Lecture 28

Literature and Psychoanalysis: Jacques Lacan

Hello all of you and welcome back to this lecture on literary theory. For the past few lectures we have been discussing how psychoanalysis can provide a novel way of approaching literature. Our focus so far has been on the works of Sigmund Freud and Carl Gustav Jung. Now, in spite of the differences that we have observed between their works, we have also observed a significant commonality, which is that the object of psychological study – be it the symptoms of hysteria, or dreams, or parapraxes, or phantasies –are all presented in the form of a narrative. The psychoanalyst treats these narratives as veils, which, once lifted, reveal the workings of the unconscious. In case of Freud, it is the personal unconscious that we see at work and in case of Jung it is the collective unconscious. But in both the cases, the strategy remains the same—language leading us to desires, wishes, fears and memories repressed or imprinted in our subconscious. Today we are going to discuss a psychoanalyst who radically revised this strategy by arguing that "the unconscious is structured like a language". In other words, our language uses do not reveal our unconscious. Rather language *is* our unconscious. The psychoanalyst I am referring to here is Jacques Lacan, and like always, before we start exploring his works we will briefly dwell upon some biographical details which will help us contextualize our discussion better.

Jacques Lacan

Lacan, whose dates are 1901 to 1981, first achieved recognition with the publication of his doctoral thesis on paranoid psychosis in 1932. In 1936, he came up with his first major idea that will form one of the key pillars of Lacanian psychoanalysis. This was the idea of the mirror

stage, which Lacan presented in the fourteenth conference of the International Psycho-Analytic Association. While presenting this paper, Lacan was stopped midway by the president of the congress Ernest Jones, who was a close associate of Freud and also his biographer. Indeed, Lacan's paper was barely mentioned in the conference publication that came out later.

Now this event has been interpreted in two different lights. One interpretation is that in that conference each speaker was allotted ten minutes for their papers and therefore Ernest Jones was not trying to especially gag the content of Lacan's paper by stopping him midway. Moreover, the conference publication did not carry Lacan's paper simply because Lacan did not submit it for publication. Some, however, do not believe in this rather mundane interpretation and read into the events of the fourteenth congress of the International Psycho-analytic Association Lacan's first major rift with the mainstream institutions of psychoanalysis. This interpretation is given credibility by referring to Lacan's later conflicts with the International Psycho-analytic Association which refused to recognize Lacan as a practicing psychoanalyst. Freud had introduced a standard practice of analyzing the patients for sessions that lasted for 50 minutes. Lacan converted these standard fifty-minute sessions into sessions of variable lengths. What this meant was that Lacan would spend different amounts of time with his patients that were not pre-determined. This might vary from just a few minutes or even a few seconds on the one hand to several hours on the other. Such experimentation with the length of sessions proved to be too scandalous for the psychoanalytic orthodoxy represented by the IPA or International Psycho-analytic Association. And in 1963 Lacan's name was struck off as a member of IPA and its affiliate societies.

Now, all of this might suggest that Lacan was consciously rebelling against the legacy of Freudian psychoanalysis not only by deviating from his fixed length sessions but also by burning

his bridges with the IPA which was an organization that was established by Freud. Indeed, this impression of Lacan departing from Freud gets even stronger if an uninitiated reader reads a few pages of Freud's writings and then compares them to Lacan's. The lucid narrative style of Freud is in sharp contrast with Lacan's writings, which often appear to be deliberately obscurantist and filled with mathematical equations and cryptic diagrams that thoroughly disrupt any sense of a narrative flow. Yet, despite of these surface differences, Lacan always claimed himself to be Freudian. In fact, his argument was that the psychoanalytic orthodoxy of his time was not Freudian enough. He therefore asked his audience to look at his works as an effort to return to Freud and to his true teachings. This attachment of Lacan to Freud can be well observed from the fact that when IPA and its affiliates struck off Lacan's name from their membership list, he went on to establish his own psychoanalytic organization which he named École Freudienne de Paris, which literally translates as the Freudian school of Paris. This institution, founded in 1964, gained significant prominence during the next few decades establishing what may be called a Lacanian school of psychoanalysis. But in 1980, a year before his death Lacan, dissolved this school that he founded while famously telling his followers, "It is up to you to be Lacanians if you wish. I am a Freudian."

