

## **BA (H) GEOGRAPHY**

### **SEMESTER VI**

#### **EVOLUTION OF GEOGRAPHICAL THOUGHT**

##### **Unit: 5 – Post-Modernism**

###### **Introduction**

Postmodernism is cultural and literary phenomenon that emerged after World War II and covers a huge body of critical thinking. Since its emergence many critical and literary discourses tried to define it but still it is not defined comprehensively. Rather many intellectuals think that it is vague to define as it is still in flux and slippery one to capture. Umberto Eco aptly expressed this nebulous concept of postmodernism in his *Reflections on the Name of the Rose* (1985) when he writes, “Unfortunately, postmodern is a term *bon a tout faire* . . . applied today to anything the user of the term happens to like”. Eco’s observations put forth clearly the vague nature of postmodernism that covers the vast body of critical thinking including sociology, theology, literature, architecture etc. As a result, the term postmodernism is associated with indeterminacy, ambivalence, irony and detachment. It is this “amorphous and politically volatile nature of postmodernism which makes the phenomenon itself exceedingly difficult to define, if not *per se* impossible” (Huysen 58).

The investigations in its origin puts forth that it was first coined in the decade of 1940s in order to name a reaction in contrast to the modern movement in architecture. But soon the term become a catch word among the critics of art in general and literary theorists in particular. Especially in 1960s the term was elaborately used by American cultural critics Susan Sontag and Leslie Fielder in the context of literature. Their critical discourses are aimed at defining the ‘new sensibility’ in the literary creations. Yet, the stances taken by contemporary commentators of this term are confused and confusing. The dilemma that whether should one call it as an extension of the modern phenomena or should it be treated as the contradictory attitude, remains very prominent subject of debate in the critical discourses of the contemporary period. It is resulted that the contemporary literary scholars get an impression that the term is an ‘empty practice of recycling previous artistic style’. But soon this phase of confusion meets to its end and the following decade sees the rise of new phenomenal changes in the every discipline of the modern sciences and every genre of modern art. Nicol in his book *The*

Cambridge Introduction to Postmodern Fiction rightly registers this change, when he writes: In the following decades the term began to figure in academic disciplines besides literary criticism and architecture – such as social theory, cultural and media studies, visual arts, philosophy, and history. Such wideranging usage meant that the term became overloaded with meaning, chiefly because it was being used to describe characteristics of the social and political landscape as well as a whole range of different examples of cultural production. (ibid) This philosophical phenomenon becomes so much popular as the social scene and cultural context is altered due to the radical and rapid developments in the fields of science, technology, economics, and especially media. The advancement in science and technology transformed the world into a single civilization with homogeneity in the metropolitan consciousness and similarity in the problems of culture and society. This ‘new sensibility’ gets its classical expressions in the contemporary literary enterprises which are afterwards grouped and named as ‘Postmodern’.

However, it is impossible to define postmodernism as being a separate ideology without the occurrence of modernism. Besides that, the boundaries between modernism and postmodernism are not clear because, firstly, its emergence is not certain and secondly, it connotes too many debated ideas from the modernist’s philosophy. As a result the term postmodernism is always differed from modernism according to its different use. This situation formulates the contradictory opinions of literary scholars and critics about the term postmodernism. Many critics bring to notice some of the characteristics of modernism that are taken to its extreme stage by postmodernism to trace its roots as well as continuation of some of the modern tendencies in it. For example, the avant-garde ideology that was flourished in the modern period is still continuing in the postmodern period to which the literary historians call as a new avant-garde.

On the other hand, the term postmodernism is largely understood as a reaction against modernism. Modernism was the product of Protestantism and Capitalism which puts forth the tendency that gives privilege to human being as a separate entity where individual rights, individual psyche and individual personality reside. These forces establish individual’s relationship with God as well as develop his tendency to earn money. Postmodernism undermines this ideology of modernism to expose its hypocrisy. It rejects the ideology of liberal humanism, its literature and culture which privileges an individual to express his personal opinions about the world in his unique and authentic style. The literature produced during this period is ironic and disillusioned about its own nature. It acknowledges its own futility as a

form of literature which breaks off from the traditional values of modernism. It recognises the purposelessness of the traditional ways of making sense of the world out of reality.

