This is a name for the post-feudal era which thinkers like the German Jurgen Habermas treat as one of progressive enlightenment or rationalization. One could say that we have long been under the sway of reason in the pursuit of rational laws and procedures. By choosing the words 'postmodernism' and 'postmodernity' to characterize the contemporary era, Lyotard's theory was implicitly criticizing Habermas. Lyotard's basic position is that in the contemporary historical situation the old European master-narratives of progressive subjective enlightenment and rational liberation (especially



liberal humanism and Marxism) no longer apply. Truth can no longer be seen as the possession of a rational subject, nor is it a property of a reality that could be described objectively, using objective scientific methods. The so-called 'truth' and 'reality' are determined by the effectivity of knowledge within a particular economic situation dominated by corporations possessing the power not only to shape the world but to say what counts as a scientific truth regarding that world. Most of these awarenesses are reinforced by what Baudrillard has to say about virtual reality or the fact of 'the real' being defined in terms of the media in which it moves. The work of Derrida, Lacan, Foucault and Roland Barthes collectively undermines subjectivity as agency and 'truth' as enabling.

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### **3.7 IMPLICATIONS FOR US**

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The implications that this kind of a scenario has for us in the 'third world' or in developing countries are far from reassuring. Most of the time we end up being dictated to (directly or indirectly, crudely or subtly) 01.1 what constitutes 'reality' and 'truth' in a single-super-power world i.e. a world dominated by the United States of America and its close allies. Consumerism and commodity fetishism have also contributed to our being largely at the receiving end of 'the postmodern condition.' Another danger is that of the 'degree zero of contemporary general culture'. Thus one listens to reggae; watches a western; eats McDonald's food for lunch and local cuisine for dinner; wears Paris perfume in Tokyo and "retro" clothes in Hong Kong (The Postmodern Condition p. 76). The hybridization of cultural forms can hypothetically lead to a scenario where some Hindu young men, somewhat fundamentalist in outlook, dance to the beat of updated Sufi music, the full significance of which may be lost on them. In its extreme Baudrillardian form, the 'loss of the real' may seem to give legitimacy to a callous indifference to disaster and suffering. Think of Baudrillard's notorious comment in which he stated that the Gulf War (involving Iraq on the one hand and western powers on the other) never happened, that what 'really' took place was a kind of tele-visual virtual reality.

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Also, marginalized people like the Blacks or those who are doubly marginalized (like Black women) can never feel comfortable in a postmodern setting unless they are given a greater say in the processes of development. In that sense, postmodernism is rightly seen by some Black feminist critics as something primarily for and by comfortable white intellectuals. In any event, anywhere in the world, postmodernism's recycled emptiness and perfunctory can always be seen as a cultural crisis. And yet, to most of us, any absolute wishing away of the effects of postmodernism as a condition is not quite feasible. The experiences of living in a global civilization are forcing a kind of unavoidable relativism upon us. On the positive side, postmodernism is a release from restrictive assumptions and elitist hierarchies. It encourages popular culture and makes us realize that there are as many realities as there are cultures and that the overall scene has become a bazaar of realities. In any event, holding on to 'history' in a monolithic sense is becoming increasingly difficult. Ours has largely become an era of instantaneous history where technology is capable of making the future obsolete even before the present has vanished. Ideas about origins, centre, presence and historical explanation are continually being undermined. There is a pluralizing and dispersal at work about which we cannot do much. We might well say with Yeats; "Things fall apart, the centre cannot hold" - we live in a world with several centres and several margins and all of them interrelated in exceedingly complex and ever-changing ways. Ruptures, intertextuality etc. can create space for new and varied forms of bonding which fully accommodate difference, the global and the local.

### Check Your Progress 3

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer.

b) Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit.

1. Point out the Convergence with Poststructuralism.

- .....
- .....
- .....
2. What are the Implications of post modernism for Us?
- .....
- .....
- .....

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### 3.8 LET US SUM UP

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Modernism was an impulse for novelty in the early 20th century literature and arts. It flowered between 1910 and 1930 mainly through the work of the high Modernists like James Joyce and T.S. Eliot. Postmodernism concern is with surface style and postmodern writing has greater self-reflexivity, Lyotard and Baudrillard have offered a philosophical framework for postmodernism, the former with his stress on the need to be incredulous towards grand narratives and the latter with 'the loss of the real' to virtual reality created largely by the new information and communication technologies. Ihab Hassan and Linda Hutcheon are two literary critics who have theorized about postmodernism. Salman Rushdie's *Midnight Children* is a representative postmodernist text. It has self-reflexivity, magic realism, fictionality, parody and hybridity of styles. It also makes full use of 'play' and takes liberties with 'history' as it is generally understood. Poststructuralism and postmodernism have reinforced each other in the area of the 'logics of disintegration'. Subjectivity and agency and the possibilities of change have suffered erosion in the face of their onslaught. Rationality and scientific thought - two cornerstones of 'modernity' - have also suffered erosion. A number of things which postmodernism stands for are not very palatable to peoples of the so-called 'Third World' where suffering is a real thing and not part of some virtual or discursive reality.

Postmodernism is a broad movement that developed in the mid- to late 20th century across philosophy, the arts, architecture, and criticism, marking a departure from modernism. The term has been more generally

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applied to describe what postmodernists believe to be the historical era following modernity and the tendencies of this era.

While encompassing a wide variety of approaches and disciplines, postmodernism is generally defined by an attitude of skepticism, irony, or rejection of the grand narratives and ideologies of modernism, often calling into question various assumptions of Enlightenment rationality. Consequently, common targets of postmodern critique include universalist notions of objective reality, morality, truth, human nature, reason, science, language, and social progress. Postmodern thinkers frequently call attention to the contingent or socially-conditioned nature of knowledge claims and value systems, situating them as products of particular political, historical, or cultural discourses and hierarchies. Accordingly, postmodern thought is broadly characterized by tendencies to self-referentiality, epistemological and moral relativism, pluralism, and irreverence.

Postmodern critical approaches gained purchase in the 1980s and 1990s, and have been adopted in a variety of academic and theoretical disciplines, including cultural studies, philosophy of science, economics, linguistics, architecture, feminist theory, and literary criticism, as well as art movements in fields such as literature, contemporary art, and music. Postmodernism is often associated with schools of thought such as deconstruction, post-structuralism, and institutional critique, as well as philosophers such as Jean-François Lyotard, Jacques Derrida, and Fredric Jameson.

Criticisms of postmodernism are intellectually diverse, and include assertions that postmodernism promotes obscurantism, and is meaningless, adding nothing to analytical or empirical knowledge.

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### 3.9 KEY WORDS

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**Moderization:** Modernization theory is used to explain the process of modernization within societies. Modernization refers to a model of a

progressive transition from a 'pre-modern' or 'traditional' to a 'modern' society.

**Narratives:** A narrative or story, is an account of a series of related events, experiences, or the like, whether true or fictitious. The word derives from the Latin verb *narrare*, which is derived from the adjective *gnarus*.

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### 3.10 QUESTIONS FOR REVIEW

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1. In what respects is postmodernism different from Modernism?
2. Why is Jean Francois Lyotard distrustful of grand narratives?
3. In what terms does Jean Baudrillard spell out "the loss of the real"?
4. What are the postmodernistic features of Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*?
5. How do both postmodernism and poststructuralism contribute to the 'logics of disintegration'?
6. Discuss about the Departures from Modernism
3. Discuss the Jean Francois Lyotard and Jean Baudrillard
4. Write about the View from within Literary Criticism
5. Discuss the *Midnight's Children* as a postmodernist text.
6. Point out the Convergence with Poststructuralism.
7. What are the Implications of post modernism for Us?

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### 3.11 SUGGESTED READINGS AND REFERENCES

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## 3.12 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

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### Check Your Progress 1

1. See Section 3.2
2. See Section 3.3

### Check Your Progress 2

1. See Section 3.4
2. See Section 3.5

### Check Your Progress 3

1. See Section 3.6
2. See Section 3.7

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# UNIT 4: POST-STRUCTURALISM

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## STRUCTURE

- 4.0 Objectives
- 4.1 Introduction
- 4.2 Post Structural Theories
- 4.3 Discourse Knowledge and Experience
- 4.4 Derrida and Deconstruction
- 4.5 Foucault and the Archaeology of Knowledge
- 4.6 Jameson and Late Capitalism
- 4.7 Baudrillard and Post Modernism
- 4.8 Let us sum up
- 4.9 Key Words
- 4.10 Questions for Review
- 4.11 Suggested readings and references
- 4.12 Answers to Check Your Progress

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## 4.0 OBJECTIVES

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After having read this unit you should be able to

- To outline post-structural theories
- To critique structuralism
- To describe deconstruction
- To explain “late capitalism”
- To discuss Baudrillard and postmodern.

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## 4.1 INTRODUCTION

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Post-structuralism is either a continuation or a rejection of the intellectual project that preceded it—structuralism. Structuralism proposes that one may understand human culture by means of a structure—modeled on language (structural linguistics)—that differs from concrete reality and from abstract ideas—a “third order” that mediates between the two. Post-structuralist authors all present different critiques of structuralism, but common themes include the rejection of the self-sufficiency of

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structuralism, and an interrogation of the binary oppositions that constitute its structures. Writers whose works are often characterised as post-structuralist include: Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, Judith Butler, Jean Baudrillard, Julia Kristeva, and Jürgen Habermas although many theorists who have been called "post-structuralist" have rejected the label

It is the intellectual trend in the ontology of ideas and schools of ideas, that they are constantly superseded. The ideas or ideologies that are superseded recede into the history of ideas. The new theories and ideas then occupy centre stage in the national and international sociological and social scientific world views. This cycle further repeats itself and though this fact is often lost sight of in the heyday of a theoretical orientation that has become popular. In the essay that follows we will first take up post structuralism and then postmodern theory. We will see how there are several overlaps indeed intermeshes between various strands of these two contemporary approaches to the study of society and culture. Thus what we are dealing with are strands of an overall approach. There is no one view on these approaches and both post structuralism and post modernism are blanket terms containing many strands of thought. Let us turn now to post structuralism first. What does the term indicate? As is clear from the word "post structuralism", these approaches are those that came after 'structuralism'. These theories and approaches sought to seek insights into society by critiquing and deconstructing social and cultural processes. The post modernism break with structuralism was the fact that structuralism reduced everything into binary oppositions and the interrelations between them. The structuralisms held they could analyse any phenomena with the help of their methodology. We must emphasize that post structuralism is a number of approaches and not one monolithic theory. However, these approaches have in common their point of departure a critique of "structuralism".

### **Critique of Structuralism**



Poststructuralists often point out in their various writings that meaning in language is diverse and open to many different interpretations. Yet to get to the meaning of a text it can be deconstructed and is different from its apparent or surface meaning. That is different meanings can be assigned to a single text depending upon the perspective taken. As would be clear by now that post structuralism proceeds as a critique of structuralism which is itself bounded by its own linguistic boundaries. Structuralism, however, was found to be inadequate as an explanation of social process and phenomena. Thus we find that

- structuralism did not pay heed to historical processes and is a-historical
- applied the rules of linguistics to societal processes which is a questionable procedure
- it is assumed that a work has meaning in itself and this persists even before it is discovered and
- the text is only a conduit between the subject and the structure of rationality.

Thus the structuralists argue that it is language and its structure which itself produces reality and since it is language that is responsible for thought it determines man's perceptions whatever they may be. Further there is the idea that meaning does not come from individuals but the rules of language and the overall 'system' which controls individuals. Therefore, the individual is subordinated and superceded by "the structure." It is the structure which produces meaning not the individual. It is specifically language which is at the base of such domination over the individual.

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## **4.2 POST STRUCTURAL THEORIES**

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Post-structuralism emerged in France during the 1960s as a movement critiquing structuralism. According to J. G. Merquior a love-hate relationship with structuralism developed among many leading French thinkers in the 1960s.

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In a 1966 lecture "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences", Jacques Derrida presented a thesis on an apparent rupture in intellectual life. Derrida interpreted this event as a "decentering" of the former intellectual cosmos. Instead of progress or divergence from an identified centre, Derrida described this "event" as a kind of "play."

In 1967, Barthes published "The Death of the Author" in which he announced a metaphorical event: the "death" of the author as an authentic source of meaning for a given text. Barthes argued that any literary text has multiple meanings and that the author was not the prime source of the work's semantic content. The "Death of the Author," Barthes maintained, was the "Birth of the Reader," as the source of the proliferation of meanings of the text.

The period was marked by the rebellion of students and workers against the state in May 1968.

As can be seen post structural theories do not agree with the 'structuralists' in several key areas of analysis and understanding. We will now turn to these and see how the two differ. However, before that let us look briefly at the background to post structuralism. By the 1950's the influence of structuralism had set in. Saussure (1857-1913) was of the view that 'meaning' had to be found in the "structure" of the whole language (Guller, 1976). It could not be discovered in individual words, and had to have an overall linguistic setting – that is the language as a whole. We find that around the 1960's the structuralist movement tried to amalgamate the ideas of Marx Freud and Saussure. The structuralists were opposed to the existentialist movement which put the individual and life experience at the centre. By contrast the structuralists opined that the individual is everywhere being conditioned by social psychological and linguistic structures which control and direct him, rather than the individual doing the same. As you will have noticed this is an extreme stand and the claim for universality of application of method also drew attention to the fact that such claims of universal application did not

necessarily hold true. Also how is it that any two structural analyses of the same field or phenomena would be different? It was because of the short-comings of the structuralist approach that post structuralism was developed by the intellectuals. This post structuralism is based on a number of basic assumptions/positions. These include:

- 1) putting all phenomena under one explanation,
- 2) there is a transcendental reality which overarches all other reality.

Post structuralism is also critical of concept of man as portrayed and developed by Enlightenment thought. The Enlightenment view that the individual is separate and whole and that the mind is the area where values evolve on the other hand the poststructuralists felt that the individual was embedded in social interaction. Such symbolic beings are referred to by the word “subject”. We can then say that the subjects are intertwined with society and culture and occupy some place within them, and sociologically based sites. Further subjects are the actors in everyday reality. In fact it is the subjects that make up society and the activities therein, include work and entertainment. We could add here that the subjects meaning and values are embedded in the identities of groups and the activities which lead them to having an identity. Thus these approaches that we are discussing have often been dubbed “anti-humanist” because post-structuralism is against the divine or transcendental wholeness as was the humanist theories view. However, ‘antihumanist’ is a misnomer and is actually another way of looking at human beings one that is essentially not against individual persons. Further we find that while structuralism presents reality as relations between binary oppositions post-structuralism’s vision of reality is a fragmented one. Social process and cultural relations are not viewed as neat oppositions – on the other hand social and cultural processes are seen in bits and pieces and the nature of reality is not seen as being amenable to total understanding of a whole process. Parts of social process can be focused upon and analysed. Poststructuralists are completely opposed to grand narratives and Meta theory feeling these are

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equivalent to a fiction and not really apprehending reality. Thus post-structural theories are themselves looking at the specific. Further the physical self (the body) is studied in the context of time and history, and brought out of the closet so to speak. Similarly it is the details of discourse and cultural actions that are now looked into. Further the role of language in building social and cultural reality is also evident in the work of the poststructuralists (Godelier, 1972). Thus the fact that society and the individual are “linguistically bound” with each other and the relationship between the two is complex. This stand clearly negates the earlier assumptions of social scientists that language was easy to comprehend and use and that there were no ambiguities regarding language – use. This the post-structural theories negate as an erroneous assumption. In fact “reality” itself is constructed within the social matrix and continues to reproduce itself over time.

Structuralism was an intellectual movement in France in the 1950s and 1960s that studied the underlying structures in cultural products (such as texts) and used analytical concepts from linguistics, psychology, anthropology, and other fields to interpret those structures. Structuralism posits the concept of binary opposition, in which frequently used pairs of opposite but related words (concepts) are often arranged in a hierarchy, for example: Enlightenment/Romantic, male/female, speech/writing, rational/emotional, signified/signifier, symbolic/imaginary.

Post-structuralism rejects the structuralist notion that the dominant word in a pair is dependent on its subservient counterpart and instead argues that founding knowledge either on pure experience (phenomenology) or systematic structures (Structuralism) is impossible because history and culture condition the study of underlying structures and these are subject to biases and misinterpretations. This impossibility was not meant as a failure or loss, but rather as a cause for "celebration and liberation". A post-structuralist approach argues that to understand an object (e.g., a text), it is necessary to study both the object itself and the systems of knowledge that produced the object. The uncertain distance between structuralism and post-structuralism is further blurred by the fact that

scholars rarely label themselves as post-structuralists. Some scholars associated with structuralism, such as Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault, also became noteworthy in post-structuralism.

### **Controversy**

Some observers from outside the post-structuralist camp have questioned the rigour and legitimacy of the field. American philosopher John Searle argued in 1990 that "The spread of 'poststructuralist' literary theory is perhaps the best-known example of a silly but non-catastrophic phenomenon." Similarly, physicist Alan Sokal in 1997 criticized "the postmodernist/poststructuralist gibberish that is now hegemonic in some sectors of the American academy." Literature scholar Norman Holland argued that post-structuralism was flawed due to reliance on Saussure's linguistic model, which was seriously challenged by the 1950s and was soon abandoned by linguists: "Saussure's views are not held, so far as I know, by modern linguists, only by literary critics and the occasional philosopher. [Strict adherence to Saussure] has elicited wrong film and literary theory on a grand scale. One can find dozens of books of literary theory bogged down in signifiers and signifieds, but only a handful that refers to Chomsky."

### **David Foster Wallace wrote:**

The deconstructionists ("deconstructionist" and "poststructuralist" mean the same thing, by the way: "poststructuralist" is what you call a deconstructionist who doesn't want to be called a deconstructionist) ... see the debate over the ownership of meaning as a skirmish in a larger war in Western philosophy over the idea that presence and unity are ontologically prior to expression. There's been this longstanding deluded presumption, they think, that if there is an utterance then there must exist a unified, efficacious presence that causes and owns that utterance. The poststructuralists attack what they see as a post-Platonic prejudice in favour of presence over absence and speech over writing. We tend to trust speech over writing because of the immediacy of the speaker: he's right there, and we can grab him by the lapels and look into his face and

figure out just exactly what one single thing he means. But the reason why poststructuralists are in the literary theory business at all is that they see writing, not speech, as more faithful to the metaphysics of true expression. For Barthes, Derrida, and Foucault, writing is a better animal than speech because it is iterable; it is iterable because it is abstract; and it is abstract because it is a function not of presence but of absence: the reader's absent when the writer's writing and the writer's absent when the reader's reading.

For a deconstructionist, then, a writer's circumstances and intentions are indeed a part of the "context" of a text, but context imposes no real circumscriptions on the text's meaning because meaning in language requires cultivation of absence rather than presence, involves not the imposition but the erasure of consciousness. This is so because these guys—Derrida following Heidegger and Barthes Mallarmé and Foucault God knows who—see literary language as not a tool but an environment. A writer does not wield language; he is subsumed in it. Language speaks us; writing writes; etc.

