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BA English Honours | Semester V | Calicut University

Foundations of Literary Theory

Course Code: ENG5CJ302 • Module 4 Notes

Module IV: Post-Structuralism, Postmodernism and Postcolonialism

1. Post-Structuralism: Discursive Power & Deconstruction

Emerging in France during the late 1960s, Post-Structuralism mounted a radical critique of Structuralism's scientific pretensions. While Structuralism believed that stable universal structures and master keys could decode human culture, Post-Structuralism revealed that language is inherently unstable, contradictory, and deeply entangled with historical power relations.

- **Michel Foucault: Discourse, Power/Knowledge & The Panopticon:**
  - *Discourse:* Language is never neutral; it is institutionalized into *discourses*—historically variable systems of representation that govern what can be thought, said, and practiced in fields like medicine, sexuality, psychiatry, and criminal justice.
  - *Power/Knowledge (Pouvoir/Savoir):* Power and knowledge directly imply one another. Power is not simply held by a monarch who says "no"; power is capillary, pervasive, productive, and dispersed throughout all social relations, constantly producing truth and subjectivity.
  - *The Panopticon & Disciplinary Society:* Borrowing Jeremy Bentham's architectural prison design, Foucault demonstrates in *Discipline and Punish* (1975) that modern institutions enforce internalized self-surveillance. When inmates believe they may be observed at any second, they police their own behavior, internalizing disciplinary power.
- **Jacques Derrida: Deconstruction & Différance:**
  - *Critique of Logocentrism:* Western philosophy has historically suffered from *Logocentrism*—the "metaphysics of presence" that assumes an ultimate ground, transcendental signified, or fixed center (God, Reason, Truth) that guarantees stable meaning outside language.
  - *Différance:* Derrida coined the homophonic neographism *Différance*, which combines the French verbs meaning "to differ" (spatial distinction) and "to defer" (temporal postponement). In language, a signifier never lands on a final, definitive signified; it points to another signifier in an endless chain of signifiers. Meaning is perpetually deferred, unstable, and context-dependent.
  - *Deconstructive Strategy & Aporia:* Deconstruction does not mean destruction; it involves identifying the hierarchized binary oppositions upon which a text relies (Speech/Writing, Nature/Culture, Reason/Madness), inverting the hierarchy, and demonstrating that the privileged term depends upon the suppressed term, bringing the text to a state of *Aporia* (insoluble impasse of meaning).

2. Postmodernist Poetics: Metanarratives & The Rhizome

Postmodernism describes the aesthetic, philosophical, and cultural condition of late-twentieth-century global capitalism:

- **Jean-François Lyotard: Incredulity toward Metanarratives:** In *The Postmodern Condition* (1979), Lyotard famously defined postmodernism as **"incredulity toward metanarratives."** Grand totalizing narratives that claimed to explain human history (the Enlightenment narrative of universal progress, the Christian narrative of salvation, the Marxist narrative of inevitable proletarian victory) have lost legitimation. Postmodernism champions localized, plural, micronarratives (*petits récits*).

- **Postmodern Stylistic Devices:** Fragmentation, pastiche (blank parody without satire), metafiction (fiction that draws attention to its own artificiality), intertextuality, hyperreality (Jean Baudrillard's simulacra), and temporal discontinuity.
- **Gilles Deleuze & Félix Guattari: The Rhizome:** In *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980), Deleuze and Guattari contrast *Arborescent* thought (hierarchical, tree-like structures with fixed roots and linear branches) with the *Rhizome* (a subterranean root system like ginger or grass). A rhizome has no center, no beginning or end; any point can connect to any other point. Rhizomatic thought celebrates non-hierarchical, horizontal, open-ended multiplicities.

3. Postcolonialism: Orientalism, Subalternity & Hybridity

Postcolonial theory interrogates the lingering psychological, cultural, and political legacies of European colonialism, exposing how imperial powers constructed and dominated the non-Western world:

