Lecture 32

Modernism and Postmodernism

Hello and welcome back to another lecture on literary theory. With our previous lecture we have completed our discussion on feminism and today we are going to take up a new topic which is modernism and postmodernism. Now both of these terms modernism and postmodernism have at its root the word “modern”. So we will start our discussion today by looking at this particular word and the kind of temporal experience that it signifies. And then we will move on to see how this notion of the modern plays out in the field of literature in particular and art in general during the period that is usually designated by the terms modernism and postmodernism?

So what is “modern”? Well at its simplest, the term modern is an adjective that specifies a point in time. It represents whatever is current and present – the time “now”, as opposed to the time that is past and the time that is yet to come. But modern is not just a point in time, it is also what may be called a temporal experience. This concept, represented by the term modern, comes out beautifully in the seminal work of the American Marxist literary scholar Marshall Berman titled *All That is Solid Melts into Air* (1982). Now I have mentioned a number of books in the course of this lecture series and I have asked you to read them if possible. But if you were to pick just one book from all of the names that I have mentioned, I would like you to pick up and read this book by Berman. This is a book that I encountered quite by chance while I was writing my doctoral thesis. And what captivated me about this book was, of course, the tremendous amount of erudition that it displayed but also Berman’s brilliantly entertaining writing style. And it remains one of the few books of literary criticism that I have come across which not only makes you

think anew about literature but also compels you to read the original literary pieces which it discusses. So as far as I am concerned, this book by Berman along with Raymond Williams's *The Country and the City* sets the standard of how literary criticism should be written. Anyway, let us now come back to Berman's comments about the "modern" being a peculiar kind of temporal experience. He writes:

> To be modern is to find ourselves in an environment that promises us adventure, power, joy, growth, a transformation of ourselves and the world – and, at the same time, that threatens to destroy everything we have, everything we know, everything we are. Modern environments and experiences […] pours us all into a maelstrom of perpetual disintegration and renewal, of struggle and contradiction, of ambiguity and anguish. To be modern is to be part of a universe in which, as Marx said, "all that is solid melts into air".

Now one might argue that this particular experience of the modern as being caught up in a maelstrom of change that opens up future possibilities even while destroying the known world of the past is a universal and eternal experience. Every generation looks at itself as modern because it invariably feels itself to be caught up in such vortices of change, where past traditions seem to be slipping away and the uncertain future opening up.

Well even if we agree with this idea, we need to concede that there is a difference in degrees. For a fourteenth-century peasant toiling his land in rural England the sense of change and modernity would be far less excruciatingly evident than for an early twentieth century urbanite residing in London or Paris. But why is that so? Well, this is primarily because the pace of change which affected human life was accelerated to an unprecedented rate especially in the Western world from around the second half of the nineteenth century. This pace of change was such that the

vanishing of the known past and familiar traditions became the hallmark experience of the lived reality. And this was especially the case in the great urban centres of the Western world.

As I have already noted in some of my previous lectures, this sense of being caught up in a violent whirlpool of change culminated in the experiences of the First World War which quite literally destroyed the Western world order as it was known till the early nineteenth century. It is this period of accelerated change, when the sense of the modern and the new overwhelmed all other experiences of reality, that is depicted within the field of literature and art by the word modernism. The exact dates demarcating this period is open to debate. But it is generally agreed that modernism starts from around the late nineteenth century – some speak of 1890 as the starting date. Further, the consensus view is that modernism comes to an end in the 1930s, and with the beginning of the Second World War and another round of violent changes we start moving beyond modernism and into the realm of the postmodern. So we will proceed chronologically here and first take up modernism for discussion, and then we will move on to postmodernism.

The Modernist Context

But before we delve into a discussion of modernism as it is understood specifically within the field of literary studies, let us dwell upon the historical context for a moment. So what was it that led to such a tremendous acceleration of changes in the lived experiences during the period designated by modernism? Well, the reasons are many but I will try to discuss some of the more important ones here. The first reason was the increased human mobility. In the Western world, the number of people moving from their places of origin to other far-flung places increased in the second half of the nineteenth century at a pace that was absolutely unprecedented. This was primarily because of the major infrastructural projects that were undertaken on a global scale.

One such infrastructural project was the opening up of the Suez Canal in 1869 which directly connected the Mediterranean to the Indian Ocean via the Red Sea. Now in practical terms, what this meant was that the distance between Europe and India was reduced by about 7000 kilometres because now the ships did not have to circle around Africa to reach India as earlier. And given that during the 19th century South and South East Asia were important European colonies, this greatly boosted the traffic movement between the colonial metropolis and the colonial periphery. However, the great infrastructural innovations of this period were more obviously visible on the land than on the sea. This was a time when tons and tons of iron were forged into railway tracks that crisscrossed the face of the earth. By 1904, for instance, it was possible to travel from the French capital of Paris to the city of Vladivostok located at the extreme eastern fringe of Russia entirely by train. And this overland route of almost 12000 km could be covered at the beginning of the twentieth century in a mere 15 days. Such gigantic infrastructural projects, by making long distance journeys both easier and affordable, made migration a central reality of life for people in the West.