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### **4.3 DISCOURSE KNOWLEDGE AND EXPERIENCE**

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The world of discourse and knowledge set the limits for our experience – and the subject (ego) can only experience or describe what he has experienced. That is to also say that there are experiences for which there is no language or a language is slowly being pieced together, and certain words and concepts gain ground and usage. This includes the usage of metaphor, metonymy and irony. These usages lead by themselves to a concern with ideology which provides an ingress and insight into relations of power and the world-view of the subjects. Again another area in which post structural theories focus upon in their analysis on what are known as cultural codes which themselves provide an understanding of our lives and how they work out within various contexts. However, it needs to be pointed out that it is understood by the post structuralists that construction of meaning implies that some aspects of social process and

individual life will be emphasised and others will be relatively reduced in importance.

In other words “objectivity” as in the case of earlier sociological theory is found to be an illusion. That is the analyses of poststructuralists does not deny its subjective orientation. Yet poststructuralists also hold that meaning in society can be deconstructed to open up new ideas and practices. However, such an exercise leads to an understanding of specifics rather than general constructions. Thus loops of meaning and process of construction reveal more about the specific scaffolding of the subject rather than an understanding of the whole. The world is mediated by discourse, language and ideology all of which structure the experience of the subject. According to post structural thinking it is the text which is the repertoire of meanings and there is no meaning outside the text. Thus meaning resides in the text itself in toto. An understanding resides in social signs and discourses in particular fields of study. Again almost paradoxically, every text exists only in relation to other texts. However, it needs to be pointed out that man’s ability to perceive reality is not at stake. Nonetheless what we know of reality is known through various processes of discourse symbols and language. Yet it must be understood that discourse itself is very varied in content. It is also a fact that discourse is sometimes sketchy and abrupt. It originates through chance and disappears also through unspecified reasons. Thus according to Foucault there is no question of predicting history through grand theories and Meta narratives (Foucault, 1969). History is thus viewed by poststructuralists as happening by chance. Thus in history the twists, turns, plots, subplots and important events and happenings cannot be pinned down – that is it happens by chance.

### **Check Your Progress 1**

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer.

b) Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit.

1. Discuss about the Post Structural Theories.

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2. What is meant by discourse Knowledge and Experience?

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## 4.4 DERRIDA AND DECONSTRUCTION

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This brief note on structuralism is important for our understanding of the process of “deconstruction” initiated by Derrida. The basics of this structuralism are: positing of a centre of power or influence which begins and ends all social processes. This could be ‘mind’ or ‘self’ or even ‘God’. all structures are composed of binary pairs or oppositions one of which is more important than the other and often signified thus: +/- . These could be good/evil, god/man and so o Thus post structuralism began with Derrida’s critique of structuralism or rather this ‘deconstruction’ of language society and culture. The structuralists felt that man was chained to structures which controlled him. In contrast, however, Derrida feels that language can be reduced to writing which does not control the subjects. According to him all institutions and structures are nothing but writing and incapable of controlling the individual. The structuralists saw order and stability in language, hence in all structures; the poststructuralists on the other hand saw language as essentially changing and quite unstable. This means that the language structure being itself in flux cannot create structures that constrain, restrain, or punish people, because language itself is disorderly, and the underlying laws of language cannot be ‘discovered’. This is what is the process of deconstruction which as the term suggests is a sort of conceptual dissection of the concept or Post Structuralism and Post Modernism 194 process being studied. Derrida who coined the term



deconstruction felt that logocentrism has dominated the Western countries. This way of perceiving has meant that writing has always been suppressed historically speaking. This has also meant that the freedom to analyse and think is taken away in a logocentric system. Derrida wants to dismantle this type of approach as it sets writing free from repression. Under these circumstances what takes place in the art form of traditional theatre is a representation of real life. Such a representation is extremely important, in fact a controlled theological theatre.

*The Theological Theatre Derrida contrasts 'theatre of cruelty' as against traditional theatre which has representational logic and renders traditional theatre as theological. Derrida writes: the stage is theological for as long as its structure, following the entirety of tradition comports the following elements: an author creator who, absent and from afar, is armed with a text and keeps watch over, assembles, regulates the time or the meaning of representation .... He lets representation represent him through representatives, directors or actors ..... who represent the thought of the "creator". Finally the theological stage comports a passive, seated public, a public of spectators, of consumers, of enjoyers. (Derrida, 1978, Writing and Difference : p:235).*

Derrida's chosen alternative stage is one which will not be controlled by texts and authors but fall short of disorder/anarchy. Thus Derrida wants a fundamental change in traditional theatre/life which would mean a great change from the dominance of the writer (God?) on the stage (theatre) or in societal process as well leading closer towards freedom of the individual. Derrida feels thus that traditional theatre needs to be deconstructed. In this mode of suggestion is included a critique of society itself, which is, as mentioned earlier 'logocentric.' Derrida feels that in theatre it is the writer who puts together the script, and that this influence is so strong that it is akin to a dictatorship. Similarly in social processes the intellectual ideas and formulations are controlled by the intellectual authorities who create discourse. Further we may add that post structuralists believe in the process of decentering because when there is no specific authoritarian pressure on society it becomes open ended and

available for 'play and difference'. This process is ongoing reflexive and open (Derrida, 1978 :297). Thus the present alone exists and it is the arena where social activity takes place. Thus we should try to find solutions by harking to the past. The future itself cannot be precisely predicted. However, there is no precise solution that Derrida provides except that in the end there is only writing, acting and play with difference. At this point in our presentation it would be instructive to look briefly at an example of post structural ideas and ideology in the case of Michel Foucault one of the major poststructuralists. One critical difference between Foucault and the structuralists is that while linguistics is the main influence for the former, it did not occur exclusively as the domain of ideas that have to be adopted or modified into a poststructuralist schema. That is post structural thinkers use a variety of ideas and influence and are not reduced to examining the relations between binary terms. This variety of sources in presenting an argument is what puts Foucault into the group of the poststructuralists.

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### 4.5 FOUCAULT AND THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF KNOWLEDGE

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Foucault described his approach/methodology as the "archaeology of knowledge." Using this approach Foucault studied knowledge and discourse. According to Foucault this approach provides better ingress to understanding society and it is different from history, which he feels is portrayed in a stereotyped linear progression, whereas the reality remains limited and 'continuous.'

*The Archaeology of Knowledge In his early work on methodology, Foucault (1966) is doing an "archaeology of knowledge". His objects of study are bodies of knowledge, ideas, modes of discourse, he contrasts his archaeology of knowledge to history and the history of ideas, both of which he regards as being too rational and as seeing to much continuity in the history of knowledge.... This highly structural approach in Foucault's early work was later abandoned for a poststructuralist orientation because it was silent on the issue of power as well as the link*

*between knowledge and power. Michel Foucault died in 1984 at the age of 58 as a leading sociologist. Among Foucault's last works was a trilogy of sexual study. These works indicated Foucault's interest in studying sexuality. These books were The History of Sexuality 1976, The Care of the Self 1984, and The Use of Pleasure 1984. (From Ritzer, 1996 Sociological Theory, p:604-5).*

Foucault, however, moved away from this structural type of analysis and began studying the 'genealogy of power.' His concern was to find out the facts about governance through knowledge production. The nature of knowledge as power should not be hierarchical and also that the higher the knowledge (e.g. science) the greater the power it wields over the subjects. Thus Foucault studied technique and process in science since this is what exerts power over people through the medium of institutions. This is not to say that the elites are scheming and manipulating power. Again Foucault uses a nonlinear perception of progress in societies from the stage of barbarism to the present civilisation. Thus history is seen instead as shifting patterns of domination. However, knowledge/power is such that it is always opposed and resisted. Thus Foucault's post structural view is that while knowledge/ power are ubiquitous they are certainly not omnipotent and total in their domination but their power/authority is always questioned and opposed. A brief introduction to Foucault's ideas would help us in completing the section on post structuralism (Foucault, 1979). Thus according to Foucault

- the mad have been misunderstood and mistreated over the course of history, and subjected to moral control
- power/knowledge are implicative of each other
- technologies exert power e.g. the Panopticon a prison with the cells around a large observation tower from which everything that inmates do is visible and observable. Such an institution is metaphoric of total societal control of the prisoners, since it forces even the prisoners or inmates to exercise self-restraint. Thus this is a direct relationship between technology, knowledge and power. Thus the Panopticon is a prototype of societal control

## Notes

and surveillance and the forerunner of intelligence services and satellite observations over geophysical territories.

Post modernism is not the term for a single type of theory, metanarrative, or grand theory. It is rather the term for an overall approach involving many Post Structuralism and Post Modern 196 similar strands. There is thus no single position in postmodernism, but all the thinkers in this approach share certain common features that separate it from “modernism.” This has been both a feature that separates it from ‘modernism’ and the approaches all indicate that what they are doing is to present, dissect, construct ideas that will be relevant to the postmodern context. A large number of sociologists still tend to think that post modernism is a passing fancy, however, it is now obvious that postmodernism cannot be ignored both as fact and phenomena. However, it cannot be denied that postmodernism is surrounded by diverse positions within the field itself.

It would be proper at this point to distinguish between some common terms that are often confused with each other although they are quite distinct from one another. Thus “post modernity” is the word used for the historical epoch following the modern era. Further ‘post modernism’ itself refers to cultural products which are different/separate from the modern cultural products (in art, architecture etc.). Again ‘postmodern social theory’ refers to a method of ideating that differs from modern social theory. From the above it can be said that the post modern covers:

- 1) a new epoch,
- 2) new cultural products,
- 3) new theories about society.

Further these new realities are getting strengthened and there is a widespread feeling that the modern era is ending and being superseded by another epoch. This was evident in breaking up of buildings which were modern and complete. However, the post modern theories themselves provide ready made solutions in a general sense. However, it

is questionable whether the birth of the post modern era can be precisely dated though it appears to have transited, from the modern in the 1960's. Post modernism indicates that in the cultural field postmodern cultural products tend to replace modern products. Again postmodern social theory has emerged from and has differences with modern social theory. Thus postmodern theory rejects the notion of 'foundationalism' of the earlier theories but itself tends to be relative, non relational and nihilistic.

**Check Your Progress 2**

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer.

b) Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit.

1. Describe the Derrida and Deconstruction theory.

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2. Discuss the Foucault and the Archaeology of Knowledge.

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**4.6 JAMESON AND LATE CAPITALISM**

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Again the postmodern thinkers reject the notion of a grand narrative or meta narrative. For example Lyotard contrasts modern knowledge which has a grand synthesis e.g. the work of Parsons or Marx such narratives are associated with modern science. Thus as Lyotard identifies modern knowledge with metanarratives, then obviously postmodern approaches demand that such theorising should be negated in its completeness. This is because postmodern scholars such as Lyotard are not afraid to face the

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differences and challenges of such a viewpoint. Thus post modernism becomes an instrument that welcomes different perspectives under the same broad umbrella. Let us now turn to look at some examples of postmodern theory. A good illustration of the postmodern theory is clearly set out in the work of Fredric Jameson. The point of departure is that modernity and post modernity mark a radical break from each other and are hard to reconcile the two. However, a middle position is taken by Jameson who writes that there are some continuities between the two epochs. According to Jameson capitalism is in its 'late' stages, but continues to be the main form of production the world over. However, this 'late' stage of capitalism has been ushered in with post modernism. Thus while the cultural logic is altered, the underlying structure remains the same as in the incipient forms of capitalism. This is reflective of the Marxian framework. Jameson sees the postmodern situation as possessing both positive and negative aspects of postmodernism. Thus there is progress and chaos side by side. Thus according to Jameson there are three stages in the progress of capitalism. The first is market capitalism typified by national markets. Following this phase comes the imperialist stage which is backed up by a global capitalist network. Then the third phase is 'late capitalism' share capital is used to commodify new areas. The effect of changes in the economic structure automatically create appropriate cultural changes. Thus Jameson points out that we can see that:

- realist culture is associated with market capitalism
- modernist culture is associated with monopoly capitalism
- postmodern culture and multinational capitalism.

*Late Capitalism .....aesthetic production today has become integrated into commodity production generally the frantic economic urgency of producing fresh waves of ever more morel seeming goods (from clothing to airplanes), at ever greater rates of turnover, now assigns an increasingly essential structural function and position to aesthetic innovation and experimentation. Such economic necessities then find recognition in the institutional support of all kinds available for art, from*

*foundation and grants to museums and other forms of patronage. (from Frederic Jameson, 1984 "Post-Modernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism". New Left Review, p:57*

. Jameson's perspective, works mainly within a base and superstructure model. According to Jameson postmodern society has some characteristics: firstly there is superficiality, in the sense the cultural products keep to superficiality and do not enquire deeply into the situation e.g. the soup cans and portrait of Marolyn Munroe – both of which are simulacra as they are a "copy of a copy." Both paintings were painted from a copy of the photographs. Thus the pictures are simulacrum – in which one cannot distinguish the original from the copy (Jameson, 1984:86). These paintings are simulacrum and lack in depth, and covers the surface meanings only. Further emotion or emotionality is hardly to be found in the postmodern societies. Thus alienation has been supplanted by fragmentation, which results in the impersonalization of interaction. Again, and thirdly historicity is set aside and it is clear that all that can be known about the past is textual and can spawn intertextuality at the most. What this implies is that the postmodernists do not restrict themselves to a single linear past but pick and choose from among the available styles. That is to say there is a strong element of pastiche. This implies that 'truth' about past history, is that we have no way of knowing what happened. The historians then have to be satisfied with a pastiche which in itself may not reflect much of past reality and there is no such thing as linear historical development. Finally postmodernism has a new technology available to it especially the computer and other electronic machines not present earlier. What we can say then is that the post modern societies are in deep flux and great confusion and many symptoms of this have appeared especially with regard to certain kinds of affliction. Thus whole new breeds of psychiatrists are busy trying to undo the stress and Post Structuralism and Post Modern 198 tension that post modernism is clearly associated with. Thus there is a problem of chaotic and disturbing trends of late capitalism. It is difficult to cope with multinational economy and the according cultural impact of consumerism. Jameson feels that cognitive

maps are needed to deal with postmodern realities. The maps can be put together by artists novelists and working people. Thus Jameson's schema tries to build bridges between Marxian theory and post-modernism, but ended up antagonising both Marxists and postmodernists. This was to be expected because despite Jameson's efforts to synthesise it was clear that a grand theory/metanarrative was unlikely to bend backwards, and therefore, Jameson uses mainly its base/ superstructure dichotomy. Jameson's postmodernism does try to maintain some basic/tenuous link with Marxian theory despite the fact that Marxism is a grand narrative. However, in the case of Jean Baudrillard postmodernism is presented as a maverick social theory of contemporary times. Thus Baudrillard journey of ideas commences in the 1960's, when he started out as a Marxist critique of consumer society he was influenced by both linguistics and semiotics. However, he soon left this orientation behind him and abandoned both Marxism and structuralism.

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## 4.7 BAUDRILLARD AND POST MODERNISM

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In the 1970's Baudrillard alleged that Marxists and their detractors both had a similar bourgeoisie orientation which was conservative. He felt that an alternative explanation was necessary. Thus Baudrillard put forward the notion of "symbolic exchange" as an alternative to economic exchange. Symbolic exchange itself involves a continuous process of a gift giving and gift taking. It is clear that symbolic exchange was beyond and opposed to the logic of late capitalism. Such symbolic exchange implied the creation of a society based on the same, but Baudrillard chose to be a-political. He studied contemporary society, and saw that it is not production but the electronic media that characterises it e.g. TV, computers, satellites. We have moved from societies under different modes of production to a society that is more involved with the code of production. Exploitation and profit motives have given way to a domination by the signs/systems that produce them. Again signs referred to something else but in postmodern society they become self referential and characterised by "simulations" and 'simulacra' which are



representations of any aspect of consumption (Baudrillard, 1973). For Baudrillard the postmodern world is “hyper reality.” Thus media becomes more real than the reality itself, and provides news, views and events in an exaggerated, skewed, and even ideological manner – thus the term hyper reality. This is not without consequences as the real tends to be buried in the hyper real and may ultimately be banished altogether.

Catastrophe Management In short, there is such distortion between North and South, to the symbolic advantage of the South.....that one day everything will break down. One day, the west will break down if we are not soon washed clean of this shame, if an international congress of the poor countries does not very quickly decide to share out this symbolic privilege of misery and catastrophe. (Jean Baudrillard, *The Illusion of the End*, p:69).

For Baudrillard culture is undergoing a very deep change which makes the masses more and more passive, rather than increasingly rebellious. Thus the masses encounter these changes with seeming ease absorbing each new cultural idea or artifact. Thus for Baudrillard masses are not seen to be the products of media. Rather it is the media which is observed to provide these wants to the masses (for objects and entertainment). For Baudrillard society is in throes of a ‘death culture.’ Thus it is death anxiety that pushes people to try and lose this anxiety by using and abusing the consumerist culture. There is no revolutionary silver lining to Baudrillard’s theory and the problem is also that symbolic exchange societies may exist but how to bring them about is not addressed to by Baudrillard. All in all Baudrillard’s brilliant and unusual ideas make it a clear breakaway from the ideas and artifacts of modernism. Baudrillard in deconstructing contemporary society shows just how much sociological theory has moved forward and away from classical thought. Thus we can see post modernism does display certain characteristics and we can see below just what these are. The first of these characteristics is that in postmodernism that is a multiplicity of views, meanings and so on. Secondly the postmodernists are looking for polysemic and alternative meanings. Thirdly there is a distrust of metanarratives and grand narratives as found in classical sociological theory. It also holds that since there a multiplicity of perspectives there

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will always be many truths. Thus postmodernists regard concepts ideas as texts which are open to interpretation. They also look for binary oppositions in the text. Further, these binary oppositions are themselves shown to be false or at least not necessarily true. Finally the post modernist identifies texts, groups which are absent or omitted. This is regarded important to any 'deconstruction.' Now postmodernism is reflected in almost all areas of life including film, TV, literature etc. which are deeply influenced by postmodern viewpoints. Let us now turn to some postmodern aspects visible in other fields. Thus in language words and forms are used and the concept of 'play' is basic to it. Thus 'play' implies altering the frame which connects ideas – allowing the troping of a metaphor. Thus the 'text' has a meaning which is understood or interpreted by the reader and not the author. This 'play' or exercise is the way that the author gains some significance in the consciousness of the reader. The problem with this postmodern view about language is very difficult to understand and is against the basis of communication where the author communicates to the reader in as lucid a manner as possible. In literature it is found that postmodern works is not so much opposed to modernist literature. Instead it tends to extend it stylistically. Some post modern literatures include David Foster Wallace and Thomas Pynchon both of whom are critical of the vast system building of the Enlightenment modernity. As you would have noticed post structuralism and postmodernism do have an intermeshing quality. Indeed some authors straddle both fields e.g. Francois Lyotard. Further structuralism tries to build models seeking out factor and patterns that are stable, which is anathema to postmodernists and rejected outright as a futile manoeuvre. Thus postmodernism has retained the cultural dimension of structuralism but has rejected the claims to its scientificity. Again post structuralism is a position in philosophy, it is not the name of an era whereas postmodernism is associated with the postmodern epoch.