Postmodernists reject the assumed certainty of scientific efforts to explain reality and traces that reality comes into being only through one's interpretation. The sense of loss of reality makes them to destroy traditional pretensions. For them the traditional mode of looking at the world as a reality which traces identity, unity, authority, and certainty is inadequate. They consider the world as extraordinary, horrific or absurd, which explores difference, separation, textuality, scepticism, and only an imitation of reality. That means history is only illusionary, an imitation of life of the period and not reality and the outcome of one's own experiences are imperfect and relative, rather than certain and universal. This sensibility of the postmodern world is aptly expressed in the words of Pillai as he writes that the present world is the world "of altered human relationships, of epistemological scepticism, of high technology and strange and distorted history, of an anarchic and revolutionary subjectivism and a disoriented sense of human purpose". In such a world, postmodernists "feel that there is no point in creating fiction that gives an illusion of life when life itself seems so illusory" (ibid). This situation leads them to create the fictionality in their works to represent the world from another's point of view. They construct the world and narrate it from others perspective to maintain the relationship between language and the fictional world with the real world existed outside.

Thus, the term postmodernism is used to refer to a point of departure for the works of literature, philosophy, art, critical theory, 33 architecture, design, and interpretation of history, law, culture and religion since the late twentieth century. At this juncture, it is necessary to define the term 'postmodernism' and comprehend its literary features.

### Defining Postmodernism

The term 'postmodern' comes into philosophical lexicon with the publication of Jean-François Lyotard's *La Condition Postmoderne* in 1979 (English: *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, 1984). Since then it is widely used by various scholars to describe a set of critical, strategic and rhetorical practices. The intellectuals of the contemporary period always attempt to define this term in the context of its predecessor, modernism. Few of them attempt to locate the similar ideological threads which are followed by the postmodern philosophy and even practised in the postmodern art. But on the contrary few literary critics and philosophers take the opposite stance in their literary creations and philosophical treatises to point out the contradictory attitudes reflected in it. Therefore, the term postmodern is identified by many

critics with the concepts like difference, repetition, trace, simulacrum, and hyperreality whereas they reject the terms like presence, identity, historical progress and rationality. It is necessary to have a brief review of the significant definitions of the term 'Postmodern' in the literary as well as in the philosophical context in order to calculate the features of the postmodernism and try to prepare a comprehensive and more illustrative definition of the term in the literary context.

American Heritage Dictionary defines Postmodernism as a term – . . . relating to art, architecture, or literature that reacts against earlier modernist principles, as by reintroducing traditional or classical elements of style or by carrying modernist styles or practices to extremes: 'It [a roadhouse] is so architecturally interesting . . . with its postmodern wooden booths and sculptural clock'.

This definition points out that postmodernism is a contemporary philosophical and artistic reaction as well as continuation of the modern phenomenon. It uses classical elements to reject modern tendencies.

Another significant discourse which must be mentioned here is Jean-Francois Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1984), in which he attempts to capture his understanding about the cultural transformations in the contemporary period. As the period is marked by the fundamental, rapid and radical changes in the human life, human breed have to face various challenges in the altered political, cultural and social context. These changes are analysed by Lyotard and generalized certain maxims which afterwards become the major principles of the postmodern philosophy and the important features of the postmodern art. Lyotard defines postmodernism as: "I define postmodern as incredulity toward metanarratives". He identifies 'metanarratives' with the grand narratives and throws light on the emergence of the 'little narratives' which create the world of fragmented truths and the altered conception of reality which become the major thematic concerns of the postmodern art. For instance the postmodern novels use the experimental narrative space in which all cultural and traditional significances are crystallized. Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981), which sets the new parameters of the narrative techniques of the postmodern literature, rebels against the established concept of truth.