But migrations were not only transcontinental. One of the major sources of migration was people moving in huge numbers to cities which by the beginning of the twentieth century had developed into major hubs of industrial production and labour employment. As Eric Hobsbawm has pointed out, in 1800 there were only seventeen cities in Europe which boasted a population of over 100,000 and the total population of all of these cities put together was not more than 5 million. By the 1890s, there were 103 European cities with a population more than 100,000 and the total population of all of these cities put together was more than 30 million. Indeed, there were four cities, London, Paris, Berlin and Vienna, which individually had a population of more than one million. And for the great majority of the inhabitants of these places, their experience of living in

industrialised cities completely reframed their sense of human existence. This produced in them unknown anxieties as well as previously unheard of possibilities, all of which were thickly layered with a deep sense of nostalgia for the past ways of life which were now vanishing at breathtaking speed. Since these experiences that the new urban dwellers were confronting in their industrialised cities were at the heart of modernism, it is not surprising that the chief centres of modernist literature and art were big cities like London, Paris, and Vienna each of which by the beginning of the twentieth century had a population of more than a million.

The realms of anxiety and possibility were not only being opened up within the Western cities but they were also being opened up at the periphery of the European colonial world. Military technological advance, especially the invention of sophisticated machine guns by people like Hiram Maxim had made the Europeans almost invincible against the forces of the rest of the world. Consequently, European colonialism had peaked between the late nineteenth and early twentieth century during which time an entire continent – Africa -- was neatly parceled out between European states as colonies. These colonies were not just sources of raw materials for the European industries but also sites of unknown experiences that were sometimes pleasantly exotic but more frequently deeply unsettling for the Europeans. And these unknown and unsettling experiences of the distant colonies formed the basis of many iconic modernist pieces of literature and art like the fiction of Joseph Conrad or the paintings of Paul Gauguin.

But so far I have only talked about changes in the material environment that produced the peculiar and unprecedented lived experiences, which were given aesthetic form by modernist authors and painters. It is, however, important to note that there was another very significant source of influence which, during the beginning of the twentieth century, deeply unsettled the domain of the known and the familiar for a number of educated Europeans. Here I am talking

about Sigmund Freud's "discovery" of the unconscious. This realm of the human psyche was as unknown to the West as the physical spaces represented by the industrialised cities or the colonized periphery. And an engagement with this psychical unknown also greatly influenced modernism – ranging from the surrealist paintings of Max Ernst to the automatic writings of André Breton.

Fragments

As stated earlier, the effect of all of these engagements with the unknown and the unfamiliar got compounded by the experience of the First World War. And one of the most iconic images of the Western man caught within this whirlpool of change and unfamiliarity is found in the writings of Walter Benjamin. Now in one of my previous lectures, I have already mentioned Benjamin's essay *The Storyteller*, but today I have a different piece in mind – an essay titled "Theses on the Philosophy of History". In that essay, Benjamin talks about his favourite painting by the artist Paul Klee, titled Angelus Novus, which literally means "new angel". As you can see on the slide, the painting depicts an almost cartoonish figure hovering in the mid-air with wing-like arms and fluttering hairs resembling scrolls of paper. Benjamin, who bought this painting for himself in 1921 writes about this figure as the angel of history and describes his condition in these lines:

> His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. The storm is what we call progress.

The figure of modernism is much akin to this angel of history because both find themselves looking at heaps of fragments even as the known world of the past explode and gets reduced to a pile of wreckage. This experience of reality as fragmented would thus emerge as one of the central motifs of modernist aesthetics. This is perhaps most strikingly evident at the visual level in the cubist paintings of artists like Pablo Picasso for instance. Take for example this 1910 painting titled “Girl with a Mandolin”. The figure of the girl is entirely made up of fragments as if the artist or the spectator is trying to look at her from several perspectives simultaneously and then trying to pile together the different images of the girl into a single representation. And as we can see here, the notion of a reality that is wholly familiar, uniform, and smoothly coherent is clearly missing from this painting here.