### Check Your Progress 3

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer.

b) Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit.

1. Discuss Jameson and Late Capitalism.

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2. Write about Baudrillard and Post Modernism.

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## 4.8 LET US SUM UP

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Post-Structuralism is a late 20th Century movement in philosophy and literary criticism, which is difficult to summarize but which generally defines itself in its opposition to the popular Structuralism movement which preceded it in 1950s and 1960s France. It is closely related to Post-Modernism, although the two concepts are not synonymous.

In the Post-Structuralist approach to textual analysis, the reader replaces the author as the primary subject of inquiry and, without a central fixation on the author, Post-Structuralists examine other sources for meaning (e.g., readers, cultural norms, other literature, etc), which are therefore never authoritative, and promise no consistency. A reader's culture and society, then, share at least an equal part in the interpretation of a piece to the cultural and social circumstances of the author.

Some of the key assumptions underlying Post-Structuralism include:

The concept of "self" as a singular and coherent entity is a fictional construct, and an individual rather comprises conflicting tensions and

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knowledge claims (e.g. gender, class, profession, etc). The interpretation of meaning of a text is therefore dependent on a reader's own personal concept of self.

An author's intended meaning (although the author's own identity as a stable "self" with a single, discernible "intent" is also a fictional construct) is secondary to the meaning that the reader perceives, and a literary text (or, indeed, any situation where a subject perceives a sign) has no single purpose, meaning or existence.

It is necessary to utilize a variety of perspectives to create a multi-faceted interpretation of a text, even if these interpretations conflict with one another.

Post-Structuralism emerged in France during the 1960s, a period of political turmoil, rebellion and disillusionment with traditional values, accompanied by a resurgence of interest in Feminism, Western Marxism, Phenomenology and Nihilism. Many prominent Post-Structuralists (generally labeled as such by others rather than by themselves), such as Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault and Roland Barthes (1915 - 1980), were initially Structuralists but later came to explicitly reject most of Structuralism's claims, particularly its notion of the fixity of the relationship between the signifier and the signified, but also the overall grandness of the theory, which seemed to promise everything and yet not quite to deliver.

In his 1966 lecture "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Science", Jacques Derrida (a key figure in the early Post-Structuralist movement, although he later founded the Deconstructionism movement), was one of the first to propose some theoretical limitations to Structuralism, and identified an apparent de-stabilizing or de-centering in intellectual life (referring to the displacement of the author of a text as having greatest effect on a text itself, in favor of the various readers of the text), which came to be known as Post-Structuralism.

Roland Barthes (1915 - 1980), originally a confirmed Structuralist, published his "The Death of the Author" in 1968, in which he argued that any literary text has multiple meanings, and that the author was not the prime source of the work's semantic content. In his 1967 work "Elements of Semiology", he also advanced the concept of the metalanguage, a systematized way of talking about concepts like meaning and grammar beyond the constraints of traditional (first-order) language.

Other notable Post-Structuralists include Gilles Deleuze (1925 - 1995), Julia Kristeva (1941 - ), Umberto Eco (1932 - 2016), Jean Baudrillard (1929 - 2007) and Judith Butler (1956 - ).

What then has postmodernism achieved? The answer is that postmodernism has turned away the shroud over the analysis and demystified both epistemological and ideological constructs. Further a deep look at ethnography has led to a reexamination and questioning of ethnography itself. Postmodernism and its adherents point out that sociologists should analyse the role of their own culture in the study of culture, and therefore, increase the sensitivity of the subject. Postmodern approaches have been criticised on several grounds. To begin with postmodernists are against theory. This is paradoxical since this is itself a theoretical position taken by the postmodernists. Again the postmodernists emphasise the illogical or nonrational aspects of a culture. Further, the postmodernist concentrates on the marginal which is itself evaluative. Then again the stress on intertextuality, but do not always follow their own advice and often treat texts as standing alone. Postmodernists also put away all assessment of theory – but this does not mean that there is no means of assessment. Thus according to postmodernists modernism is inconsistent but they themselves exercise it as and which way they want. Finally the postmodernists are self-contradictory when they deny any claims of reality or 'truth' in their own writings. Finally there is the issue of postmodernism not having any confidence in the scientific method. But if sociology does follow this position, then it will turn into a study of meanings, rather than causes which influence what it is to be an individual in society.

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## 4.9 KEY WORDS

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**Structuralism:** In sociology, anthropology, and linguistics, structuralism is the methodology that implies elements of human culture must be understood by way of their relationship to a broader, overarching system or structure. It works to uncover the structures that underlie all the things that humans do, think, perceive, and feel.

**Post Structuralism:** Post-structuralism is either a continuation or a rejection of the intellectual project that preceded it—structuralism.

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## 4.10 QUESTIONS FOR REVIEW

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1. Discuss about the Post Structural Theories.
2. What is meant by discourse Knowledge and Experience?
3. Describe the Derrida and Deconstruction theory.
4. Discuss the Foucault and the Archaeology of Knowledge.
5. Discuss Jameson and Late Capitalism.
6. Write about Baudrillard and Post Modernism.

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## 4.11 SUGGESTED READINGS AND REFERENCES

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## 4.12 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

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### Check Your Progress 1

1. See Section 4.2
2. See Section 4.3

### Check Your Progress 2

1. See Section 4.4
2. See Section 4.5

### Check Your Progress 3

1. See Section 4.6
2. See Section 4.7

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# UNIT 5: IMPLICATIONS: THE DEATH OF THE AUTHOR

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## STRUCTURE

5.0 Objectives

5.1 Introduction

5.2 'From Work to Text'

5.2.1 The Work is Concrete

5.2.2 The Text is Always Paradoxical

5.2.3 The Text Practices the Infinite Deferral of the Signified

5.2.4 The Text is Plural

5.2.5 The Text is Read Without the Father's Signature

5.2.6 The Text Abolishes the Distance Between Writing and Reading

5.2.7 The Text is Linked to Pleasure

5.2.8 By Way of Conclusion

5.3 The Death of the Author'

5.3.1 How did the Author Emerge?

5.3.2 What Functions did the Author Perform?

5.3.3 Who Killed the Author?

5.3.4 Implications of the Death

5.3.5 By way of conclusion

5.4 Let us sum up

5.5 Key Words

5.6 Questions for Review

5.7 Suggested readings and references

5.8 Answers to Check Your Progress

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## 5.0 OBJECTIVES

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In the preceding units, you prepared for Deconstruction with some preliminary concepts relating to New Criticism and Structuralism and studied Deconstruction proper as it applied to Structuralism in general and Saussure's linguistic theory in particular. In this Unit, I will attempt to explain how it has affected criticism and our concept of the literary work. I propose to do it in two parts. In the two parts we will study the



content and implications of two essays: "From Work to Text" and "The Death of the Author?" by the French theorist and critic, Roland Barthes. These essays are broadly agreed to be deconstructive in intent. They outline the consequences of reviewing literature on the revised poststructuralist theory of language.

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## 5.1 INTRODUCTION

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Roland Barthes is regarded as a pre-eminent structuralist in literary studies, the structuralist who developed a method for studying the structure of cultural signs and discourses. There are some who also argue that it was Barthes who prepared the way for Derrida and much that has happened in poststructuralism. Yet, most of Barthes' later works are often cited as poststructuralist in intent, showing the reader, what it means in literature to theorize the way poststructuralism does. Although some (if not most) of Barthes is difficult and elusive, trying not to conform to any accepted theory completely, the two essays we have chosen to discuss are coherent examples of the application of the poststructuralist theory of language to literature. After having read these two essays, you will also have had yet another concrete manifestation of how deconstruction questions and inverts accepted hierarchies like author1 reader, reading/writing etc. My analysis of the essays divides into two sections: "Understanding the Essay" and "By Way of Conclusion". Try to read the essays along with or before the section titled "Understanding. . ." then reread the original essay, going back to my explanations. Move on to the Conclusion only after you feel confident about having understood the main argument of the essay.

In his essay, Barthes argues against the method of reading and criticism that relies on aspects of the author's identity to distill meaning from the author's work. In this type of criticism against which he argues, the experiences and biases of the author serve as a definitive "explanation" of the text. For Barthes, however, this method of reading may be apparently tidy and convenient but is actually sloppy and flawed: "To give a text an author" and assign a single, corresponding interpretation to it "is to impose a limit on that text".

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Readers must thus, according to Barthes, separate a literary work from its creator in order to liberate the text from interpretive tyranny (a notion similar to Erich Auerbach's discussion of narrative tyranny in biblical parables). Each piece of writing contains multiple layers and meanings. In a well-known quotation, Barthes draws an analogy between text and textiles, declaring that a "text is a tissue [or fabric] of quotations", drawn from "innumerable centers of culture", rather than from one, individual experience. The essential meaning of a work depends on the impressions of the reader, rather than the "passions" or "tastes" of the writer; "a text's unity lies not in its origins", or its creator, "but in its destination", or its audience.

No longer the focus of creative influence, the author is merely a "scriptor" (a word Barthes uses expressively to disrupt the traditional continuity of power between the terms "author" and "authority"). The scriptor exists to produce but not to explain the work and "is born simultaneously with the text, is in no way equipped with a being preceding or exceeding the writing, [and] is not the subject with the book as predicate". Every work is "eternally written here and now", with each re-reading, because the "origin" of meaning lies exclusively in "language itself" and its impressions on the reader.

Barthes notes that the traditional critical approach to literature raises a thorny problem: how can we detect precisely what the writer intended? His answer is that we cannot. He introduces this notion of intention in the epigraph to the essay, taken from Honoré de Balzac's story *Sarrasine* in which a male protagonist mistakes a castrato for a woman and falls in love with him. When, in the passage, the character dotes over his perceived womanliness, Barthes challenges his own readers to determine who is speaking, and about what. "Is it Balzac the author professing 'literary' ideas on femininity? Is it universal wisdom? Romantic psychology? ... We can never know." Writing, "the destruction of every voice", defies adherence to a single interpretation or perspective.

(Barthes returned to *Sarrasine* in his book *S/Z*, where he gave the story a rigorous close reading.)

Acknowledging the presence of this idea (or variations of it) in the works of previous writers, Barthes cited in his essay the poet Stéphane Mallarmé, who said that "it is language which speaks". He also recognized Marcel Proust as being "concerned with the task of inexorably blurring ... the relation between the writer and his characters"; the Surrealist movement for employing the practice of "automatic writing" to express "what the head itself is unaware of"; and the field of linguistics as a discipline for "showing that the whole of enunciation is an empty process". Barthes' articulation of the death of the author is a radical and drastic recognition of this severing of authority and authorship. Instead of discovering a "single 'theological' meaning (the 'message' of the Author-God)", readers of a text discover that writing, in reality, constitutes "a multi-dimensional space", which cannot be "deciphered", only "disentangled". "Refusing to assign a 'secret', ultimate meaning" to text "liberates what may be called an anti-theological activity, an activity that is truly revolutionary since to refuse meaning is, in the end, to refuse God and his hypostases—reason, science, law."

#### Influences and overview

Ideas presented in "The Death of the Author" were anticipated to some extent by New Criticism, a school of literary criticism important in the United States from the 1940s to the 1970s. New Criticism differs from Barthes' theory of critical reading because it attempts to arrive at more authoritative interpretations of texts. Nevertheless, the crucial New Critical precept of the "intentional fallacy" declares that a poem does not belong to its author; rather, "it is detached from the author at birth and goes about the world beyond his power to intend about it or control it. The poem belongs to the public. Barthes himself stated that the difference between his theory and New Criticism comes in the practice of "disentangling". Barthes' work has much in common with the ideas of the "Yale school" of deconstructionist critics, which numbered among its

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proponents Paul de Man and Barbara Johnson in the 1970s, although they are not inclined to see meaning as the production of the reader. Barthes, like the deconstructionists, insists upon the disjointed nature of texts, their fissures of meaning and their incongruities, interruptions, and breaks. A. D. Nuttall's essay "Did Meursault Mean to Kill the Arab? The Intentional Fallacy Fallacy" (*Critical Quarterly* 10:1–2, June 1968, pp. 95–106) exposes the logical flaws in the "Intentional fallacy" argument.

Post-structuralist skepticism about the notion of the singular identity of the self has also been important for some academics working in feminist theory and queer theory.[according to whom?] These writers find in Barthes' work an anti-patriarchal, anti-traditional strain sympathetic to their own critical work. They read "The Death of the Author" as a work that obliterates not only stable critical interpretation but also stable personal identity.

Michel Foucault also addressed the question of the author in critical interpretation. In his 1969 essay "What is an Author?", he developed the idea of "author function" to explain the author as a classifying principle within a particular discursive formation. Foucault did not mention Barthes in his essay but its analysis has been seen as a challenge to Barthes' depiction of a historical progression that will liberate the reader from domination by the author.

Jacques Derrida paid ironic homage to Barthes' "The Death of the Author" in his essay "The Deaths of Roland Barthes".

Literary theorist Seán Burke dedicated an entire book to opposing "The Death of the Author", pointedly called *The Death and Return of the Author*.

J. C. Carlier, in the essay "Roland Barthes' Resurrection of the Author and Redemption of Biography" (*Cambridge Quarterly* 29:4, 2000, pp. 386–393), argues that the essay "The Death of the Author" is the litmus test of critical competence. Those who take it literally automatically fail

that test. Those who take it ironically and recognize a work of fine satiric fiction are those who pass the test. Barthes was satirizing the stale notion that the author should be disregarded. This interpretation cannot be logically faulted, as Barthes' essay, taken literally, says that the essay means what any reader chooses it to mean. To say that Barthes did not intend such a meaning betrays the literal meaning of the essay and invokes the traditional notion of authorial identity and continuity. No wonder that Barthes signed the essay and claimed copyright: he thereby reasserted the traditional notion of authorship.

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## 5.2 'FROM WORK TO TEXT'

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One important implication of the poststructuralist view of language is the passage from "work" to "text"- idea we have already brushed through in. This essay should clarify it further. Meanwhile it is important for you to be clear about what this new way of looking at language implies. Therefore, it would be advisable for you to revise that section in Unit 2 before proceeding further. The theory of the "text" was developed by those associated with the Journal *Tel Quel* in the late 1960s and early 1970s, which included apart from Barthes, Derrida, Julia Kristeva and Sollers. Although the idea of "text" is implicit in the writings of all these theorists, it derives primarily from a deconstruction of structural linguistics, spelt out most clearly in Barthes' theory of the "text" to which this essay substantially contributes. Thus Barthes begins by speaking of the debt which the notion of the "text" owes to the changing view of language: "A change has been taking place in our ideas about language and as a consequence about the literary work". In order to clarify the main ideas behind the notion of a "text" Barthes offers some enunciations or definite statements to indicate what he has in mind when speaking of a text. The status of these enunciations are metaphoric at is, they do not define the text but suggest its nature indirectly. Barthes, like Derrida earlier, is not ready to commit the deconstructionist heresy of definition. So, with this pre-condition Barthes sets on to describe what the notion of a "text" implies and how it has evolved from "work". This is the intention reflected in the title "From Work to Text". Barthes proceeds point-wise in this project and so shall we.

### **5.2.1 The Work Is Concrete**

The work has a material existence, the text does not. Therefore, they cannot be distinguished as objects. The difference, Barthes says, is as follows: "The work is concrete, occupying a portion of book space [say on the book- shelf]; the text on the other hand is a methodological field . . ." The work can be seen in bookstores, in card catalogues and course lists, while the text reveals itself, articulates itself according to or against certain rules. While the work is held in hand, the text is held in language exists only as discourse. In other words, the text is experienced only in an activity of reading. Barthes is fairly lucid here but the lucidity is illusory, so let's investigate his concepts a little further. Methodology refers to "the process or way in which a particular mental activity proceeds" and "field" refers to the scene or space of an activity or influence. Therefore, a "methodological field " refers to a scene or space in which a particular mental activity proceeds, a space, which a particular form of mental activity creates. A certain degree of abstraction is involved here so try to grasp it carefully. When speaking of "text" we refer to a mental space in which proceeds a particular mental activity set in motion by the act of reading a work. It is in this sense that Barthes refers to the work as something concrete while presents the text as a process something dynamic and transient.

### **5.2.2 The Text is Always Paradoxical**

"Doxa" refers to a commonly accepted opinion or more simply public opinion. Therefore, paradoxical means something, which goes beyond commonly accepted opinions. In claiming that the text goes beyond the limit of 'doxa', Barthes perhaps wants to imply that in containing the play of a number of interpretations, a text always tends to go beyond what is the commonly accepted notion of a work/genre or type of writing. This liberation of the text from a fixed centre (which holds the work together) gives it a subversive potential, through which, it continuously challenges all boundaries set up by commonly accepted opinions or theories. The text, in other words, always calls into question

all pre-existing assumptions about its meaning. It is on these grounds that Barthes writes that what constitutes a text is its "subversive force with regard to old classification."

### **5.2.3 The Text Practices The Infinite Deferral Of The Signified**

The work is tied to one signified. In other words to read a "work" is to practise the Saussurean stability of the significant or to revel in the possibility of a fixed meaning. Meaning can be fixed in two ways. On the one hand, one can attribute straight, literal meanings to words. The work would then pose a challenge only to the linguist who would study the production of this simple meaning. On the other hand, we can assume that its meaning is fixed but hidden; that is, there is in it something deeper than the straight and literal meaning. In this case it would interest a school of criticism like Marxism, Freudianism, etc., which would look for a relevant meaning in it. Criticism up to Structuralism practices this brand of reading a work. The "text" on the contrary practices the infinite deferral of the signified-invites us to defer meaning. Barthes here reminds us of all that we have read while deconstructing the signifier and the significant that is, the production of meaning through difference. If you recall the complex web-like flickering structure of meaning outlined while discussing the production of meaning in a sentence, you will not have much difficulty in understanding this aspect of a text. I say so because it is the same theory of reading, which we applied to a sentence there, which Barthes evokes here to assert the infinite deferral of the meaning of a text. Continuing on the same premises, Barthes says that the 'infinite' or infinite play of the signifier does not imply that meaning is something unnamable, beyond language, but the idea that fixity is not a part of its identity. In the context of reading, this perpetual play of signifiers should not be thought of as leading from a surface to a deeper level of meaning, but merely undirected and unpurposive movement. The logic that governs the reading of a text is not that of comprehension-that is, to find out what it exactly means, but, to merely revel in the free-play of its signifiers. This free-play is generated by the

symbolic rather than referential status of language. The symbolic status of language and hence of the text, is the product of the divorce between the "word" and the "world"--an idea you encountered in Saussure's theory of language. Language does not connect directly with the reality and a text creates a plane of its own, inhabited by forces different from the real. "A work whose integrally symbolic nature one conceives, perceives and receives is a text."

### 5.2.4 The Text Is Plural

It is not only that a work can have many meanings, its plurality is irreducibly plural, it cannot be limited to a fixed number. Every context will create its own meaning for the text, but even within a given context, the meaning is irreducibly plural. So, in a text many meanings co-exist and each of these meanings is traversed by the others- constituting a part of it and constituted by it in turn-each carrying the traces of others and inextricably linked to them.