- **Edward Said: Orientalism (1978):** Said applies Foucault's concept of discourse to reveal that the "Orient" is not an inert physical reality, but a European ideological invention. Western literature, art, and academic scholarship systematically constructed the East as exotic, feminine, backward, irrational, and despotic, contrasting with the West as rational, masculine, moral, and civilized. *Orientalism* provided the intellectual justification for colonial conquest and imperial domination.
- **Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak: Othering & "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988):**
  - *Othering:* The discursive process of projecting negative traits onto colonized subjects, creating an inferior "Other" to confirm Western imperial superiority.
  - *The Subaltern:* Borrowed from Gramsci, the subaltern represents the severely marginalized who have no institutional voice. In her landmark essay, Spivak investigates the colonial outlawing of Sati (widow burning), demonstrating that Indian women were caught between British white men claiming to "save brown women from brown men" and native patriarchal leaders romanticizing self-immolation. The subaltern woman has no space of enunciation; she cannot speak within the dominant institutional discourse.
- **Homi Bhabha: Mimicry, Hybridity & The Third Space:**
  - *Colonial Mimicry:* The colonial apparatus demands that the native subject imitate the colonizer's language, religion, and manners ("almost the same, but not quite"). However, mimicry is inherently ambivalent; by imitating the master, the native subtly mocks and menaces colonial authority.
  - *Hybridity & The Third Space:* Colonial encounters dismantle fantasies of cultural purity. Cultures are always ambivalent and impure. Cultural translation occurs in a liminal "Third Space" of hybridity, an in-between zone that subverts binary colonial hierarchies and creates radical possibilities for cultural resistance.

4. Decolonization, Neo-Colonialism & Cultural Imperialism

Postcolonial scholarship moves beyond formal political independence to confront continuing economic and cultural subjugation:

- **Decolonizing the Mind (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o & Frantz Fanon):** In *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), Fanon analyzes the deep psychological trauma of colonial subjugation, advocating for revolutionary violence to purge colonial inferiority. In *Decolonising the Mind* (1986), Kenyan author Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o exposes language as a "carrier of culture." Enforcing colonial languages alienates African children from their indigenous heritage; authentic decolonization requires reclaiming African indigenous languages.

- **Neo-Colonialism & Cultural Imperialism:** Kwame Nkrumah coined *Neo-Colonialism* to describe how former colonial powers continue to exploit sovereign nations through multinational corporate capital, unequal trade agreements, and cultural media hegemony, perpetuating global dependency under the guise of free-market globalization.

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

In contemporary critical theory, philosophical poetics, and cultural studies, analyzing Module 4 requires traversing dense intellectual lineages from linguistics and psychoanalysis to dialectical materialism and post-structuralist deconstruction. Literary theory does not merely provide instrumental tools for decoding novels and poems; it interrogates the very foundations of meaning, human subjectivity, ideological state power, and the historical conditions under which texts are produced and consumed.

1. Core Epistemological Paradigms & Theoretical Cleavages

Literary theorists and critical philosophers navigate fundamental theoretical debates within Module 4:

- **Autonomous Form versus Socio-Historical Determination:** A central intellectual division contrasts New Criticism and Russian Formalism (which treated the text as an autonomous, self-contained verbal icon) with Marxist and Cultural Materialist criticism (which insists that literature is determined by economic base structures, class contradictions, and historical forces).
- **Humanist Essentialism versus Post-Structuralist Anti-Humanism:** Classical liberal humanism viewed the author as a sovereign, intentional creative genius endowed with a stable core identity. Post-structuralism (Roland Barthes's "Death of the Author", Michel Foucault's "What is an Author?") dismantled this romantic myth, demonstrating that the "author" is a discursive construct and that language speaks through the subject rather than vice versa.
- **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 4:

Theoretical Paradigm	Epistemological Focus	Foundational Concept & Mechanism	Key Theorists & Landmark Texts
Structuralism	Language as an autonomous relational system of differential signs.	Arbitrariness of sign; Langue vs. Parole; Binary Oppositions; Syntagmatic/Paradigmatic.	Ferdinand de Saussure (*Course in General Linguistics*), Roman Jakobson, Claude Lévi-Strauss.
Psychoanalysis	The unconscious; desire, repression, and psychic formation of subjectivity.	Id/Ego/Superego; Mirror Stage; Imaginary/Symbolic/Real; Lack and the Gaze.	Sigmund Freud (*The Interpretation of Dreams*), Jacques Lacan (*Écrits*).

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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.

3. Glossary of Theoretical Terms & Critical Frameworks

Critical Term	Theoretical Origin	Standard Theoretical Definition & Application
Defamiliarization	Russian Formalism	*Ostranenie*: Making familiar objects and language appear strange or unfamiliar to refresh perception and overcome habitual blindness.
The Mirror Stage	Lacanian Psychoanalysis	The developmental moment (6–18 months) where an infant misrecognizes its fragmented body in a unified mirror image, initiating an illusory ego.
Cultural Hegemony	Gramscian Marxism	The dominance of a ruling class maintained not primarily by physical force (coercion), but through ideological consent engineered via civil institutions.
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Écriture Féminine	French Feminist Theory	"Women's writing" formulated by Hélène Cixous, asserting that women must write through their bodies to disrupt patriarchal phallogocentrism.

4. Rigorous Theoretical Textual Application Protocol

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