Such artistic attempts to engage with fragments were also noted during the modernist period in the field of music, most prominently in the form of the atonal music of Arnold Schoenberg. But since we are focused on literature, let us discuss some pieces of literary modernism which engage with the experience of fragmented reality. Among the most famous of such literary pieces we can count W.B. Yeats's 1919 poem "The Second Coming" which announces, at the end of the First World War, the destruction and fragmentation of the coherent and familiar world of the past through these memorable lines:

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,

T.S. Eliot is even more direct in his pronouncement when he presents our perception of reality as “a heap of broken image” in his poem “The Wasteland”. A more interesting, but perhaps less direct, way in which modernist writers engaged with the notion of a fragmented reality and the loss of the past and of tradition as a comprehensive whole is evident in James Joyce’s novel

Ulysses. This novel was published in 1922 which is often hailed as the miracle year of literary modernism. This is because in the very same year Eliot's "The Wasteland" was also published and so were Virginia Woolf's novel *Jacob's Room* and the short story "Mrs. Dalloway in Bond Street" which Woolf later developed into the classic novel *Mrs. Dalloway*. Anyway, the reason I referred to *Ulysses* was that I wanted to draw your attention to the ways in which it engages with fragmentation, and one of the chief ways in which the novel articulates fragmentation is through the writing style. The entire novel parodies a number of writing style ranging from that of the sentimental literature to catechism, to surrealist fiction, to pedestrian slangs. And by mixing up all of these different stylistic techniques the novel conveys a sense of being something like a patchwork quilt – a kind of a collage in which various scraps and pieces of literary traditions are placed together to form a design.

Mythic subtext

Now here you might observe that I am actually putting forward a contradiction when I am pointing out both the fragmented nature of *Ulysses* as well as its attempt to create a design. And this contradiction is central to modernism. As we noted in Walter Benjamin's elaboration of Paul Klee's painting, the figure of the angel caught within the maelstrom of modern history cannot refuse to acknowledge the process of fragmentation that he sees unfolding before his eyes. But neither can he help himself from trying to "awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed". So, there is a duality at work here in which the process of fragmentation is acknowledged and yet attempts are made to bring the fragments together to form a whole again. This duality is at the heart of modernist literature. So for instance, even while texts like "The Wasteland" or *Ulysses* present a fragmented surface they also attempt to structure these fragments to produce a sense of wholeness and unity. And one of the major ways in which

modernist literature tries to structure the fragments and give them a sense of unity is through using myths. So underneath all the various allusions, quotations, stylistic changes that these texts depict, you will find an underlying mythic story that keeps these fragments together. So whereas "The Wasteland" employs the Fisher King Myth of the Arthurian legend, Joyce's *Ulysses* is underlined by the myth of Odyssey which we find narrated in the Homeric epic. It is through these underlying stories or myths that modernist literary works seek to maintain a sense of coherence. This coherence is not often visible on the surface and therefore readers might miss it on their first reading. But these mythic structures are nonetheless present at the subliminal level forming a connected wholeness. The experience of reading a modernist text is therefore somewhat akin to the experience of looking at the cubist painting of Picasso that I mentioned before. Maybe at the first glance, the painting will only appear to be a heap of fragments, but when you concentrate on it, you start making out the presence of a pattern which unites the fragmented surface into the identifiable shape of a girl with a mandolin. The effect of the underlying subtext is something similar because it too binds the fragmented surface of the text and gives it a sense of wholeness.

Postmodernism

When, however, we move from modernism to postmodernism, which is assumed to begin from around the time of the Second World War, we notice two things. The first is that the modernist engagement with the notion of fragmented reality remains intact. This is but expected because all the agencies of change that were at work during the modernist period intensified and accelerated in the decades following the 1930s. And the horrors of the First World War were acted out on a far larger scale by the Second World War. But on the other hand, with the emergence of postmodernism, we also start encountering a critique of the desire for wholeness that underlined

the modernized engagement with fragments. To understand this further let us now move to study the work of Jean-François Lyotard.

Lyotard, whose dates are 1924 to 1998, was the author of the highly influential 1979 publication *La Condition Postmoderne* which was later translated in English as *The Postmodern Condition*. This book was one of the pioneering texts which introduced the term postmodernism in the fields of philosophical, literary, and cultural studies. And according to this book the most fundamental feature that characterizes the "postmodern condition" is “incredulity towards metanarratives”.

So what is a metanarrative? Well, the prefix "meta" is derived from Geek and is usually used to signify something that lies beyond or above. Now according to the Oxford English Dictionary, the prefix “meta” is attached “to the name of a subject or discipline to denote another which deals with ulterior issues in the same field, or which raises questions about the nature of the original discipline and its methods, procedures, and assumptions”. Now if we turn specifically to the definition of metanarrative in the Oxford English Dictionary, we get this:

[A] piece of narrative, esp. a classic text or other archetypal story, which provides a schematic worldview upon which an individual's experiences and perceptions may be ordered.