The text thus becomes a site of various echoes and resonances emanating from plural readings and contexts. Therefore, Barthes says that the text's plurality is not because of the ambiguity of its contents but because of its 'stereographic plurality'. In order to understand the term 'stereographic' you have to first understand the term stereoscope. A stereoscope is something all of us have played with in our childhood. It is an instrument for viewing a pair of photographs, taken at slightly different angles, each with one eye. The two photographs combined create an impression of depth and solidity. A stereograph is the photograph used in a stereoscope. Viewed from this metaphor, each of the plural readings of a text is like a stereograph, similar yet different from other stereograph(s) uniting in the single image or reading of a text. - Each text is also the product of many other texts-that is, it is inter-textual. This inter-textuality does not mean that it should be possible at a given moment, or in a given reading, to identify a fixed number of texts out of which the present text is constituted. So, in reading a particular statement in a text we might hear resonances of various other texts, yet no text or set of texts may be



said to be the determining one for the effect perceived. It is in this sense that Barthes says that the quotations we identify in a text are without quotation marks and that is what I intend to suggest I by the word resonance rather than a direct hearing of another text.

### **5.2.5 The Text Is Read Without The Father's Signature**

The work is usually considered the product or child of forces outside it--that is, both its creation and meaning are seen as determined by outside forces. Barthes identifies three of them here: the first includes 'race' and 'history'. The Marxist school, for example, would consider certain historical forces creating or determining the form or bounds of a particular work. Thus, it is commonplace to speak of 19<sup>th</sup> century Russian classics as the embodiment and product of certain historical forces culminating in the 1905-1917 Revolution. Second, Barthes speaks of conventional criticism's efforts to see works as part of a larger tradition. Thus, it may see a work as inaugurating a particular tradition and others continuing it, marking the different stages of that evolving tradition. F.R. Leavis and Raymond Williams practised this brand of criticism for a long line of English novelists, starting from Dickens to Lawrence and Forster. Third, Barthes refers to the tendency of allocating or devoting the work to an author, a tendency which aims at explaining everything in the terms of the author's experiences, views and intentions. The best example of this is the biographical school of criticism. The 'text' on the other hand, is read without the guiding intent of race, history, tradition or the author. All these may affect our reading of a text but not provide any absolute guiding framework for its meaning. The concept of intertextuality (discussed earlier) would necessitate the resonance of historical, biographical or other texts in our reading of a given text, but a text cannot be tied to a single or multiple texts as its determined product. So, the author enters into a reading of his / her text, but only as a guest, as one of the texts that will participate in the play of intertextuality--not as the controlling or determining force.

### **5.2.6 The Text Abolishes The Distance Between Writing And Reading**

A work is ordinarily an object of consumption that is to say that in reading a work we presume that a reputed not so reputed name, or one who has been worth printing or reviewing, has something valuable to offer. A sincere reading on correct lines can consume its value, if necessary, with the help of criticism. The text on the other hand, empties the work of this conceivable value and fills it with play, production and activity. There is no definite meaning that the reader can now consume instead the reader is now actively involved in the production of meaning. Thus, meaning and significance, which had conventionally been assumed to be tied to the author now come to be associated partly with the reader. It is not that the reader's involvement is intensified in the text. It is rather that the reader now has a more definite involvement. she refuses the fixed meaning handed down to himher through tradition and instead, reads and writes simultaneously in the process of deciding a text's meaning.

### **5.2.7 The Text Is Linked To Pleasure**

The work is linked to a certain kind of pleasure. I can enjoy reading Shakespeare or Milton but this pleasure is the pleasure of appropriation 1 consumption. This pleasure, Barthes says, is one of separation. It is linked to the fact that I cannot write what I am reading. The text on the other hand, yields a different kind of pleasure without separation. The play that characterizes a decentered text ensures that there is going to be no stability, which a reader can appropriate and be separated from. Instead, the reader is going to be continuously implicated in producing the meaning that the text approaches. This yields a different kind of pleasure designated by Barthes and Demda by the French term 'jouissance'. We may refer to it as bliss but there is also an erotic element associated with it.

### **5.2.8 By Way Of Conclusion**

At the end of having read an account of Barthes' idea of the text, you may be feeling "idealess" about it. You may have understood his

arguments but still fail to close your fist over the meaning of the word "text" or state in approximate terms that "A text is. . . ". This is because all statements about the text themselves have to be texts, and being texts they will be marked by an indeterminacy which will not let you point your finger to a concrete suggestion about what a text is or should be. This is the , formulation with which Barthes concludes his essay. But before we conclude this attempt at understanding Barthes' essay, let's discuss a point which occurred at the beginning of this essay-arthes ' s claim that the passage from 'work' to 'text' is an epistemological shift rather than a radical break. Perhaps the shift Barthes has in mind is the shift in Saussurean linguistics and after, from the referential to the differentialdeferantid nature of meaning. I say so because the notion of the text is the logical fallout of applying a deconstructive view of language to literature. This is not a radical break because we are operating within the broad framework of deciphering the relationship between signs and meaning.

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### **5.3 THE DEATH OF THE AUTHOR'**

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This essay is structured not as an exposition but as an argument. Therefore we will study it differently. I will not attempt here a commentary parallel to the essay but try to organize Barthes' arguments in the essay in response to a series of questions. Broadly speaking, the essay can be read as answering these four questions:

- (a) How did the author emerge?
- (b) What functions did the author perform?
- (c) Who killed the author?
- (d) Implications of the death.

In the process of answering these questions, I hope to develop the arguments Barthes cites in this essay and help you understand-the causes for and implications of the emergence and death of the author.

### **5.3.1 How Did The Author Emerge?**

The author, say, a Barthes is a modern (read new) figure, a product of Western society. Your own society does not use this idea - the Hindi equivalent of this concept i.e. lekhak translates into "writer" rather than "author". In some ethnographic societies, Barthes says, the responsibility for a narrative is never assumed by a person but by a mediator whose "performance"--the mastery of the narrative code may possibly be admired but never his genius at having "authored" the tale. In our own mythology, both Valmiki and Tulsidas are credited with giving a shape or narrative form to the story of Lord Ram rather than authoring it. On the contrary, a Western classic like Decameron, or The Canterbury Tales is tied firmly to the tail of its author. Barthes explains this through a particular process in the development of western thought. In the Renaissance, the Western world displaced "God" from the centre of the universe and put "Man" there. Broadly speaking this is the Humanism of the Renaissance. Barthes sees it continuing in the rise of English Empiricism, French Rationalism and finally a deep personal faith of the Reformation, reflected in the life of Martin Luther. All these led to the discovery and consolidation of the prestige of the individual. This faith also led to the rise of positivism in philosophy (a movement that recognizes only positive facts and observable phenomena). The man-centered world now started recognizing only those facts, which could be observed and verified. Further, it is in this centering and faith in the powers of the individual where Barthes sees the rise of capitalist-system centered on a man and his wealth. In literature, this faith and confidence in the power of the individual to construct a stable world, a sphere of value and significance, found expression in the concept of an 'Author'.

### **5.3.2 What Functions Did The Author Perform?**

Once the concept of an author was in place it exercised a certain influence, or "tyranny" as Barthes would say, on the interpretation of literary texts. Thus, the content of a work began to be understood and explained in terms of the author's life, tastes, passions and experiences. This tendency to look for causal factors in the life of the author tended to

spill over from the biographical school to the marxist or psychoanalytic schools. In fact, Barthes sees the continuing tyranny of the author in the way some critics persist in reading the literary work as a product of the author. He also refers to the way we classify works in bibliographies and histories under the head of an author to emphasize our inability to break free of the author as a determining force. The implication of such classification is that we see the author as a living voice behind the work, speaking to us about his own views and experiences through the transparent medium of language. This view as we have argued before, is a fallacy.

### 5.3.3 Who Killed The Author?

Though the sway of the author remains powerful, it is also certain that some writers have long attempted to counter it. In France, Mallarmé was the first to see and to foresee the necessity to substitute language itself for the author who, until then, was supposed to be in complete control over language. Mallarmé's entire poetics consists in suppressing the author in the interest of writing. Paul Valéry in his own way stressed the written nature of all linguistic and philosophical projects. Furthermore,

Barthes goes on to discuss the role of Marcel Proust & Surrealism in weakening the hold of an individual over a work's meaning. Finally, Barthes narrows down to the revised theory of language as the culprit that decisively killed the author. He shows us that the act of stating something is an empty process, which does not require the support of the speaker to function as a statement. What he is trying to say is that the meaning of a sentence does not depend for its existence on a speaker's presence or intent. The sign-words themselves are enough to set a meaning into play. The authorial intent is not a necessary element in the understanding of a text. The author disappears from behind the work also because in Poststructuralism there is no "Individual" or "Self" ; only a "Subject". The term "Individual" has the implication that a human being is in some way given and finally formed-a stable creature in control of and creating things around him. On the contrary, the notion of a "Subject" emphasizes the fact that the individual is constructed at the

point of entry into the symbolic orders of language and discourse. So, there is no definite entity whose intent we can read in a work. Thus, language instead of being created by man becomes the creator of man, at least in the sense we know ourselves. Being a "subject" man is also reduced to a field in which numerous forces are at play. Instead of stability, it is the notion of flux that comes to characterize the notion of a subject. Therefore, no single moment of one's existence is completely identical with another. All these insights combined have contributed to the death of the author in poststructuralist thought. The author had to disappear also because the writing individual speaks from a specially problematic site in the text—site where a writing subject, an independent subject or the person who happens to write, a fictional character through which the author speaks, the ideas of the age, universal wisdom etc. all meet, mixing inextricably with each other. The text thus harbors a voice without a fixed or determinate origin. The writing subject who appears to be that origin is revealed on closer scrutiny to be a flux of different forces only a few of which have been outlined above. Thus his/her status as an author with a single unified intent comes under question.

### 5.3.4 Implications Of Death

The most obvious implication of this death is the fact that the author's life, experiences, passions, intent cease to be important elements of the meaning of a text. The text is seen as embedded in language, and performs according to its own rules. Therefore, Barthes writes that instead of the author we now have the "scriptor" who merely writes, giving a material tangible shape to the text without limiting or controlling its meaning in any significant way. Because the author dissolves into the identity of the scriptor, the reader is foregrounded in producing the meaning of a text. This leads Barthes to say that every text is "eternally written here and now" because the reader in a sense writes. The reader rewrites the text in every act of reading/re-reading it. The reader is so important because the interaction of forces that characterizes the interpretation of a text is set into motion and has play in the mind of the reader. Thus, the reader comes to play a new and redefined role in the process of the production of meaning. Instead of a fixed and a

determinate meaning being transferred to the reader in the process of reading, reading a text now looks like a play of numerous forces focused on the reader. In the process, the conventional hierarchy writer/reader is deconstructed to yield a more important place to the reader, which can be deconstructed in subsequent readings.

The next important implication of the death of the author is the fairly radical Implications questioning which it initiates about the mimetic function of literature. The "mimetic" view syterary work as "representing" or "mirroring" a particular reality through the agency of an author. So, it is commonplace to believe that E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India* represents an Englishman's perception of colonial India. But with the death of the author, a text can no longer simply designate or represent something which the author had in mind, something which was objectively present there and the author was describing. No matter how hard the author tries, the meaning of hidher written text will be detennined/controlled by a set of forces the writing sets in play in the mind of the reader. This "set" and "play" are highly subjective and cannot be spoken about in any concrete terms as yet. An important implication of the above-stated argument is that certainty of expression becomes an impossibility. The claim that I can mean anything fixed, that I deal with stable meanings in communicating with someone else is effectively undercut. Indeed the picture that now emerges is that instead of man writing through language to express a fixed meaning, it is language that writes through us, creating meanings in our minds whose theoretical status is extremely dubious. You should now be in a position to understand what Mallarme and Valery had been trying to say by stressing the importance of language as well as the observation with which Barthes opens this essay "Writing is the destruction of every voice". In that case, what does the author/writer actually do in writing a text? Hidher job, Barthes would have us believe is only to mix writings. Every statement that I write as indicative of my intent is crossed over and through by "cades" from other writings, which makes it a tissue, woven by presences of earlier read statements in the mind of a reader. Put simply, Barthes seems to be saying that every element read in a text

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evokes a chain of associations in terms of which the reader interprets the meaning of that element. For example, when you encounter the term "love" in 16th century poetry two things happen in your interpretation of it:

1. the word is nebulously defined by its difference from other words in your vocabulary.
2. all previous usages of that word (literary, non-literary, aurd, visual, metaphorical etc.) interact with the given context to give you an idea of what the word should mean here.

This chain of associations though broadly unified in a culture may be significantly different for individuals, therefore, the term may have distinct shades of meaning for different readers even within a given culture. So, what the author does by using the term "love" is not to transfer a fixed value or counter to you but to set in motion a chain of associations which will interact with the context to suggest the meaning of the word for you.

### **5.3.5 By Way Of Conclusion**

All that we read before has one fairly important consequence, which merits separate exploration. It is the radical foregrounding of the reader. The death of the author marks the birth of the reader in a new and more important role. Instead of being a passive and receptive experience, reading is now transformed into a creative activity with a considerable role played by the reader in the production of meaning. This fact has important political consequences. If there is no voice or a fixed intent behind writing, it ceases to be a dependable political media—that is, an agency through which a message may be effectively conveyed. The control of what a text can convey to the reader now slips out of the grip of the author to disseminate into a bewildering galaxy of forces operative in a culture, outside the control of any single individual or group of individuals. This proves to be a fairly liberating experience for the lay reader as it not only opens new vistas to be explored through the text but



also resists the imposition of readings, which may have vested interests behind their propagation. Understandably this theory of reading is labeled 'humanistic' in intent because it stresses so much the role and interest of the readers. Some critics see this theory as "humanism hypocritically turned champion of human rights". They argue that it is hypocritical because while talking about man, it shifts the focus to forces beyond man's control and generates a world-view from which all certainties seem to have disappeared. Barthes shirks this attack but a retort by saying that what had been treated as "humanism" before (that is the Humanism of the classics) was limited because it focused on the writer and not the reader. This theory advances further towards humanism by shifting the focus to the reader. 'Centering on the author meant listening to what she had to say and that in turn meant flowing with her in the act of "setting aside, ignoring, smothering or destroying" many issues the text is capable of generating ; issues that often contradict the professed intent of the author. It is to sacrifice the rich plurality of a given text in lieu of bowing down to an ostensibly neutral but actually ideologically charged voice. When the Renaissance displaced God from the centre of the universe, it effected a similar shift, choosing to read in the natural vs. cultural text not the manifestation of a divine will but a set of bewildering forces-cultural, political, social etc., engendered by man. Roughly in the same way, the poststructuralist reader reads in the text not the author's will but the play of a host of forces, amongst which the author is only one. And this tendency spills over from reading literature into all spheres of thought, wherever there is a centre which wants to dictate or control the meaning of a phenomenon.

### Check Your Progress 1

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer.

b) Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit.

1. Discuss about the 'From Work to Text'.

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2. Describe the “Death of the Author from philosophical aspect”.

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## 5.4 LET US SUM UP

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The two essays discussed in this Unit are fairly radical statements of the poststructuralist view of literature. We hope you have had a concrete instance of how Deconstruction questions and inverts accepted hierarchies like author reader, reading and writing etc.. "The Death of the Author" is a logical continuation from the passage 'From Work to Text'. As the control of the author loosens over the meaning of the work, his/her significance diminishes and a point comes when the author's significance is reduced to a minimum. This is what Barthes refers to as the death of the author and as we have seen, it occurs at the cost of the rebirth of the reader in a new, redefined, more creative and free role. Each of these two points as we have seen has distinct political implications. Together, they liberate the reader from accepted readings and permit him/her the opportunity to write and read the text in a new way.

“The Death of the Author” is an essay written in 1967 by French literary critic and philosopher Roland Barthes. It is a highly influential and provocative essay (in terms of the various claims it is making) and makes various significant developments and changes in the field of literary criticism.

Through this relatively short but artistic piece of work, Barthes critiques and shakes up the traditional way of approaching and analysing the text, one that is too author-centric: which is too focused in looking for the intentions of the author and analysing the life and background of the

author to unravel the meaning of the text instead of just assessing the content of the text alone.

In the first paragraph, Barthes tries to explain the fundamental idea that he lays forward in his essay through the character of Zambinella taken from *Sarrasine*, a novella written by Balzac.

Talking about this character, who is actually a castrato (a castrated male) disguised as a woman, Balzac writes, “It was Woman, with her sudden fears, her irrational whims, her instinctive fears, her unprovoked bravado, her daring and her delicious delicacy of feeling.”

Barthes poses a question of whether it is ever possible to know whose ideas are coming forth in these expressions. Is these the character of that novella speaking? is it the man Balzac speaking with his preconceived knowledge and prejudice of women or is it someone else?

Basically, what Barthes makes us realise as a reader is that one can never find for certain through what a particular character is talking if it is the personal opinion of the author coming through the mouth of that character or someone else.

In the similar fashion of what W.K. Wimsatt and M. C. Beardsley do in their essay titled “The Intentional Fallacy”, Barthes also warns the reader to not pay unnecessary attention to neither the life of the author nor the ‘real meaning’ that author was trying to say through his work.

According to Barthes, the intentions of the author are irrelevant. The work isn’t an exact replica of his intentions and in the process of giving words to the thoughts, writer intentionally or unintentionally is involved in a process of meaning-making on which he has not complete control as the author/ writer isn’t a God.

Thus the pursuit of trying to figure out the author’s intentions are a complete distraction and unnecessary as even if the author is alive (which

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is the not the case several times if the author is dead), one can't be fully certain if the author is genuine about his intentions.

And, in case even if the author is honestly telling his intentions behind what he has written, there is no guarantee that author was successfully able to depict that in his work, which would not only show a supposed failure but in fact add beauty to the text due to the various possible interpretations that it might offer.

Barthes critiques the idea of 'originality' and 'truth' that one associate with the author. This approach of giving excessive authority to the author has various problems. This approach makes us take the biographical approach to read the text.

This approach has two problems, one that it falsely assumes, as discussed above, that one can uncover the intentions of the author. Second, that there is a fixed meaning of the text that one should try to find.

Barthes critiques this by suggesting that one should not see the author as some sort of divine creator who creates the text or meaning out of nothing but sort of a collage maker who is putting together various pre-existing thoughts and ideas in a unique and skilful way.

Barthes says this importance given to the author as an original creator is recent, as in earlier times, like at the time of Greeks, the focus was more on the narrative techniques and how a text is presented and not in its original plot, as the most of the texts were coming from the same mythological stories that were presented in different ways by different authors.

So, therefore, Barthes through this essay shifts the focus from the author to the reader. Barthes is not interested in the 'true meaning' of the text as according to him there is no such thing. Both the reader and author bring with them preconceived knowledge and ideas that they have of certain things, which definitely affects their reading of the text.

So, there could be as different ways of reading and interpreting a text as there are a number of readers. Barthes states at the end of the essay and rightly so that he is more interested in proclaiming the 'birth of the reader' than in the death of the author. Barthes essay lays the foundation for various theories like post-modernism and reader-response theory.