Fredric Jameson's *Postmodernism, Or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991) discusses the term postmodernism in relation with the condition of late capitalism. According to Jameson, postmodernism is ambiguous in nature because it either expresses the deeper historical

impulses that are irrepressible or diverts these impulses. Therefore, he proposes to grasp the concept as an attempt to think present historically in the age that has forgotten how to think historically. So, he defines the term “Postmodernism not as a style but rather as a cultural dominant: a conception which allows for the presence and coexistence of a range of very different, yet subordinate, features”. His observations clearly show that though postmodernism is a separate phenomenon or a break off from modernism; it has its roots in modernism which helps to establish grounds for new thoughts. So it will be not an exaggeration to call postmodernism as a continuation as well as break off from the modern tendencies. Following Jameson, Linda Hutcheon in her *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (1988) also tries to capture the term postmodernism in the context of cultural changes that occurred during the recent period. She focuses on some of the significant points that overlap with modernist aesthetic practices to express a flexible conceptual structure of postmodernism. In the altered historical, social and political context, she defines the term as: Postmodernism is a contradictory phenomenon, one that uses and abuses, installs and then subverts, the very concepts it challenges – be it in architecture, literature, painting, sculpture, film, video, dance, TV, music, philosophy, aesthetic theory, psychoanalysis, linguistics, or historiography. She thinks that the term postmodernism is itself contradictory in nature as it undermines as well as uses some of the modern concepts to which it challenges. She identifies postmodernism as a cultural activity which is necessarily contradictory in its approach towards the late capitalist society and marked with “the presence of the past”.

Charles Jencks proposes rather a comprehensive definition of postmodernism in his book *What is Post-modernism?* (1996) in which he articulates: Post-modernism is fundamentally the eclectic mixture of any tradition with that of the immediate past: it is both the continuation of Modernism and its transcendence. Its best works are characteristically double-coded and ironic, making a feature of the wide choice, conflict and discontinuity of traditions, because this heterogeneity most clearly captures our pluralism. For Jencks, postmodernism is a philosophical approach that emerges out of the mishmash of past and present ideas. In one way it extends modernist’s ideas at some extent, whereas in other way it surpasses these tendencies in order to break new grounds for the current philosophical ideas. Such a nature of the term makes it overloaded with the characteristics like irony, ambiguity, discontinuity, fragmentation etc. Another important theorist is Jean Baudrillard who in his book *The Ecstasy of Communication* (1985) defines the term postmodernism as: “It is the end of interiority and intimacy, the overexposure and transparence of the world which traverses him without

obstacle. He is now only a pure screen, a switching centre for all the networks of influence”. Baudrillard’s observations put forth the view that the postmodern world is exploded rapidly with the overexposure of radical developments in the fields of science and technology, which has made the simulated versions of everything. With this regard, another significant definition proposed by David Harvey in his essay *The Condition of Postmodernity* (1990), which captures acutely the phenomenal changes as: “The most startling fact about postmodernism [is] its total acceptance of the ephemerality, fragmentation, discontinuity, and the chaotic”. Stephen R. C. Hicks in his book *Explaining Postmodernism: Skepticism and Socialism from Rousseau to Foucault* (2004), gives a comprehensive and comparative chart which compares the Premodernism, Modernism, and Postmodernism in social, cultural and philosophical scenes.

Chart 1.3

Defining Pre-modernism, Modernism, and Postmodernism:

	Pre-modernism	Modernism	Postmodernism
Metaphysics	Realism: Supernaturalism	Realism: naturalism	Anti-realism
Epistemology	Mysticism and/or faith	Objectivism: Experience and Reason	Social subjectivism
Human Nature	Original Sin; Subject to God’s will	Tabula rasa and autonomy	Social construction
Ethics	Collectivism: altruism	Individualism	Collectivism: egalitarianism
Politics and Economics	Feudalism	Liberal capitalism	Socialism
When and Where	Medieval	The Enlightenment; 20th century sciences, business, and technical fields	Late 20th century humanities and related professions

This comparison makes the term postmodernism more comprehensive. The changes observed in the Metaphysical, Epistemological, Ethical, political and cultural contexts reflect the postmodern tendencies which are further observed in the postmodern literature. Aforementioned philosophical discourses point out that postmodernism is a cultural and

literary movement born out of its predecessor modernism and carries certain tendencies of modernism to its extreme stage as well as rebels and challenges to these tendencies at other context. It is both a continuation as well as a break from modernism, and is marked by the characteristics such as fragmentation, discontinuity, irony, ambiguity, ephemera, chaos, scepticism etc. Each definition mentioned above throws light on the nebulous nature of the concept of postmodernism in the altered social, cultural, economical and political situation of the contemporary period from different perspectives. Beside these definitions, it is essential here to take a brief review of the postmodern philosophy and the contemporary thoughts in order to comprehend the term 'postmodernism'.