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BA English Honours | Semester V | Calicut University

Foundations of Literary Theory

Course Code: ENG5CJ302 • Module 2 Notes

Module II: Psychoanalysis and Phenomenology

1. Freudian Psychoanalysis: The Unconscious & Psychic Topography

Sigmund Freud revolutionized modern philosophy and literary criticism by dismantling the Enlightenment myth of the rational, sovereign, unified human ego. Freud revealed that the conscious mind represents merely the tip of a vast psychic iceberg; human thoughts, behaviors, and creative expressions are driven by the subterranean forces of the **Unconscious**.

- **Freud's Structural Tripartite Model of the Psyche:**
  - *The Id (Es):* The primitive, amoral, instinctual reservoir of psychic energy governed exclusively by the **Pleasure Principle**. It seeks immediate gratification of sexual drives (Libido/Eros) and aggressive destructive impulses (Thanatos/Death Drive), completely indifferent to social law.
  - *The Ego (Ich):* The conscious, rational mediator operating under the **Reality Principle**. It navigates between the unrealistic demands of the Id, the punishing moral dictates of the Superego, and external physical reality.
  - *The Superego (Über-Ich):* The internalized moral conscience and social censor, assimilating parental prohibitions, religious taboos, and societal laws. It punishes the Ego with irrational feelings of guilt and unworthiness.
- **Repression, Defense Mechanisms & The Freudian Slip:** Traumatic desires and forbidden instincts are forcefully banished into the unconscious through *Repression* (Verdrängung). However, repressed desires are never destroyed; they return in disguised, symptomatic forms—neuroses, fetishistic fixations, parapraxes (Freudian slips of the tongue revealing unconscious intentions), and artistic creations.
- **Dream Work (The Royal Road to the Unconscious):** In *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900), Freud distinguished between the *Manifest Content* (the dream as remembered upon waking) and the *Latent Content* (the underlying unconscious dream-thoughts). The dream-censor transforms latent desires into manifest imagery through:
  - *Condensation:* Fusing multiple unconscious persons, ideas, or desires into a single composite dream image (analogous to Jakobson's metaphor).
  - *Displacement:* Shifting emotional intensity from an important, dangerous idea onto a trivial, neutral object (analogous to Jakobson's metonymy).

2. Jacques Lacan: The Linguistic Restructuring of the Unconscious

French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan famously proclaimed that **"the unconscious is structured like a language."** Lacan synthesized Freudian psychoanalysis with Saussurean structural linguistics, redefining human subjectivity through three register orders:

- **The Mirror Stage (Le Stade du Miroir):** Occurring between 6 and 18 months of age, the infant—physically uncoordinated, experiencing its body as fragmented bits and pieces (corps morcelé)—gazes into a mirror and perceives a complete, unified visual reflection. The infant joyfully identifies with this visual gestalt. However, Lacan emphasizes that this identification is a *méconnaissance* (fundamental misrecognition)—the unified image is an external illusion. This initiates the **Imaginary Order**, characterized by dual narcissistic identification and alienation.
- **The Three Lacanian Orders:**

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- *The Imaginary:* The realm of sensory images, pre-linguistic illusions of wholeness, narcissistic identification, and the mother-infant symbiotic bond.
- *The Symbolic Order:* The realm of language, social laws, cultural kinship structures, and patriarchal authority (the *Name-of-the-Father / Nom-du-Père*). Entering the Symbolic requires castration—submitting to language and accepting the loss of the mother. Subjectivity is forever split () between the conscious speaking subject and the unconscious.
- *The Real:* That which resists symbolization absolutely; the traumatic, impossible, unspeakable core of existence that cannot be absorbed into language or image.

- **Desire, Lack (Manque), and Objet Petit a:** Desire is never satisfied because desire is fundamentally the desire for the Other's recognition. Human beings suffer from constitutive lack (*manque-à-être*). The *objet petit a* (object-cause of desire) is the elusive, unattainable fantasy object that we endlessly pursue, falsely believing it will restore our lost wholeness.
- **The Gaze (Le Regard):** The awareness that one is visible, caught in a field of vision from an external point that cannot be fully seen or controlled, generating profound existential vulnerability.

3. Phenomenology: Intentionality & Corporeality

Founded by Edmund Husserl and radicalized by Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Martin Heidegger, phenomenology suspended scientific abstractions to examine immediate lived human experience:

- **Husserlian Intentionality:** Consciousness is never an empty container; consciousness is always **intentional**—consciousness is always consciousness *of* something. In literary reception (pioneered by Wolfgang Iser and Roman Ingarden), a literary text is not a physical object, but an intentional schema that comes alive only when the reader's consciousness actively "fills in the gaps" (Unbestimmtheitsstellen).
- **Merleau-Ponty and Corporeality (The Lived Body):** In *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945), Merleau-Ponty demonstrated that we do not have bodies; we **are** our bodies (*corps propre*). Perception is rooted in bodily kinetics, tactile embodiment, and sensory immersion in the world, rejecting the Cartesian dualism of detached mind versus physical matter.

Advanced Critical Theory, Epistemological Debates & Hermeneutics (Extension Phase 1)

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- **Universalism versus Postcolonial & Intersectional Particularity:** Eurocentric critical traditions long posited Western aesthetic values as universal human truths. Postcolonial theorists (Said, Spivak, Bhabha) and Black feminist scholars (bell hooks, Crenshaw) deconstructed this epistemic violence, revealing that universalist claims erase the historical specificities of colonial conquest, racial violence, caste oppression, and patriarchal hegemony.

2. Comparative Analytical Matrix: Major Theoretical Schools & Key Concepts

A structured comparative assessment delineates performance metrics and theoretical axes in Module 2:

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Post-Structuralism	Instability of meaning; critique of logocentrism; deconstruction of binaries.	Différance (differ/defer); Discourse/Power/Knowledge; Rhizome; Incredulity toward metanarratives.	Jacques Derrida (*Of Grammatology*), Michel Foucault, Jean-François Lyotard, Gilles Deleuze.

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