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## 5.5 KEY WORDS

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**Enunciations:** Express definitely, proclaim.

**Subversive:** That which serves to overturn, upset or effect destruction, often in an indirect way.

**Ethnographic:** Relating to a scientific description of the races of men. In this context, Barthes seems to be referring to societies which are organized around certain races.

**Humanism:** One of the most important ideals of the English Renaissance which had two important characteristics :(a) placing man at the centre of the universe. (b) a renewed interest in ancient Greek and Latin scriptures because these scriptures focused on the unlimited powers of the human being.

**Empiricism:** A school or branch of philosophy based on or acting exclusively on observation and experiment and not on theory. It celebrates and relies on the individual's power of observation.

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## 5.6 QUESTIONS FOR REVIEW

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1. Outline three important differences between a work and a text.
2. Illustrate Barthes' idea that the text practices the infinite deferral of the signified.
3. If the author was the father in Barthes' view of reading before poststructuralism, who do you think was the mother.
4. Give a socio-historical account of the emergence of the author.

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## **5.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

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### **Check Your Progress 1**

1. See Section 5.2
2. See Section 5.3

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## **UNIT 6: DERRIDA**

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### **STRUCTURE**

- 6.0 Objectives
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## **6.0 OBJECTIVES**

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After reading this unit, you will be able to:

- Appreciate the significance of Jacques Derrida's work within the context of contemporary Western thought;
- Explain some of the concepts and assumptions that consistently shape Derrida's works;
- Provide an informed discussion of the important debates around deconstruction as well as Derrida's understanding and use of the term;
- Clarify Derrida's position on the question of woman or gendered identity and feminism; and
- Assess the value of Derrida's work from a feminist perspective.

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## **6.1 INTRODUCTION**

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Before you begin reading this unit, you may find it helpful to review what you have read earlier. In this unit, we will examine Derrida's work much more closely with a view to better appreciate its implications for questions of gender identity and politics. To this end, we will first attempt to clarify some of the basic premises that inform Derrida's works through a close scrutiny of his ground-breaking essay, "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences." Continuing your earlier engagement with the term, we will then seek to understand the different ways in which Derrida theorised, deployed and practised deconstruction. Finally, we will explore Derrida's statements about the woman question and conclude with a synoptic account of various feminist responses to Derridean thinking.

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## **6.2 JACQUES DERRIDA: LIFE & WORKS**

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Jacques Derrida was born in 1930 to a petit bourgeois Sephardic Jewish couple in the El Biar suburb of French-ruled Algiers. He had four other siblings, two elder and two younger, none of whom pursued academics. After an early education in Algiers intermittently marred by incidents of anti-Semitism—being expelled from one school and pressured to leave another because he was a Jew—Derrida left for France in 1949 to complete his higher studies. To begin with, he was at the Lycée Louis-le-Grand in Paris. Thereafter, in 1952, despite trying and failing initially, he secured acceptance at the reputed École Normale Supérieure where many illustrious French intellectuals cut their academic teeth. At ENS, Derrida not only met Louis Althusser with whom he struck up a close friendship over the years but also others like Jean Hippolyte and Michel Foucault. While Derrida's early philosophical training and work in France was largely focussed on Edmund Husserl and related phenomenological concerns, he was also influenced by and engaged with the works of Rousseau, Sartre, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Saussure, Freud, Levinas, Strauss, among others. He submitted his dissertation on Husserl for his Diplôme d'études supérieures, the equivalent of a Master's degree, in 1954. Derrida did not defend his doctoral thesis until 1980, but before that and subsequent to teaching soldiers' children in exchange for active

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military service during the Algerian War of Independence, he held several academic positions at prestigious institutions, initially in France and later abroad, especially, the United States. In Paris, after teaching at the Sorbonne (1960–64), Derrida was invited to join the *École Normale Supérieure* by Althusser and Hippolyte in 1964. He remained with ENS till 1983. Subsequently, till his death, he served as the Director of Studies at the *École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales*. In 1983, he was also instrumental in the setting up of the *Collège Internationale de Philosophie*—an institute meant to radicalize the research and dissemination of philosophy and free it from rigid establishment controls. Derrida served as inaugural President of the *Collège Internationale de Philosophie*. Concurrently, from the seventies on, Derrida worked at several American institutions including Yale University, Johns Hopkins, SUNY Buffalo, Cornell University, and University of California, Irvine. Starting in 1986, in fact, he had an ongoing arrangement to teach for one semester every year at the latter institution, which now also houses the valuable Derrida archives. Apart from these regular and visiting appointments, Derrida also lectured and toured extensively around the world, with India too making it on his itinerary. Derrida succumbed to pancreatic cancer in 2004, a little while after he was first diagnosed with the disease. He was survived by his wife, Marguerite Aucouturier, a psychoanalyst (whom he married in 1957 when at Harvard on a grant to study James Joyce), their two sons, Pierre and Jean, and two grandchildren. Derrida also had another son, Daniel, with feminist philosopher Sylvia Agacinski. While his star has been on the wane for some years now, at the peak of his career Derrida attracted celebrity and controversy, flack and following to a degree unparalleled by any of his contemporaries. Derrida began the early years of the sixties quietly enough, writing reviews and actively contributing to *Tel Quel*, the French left-avant-garde journal begun by Philippe Sollers and Jean-Edern Hallier in 1960. He first came to the notice of the English speaking world at a 1966 conference hosted by the Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, called “The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man.” Derrida presented his now famous paper “Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences” to this forum, which even today

is often cited as the moment when Poststructuralism announced its arrival on the world intellectual scene. The following year saw Derrida further firm up his international credentials with three significant publications: *Speech and Phenomena* (trans. 1973), *Writing and Difference* (trans. 1978), and his most famous *Of Grammatology* (trans. 1976). Together, these works provided an early demonstration of that most controversial of terms associated with Derrida, i.e., deconstruction. Derrida did not slow down after his ‘annus mirabilis’ (year of wonders, or more appropriately, here, year of wonderful achievements). Rather, he proved a prolific author till the end who had over 50 books and literally countless essays and papers to his credit. Some of Derrida’s important later works include *Glas*, *Acts of Literature*, *Aporias*, *Specters of Marx*, *The Gift of Death*, and *Of Hospitality*. It is often said that a break is discernible from the 1990s in the body of his work, marking a much more political and ethical “turn” in his preoccupations. Writings such as *Specters of Marx*, *Politics of Friendship*, *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness* Jacques Derrida , among others are adduced in support of the claim. Indeed, one of the most persistent criticisms levelled against Derrida has precisely to do with his work being seen as “apolitical” and nihilistic. His dilatory and deliberately opaque prose, the extreme experiments with style, for instance, in *Glas* and *Postcard from Socrates to Freud and Beyond*, the unrelenting focus on text and textuality in the earlier works, the association with Paul de Man and the so-called Yale school of criticism, combined with often misapprehended apothegms (sayings or maxims) like “il n’y a pas de hors-texte” (see glossary) that have taken on a life of their own have only fed fire to this perception. Identitarian (those who privilege different identity groups like class or gender or race as categories around which to mobilise opinion and/or agitate) thinkers, including old-school Marxists and feminists, have been wary of Derridean deconstructive premises, suspecting it of playing into conservative hands and fronting reactionary agendas.

While Derrida has consistently refused simplistic political stances and gestures, he has always asserted a continuity in the philosophical tenor of his works. And during his lifetime he has many times given both verbal

and active support to political causes, whether that be protesting against the Vietnam War or capital punishment, or apartheid in South Africa or mobilising for the rights of state-persecuted Czech writers and immigrant employees in France. Another set of people, especially, analytic philosophers have been wary of Derrida on different grounds: they questioned if he was a philosopher at all and alleged he had greater traction with literary and cultural studies departments than with scholars of his own stripe. Things came to a head in 1992 when Cambridge University's decision to confer an Honorary Doctorate on Derrida sparked off an unprecedented transcontinental letter campaign by some faculty members to foil the move. They were defeated when matters were put to a vote and Derrida finally got the honorary doctorate from Cambridge University as indeed he did from many other institutions. But the episode captures in gist the kind of resentment and resistance Derrida generated in certain quarters. Derrida was notoriously camera-shy in the early part of his career: he did not want his photograph/face to "authorize" his writing.

Later, however, he eased up to the extent of starring in a film called *Derrida*. Despite the fact that Derrida is no longer "the rage" as he once was across American literary and humanities departments, he is by no means without influence. He continues to inspire conferences, special issues of journals, books and research aplenty at least in the Anglophone academy, including India, close to seven years after his death and forty-five years after he first emerged upon the international academic stage. This is certainly testament to his enduring value as a thinker. It also means that there are numerous sources and avenues through which to process that value for ourselves.

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### **6.3 STRUCTURE, SIGN AND PLAY: AN INTRODUCTION TO EARLY DERRIDEAN THOUGHT**

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This section offers an introduction to early Derridean thought through an exposition of the core ideas articulated in Derrida's ground breaking essay, "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human

Sciences.” Since the premises of the essay remain germane to much of Derrida’s oeuvre or body of work, “Structure, Sign and Play...” in many ways selects itself as an introductory text par excellence. As already mentioned, Derrida first presented his ideas in the form of a paper at a 1966 conference called “The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man,” organised by René Girard, Richard Macksey and Eugenio Donato at the Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore. This conference was originally meant to acknowledge the influence of Levi Strauss’ structural anthropology across the social sciences and humanities and hail the arrival and establishment of structuralism as an inter-disciplinary programme for the first time in the US. Not surprisingly, several leading structuralists of the time (Roland Barthes, Tzvetan Todorov, Lacan, Lucien Goldmann, to name a few) were to be counted among the attendees. That the conference volume when it was published in 1970, far from celebrating structuralism was subtitled *The Structuralist Controversy* is a measure of the kind of impact that Derrida’s paper had. In retrospect, the 1966 paper is often identified as a significant moment in the advent and elaboration of poststructuralism.

### **6.3.1 Structure, Centre, Margin**

The recurring proposition of “Structure, Sign and Play...” is simply that an “event” has occurred in “the history of the concept of structure” which simultaneously bears the characteristics of a “rupture” and a “redoubling” (Derrida, 2004, p. 89). The rest of the essay, as will become clearer as you read on, fleshes out the form and implications of this “event” in a way that constitutes a thoroughgoing critique of longstanding Western philosophical assumptions. According to Derrida (2004), traditionally, Western philosophy has avoided engaging with the constructedness of structures; that is to say, their being constructed and not natural structures. This avoidance is managed through recourse to the notion of a centre: “the structurality of structure...has always been neutralized or reduced...by a process of giving it a centre, or of referring it to a point of presence, a fixed origin” (Derrida, 2004, p. 90). To paraphrase Derrida, the centre is whatever performs as the organizing principle of a structure. In so doing, it not only stabilizes and naturalizes

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the structure it is centre of, but also, necessarily, itself. In other words, the centre functions to control what Derrida calls “the play of the structure” (see glossary for “play”). On the one hand, “by orienting and organizing the coherence of the system, the centre of a structure permits the play of its elements inside the total form” (Derrida, 2004, p. 90). On the other hand, the centre also cuts off play beyond the margins of the structure it demarcates. Moreover, as centre, it is the point at which the limited play which characterizes a structure and constitutes its structural logic becomes impossible, or as Derrida qualifies “has always remained interdicted” (Derrida, 2004, p. 90). One way to understand the concept of centre and structure is by thinking of a game, say, cricket. Fielders can be positioned in different places on the field by the captains or the bowlers; bowlers can be changed; the batting order can be moved around; the batsmen have flexibility in choice of strokes, while the bowlers in choice of delivery—bouncer, yorker, googly, etc. However, this play and flexibility disappears when it comes to the core set of rules which govern the different formats of the game. For e.g., a batsman cannot play with a baseball bat, a bowler cannot throw the ball, and so on. If the core rules changed then the very structure of the game as we know it would become impossible. Yet these core rules are not really unchangeable or natural. The different formats of cricket show that rules can and have been changed to produce new forms of cricket. The rules are thus arbitrarily made up. They are not the game, but some sort of consensus about a set of rules makes the game possible. Hence the paradox of classical thought: the centre is both inside and outside the structure. “The centre is at the centre of the totality, and yet, since the centre does not belong to the totality..., the totality has its centre elsewhere. The center is not the center” (Derrida, 2004, p. 90). Centred structures, thus, are, by definition, instances of contrived coherence or coherence in contradiction; they are premised on an absent presence—the centre. They are inherently unstable, although they project an appearance of stability and fixity through the ruse of the idea of a natural centre. The “event” that Derrida calls attention to at the start of the essay is firstly a greater awareness of the constructedness of structures or thought systems, their “structurality” which has always existed since structures must inevitably be constructed.

This leads to a more acute consciousness of play (defined as rupture or the disruption of presence), rather than centred presence, as the matrix and modality of meaning (hence rupture). The history of Western philosophy prior to this “event,” Derrida contends is “a series of substitutions of centre for center” whose task has been “the determination of Being as presence” where presence includes “all the names related to fundamentals, to principles, or to the centre” be it “eidos, arche, telos, energeia, ousia (essence, existence, substance, subject), aletheia, transcendentality, consciousness, God, man, and so forth” (Derrida, 2004, p. 90-91). In other words, transcendental signifieds invested with authority by the structures of which they are a part are centred within the structure and consequently lead to the creation of power hierarchies with a dominant centre and its margins.

Where lies the source of the change in thinking, of the decentering of dominant philosophical assumptions about structures and centres? Since ‘origins’ refer to a central or initial point, Derrida is loath to fix a point of origin to this alternative stream of thought and so re-enact a lapse into centred thinking. Nonetheless, he cites Nietzsche, Freud, and Heidegger as some examples who undertook in various ways to destabilize different axiomatic anchors of Western philosophy, i.e., Truth, a fully conscious and rational Self, Being. Derrida insists furthermore that, in the “absence of a center or origin, everything became discourse,” i.e., “a system in which the central signified, the original or transcendental signified, is never absolutely present outside a system of differences” (2004, p. 91). In other words, once the idea of centred stable structures came to be discredited, language (especially Saussure’s understanding of language as made up of signs whose relations to each other is arbitrary and conventional) became the model for understanding how meaning was generated through difference and in relation.

Underscoring the onset of the era of discourse and textuality, however, is not simply an unacknowledged nod to Saussurean linguistics and the structuralist wave it generated: Derrida is quick to point out how taking the sign to be a stable concept merely makes of it a new nucleus of

centred thinking. In fact, this insistence on difference from Saussurean structuralism becomes the launch pad for Derrida's engagement with the Saussure-influenced structural anthropology of Levi Strauss. The critique which follows is not any wholesale rejection of Levi Strauss as has been sometimes alleged. Rather, it is a deconstructive reading attentive to the unresolved tensions and paradoxes underlying the Straussian project to come up with a science of human cognition, to determine the deep structures of thought which generate the vast variety of past and present cultural formations and expressions. The tone is set early with Derrida's nuanced representation of the salience of ethnology and Levi Strauss at the time.

### **6.3.2 Derrida's Critique Of Levi Strauss And Ethnology**

Comparative ethnology studies human groups or cultures in a comparative frame without a priori privileging any one culture over the other. European ethnocentrism refers to the practice among scholars to take Europe and the white European as the point of reference and standard against which to measure all other civilizations, races and ethnicities. According to Derrida, comparative ethnology is born precisely at the moment when European ethnocentrism bites the dust. Nonetheless, ethnology remains a European science. Levi Strauss, Derrida says, deserves attention not simply because of the prestige attached to ethnology in the contemporary moment or because his ethnology has been influential. Rather, Strauss deserves attention because a "certain choice" and "doctrine has been elaborated" (p. 93) in his work as concerns the discourse and purport of ethnology vis-à-vis the social sciences. In other words, Levi Strauss is important for the ways in which he is both inside and outside the practices of traditional European social sciences: on the one hand, using such concepts and methods as he finds practical, and on the other, showing them up to be contingent and convenient ideas and tools. In example after example thereafter, Derrida demonstrates both what Levi Strauss' ethnology achieves but also and more importantly, what it shies away from and/or excludes. Take, for instance, the nature/culture binary that has structured Western



epistemology since even before the time of Plato. In *Elementary Structures*, Levi Strauss calls the incest prohibition a scandal, something which cannot be explained by the nature/culture opposition (see glossary) in that it has the predicates or characteristics of both categories. Derrida asserts that “[b]y commencing his work with the factum of the incest prohibition” Levi Strauss “places himself at the point at which this difference [between nature and culture], which has always been assumed to be self-evident, finds itself erased or questioned” (Derrida, 2004, p. 94). According to Derrida, Strauss on the one hand, exposes the dichotomous understanding of nature and culture to be problematic because of the widespread prevalence of the incest prohibition. On the other hand, Derrida says, Strauss by calling the incest prohibition a scandal paradoxically gives legitimacy to the nature/culture binary, for only when the nature/ culture binary is taken to be a norm, can the incest prohibition be seen as a scandal.

Derrida explains that the bricoleur, as opposed to the engineer, according to Strauss in *The Savage Mind* is someone who uses the means at hand to perform his task/s (2004, p. 95). In other words, where the bricoleur innovates, the engineer invents could be one way of understanding the distinction. While Derrida acknowledges the legitimacy of bricolage (play; see Glossary), that is, the discourse of the bricoleur, he also shows how the binary within which the bricoleur exists is unsustainable on deeper scrutiny. “If bricolage” Derrida points out is “the necessity of borrowing one’s concepts from the text of a heritage” (i.e., a pre-existent system or structure of thought) then “every discourse is bricoleur” and the engineer who must “construct the totality of his language, syntax, and lexicon” inevitably “a myth produced by the bricoleur” for self-confirmation (Derrida. 2004, p. 96). While the concept of play as bricolage, as supplementarity, has been significant in Strauss’ work, Derrida faults the ethnologist, ultimately, for the unexamined tensions between play and history, and play and presence that inform Strauss’ writings. Derrida perceives “in his work a sort of ethic of presence, an ethic of nostalgia for origins [i.e., centres]...” (Derrida, 2004, p. 102). This structuralist position, according to Derrida, celebrates the

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fictiveness of the centre as freedom. “Structure, Sign and Play” thus offers a comprehensive critique of Western philosophy.

Through a deconstructive reading of the binary oppositions that undergird its metaphysics of presence, its centred structures, Derrida highlights the play of signs which is limited, excluded and falsely rendered derivative. His engagement of Strauss likewise reveals the blindspots of structuralism. The poststructuralism he heralds in many ways is only the extension, rather than the overturning of structuralist insights. It is a carrying forward of structuralist thought through to its logical conclusion, which, of course, in unraveling and superceding structuralist verities participates in “the seminal adventure of the trace” (Derrida, 2004, p. 102; see glossary for “trace”) and announces the arrival of the poststructuralist moment of play “without security” (Derrida, 2004, p. 102). In retrospect, it should be clear how the title of Derrida’s essay represents a rather exact if condensed articulation of the major shifts in Western epistemology round the human sciences up to the conjuncture of the 1966 conference: from structure to sign, and almost simultaneously, to play.