Yet, in spite of these repeated assertions of being a Freudian, one cannot help but consider Lacan as a wonderfully original thinker who, even while revisiting such typically Freudian concepts like the Oedipal complex, drastically changes our more mundane understanding of that phenomenon. Indeed, it was this charismatic originality that made Lacan into a cult figure in the post-second world war decades within the intellectual circles of Paris. At the heart of this cult status was the seminar series which Lacan started delivering in 1953 and with which he continued till 1980. This lecture series was attended by various French intellectuals of the day

which included figures like Michel Foucault Gilles Deleuze, Luce Irigary and Julia Kriesteva. One interesting piece of information about this seminar series was that between 1964 and 1969 they were held in Paris's École normale supérieure or ENS. Now those of you who have carefully followed my previous lectures would know that ENS was the intellectual hotbed during the 1960s. A number of scholars associated with the events of 1968 were affiliated with the ENS. And indeed, while Lacan was delivering his lectures in ENS in which he was reinterpreting Freud, at the same institute, Louis Althusser was working on his interpretation of Marx's *Capital* which produced the two seminal texts *Reading Capital* and *For Marx*. And both these contemporaries in their powerful reinterpretation of Marx and Freud were heavily influenced by the wave of structuralism which had swept through France following the publications of Claude Levi Strauss's works on structuralist anthropology. So an important thing to note here is that though text books on literary theory would usually present figures like Levi-Strauss, Althusser and Lacan under three different chapters dealing with structuralism, Marxism and psychoanalysis as distinct though-categories, yet we can discover very intimate linkages between the works of these intellectuals. And therefore one innovative way of approaching literary theory might be to group literary theorists according to their locational proximity in terms of space and time rather than according to their acclaimed ideological affiliations. In any case, let us move from this biographical sketch of Lacan to his main ideas.

Borromean Rings

Now one interesting thing about Lacan is that his thoughts were chiefly conveyed to his audience through lectures rather than through book publications. Indeed, apart from his doctoral thesis, Lacan only published one book in his life time which was titled *Écrits* and which was a collection of all the major essays that Lacan had written till 1966. The notes of his seminars,

which represent the chief part of Lacan's oeuvre is in the process of being published. So like some of the other theorists that we have encountered in this course, the Lacanian canon too is very much in the making. However, the basic framework of Lacanian psychoanalytical theory is pretty well established. According to Lacan, our psychological life is guided by three different orders or registers which he referred to as the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real. These three orders form a kind of interlocking matrix, which Lacan depicted through the image of the Borromean rings which you can see on the slide now. This complex structure is referred to as Borromean rings because it famously formed part of the court of arms of the Italian aristocratic family of the Borromeo. What is noticeable about this structure is how the rings are intertwined in such a way that if any one of the rings breaks, the entire structure will fall apart. From the perspective of Lacanian psychoanalysis, the Imaginary, Symbolic and the Real are intertwined like the three Borromean rings and our psychological phenomena play out in the space created between these intersecting orders.

But what constitutes the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real? Let me take them up one by one starting with the Imaginary order.

The Imaginary and the Mirror Stage

Now the first thing that we need to clarify before going into any detailed exploration of the Imaginary is that the name of this order is not rooted in the usual English meaning of the term Imaginary, which is unreal or fictitious. The term Imaginary, rather, derives from the word "image" and this order has at its centre the process of the development of the ego with reference to the image of one's own body as a coherent whole. As far as Lacan is concerned, the most crucial aspect of this process of ego development, that is to say the development of the sense of one's own identity, is what is referred to as the mirror stage. The mirror stage happens in the life

of a child when it is between six and eighteenth months and when it starts recognizing the image of its body on a mirror as its own self. To understand the major implications that this recognition has in the psychological life, we will however have to start from the phase that precedes the mirror stage.

In this preceding phase, the child does not have any coherent sense of its own body or any sharp sense of distinction between its own self and the external world. This is why Lacan wittily refers to a child in this phase as an hommelette. This word is what is called a portmanteau configuration which yokes together two different French words and their meanings. The first word is “homme” which in French means man. The second word is omelette which is also commonly used in English and which refers to a preparation of beaten eggs that is spread out on a frying pan and then allowed to gradually solidify over heat. Now, a very young child is not yet a man or an “homme” but an hommelette in the same way that a small book is a booklet or a small pig is a piglet. At another level, this very young child in the phase that precedes the mirror stage does not have a very well defined notion of its bodily identity and is thus something akin to an omelette of beaten eggs where the liquid mixture keeps spreading over the frying pan without any definite shape. Thus, the portmanteau word hommelette is used by Lacan as a pun operating on both these levels of meaning.