Now, as we have just seen, modernism was heavily invested in the concept of metanarratives. When confronted with the fragmentation of their known world, familiar past, and accustomed rhythms of life the modernist artist, or novelist or poet tried hard to connect the fragments together by highlighting the presence of an underlying design – a grand metanarrative that would help make sense of the world as a unified whole.

However, according to Lyotard, postmodernism denies the primacy of any such unifying metadiscourse and prioritizes what he calls the petit récits or little narratives instead of a single unifying grand narrative or master narrative. Now, this shift from foregrounding a grand metanarrative to critiquing or showing incredulity to metanarratives has had significant consequences within the field of literary studies. But before we come to that let us try and understand why Lyotard talks about the priority of little narratives over one grand narrative. And to do that we will have to turn to one of the greatest philosophers of the twentieth century, Ludwig Wittgenstein because it is his idea of "language games" that influenced Lyotard's theorization of postmodern incredulity towards metanarratives.

To try and understand Wittgenstein's concept of "language games" let us take the help of an example. Let us say I utter the following statements:

The ear is burning…

The nose is burning…

The tongue is burning…

The body is burning…

These are statements with which the religious preacher Gautam Buddha began the different sections of his famous fire sermon while addressing a gathering of thousand monks or *bhikkhus*. Now in this context, the notion of burning is to be understood as the discomfiture and restlessness caused by desire which adheres to our senses and to our body as a whole thereby causing us misery or *dukkha*. The way to achieve liberation from dukkha is to eliminate craving

or desire and this will lead to what Buddha calls *nirvana* which literally means the extinguishing of the fire.

Now let us suppose I utter these same set of statements about burning while sitting in front of a doctor in his chamber in a hospital. In that context, my statements would be understood quite differently from how Buddha's disciples understood his fire sermon. In the hospital, the doctor would interpret my statements to mean that I am suffering from burning sensations throughout my body because of some physical malady. Now, why is the understanding of the statements and especially the word burning different in these two different scenarios? According to Wittgenstein, they are differently interpreted because the two different scenarios set up two different kinds of language games.

According to Wittgenstein, our language uses are intimately connected to our concrete social activities. What we speak is an integral component of how we engage with the world through action. Different spheres of activities produce different kinds of language uses which are underlined by their own distinct rules of meaning-making. For instance, the *bhikkhus* listening to the fire sermon and Gautam Buddha who was delivering it was using language as a compliment to their religious or spiritual activities. Therefore, the understanding of the language comes from within that context of religious action. This makes it a distinct language game in itself, and here Wittgenstein uses the word game because, just like any other game like cricket, football, chess etc, in this language game too, the meaning-making is guided by its own unique set of rules.

On the other hand, when I utter the sentences in front of a doctor, the doctor and I are caught up in another unique language game which is distinct from the previous one. In this language game, the understanding of the words is based on the medical action which provides the context. And

this context of action generates a set of meaning-making rules that are very different from the rules of the language game in which the *bhikkhus* and Gautam Buddha participates during the fire sermon. And what we need to keep in mind here is that you cannot use the underlying rules of a language game rooted in a specific context of an action to interpret another language game that is rooted to another sphere of action. Not only that, we cannot even legitimately critique the meaning-making processes of a language game from the vantage point of another language game. This is similar to the fact that we cannot critique the way a game like football is played and understood from the vantage of cricket playing. This would not only be an absurd exercise but also an illegitimate exercise.

Now, in Lyotard's scheme of things, the petit récits or little narratives are distinct language games rooted in different contexts. Therefore, any attempt to understand them through the lens of one single grand narrative in the name of unity is to be considered an illegitimate action. In contrast, the little narratives are to be celebrated over a single metanarrative – and this is precisely the celebration that characterizes the postmodern condition. But then why should the plurality of little narratives be celebrated over the singularity of a grand narrative? Well, one grand narrative effectively means the imposition of one specific narrative promulgated from one specific subject position on to everything else. For instance, the grand narrative of patriarchy is promulgated from a subject position which prioritises the male and the masculine. In our lectures on feminism, we have already seen how the hold of this grand narrative has led to a systematic denial of women's rights. It is only gradually that we are trying to move towards a world order where women-centric discourses would be at least regarded to be as legitimate as the men-centric discourses of patriarchy. Similarly, it is only gradually that we are trying to emerge out of the grand narrative of heterosexuality and bring to the mainstream narratives about alternative forms

of sexuality. From Lyotard's perspective, the postmodern condition is characterized by this growing sensitivity towards the possibility of a multiplicity of narratives. And one of the major consequences of this celebration and proliferation of alternative discourses has been marked by the rise of postcolonialism in the field of literary studies. And we are going to take up postcolonialism and its impact on literary theory in our next lecture. Goodbye till then.