### Check Your Progress 1

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer.

b) Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit.

1. Discuss about Jacques Derrida: Life & Works.

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2. Write about the Structure, Sign and Play: An Introduction to Early Derridean Thought.

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## 6.4 DECONSTRUCTION

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In the popular imaginary, Derrida and deconstruction go together, with deconstruction often serving as shorthand and stand-in for Derrida's entire body of work. Such has been the purchase of this identification that no introduction to Derrida can avoid engaging with the term without calling into question the credibility of its own enterprise. Because deconstruction is an important and multiply meaningful word in the Derridean lexicon, this section offers a brief clarification of the term and its checkered life in the Western academia. The word deconstruction first appears in Derrida's writings in the 1960s. Contrary to common belief, it is no invention on the part of Derrida. As Derrida himself states, deconstruction is "a very old word in the French language" (as cited in Wolfreys, 2008, p. 21). According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the word is also no newcomer to the English language, having first found written expression in English way back in 1882. Derrida's use of deconstruction, moreover, draws substantially on the German philosopher Martin Heidegger's employment of the German concepts *Destruktion* and *abbau*. This idea of deconstruction was never far from Derrida's early writings and his entire oeuvre may justly be seen as performing it, with two important caveats. As Peggy Kamuf notes, "Derrida had initially proposed [deconstruction] in a chain with other words—for example, *différance*, spacing, trace—none of which can command the series or function as a master-word" (as cited in Wolfreys, 2008, p. 23). That is to say, first of all, deconstruction has no priority in Derrida's body of writings as the core signifier of a practice, a programme, a thesis or anything else. Second, Derrida has been neither unequivocal in his enthusiasm for the term nor consistent when elaborating on it. At least some of Derrida's reluctance to have his work reduced to this one word may be attributed to deconstruction's "American chapter." For a time when Derrida was at Yale University in the late 70s and early 80s, he was part of a group of prominent literary

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critics, among them, Paul de Man, J Hillis Miller, Geoffrey Hartman, and Harold Bloom, who were tagged as constituting the Yale School of deconstruction. There was, in fact, no such “school,” it being chiefly a media creation, based, as Julian Wolfreys says, on a fundamental “misunderstanding of the nature of the critical work that Derrida, de Man and Miller were each, in their own fashion, pursuing. Such work was mistakenly given the name of ‘deconstruction...’” (Wolfreys, 2008, p. 7). The label stuck, no doubt helped in part by the 1979 anthology *Deconstruction and Criticism* to which Derrida et al contributed. The chief drawbacks of the American literature departments’ embrace of Derrida and deconstruction were two-fold. On the one hand, the philosophical context of Derrida’s writings—which back in France included the twin ruling ideologies of phenomenology and structuralism with which Derrida was grappling—got elided in the American valorization of deconstruction as Derrida, and the further representation of that deconstruction as principally a method of reading literary texts. So transformed into an instrument and pedagogy, deconstruction proved fertile ground for a welter of distortions which while outraging and intimidating people with its “extremism,” its “irreverence,” its “nihilism,” its “textualism” (Richard Rorty, Robert Scholes among others) its “obscurantism” (Foucault is alleged to have commented on Derrida’s intellectual terrorism), also won for Derrida messianic cult status for a period of time. The currency of misreadings round Derrida’s *il n’y a pas de hors-texte*, for instance, certainly can be attributed to this warped dynamic of translation and reception at play in America. On the other hand, because of its close association with the Yale literary critics, deconstruction could not escape being embroiled in the whole Paul de Man saga. When, after his death, a couple of previously unknown articles by de Man expressing anti-Semitic thoughts during the World War were discovered, the backlash was swift and brutal. Paul de Man was pilloried as a Nazi apologist. Along with de Man, deconstruction too was reviled for its political evasiveness, its relativism, even fascism. In fact, neither deconstruction nor Derrida has been able to completely shake off the infamy and slur (intellectual and ethical) that attached to involvement in the de Man affair. Not surprisingly, Derrida himself has expressed

reservations about the American avatar of deconstruction. So, what is deconstruction? Over the years, Derrida's responses to this question have been erratic—ranging from a refusal to oblige calls for definition to a disavowal of the term. Some of these include the following assertions: “I have never claimed to identify myself with what may be designated by this name [deconstruction]. It has always seemed strange to me, it has always left me cold. Moreover, I have never stopped having doubts about the very identity of what is referred to by such a nickname” (Derrida, 1995, p. 15); “...in spite of appearances, deconstruction is neither an analysis nor a critique.... I would say the same about method. Deconstruction is not a method and cannot be transformed into one.... It must also be made clear that deconstruction is not even an act or even an operation” (Derrida, 1988a, p. 3). His clarifications ranged from sometimes cryptic to sometimes loquacious statements on deconstruction. On one occasion, Derrida claims that “deconstruction not only teaches us to read literature more thoroughly by attending to it as language... it also enables us to interrogate the covert philosophical and political presuppositions of institutionalized critical methods which generally govern our reading of a text...” (Derrida, 1984, p. 125). In another instance he speaks of deconstruction as “destabilization on the move”: “but it is not negative. Destabilization is required for ‘progress’ as well. And the ‘de-’ of deconstruction signifies not the demolition of what is constructing itself, but rather what remains to be thought beyond the constructivist or destructionist scheme...” (Derrida, 1988b, p. 147). Elsewhere he asserts that “Deconstruction is justice” (Derrida, 1992, p. 15) while distinguishing both from law. In still other statements, Derrida claims that “Deconstruction is merciless,” (Derrida, 1995, p. 16) a “kind of ethics of ingratitude” (Derrida, 1995, p. 15) at one and the same time as it is “devoted to grace and gratitude, thus to a gratitude without thanks, without exchange...” (Derrida, 1995, p. 15). Moreover, that “deconstruction would consist, if at least it did consist, in...deconstructing, dislocating, displacing, disarticulating, disjoining, putting ‘out of joint’ the authority of the ‘is’” (Derrida, 1995, p. 25). As you can see from the above, deconstruction is not a static theory or stable set of formulas for Derrida available before-the-fact for ready

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application, or for replication/reproduction. In fact, as Martin McQuillan declares “Deconstruction is not a school or an ‘ism’. There is no such thing as ‘deconstructionism’ [incidentally, Edward Said is one of the people known to have used the word!]: this is a word used by idiots” (McQuillan, 2000, p. 41). Nonetheless, certain recurrent patterns and strategies may be isolated as more pertinent to the work of deconstruction through close attention to Derrida’s writings, especially as it concerns reading texts. If, according to Derrida, deconstruction destabilizes the structures of logo- and phonocentric (see glossary for both terms) thinking and by extension the metaphysics of presence from within, then *sous rature* (see glossary) or the practice of placing terms under erasure, is significant. It works on the principle that received notions, that language itself, in the case of Derrida, is “inadequate yet necessary” (Sarup, 1993, p. 33).

A simpler, more pared down, representation of Derrida’s “reverse and displace” deconstruction could read as follows—identify binary oppositions in text ? since binary oppositions exist in a “violent hierarchy” identify which term in the binary is central and which marginal ? reverse the relation by showing how the central term is dependant on the marginal, so the repressed term is actually central, etc. ? finally, put this newly recovered term under erasure to defeat the very logic of logocentricism, i.e., ordering of the world/thought through binary oppositions that privilege one pole by decentring the other.

Ultimately, however, Nicholas Royle’s (2007) collage of terms working on the logic of “and” and “also” may be the best way, strategically as well as empirically, to tackle the question, what is deconstruction. In other words, deconstruction cannot be pinned down to any one or even a set of meanings. It remains an open-ended term.

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## **6.5 DERRIDA AND THE QUESTION OF GENDER**

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How might the positions and formulations sketched above impact or intersect with questions of gender, subjectivity and agency? Has Derrida

ever directly addressed the problematic of gender identity/politics in his texts? How have feminists responded to the provocations of Derrida's work? Do they see potential in deconstruction to forge a useful feminist praxis, or do they see Derrida and his writings to be fundamentally hostile to any practical feminist politics? In this section, let us briefly illuminate some of the conflicts and concerns around gender based on our understanding of Derrida's writings.

### 6.5.1 The Problematics Of Gender

Derrida has not dealt directly with the topic of women, sexual difference, femininity and/or gender politics in his work except sporadically—Spurs: Nietzsche's Styles; "Geschlecht: Sexual Difference, Ontological Difference"; Glas; "Otobiographies"; "Women in the Beehive"; The Post Card; "At This Very Moment in This Work Here I Am"; "Choreographies"; "Deconstruction in America" being some examples of this engagement. Scant and scattered as it may be, Derrida's thoughts have occasioned much debate and interest among feminists. Especially controversial has been Derrida's articulation of woman as concept as well as his deprecation of feminism. In *Spurs* (1979), for instance, Derrida offers a representation of woman as concept that has exercised and influenced feminist thinking over the years (for instance, the works of Teresa de Lauretis, Jane Gallop, Gayatri Spivak, Jacqueline Rose, to name a few). According to Derrida, Nietzsche's dispersed statements about the essential metaphoricity of woman, the "relation between art and woman" (Derrida, 1979, p. 47) constitute a rethinking of truth, indeed, of philosophy itself. Nietzsche's woman "is not a determinable thing.... Perhaps, woman—a non-identity, a non-figure, a simulacrum—is distance's very chasm" (Derrida, 1979, p. 49). Furthermore, "There is no such thing as the essence of woman because woman averts, she is averted of herself. .... There is no such thing as the truth of woman, ... Woman is but one name for that untruth of truth" (1979, p. 51). "That which will not be pinned down by truth is, in truth—feminine (1979, p. 55). If this is so, however, the "credulous and dogmatic philosopher who believes in the truth that is woman, who believes in truth just as he believes in woman, this philosopher has understood nothing. He has

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understood nothing of truth, nor anything of woman. Because, indeed, if woman is truth, she at least knows that there is no truth, that truth has no place here and that no one has a place for truth. And she is woman precisely because she herself does not believe in truth itself, because she does not believe in what she is, what she is believed to be, in what she thus is not" (Derrida, 1979, p. 53).

While deconstruction has been equated with "woman," among many other terms, Derrida is keen to clarify that "For me deconstruction is certainly not feminist." Deconstruction "naturally supposes a radical deconstruction of phallogocentrism [see glossary], and certainly an absolutely other and new interest in women's questions. But if there is one thing it must not come to, it's feminism." Rather, "deconstruction is deconstruction of feminism, from the start, insofar as feminism is a form—no doubt necessary at a certain moment—but a form of phallogocentrism among others" (Derrida, 1985, pp. 30-31). As mentioned, Derrida's formulations on "woman" and deconstruction itself have been furiously contested as well as welcomed by feminist thinkers. If Gayatri Chakrovorty Spivak (postcolonial feminism), Drucilla Cornell (ethical feminism), Joan W Scott (politics of gender in history), Hélène Cixous (*écriture féminine*) are some of the names that might be adduced in favour of Derridean insights, then Seyla Benhabib, Margaret Whitford, Somer Brodrib, Rosi Braidotti, among others, may be cited as feminists more critical of Derrida. Cornell (1995), for instance, is emphatic that Derrida's "exposure of the limit of phallogocentrism—the way in which central philosophical concepts are profoundly tied in with the unconscious significance given to the phallus—is an important intervention for making that process of resymbolization possible" (Cornell, 1995, p. 151) which it is the task of contemporary feminism to work towards. It is not possible to rehearse here in any detail the sheer variety of feminist responses to Derrida. Instead, this section concludes with a summing up of some of the salient points of overlap and divergence between feminism and Derridean thinking provided by Elizabeth Grosz.



## 6.5.2 Elizabeth Grosz: Overview Of Feminism & Deconstruction

According to Grosz (1989), the value of Derrida to feminism may be encapsulated under four heads:

- his critique of logocentrism;
- the stress on “materiality of reading processes;
- the concept of *différance*; and
- his “focus on the irreducible textuality of discourses” (Grosz, 1989, p. 37).

Let us look at each one of these, as discussed by Grosz. Of the first, Grosz asserts that Derrida’s “challenge to logocentricism parallels and refines feminist challenges to phallogocentric discourse. Logocentrism is implicitly patriarchal. Given the close cooperation between these ‘centrisms, deconstruction and the play of difference it engenders, are allied with feminist struggles within the production of discourses” (Grosz, 1989, p. 37).

Likewise, Derrida’s insistence “on the materiality of reading processes confirms the productivity attributed to it by Althusser and Lacan. ... Derrida makes the powers at work in discourses (whether in knowledges, truths or fictions), powers that are clearly instrumental in the oppression of women, and others, explicit where they must normally function implicitly” (Grosz, 1989, p. 37). According to Grosz, Derrida’s “development of the concept of *différance*” furthermore, “has become emblematic of a powerful trajectory within feminist theory, distinguished from liberal struggles for equality. In recognising the limits of equivalences within the masculine (if masculinity is oppressive, why aspire to it as an ideal?), many feminists have instead directed their attentions towards developing autonomous definitions of woman and femininity. This autonomy, at least for some feminists, finds a source in the Derridean notion of *différance*” (Grosz, 1989, p. 37). And finally,

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Derrida's "focus on the irreducible textuality of discourses"... confirms feminism's interest "not simply in women as the object of speculation and knowledges, but in the metaphors of femininity, excess, materiality and play in the production of knowledges" (Grosz, 1989, p. 37). In other words, Derrida's work on the one hand shows how reading is an inevitably political act and therefore an exercise in power relations, or, at least a negotiation of power relations. On the other hand, Derrida's work has allowed feminists a new way of exploring their identity as well undertaking a much more thoroughgoing critique of the very practices of knowledge production. That is to say, Derrida's work facilitates the emergence of a radical politics that names the tyranny of the One to be also the tyranny, among others, of patriarchy and phallocracy. Grosz (1997) provides a similarly brief but handy overview of some of the key objections to Derrida's work voiced by feminist scholarship over the years. One of the oft-repeated criticisms against Derrida is that he "speaks in the name of, for, or as a feminine subject in a mode of male appropriation of women's right to speak" and that "along with Deleuze and others, wants to occupy just the very speaking position that women have finally produced for themselves..." (Grosz, 1997, p. 82-83). Another point of concern is how Derrida places "deconstruction in a position oppositional to feminism, a position of structural domination over feminist concerns". Grosz cites Margaret Whitford especially as advancing this line of reasoning: "In the opposition which he sets up between deconstruction and feminism, there is no question for Derrida of privileging the subordinate term, since it would leave him without a place to speak"... (Grosz, 1997, p. 83-84). A third bone of contention remains Derrida's alleged disregard of the practicalities around women's mundane and ordinary experiences of disempowerment. In other words, Deconstruction, "remains both elitist and unrelated to power struggles that function in more mundane and everyday terms" (Grosz, 1997, p. 84). For his feminist critics, then, Derrida does a disservice to the cause of feminism when he pits it in a binary relation with deconstruction—where deconstruction is always the positive term and feminism, another form of logocentrism. They allege that Derrida's theories camouflage and distract from the myriad ways in which women daily experience systemic

oppression. And in doing so, they assert that Derrida unfortunately becomes one more variant of patriarchal power that actually muzzles flesh-and-blood women while philosophising about the “idea of woman” or, speaking for and as women. Ultimately, then, it is for each one of us to determine for ourselves, depending on the specificity of our needs and location, whether or not we see value in the potential solidarity between feminism and deconstruction. What remains indisputable is the many ways in which Derrida has challenged and stimulated feminist thinking for the last many decades.

**Check Your Progress 2**

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer.  
b) Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit.

- 1. Discuss about the Deconstruction.

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- 2. Discuss the relation of Derrida and the Question of Gender.

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**6.6 LET US SUM UP**

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In this unit we have focussed in some depth on Derridean thought. Through a synoptic overview of his life and works we have first outlined the importance of Derrida as an intellectual whose work has significantly influenced contemporary Western poststructuralist and postmodern thinking. We have then tried to grasp some of the central tenets of

Derridean thinking through an exposition of the ideas found in one of his earlier essays, i.e. “Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Science.” This was followed by a closer scrutiny of the term deconstruction. On the one hand, we have sought to illuminate the debates and controversies around this term, its origins and different significance in Europe and North America. On the other, we have tried to highlight Derrida’s own complex, at times ambivalent as well as contradictory, representation and deployment of it. Given how “woman” has been one of the words proposed as a substitute for deconstruction in Derridean thought, we have then taken a closer look at Derrida’s thinking on gender identity and politics. Finally, and in the light of Derrida’s statements on the question of woman and feminism, we have read of some of the salient ways in which Derrida may be useful for feminist purposes as well the chief ways in which he has been debunked and/or criticised by feminist thinkers. It is hoped that this unit has equipped you to critically engage and or adapt Derridean thinking when tackling not only theoretical questions of gender identity, but also practical problems of feminist politics.

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### 6.7 KEY WORDS

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**Bricolage** : “describes an asystematic or creative approach to meaning, such that the meaning of a cultural practice or a literary text is produced unpremeditatedly, by making use of whatever happens to be at hand in order to see what ‘works’” (Lucy, 2004, p.133). Bricolage is the opposite of what Strauss, according to Derrida understands by “engineering (or scientific) discourse,” which proceeds according to unvarying rules and inflexible methods of analysis that enable the engineer or the scientist to solve a problem not by trial and error, but through the rigorous application of rational thought. In this way the engineer or the scientist appears to be the author of his own discourse, sole progenitor of an idea, a theory or a solution” (Lucy, 2004, p.133) However, as Derrida points out, insofar as bricolage is the “form of creative thought in general..., the absolutely uncreative rationality of the engineer is a ‘myth’ created by bricolage” (Lucy, 2004, p. 134). In other words, “bricolage is typical of every discourse” (Lucy, 2004, p. 134).

**Différance** : a neologism combining difference and deferral. “Along with deconstruction, this is one of the names Derrida uses to describe his own techniques of reading philosophic and logocentric texts. In his work, the term refers to three related concepts: first, to the movement or energy preconditioning the creation of binary oppositions. It is the unacknowledged ground of the opposition between identity (or sameness) and difference. In this sense, *différance* precedes oppositions. Second, it refers to an excess or an unincorporated remainder which resists the imperative of binary organisation. *Différance* is both as well as neither identity and difference. In this sense, *différance* exceeds binary oppositions. And third, it is the name of Derrida’s own procedures for reading and locating this *différance*. The term thus refers to a difference within difference itself, a difference which distinguishes difference from distinction, a different difference from that which opposes identity” (Grosz, 1989, p. xvii)

**Il n’y a pas de** : Occurring in “...That Dangerous Supplement...” hors-texte (Derrida, 1994, p. 158), the phrase is often translated into English as “there is nothing outside the text.” In this form it has achieved a kind of notoriety among people who have taken it to represent Derrida’s textualism and used it to mistakenly support him, but equally to mistakenly attack deconstruction. In an attempt to clarify matters Derrida himself suggested a different translation: “there is nothing outside context” (as ctd. in Royle, 2007, p. 65). Alternatively, he states “there is nothing but context” (as ctd. in Royle, 2007, p. 65). To quote Royle (2007), “context” here means “speech, life, the world, the real, history, and what not” (p. 65). Deconstruction through such a lens would be “the effort to take this limitless context into account, to pay the sharpest and broadest attention possible to context, and thus to an incessant movement of recontextualisation” (as ctd. in Royle, 2007, p. 65).