When between the age of six and eighteen months, the child learns to recognise its bodily image in the mirror or any other shiny surface, then two important things happen. The first thing is that the baby gets to recognize its body as a comprehensive entity with a well-defined shape that is distinct from shapes of other things or persons around him. The second thing is that the baby gains a semblance of mastery over this image of its own self. This is because the baby realises that it can manipulate the image on the mirror by shifting its own arms, legs, head etc. Now both

of these ideas of a distinctly shaped body and a sense of mastery over it that the baby acquires vis-à-vis its mirror image is in contrast with the lack of motor skills and sense of bodily fragmentation that the baby otherwise experiences. Therefore, the mirror image starts becoming for the child a site of pleasure—a site which gives it a sense of completeness and of being in control that it otherwise lacks. This leads the baby to identify with that image. In other words, as far as the baby is concerned, its image on the mirror comes to stand for who he or she is.

From the Lacanian perspective, the ego or what is also referred to as the Ideal-I is, therefore, identified as this self-image acquired during the mirror stage. Consequently, according to Lacan, this ego has two characteristic features – one is **misrecognition** and the other is **alienation**. Why is ego associated with misrecognition by Lacan? Well the mirror image, which becomes the basis of ego or the Ideal-I is at the final instance only an illusion. It gets prioritised in the psychological world of the baby because it gives the baby a sense of wholeness and mastery but then this wholeness and mastery is missing from the actual experiential world of the baby. The identification of the baby with the image thus happens at the cost of putting aside the actual experiential sense of being, which is why Lacan classifies it as a deliberate misrecognition. The reason why ego is associated with alienation must have already become clear from this discussion. The ego is alienated because the image which forms its basis is an external projection that is located outside the subject. Now here we need to take note of two things. First is that Lacan makes a distinction between the subject and the ego because the latter is actually an alien idea, or an external image, that the subject latches on to and invests with a sense of identity. Second, this use of the term alienation is different from how we had earlier used the term alienation while discussing Marxism and especially the epic theatre of Brecht. So, please don’t confuse these two different ideas of alienation.

Symbolic Order

So from the imaginary order, let us now move on to the symbolic order. Lacan's work on this symbolic order was heavily influenced by the structuralist insights provided by Levi Strauss. And we will therefore start our discussion on the symbolic order by revisiting Levi Strauss. Now if you remember our earlier lecture on Levi Strauss, you will know that there we had discussed his structuralist approach to myths. However, I had also mentioned in that lecture that Levi Strauss uses the structuralist lens to approach kinship relations. In that lecture I had not elaborated on the kinship structure but that is where we need to focus today in order to understand the roots of Lacan's symbolic order. Levi-Strauss in his study of the human kinship structure noted that the kinship relations are underlined by a sort of grammatical structure which was above and beyond the actual human beings who performed the kinship roles. To understand this, let us assume that there is a real woman called Parvati who gets married to a real man named Anand. Now this marriage of two real and unique individuals will immediately situate them in a network of kinship relations – of various kinds of in-laws for instance – which is independent of the individuals per se. Thus, if Parvati was to marry someone called Mukul instead of Anand, that marriage will again open up the same kind of kinship network as before. So, here, the identity of Parvati operates at two distinct levels. One at the level of signifier and the other is at the level of the signified. The signifier here is the role of the wife and the signified here is the actual person who is Parvati. Now, from our study of structuralism, we know that the meaning of the signifier is independent of the signified. Indeed, the signifier gains its meaning through its relation with other signifiers. Similarly, the role of the wife gains meaning only inside the context of the network of other kinship relations within which it is situated. In the language of structuralism, the grammar of kinship relations which determine the meaning and significance

of particular kinship roles within any society resembles the level of “langue”. The marriage of Parvati and Anand, or Parvati and Mukul, for that matter, operates as individual instances of “parole” which mobilises the langue of kinship grammar. Now though I have been somewhat cryptic here, I am sure those of you who have followed my lectures on structuralism and poststructuralism carefully would have no difficulty in understanding my explanation here. So the main inference that we can draw from this study of Levi-Strauss on kinship structure is that at one level, human beings operate in society just as signifiers operate within language. This is what is referred to as the symbolic order where there are no essential identities but simply marks or symbols which generate meaning through their interrelations.