**Logo- and Logocentrism**: “designate[s] the dominant form of meta phonocentricism physics in western thought. The logos, logic, reason, knowledge, represents a singular and unified conceptual order, one which seems to grasp the presence or immediacy of things. Logocentrism is a system of thought centred around the dominance of this singular logic of presence. It is a system, which seeks beyond signs and representation, the

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real and the true, the presence of being, of knowing and reality, to the mind—an access to concepts and things in their pure, unmediated form. Logocentric systems rely heavily on logic of identity which is founded on the exclusion and binary polarisation of difference” (Grosz, 1989, p. xix). Linked with logocentrism is phonocentrism, i.e., the philosophical bias that valorises speech over writing as an authentic marker of self-presence—“because speech implies immediacy. In speech meaning is apparently immanent, above all when, using the inner voice of consciousness, we speak to ourselves.... [U]nlike writing, which is hopelessly mediated, speech is linked to the apparent moment and place of presence and for this reason has had priority over writing” (Sarup, 1993, p. 36).

**Nature/culture** : a binary that has been a feature of western binary philosophical thought systems from at least the Sophists onward. Levi Strauss, Derrida says, both uses the nature/culture binary and problematizes it through a focus on incest taboo. According to Strauss, Derrida explains, that which is “universal” and “spontaneous” belongs to the category of nature, while that which is contingent on a set of norms, and therefore, culturally variable, belongs to the category of culture. Strauss calls the incest prohibition a scandal because it is both natural—being universal, and cultural—being rule-governed and different from place to place in what/who exactly it proscribes (Derrida, 2004, p. 93-94).

**Phallogocentrism** : or phallogocentrism is a form of logocentrism where the phallus stands in for logos. “The term refers to the ways in which patriarchal systems of representation always submit women to models and images defined by and for men.... There are three forms phallogocentrism generally takes: whenever women are represented as the opposites or negatives of men; whenever they represented in terms the same as or similar to men; and whenever they are represented as men’s complements.... When [any of these] occurs, two sexual symmetries... are reduced to one (the male), which takes it upon itself to adequately represent the other” (Grosz, 1989, p. xx).

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## 6.8 QUESTIONS FOR REVIEW

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1. How is the centre both inside and outside the structure?
2. Why are centred structures inherently unstable?
3. Think of some examples of transcendental concepts that societies place at the centre of certain institutional structures. From where is their power derived? What is arbitrary about this power?
4. What is the change in thinking that the “event” inaugurated, according to Derrida.
5. According to Derrida, how does Strauss differentiate the ‘bricoleur’ from the ‘engineer’.
6. Did Derrida invent the term “deconstruction”?
7. What were the chief drawbacks of the American literature departments’ embrace of Derrida? Did Derrida distance himself from this? Explain.
8. What does Derrida mean when he says, “deconstruction is deconstruction of feminism”?
9. Discuss about Jacques Derrida: Life & Works
10. Write about the Structure, Sign and Play: An Introduction to Early Derridean Thought
11. Discuss about the Deconstruction.
12. Discuss the relation of Derrida and the Question of Gender.

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## 6.9 SUGGESTED READINGS AND REFERENCES

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- Benhabib, Seyla (1995). *Feminism and Postmodernism: An Uneasy Alliance*.
- *Feminist Contentions: A Philosophical Exchange*.(Eds.) Seyla Benhabib, Judith Butler, Drucilla Cornell, Nancy Fraser with Introduction by Linda J. Nicholson. New York and London: Routledge.
- Braidotti, Rosi (1991). *Patterns of Dissonance: A Study of Women in Contemporary Philosophy*. (Trans.) E. Guild. Oxford: Polity Press.
- Cornell, Drucilla (1995). *Rethinking the Time of Feminism*. Feminist

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- *Contentions: A Philosophical Exchange*. (Eds.) Seyla Benhabib, Judith Butler, Drucilla Cornell, Nancy Fraser with Introduction by Linda J. Nicholson. New York and London: Routledge.
- Cuddon, J. A. (1998). *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*. New Delhi: Penguin Books.
- Derrida, Jacques (1979). *Spurs: Nietzsche's Styles*. (Trans.) Barbara Harlow. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press.
- Derrida, Jacques (1982). *Choreographies* Jacques Derrida & Christie V. McDonald. Interview. *Diacritics* 12, 66-76.

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## 6.10 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

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### Check Your Progress 1

1. See Section 6.2
2. See Section 6.3

### Check Your Progress 2

1. See Section 6.4
2. See Section 6.5



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# UNIT 7: BEGINNING DECONSTRUCTION

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## STRUCTURE

- 7.0 Objectives
- 7.1 Introduction
- 7.2 Defining Deconstruction
  - 7.2.1 Beginning Deconstruction
  - 7.2.2 Nietzsche's Deconstruction of Causality
  - 7.2.3 Why Deconstruct?
- 7.3 Deconstructing Definitions
- 7.4 Deconstructing Structuralism
  - 7.4.1 The Inaugural Moment
  - 7.4.2 Deconstructing Saussurean Linguistics
- 7.5 Some Operative Strategies
  - 7.5.1 Writing versus Speech
  - 7.5.2 Deconstructing Presence
  - 7.5.3 Critiquing Logocentrism
- 7.6 Let us sum up
- 7.7 Key Words
- 7.8 Questions for Review
- 7.9 Suggested readings and references
- 7.10 Answers to Check Your Progress

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## 7.0 OBJECTIVES

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This unit has three objectives. The first is to bridge the gap between Structuralism and Poststructuralism, the second to give you a working awareness of Deconstruction and the third to outline some of the common strategies used in a deconstructive analysis.

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## 7.1 INTRODUCTION

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Structuralism flourished for talkatively short period about two decades or so the late 1960s, another movement, deriving its name from Structuralism began to emerging of Structuralism. "After" Structuralism, in terms of time, as the term can be interpreted at one level,

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Poststructuralism can be seen carrying forward certain ideas and issues within Structuralism to their supposedly logical end. However when the term 'post' is interpreted as 'after' in the thematic sense, Poststructuralism begins to emerge as a break away from conventional Structuralism. Indeed, the underlying theoretical matrix which supports Poststructuralism has so radically departed from the basic premises of Structuralism that it seems justified to refer to it as an independent movement. Poststructuralism turns certain insights of Structuralism against itself and points to certain fundamental inconsistencies in method, which the structuralist could not correct. In his writings on Saussure, Derrida shows where Saussure failed to grasp the full significance of his own theories. Having said this much, one realizes that it is difficult to catch Poststructuralism in any opening statement--precisely because of its multi-faceted nature. What we have said until now is only one way of entering this diffuse and diverse field. Another one is to begin exploring the topic under discussion: Deconstruction. It is one of the main movements within this stream; therefore let's move on to it.

Originated by the philosopher Jacques Derrida, deconstruction is an approach to understanding the relationship between text and meaning. Derrida's approach consisted of conducting readings of texts looking for things that run counter to the intended meaning or structural unity of a particular text. The purpose of deconstruction is to show that the usage of language in a given text, and language as a whole, are irreducibly complex, unstable, or impossible. Throughout his readings, Derrida hoped to show deconstruction at work.

Many debates in continental philosophy surrounding ontology, epistemology, ethics, aesthetics, hermeneutics, and philosophy of language refer to Derrida's observations. Since the 1980s, these observations inspired a range of theoretical enterprises in the humanities, including the disciplines of law,<sup>3-76</sup> anthropology, historiography, linguistics, sociolinguistics, psychoanalysis, LGBT studies, and the feminist school of thought. Deconstruction also inspired

deconstructivism in architecture and remains important within art, music, and literary criticism.

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## 7.2 DEFINING DECONSTRUCTION

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Let me begin with an anecdote. A Japanese friend of Jacques Derrida (the man with whom Deconstruction is associated) once asked him to suggest an approximate definition of the term. Derrida replied : "All sentences of the type 'Deconstruction is X or Deconstruction is not X', a priori miss the point, which is to say that they are at least false. As you know one of the principal things at stake in what is called in my texts Deconstruction is precisely "the delimiting of Ontology and. . . the third person present indicative S is P". Derrida has always resisted attempts to reduce Deconstruction to a concept definable in terms of a method or technique. For it is precisely this idea or assumption that meaning can be grasped in the form of some proper self-identical concept that Derrida is most determinedly out to deconstruct. Yet, if the institution of teaching and more fundamentally, the process of communication, have to continue, I or Derrida, must attempt to say something which gives you a working idea that Deconstruction is about something. It is in this spirit and with all due respect to Derrida's refusal to define Deconstruction that I proceed to give you a glimpse into the phenomenon.

### 7.2.1 Beginning Deconstruction

Deconstruction has been variously presented as a philosophical position, a political or intellectual stance or just simply as a strategy of reading. As students of literature and literary theory, we should be interested in its power as a mode of reading; therefore most of the points about Deconstruction in this Block will be made through instances of reading literature and philosophy. Let us begin here with a simple reading of Derrida describing a general strategy of Deconstruction: Every philosophical argument is structured in terms of oppositions and in this "traditional philosophical opposition we have not a peaceful co-existence of facing terms but a violent hierarchy. One of the terms dominates the

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other (axiologically, logically etc.), occupies the commanding position. To deconstruct the opposition is above all, at a particular moment to reverse the hierarchy". Deconstruction, Derrida implies, looks upon a text as inherently riddled with hierarchical oppositions. A deconstructive reading uncovers not only these hierarchical oppositions but also shows that the superior term in the opposition can be seen as inferior. When we put together some other strategies of Deconstruction outlined in Derrida's writings, a working definition begins to emerge. "To deconstruct a discourse is to show how it undermines the philosophy it asserts, or the hierarchical opposition on which it relies, by identifying in the text and then dismantling the rhetorical operations that produce the supposed ground of argument, the key concept or premise." This explanation by Jonathan Culler is comprehensive. So, let us treat it as a companion to the description by Derrida cited above in order to advance our working idea of Deconstruction. Broadly speaking Derrida and Culler are making these points:

1. ' Deconstruction is a "searching out" or dismantling operation conducted on a discourse to show:
2. How the discourse itself undermines the argument (philosophy) it asserts.
3. One way of doing it is to see how the argument is structured/construct, that is investigate its rhetorical status or argumentative strategy. As Derrida argues, this structure is often the product of a hierarchy in which two opposed terms are presented as superior and inferior. Deconstruction then pulls the carpet from below the superior by showing the limited basis of its superiority and thus reverses the hierarchy, making the superior, inferior.
4. This reversed hierarchy is again open to the same deconstructive operation. In a way, Deconstruction is a permanent act of destabilization. .So, Deconstruction points to a fallacy not in the way the first or second hierarchy is constructed but in the very process of creating hierarchies in

human thought (which as I have stated earlier, is indispensable to most if not all human arguments or thought.). Deconstruction does not lead us from a faulty to a correct way of thinking or writing. Rather it shows us the limitations of human thought operating through language even while harboring the same limitations itself. Every deconstructive operation relies on the same principle it sets out to deconstruct and is thus open to deconstruction itself. Yet, Deconstruction is not simply about reversing hierarchie Mough it is one of the I things a deconstructive analysis achieves. Fundamentally, it is a way of I understanding the structure of a discourse, locating its controlling centre and identifying the unfounded assumptions on which it relies to function as a discourse. It may be compared to a probing operation that uncovers fault lines in a discourse, which may include ideological assumptions and suppositions.

### 7.2.2 Nietzsche's Deconstruction Of Causality

Let us consider a brief exposition of this principle in Nietzsche's deconstruction of causality. Causality is an accepted fact of our life. In our day-to-day life we take it for granted that one event causes another, that causes produce effects. This is the principle of causality and it asserts that cause comes before effect in tern of time and reason. That is when we think, cause always gets a priority in creating and existing before an effect. Yet, Nietzsche argues that this principle of causality is not given hut the product of a rhetorical operation, which effects a chronological reversal. Suppose one sits and feels a pain. This leads one to look for a cause and noticing a pin discovers the cause for the pain. In the process of explaining the pain one reverses the order in which perception took placminstead of 'pain to pin"one thinks: pin to pain. "The fragment of the outside world of which we become conscious comes after the effect has been produced on us and is projected a posteriori as its 'cause' ". On the contrary, continues NiRtzsche "the basic fact of experience is that the cause gets imagined [established?] after the effect has occurred". The principle of causality leads us to substitute the cause for the effect as the originating term. Let us investigatkfurther what this simple example implies. First, it does not lead to the conclusion that the

principle of causality is faulty and should be done away with. On the contrary, the deconstruction itself relies on the notion of cause: the experience of pain causes us to discover the pin and thus causes the production of a cause. To deconstruct causality one must operate with the principle of causation itself. To repeat what has been said earlier<sup>4</sup> deconstruction operates through the very principle it deconstructs. It attacks a rational structure from the inside. Second, Deconstruction reverses the hierarchical opposition of the causal scheme. In our normal distinctions between cause and effect, the cause becomes the origin of the effect, producing it in some way. The effect is derived, secondary and dependent upon the cause. Deconstruction exchanges these properties and upsets the hierarchy. If the effect (i.e. pain) causes the cause (i.e. pin) to become a cause, then the effect and not the cause should be treated as the origin. We have already seen that the effect (pain) cannot be treated as the origin. If neither cause nor effect can unproblematically occupy the position of origin, then origin is no longer originary, it loses its privileged status.

### 7.2.3 Why Deconstruct?

Now that you have had some idea of Deconstruction, let us pose ourselves a basic question - why deconstruct? What use does this strategy have for us? We have already said that it neither explains a text nor leads us from a faulty to a correct way of thinking. Then, is it not a futile exercise? Some attacks have been made on Deconstruction on these grounds but they seem to miss an important implication of this principle. In the process of reversing hierarchies a whole strategy of the process of making hierarchies is uncovered and found wanting. The strategy uncovered can be roughly termed ideology and as we all know ideologies have distinct political implications. For instance, here, the ideology which makes us perceive the pin as primary is one of rationality from which causality derives. #I This may be difficult for you to understand at this stage, so, let's consider another hierarchy: white/black. The supposed superiority of whites over blacks operative in certain minds, (yet being undermined progressively) was responsible for the

ideology of colonialism. This led to a brutal and exploitative rule by colonial powers over almost the whole of Africa and parts of Asia, for over three hundred years. By investigating and showing as groundless the thought process which posited white as superior to black, Deconstruction continues to counter the destructive potential of racist ideologies. In reversing the hierarchy, it helps initiate a process by which the politically oppressed can be elevated to positions of power and also reminds us that the new hierarchy too is deconstructible.

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### **7.3 DECONSTRUCTING DEFINITIONS**

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The beginning of this unit recorded Derrida's resistance to defining Deconstruction. . Now let us try to understand that antipathy towards definition<sup>4</sup> in the process we will have deconstructed the concept of "definition". To begin with, let us revert to our fundamental guide- the Oxford English Dictionary. To define comes out of two terms "den and "finis". One of the senses of the prefix 'de' is to complete something as evident in the word denude 'Finis' is a Latin term meaning end. So, to define a thing is to 'complete its ends' or 'settle the limits of. Later, it acquired the contemporary sense: "declare the exact meaning". In either case there is a presumption that there exists something which can be presented in a definition other delimited from the world's plenitude or "built - up" 1 "declared" through a linguistic system. That pre-linguistic phenomenon beyond thought, beyond articulation, which a definition would exactly represent in language, is an illusion. If we analyze Derrida's response to his Japanese friend, this point stands substantiated. Derrida explains his resistance to definitions through his efforts to:

1. Delimit Ontology - that is set limits to or circumscribe the science dealing with the essence of things.
2. Prove that all statements saying 's' is/ is not 'p' wrong.

In questioning Ontology, Demda is questioning the essence of things, the possibility that anything can have a stable and concrete essence, which can be represented or defined in a linguistic or any other system. The

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argument about essence and existence began with Plato who argued that essence resides in heaven as a superior form, while existence is its replication in an inferior substance. Deconstruction would reverse this hierarchy by the simple argument that any reference to essence has to begin with existence. If essence is dependent on existence then its primacy is undermined and the real primacy of existence asserted. This is the observation that the deconstructionist would bring to the notion of definition. S/he would assert that the presumption that anything has a concrete pre-linguistic existence, an essence, which can be presented exactly in a definition, is an illusion. Point 2 reiterate Point 1; we cannot have an exact representation a given thing (s) in terms of another). The meaning of anything (including essences) cannot be represented or defined in terms of another self-identical concept. Derrida's refusal to define Deconstruction should be understood along these Lines.

### Check Your Progress 1

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer.

b) Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit.

1. Define Deconstruction.

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2. Discuss the Deconstructing Definitions.

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## 7.4 DECONSTRUCTING STRUCTURALISM

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Let us now focus on Structuralism, specifically its Saussurean linguistics and attempt to deconstruct it. In the process, I also hope to acquaint you with some typical approaches and operations involved in deconstructive readings.

### 7.4.1 The Inaugural Moment

This is a difficult essay. Please read and re-read the original before reading and rereading this explanation. "Perhaps, something has occurred in the history of the concept of structure that could be called an event. . . [presumably] when the structure of structure had to begin to be thought". This is the opening statement of the essay whose title appears in the title to this section. However, it is especially relevant because it marks the moment when Post-Structuralism or even Deconstruction as a movement begins, opposing itself to Structuralism as well as traditional Humanism and Empiricism. If you recall, Structuralism, taking its cue from Saussurean linguistics held out the hope of achieving a scientific account of the structure of a wide range of cultural phenomena. The structural Anthropology of Levi Strauss tried to do this for myths. In literature, critics like Jakobson and Todorov tried to outline the structure of poetry and the narrative respectively. Derrida's opposition and critique of the structuralist project begins with the observation that all such analyses imply that they are based on some secure ground, a 'centre', that is outside the system under investigation and guarantees its intelligibility. Such a secure ground for Derrida is a philosophic fiction, created by the structuralist in the hope of discovering that scientific account. That is to say, there is no fixed or definite structure, of say, a myth. One has to decide the idea or the centre around which one would want to study the structure of the myth. Let us try to understand this difficult and complex statement. What we need to start with is the concept of structure itself. So, recall the structure we started with that. A structure is always of an entity, a particular mass of plastic, steel and ink fit together into an organized whole only when we start putting it together with the idea or end of reassembling a pen. By themselves, that is without the idea or end

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of a pen, they do not add up to the structure of a pen. So, what makes these pieces?

constituents and helps them constitute a particular structure, is the idea of a pen or the end that it has to be assembled as a pen. Therefore Derrida comments "how can one perceive an organized whole except by starting with its end or purpose!". Similarly in literature, unless one has postulated a definite meaning for a work one cannot discover its structure, for the structure is that by which the end, or that meaning, is made present. A different meaning would entail a different structure. So, the structuralist knows beforehand the entity whose structure she is investigating and whose constituent units and interrelations she is outlining. -This knowledge is necessary if the structure has to be presented as coherent. This knowledge is the centre Derrida refers to. So, when he claims that the study of a structure is governed by "a move which consists of giving it a centre" what he perhaps means is that a priori knowledge which in a sense dictates the structures the analyst will find in the text. Understandably, he also claims that this centre forms and organizes the structure, permitting certain combinations of elements and excluding others.