Now what is important to note here is that this symbolic order of kinship structure, within which humans operate, precedes their individual existence. Thus for instance, the identity of wife within the kinship structure precedes Parvati and the event of her getting married to someone. This is similar to how the underlying structure of langue pre-exists individual instances of parole. Now Lacan both adopted this concept from Levi Strauss as well as expands upon it. According to Lacan, it was not only the kinship relations that represented the symbolic order but all other aspects of human social and psychological life as well. This is because human existence is inextricably associated with the symbolic order of language which precedes our individual existence and continues beyond the end of our individual existence. In other words, we become fully humans only when we are subjected to the symbolic order of the language. Thus, language is the medium or template on which we articulate our identity, and this “I” which we utter from within the language to identify ourselves, operates just like the mirror image. It is external to us but it is the mark on which we project our sense of selfhood. Thus, both the mirror image and the language, from within which we enunciate the “I” that identifies us, are alien or “other” to us.

Now, to distinguish these two “others”, Lacan refers to language as the big Other. Now the reason he does that is because with the mirror image there is a very tight fit between the image and the subject’s identity. My mirror image begins and ends with me. Language on the other hand is an “other” which precedes me and which will continue after me. Therefore language cannot be completely assimilated to my individual identity. And this is why it is referred to as the big Other.

Now when Lacan asserts that our human identity is articulated from within the symbolic order of language he is not just speaking of the conscious part of our identity but also the unconscious part. This is because Lacan believes all our wishes, desires and fears, even when repressed are structured by the force field of language. In other words, desires, wishes, fears are all generated within the symbolic order of language irrespective of whether they get repressed or not. This is why Lacan argues that not only our conscious self-identity but also our unconscious is structured like a language. Now this idea of desires and fears generating within the symbolic order of language is a complex one and to properly explain it we will need to go into a discussion of how Lacan reinterprets the Freudian idea of oedipal complex. Unfortunately, we do not have that amount of time in our hand. But if you are interested to know more about it you can refer to Sean Homer’s book on Jacques Lacan in the Routledge Critical Thinker Series which provides a very lucid elaboration of this topic.

Now, it is important to note here that this idea of the unconscious being structured like a language of course radically revises the relationship between literature, or any other concrete language use for that matter, with the unconscious. With Freud or even Jung, instances of language use were probed to reach at the unconscious that lay beyond the linguistic structure. But with Lacan we reach at an understanding of the unconscious, which is linguistic in nature.

This is a typically structuralist move where everything gets folded within the language structure and there is no transcendental signified outside the structure. With Freud and Jung, the unconscious stood beyond the structure of language, imparting layers of meaning to it while itself remaining above and beyond that meaning making process. With Lacan, however, the unconscious itself comes within the structuring process of language. So just to give you an example, the two processes of condensation and displacement which in Freud plays a key role in the unconscious dream-work is understood in Lacan as the language tropes of metaphor and metonymy.

The tissue of language which constitutes literature thus becomes here the same tissue that constitutes the unconscious of the author and the reader. So, here we again come back to the core idea of structuralist literary criticism – there is nothing beyond language and its structuring principles in the form of a transcendental signified.

The Real

Now before we end our discussion of Lacan, let me very briefly dwell upon the order of the Real. And here when I say briefly I really mean it because this is a concept that Lacan himself kept rather vague. Now the reason why Lacan kept himself vague when talking about the Real is because the Real is that which continuously escapes the articulation of the symbolic order or language. So let me elaborate on this statement. Though Lacan asserts that the whole of our psychological life is structured by the symbolic order of language, he also admits the presence of a reality that is beyond this symbolic order. This is the reality which consistently escapes articulation through language and constitutes the order of the Real. An example of our encounter with the Real would be for instance our encountering a near fatal accident or a life threatening situation. In that encounter, we are left speechless. It causes a trauma that is beyond articulation

and that stuns us into absolute silence. Sooner or later we overcome this stunned state and get back to the symbolic order of language and articulation, but that moment of shock represents the moment of our encountering the Real.

So with this, we end our discussion on Lacan as well as our discussion on the topic of Psychoanalysis and Literature. In our next lecture we will take up feminism. Thank you