This notion should not be difficult to understand. When one speaks of the structure of a literary work, one starts with the meanings or effects of the work and tries to identify the structures responsible for those effects. Possible configurations or patterns, which do not contribute, are rejected as irrelevant. That is to say, an (intuitive?) understanding of the work's meaning functions as the "centre", governing its play. It is both the starting point that enables one to identify structures as well as a limiting principle. Derrida, in this essay identifies such a "centre" functioning in Lévi-Strauss' structural anthropology. If we take this notion to the hierarchy in binary oppositions we have already discussed, the centre would refer to the controlling intent that constructs the hierarchy and ensures that it stays in place. But to grant any principle, intuitive understanding or primary knowledge this privileged status is an ideological step. Notions of meaning of a particular work are determined

by the contingent fact of readers' history and the critical and ideological concepts current at that time. Why should these particular cultural products be allowed to remain outside the play of structure, limiting it but not limited by it in turn? To make any effect the fixed point of one's analysis cannot but seem a dogmatic and prescriptive move, which reflects the desire for absolute and authoritative meanings. Therefore, the status of such centres came to be seriously questioned "at the moment when theory began to consider the structured nature of structures", writes Derrida. Implicitly, the statement also claims that structural thought had shown blindness towards its controlling "centre" and was deluded that it was discovering structures when it was actually constructing them from the textual matter, under the control of a centre. Poststructuralism corrected this blindness of Structuralism and opened the possibility of displacing the "centre" during an analysis of the system itself. Though one could not start without an implicit/explicit centre, Poststructuralism hopes to displace the centre from its role of an unexamined postulate by its rigorous deconstructive analyses. It is with this conviction, not to let any centre function as an unexamined postulate that Deconstruction approaches not only structuralist but all discourses, for Derrida's point is that Structuralism shares with Western metaphysics this desire for a stable centre. This is commonly referred to as the decentering of a system. It implies that there is no centre that cannot be replaced by another one, which itself would be equally vulnerable.

### **7.4.2 Deconstructing Saussurean Linguistics**

Saussure built his linguistic theory around certain hierarchies, which if investigated thoroughly can be found to be problematic. Let us start with the first : (a) Langue / parole. Saussure conceived of language as a stable system and shifted the focus of linguistics from a study of its parole to its langue. He did this because he believed that a diachronic study of parole would be extremely varied and thus impossible to complete, while a synchronic study of langue was systematically possible. Further, Saussure postulated the sign theory and argued that the word 'cat' is 'cat' because it is not 'cap' or 'bat'. But how far is one to press this process of

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difference? 'Cat' is also what it is because it is not 'bat' 'mat' and so on. Where is one supposed to stop? It would seem that this process of difference in language could be traced round infinitely. But if this is so, what has become of Saussure's idea that language forms a stable system whose langue he was out to study. Saussure's langue suggested a delimited structure but it appears impossible that in language we can draw a line. In other words langue comes to harbour some of the key characteristics of parole. (b) Signified Signifier : Saussure's sign theory insists on the purely differential nature of the sign but maintains a rigorous distinction between the signifier and the signified. The signified is equated with a concept while the signifier is associated with a material or verbal form. The signifier, in Saussure's theory exists to give access to the already existing signified. This, according to Derrida, is problematic for he suggests that Saussure's equation between the signified and the concept leaves open in principle the possibility of conceiving a signified concept in itself, a concept simply present to thought, independent from the linguistic system, that is to say, from a system of signifiers. In leaving this possibility open, . . . [Saussure] accedes to the traditional demand of what I have proposed to call a "transcendental signified" which in itself or in its essence would not refer to any signifier, which would transcend the chain of signs and at a certain moment would no longer itself function as a signifier. On the contrary. . . from the moment one puts into question the possibility of such a transcendental signified and recognizes that every signified is also in the position-of a signifier, the distinction between signifier and signified and thus the notion of sign becomes problematic at its root" That is to say, if you want to know the meaning (signified) of a signifier, you can look it up in the dictionary but all you will find are more signifiers and so on . The process we are discussing is not only infinite but also circular---&at is, at a particular point in this search, one may land up with the same signifier one started with and repeat the same process again. Signifieds can only be known in and as signifieryou will never arrive at a final signified which is not a signifier in itself. So, the concept of a signified may be theoretically valid but doesn't exist in practice. This does not mean that the notion of sign could or should be scrapped; on the contrary, the distinction between

what signifies and what is signified is essential to any thought. But it does follow that the distinction between the signifier and the signified cannot be one of substance. Saussure's linguistic theory is thus, on the one hand, a powerful critique of logocentrism and on the other hand its explicit affirmation. His arguments about the purely differential nature of the sign and the absence of any positive content in it are the critique. At the same time the assumption that the signifier exists to give access to the signified and thus seems to be subordinated to the concept or meaning that it communicates, is the affirmation. So, Derrida says that the neat distinction between a signifier and a signified and the primacy granted to the signified in Saussure's theory cannot be accepted and the hierarchy has to be reversed. An important implication of the earlier arguments is that meaning is not immediately present in the sign. Given the fact that the meaning of a sign is constituted by its difference from an infinite number of signifiers has to be scattered or dispersed along the whole chain of signifiers. That is to say, meaning is never fully present in any one sign alone, but is rather a kind of constant flickering of presence and absence—"Half there, half not there". Reading a text is more like tracing this process of constant flickering than it is like counting the beads of a necklace. It feels like an endless quest for something which keeps slipping out. Thus, in Derrida's parlance meaning is not only the product of difference but 'différance'. This is a new term coined by Derrida. Let's examine its meaning and implications. The French verb "différer" means to "differ" and 'defer'. Différance seems exactly the same as difference but the ending 'ance' which is used to produce verbal nouns. So, 'différance' is a verbal noun meaning "difference - differing - deference". Différance thus designates both a passive difference already in place as the condition of meaning and a continuous act of differing which produces differences and deference. When we apply this to the production of meaning it comes to imply a process in which the signifier differs as well as continues to differ from an infinite number of signifiers, creating a store of meaning by the differences already achieved and anticipating differences about to be achieved. At no point in our experience of a signifier, are all the differences exhausted to yield

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a stable and final signified. Thus meaning, the product of difference is deferred-"Half there, half not there".

Another sense in which meaning is never stable, identical with itself, is that signs must be repeatable or reproducible. Thus, the word 'cat' is a sign because we can use it under different circumstances in which it may mean somewhat similar things. So, repeatability or iterability is an essential characteristic of the sign, yet, it is also what divides its identity, because it can always be reproduced in a different context with a changed meaning. It is difficult to know what a sign originally means: we simply encounter it in many different situations, and although it must maintain a certain consistency across those situations, it is never absolutely the same. "A cat drinking milk" and "A cat licking cream" evoke different ideas in our mind even when we are referring to the same cat. The signified is always altered by the chain of signifiers in which it is entangled. In simple words, the meaning of a word changes as its context changes. Yet another aspect contributing to the instability of meaning is the concept of 'trace'. Every word, the deconstructionist would have us believe, has accumulated a number of meanings in the history of its existence. All these meanings exist within the semantic framework of that word as 'traces'. As the word continues to evolve, the various meanings sediment within its framework. Any word within a given text can thus be claimed to signify any or all of the diverse senses it has signified through its recorded history. For this mode of reading, the limits of what a word can mean are set only by the history of that word. A word, thus, instead of giving access to a meaning becomes a "vibratory suspension" of equally likely meanings, which may include incompatible or even contradictory meanings. The implication of all this is that language is a much less stable affair than Saussure had considered. It is not a well-defined, clearly demarcated structure containing the following hierarchies as Saussure would have us believe:

- Langue/parole
- Synchronic/diachronic
- Signified/ signifier

It now begins to look much more like a sprawling limitless web where there is a constant interchange and circulation of elements, where none of the elements is absolutely definable and where everything is caught up and traced through by everything else. It is this web-like complexity, which Poststructuralism designates by the term "text". If this is so, then the expressive/realistic function of literature and language, already discredited by the structuralists, suffers another serious blow.

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## **7.5 SOME OPERATIVE STRATEGIES**

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Most of Derrida's writings on Saussure and other philosophers of the Western tradition, chiefly Plato to Rousseau and Levi Strauss, harbor a critique of the way in which human thought operates through philosophy and the sciences. To begin with, let us see how and what Deconstruction identifies as problems in that "way" of operation and let's make Saussure's view on writing and speech the first site of investigation.

### **7.5.1 Writing Versus Speech**

The Western philosophical tradition, observes Derrida, all the way from Plato, to Saussure to Levi Strauss, has consistently looked down upon writing as a mere lifeless, alienated form of expression and consistently celebrated the living voice. Thus, Saussure says: The object of linguistic analysis is not defined by a combination of the written word and spoken word: the spoken word alone constitutes its object. This is because writing is considered simply as a means of representing speech, a technical device or external accessory that need not be taken into consideration when studying language. As mentioned earlier, Plato too shares this view. In *Phaedrus* he says that separated from the father or the communicative intent, writing can give rise to all sorts of misunderstandings since the speaker is not there to explain to the listener what she has in mind. In speech, my words seem immediately present to my consciousness and my voice becomes their spontaneous medium. Although I use signifiers in speech, they disappear as soon as they are

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uttered and do not obtrude on the meaning. In writing by contrast, my meanings threaten to escape my control: the written I printed word has a durable material existence and can be circulated, cited and reproduced in ways I did not foresee or intend. This is the case which Saussure and commonsense make against writing and for speech. However, the moral fervour that marks Saussure's discussion on writing indicates that something important is at stake. He speaks of the "dangers" of writing which "disguise[s]" language and even on occasion "usurps" the role of speech. The "tyranny of writing" is powerful and insidious, leading for example, to errors of pronunciation that are "pathological", a corruption of the natural spoken form. Writing, supposedly a representation and inferior form of speech, threatens the purity of the system it serves. But, if writing can affect speech, the relationship is more complicated than it first appear. Saussure's hierarchy "speech 1 writing" is first threatened by Saussure's taking to the example of writing to explain the nature of linguistic signs. How can one illustrate the notion of a purely differential unit? Saussure seems to ask himself and replies: "Since an identical state of affairs is observable in writing, another system of signs, we shall use writing to draw some comparisons that will clarify the whole issue ". The letter 't' for example can be written in various ways so long as it remains distinct from l,f,d, etc."

Thus writing, which Saussure claimed not to be the object of linguistic inquiry turns out to be the best illustration of the nature of spoken linguistic units. The announced hierarchy that makes writing a derivative form of speech, is inverted, and speech is presented, explained, as a form of writing. In fact Derrida goes on to show that all the characteristics which privilege speech over writing are already present in writing. Additionally, the disappearance of the signifier in speech which creates the impression of direct presence of thought is illusory, However swiftly the spoken word vanishes, it is still a material form which like, the written word works through its differences from other forms. So, if the vocal signifier is preserved for examination, as in a tape recording, so that we can "hear ourselves speak ", we find that speech too is a sequence of signifiers which works through differences. It is precisely this work of



difference that the privileging of speech seeks to suppress. So, if speech also operates like writing then we have a new concept of writing\* generalized writing or *archi-écriture* as Derrida calls it - that will have as its sub-species a vocal writing and a graphic writing. Behind Saussure's prejudice (also operating in the writings of Plato, Husserl, Levi Strauss and others) lies a particular view of man. This view sees man as able to create and express his own meanings, as in full possession of himself and dominating language as a transparent medium to express his innermost being. Derrida goes on to show that this view is based on a "metaphysics of presence" which originates in the "suppression of difference". The inability to see the "differing and deferring" nature of meaning leads to the illusion of the presence of meaning behind a word. From here, this notion of presence contaminates human thought in various spheres.

### 7.5.2 Deconstructing Presence

Like Saussure's privileging of speech over writing, most Western philosophy too relies on the metaphysics of presence. Among the familiar concepts that depend on the value of presence are: The immediacy of sensation : It is commonplace to assume that on touching something we recognize its heat on a pre-linguistic plane, that is its heat is a priori present and then the mind processes it in terms of language and transforms that sensation into the word *hot* . On the contrary, deconstruction would see here a fault similar to Saussure's privileging of speech and argue that nothing exists on the pre-linguistic plane and the sensation is recognized as *hot* only via language. The presence of ultimate truths to divine consciousness: This pervades almost the whole of Plato's philosophy. In banishing the artist from his Republic, Plato argued that the artist was at three removes from the *I*deal. So, there is the divine idea of a chair that is its essence, which the carpenter copies by giving it a material form. The painter copies further from the carpenter's model and is thus at three removes from the idea *I* essence. Deconstruction would show that the essence or *I*dea of a chair is a construct deriving from the carpenter's or the artist's creation. Truth as what subsists behind appearance: We have seen this notion operating

behind Saussure's assumption that language is an appearance behind which truth lies. Deconstruction would argue that all truths are linguistic constructs. The notions of "making clear", "grasping", "demonstrating" and as you have already seen "defining" all invoke the, notion of presence. That is, these notions presume independent existences which they set out to define or demonstrate.

Deconstruction would show that there are no such independent presences. All presences are constructs of systems-to define something is in a very crucial sense to recreate it. Deconstruction works through its close readings to reveal that any notion of presence on which a discourse banks is a fiction, which can be seen to be created within that system. Thus, Saussure's banking on the notion of a self-present meaning to privilege speech over writing is shown as incorrect and meaning is revealed to be a product of the system of which speech is also a part.

### **7.5.3 Critiquing Logocentrism**

In philosophy this dependence on "presence" is inextricably linked to "logocentrism". So, Demda says "Just as Western philosophy has been phonocentric (as evident in the references to Plato and Saussure), so also it has been in a broader sense "logocentric." In order to understand this claim let us begin with the word logos. In ancient Greek philosophy, logos referred to cosmic reason, regarded as the source of world order. Derrida can be thus interpreted as saying that philosophy has always been centered on reason, which gives validity to all operations, acts as an unexamined centre. If we examine the operations of this reason closely,,it can be seen to create some ultimate presence, truth or reality to act as an unassailable foundation on which whole discourses can be built. A great number of candidates for this folded, the Idea, the World spirit, have been thrust from time to time. This unexamined centre then creates a hierarchy, assumes the priority of the first term and conceives the second as a complication, negation or a deficient form of the first. For example, religion as a discourse relies on the unquestioned primary status of God and arbitrarily devalues man as a complication, negation or a deficient

form of God. Since each of these centres hopes to found the whole system of thought it must itself be beyond the system. It cannot be implicated in the very thought, which it attempts to order: it must somehow be anterior to them. That is, God should exist independently, outside religion. That any such transcendental entity is a fiction is one consequence of the poststructuralist theory of language we have outlined. There is no concept that is not shot with traces and fragments of other ideas. It is just that out of this play of signifiers, certain meanings are elevated by ideologies to a privileged position, around which, other meanings are forced to turn. Consider in our own society freedom, democracy, order and so on. Often they seem to be the origin of all other meanings in our life, but when investigated they turn out to be themselves derived from other ideas or concepts.

**Check Your Progress 2**

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer.

b) Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit.

1. Deconstructing Structuralism.

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2. Discuss Some Operative Strategies.

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**7.6 LET US SUM UP**

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## Notes

The working idea that emerges from the foregoing discussion is that deconstruction is a "searching out" or dismantling operation conducted on a discourse to show how the discourse itself undermines the argument (philosophy) it asserts. One way of doing it is to see how the argument is structured constructed, that is identify the terms presented as superior and inferior in it. Deconstruction then pulls the carpet from below the superior by showing the faulty basis of its superiority and thus reverses the hierarchy, making the superior, inferior. This reversed hierarchy is again open to the same deconstructive operation. All human thought, from the basest to the most noble, is subject to such investigation and exposure. Though a frightening and apparently futile project, it has had distinct positive political implications.

But, deconstruction is not solely a matter of reversing hierarchies. Fundamentally, it involves looking into the structure of a discourse and revealing the moments when certain assumptions becomes its controlling centre. The centre in turn creates its hierarchies, which an interpretation can go on to reverse. A deconstructive analysis when applied to Saussure's theory of language reveals certain embarrassing moments when the theory contradicts itself. Deconstruction starts with the binaries languelparole, synchronic/diachronic, signified signifier, speech1 writing and shows how each can be reversed. The privileged place each occupied in Saussure's theory is thus proved arbitrary. Such arbitrary privileging has gone on in the Western world for centuries now and deconstruction aims to correct this fallacy. Certain recurrent fallacies like the metaphysics of presence and logocentrism are identified in many philosophical projects and imploded by deconstruction. But it should also be remembered that, by its own nature, deconstruction involves its own dismantling. The process which implodes these fallacies can also be shown to be fallacious infiniturn.. It is a methodology based on suspicion and skepticism and fits in with the general mood of questioning that characterizes the present intellectual activities of the West.

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## 7.7 KEY WORDS

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**Discourse:** Ordinarily the word refers to a talk, argument or assertion on a subject held forth in speech or writing. However, it was given a special sense by the French theoretician, Michel Foucault. He uses the word to refer to the relationship between language and social institutions: To examine language at the level of discourse is to identify the institutional rules that make possible particular significations and consequently particular forms of knowledge.

**Logical:** Reasoned correctly, defensible on grounds of consistency.

**Rhetoric:** A special use of language, its structures and possibilities designed to achieve a persuasive or assertive effect irrespective of the truth of the statement. To analyze the rhetorical status of a text is to understand the way it uses the structures and possibilities of language to persuade us about its truth claim. **Transcendental Signified:** A signified, as we know, is not an independent entity but the product of the interplay of a number of signifiers. A transcendental signified would be one that escapes this play of signifiers and has a privileged existence. It is in this sense that the adjective transcend is used here - as that which goes beyond or is independent of the play of signifiers which produce other signified. This, as Derrida has shown us, is a philosophical fiction.

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## 7.8 QUESTIONS FOR REVIEW

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1. Explain Derrida's resistance to definitions and to defining deconstruction in particular.
2. Attempt a deconstruction of the principle of causality as evident in your day-to-day life.
3. Explain the concept of a structure and discuss the notion of a stable centre.
4. Discuss the limitations of deconstruction as a method of critical inquiry.
5. Define Deconstruction.
6. Discuss the Deconstructing Definitions.
7. Deconstructing Structuralism.
8. Discuss Some Operative Strategies.

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## Notes

In language there are only differences. Even more important: a difference generally implies positive terms between which the difference is set up; but in language there are only differences without positive terms. Whether we take the signified or the signifier, language has neither ideas nor sounds that existed before the linguistic system, but only conceptual and phonic differences that have issued from the system.

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## 7.10 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

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### Check Your Progress 1

1. See Section 7.2
2. See Section 7.3

### Check Your Progress 2

1. See Section 7.4
2. See Section 7.5