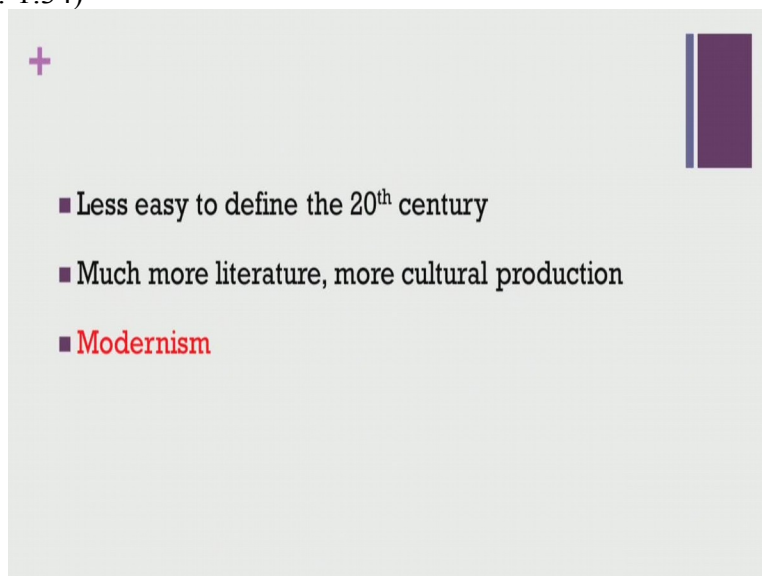


History of English Language and Literature
Professor Merin Simi Raj
Department of Humanities and Social Sciences
Indian Institute of Technology Madras
Lecture No 22: Towards Modernism

Hello and welcome to today's session of NPTEL course, the history of English language and literature. The journey that we began looking at the old English period onwards has now culminated in the beginning of 20th century with the inaugural and the epoch making moment of Modernism. From the beginning, we have been noticing that each age is dominated by particular characteristics and traits but there is also a sense of continuity which ensures that literary history makes more sense and also that there is a sense of coherence which gives an overall significance, relevance and meaning to this entire process of cover literary history.

But however, we also begin to realise that once we have reached Modernism, much of this coherence seems to break down. It is no longer possible to have a linear discussion or a linear presentation of narratives in a chronological fashion because multiple things are happening at the same time, it is no longer the dominance of a single genre or a single set of representative writers but there are various influences coming in. We are no longer able to differentiate between the various influences, the various publications and also the various forms of writings, the forms of artistic expressions that are being delivered. So this makes the 20th century less easy to define and more complex to access.

(Refer Slide Time: 1:34)



+

- Less easy to define the 20th century
- Much more literature, more cultural production
- **Modernism**

And compared to all the ages and literary periods put together, we realise that the 20th century has got much more literature and it also has got an immense amount of cultural production to its credit, makes the beginning of this journey an all the more complex process. And however, all of this complexity and all of this incoherence is together captured in a single term, Modernism.

(Refer Slide Time: 1:57)

+ Periodization

- different starting points
- generally accepted — 1895-1945
- modernism proper - between the two World Wars
- 1895 - 1910 — matures during the World Wars
 - 1914-18; 1939-45
- Period of high modernism - 20 years - 1910 to 1930
- Eliot, James Joyce, Pound, Woolf, Wallace Stevens, Gertrude Stein
- Marcel Proust, Mallarme, Kafka, Rilke

In terms of a periodisation, it is again a little difficult to periodise and to structurally engage with the idea of Modernism. Many historians are of different opinions about the periodisation of the modernist period. Some of them have even located different starting points and it all depends on the kind of perspective that one uses and also the paradigm from which one tries to engage with this event or this epoch making moment of Modernism. It would be safe to say that the generally accepted period of Modernism is from 1895 till 1945.

We notice that it is a long ranging period and it is also difficult to identify a single influence that could be seen as the most representative one of this period. There is a consensus that Modernism proper, it happened between the 2 world wars and that since it can also be seen the specially the period of high modernism, it can also be seen as a literary period or an artistic period sandwiched between the 2 world wars.

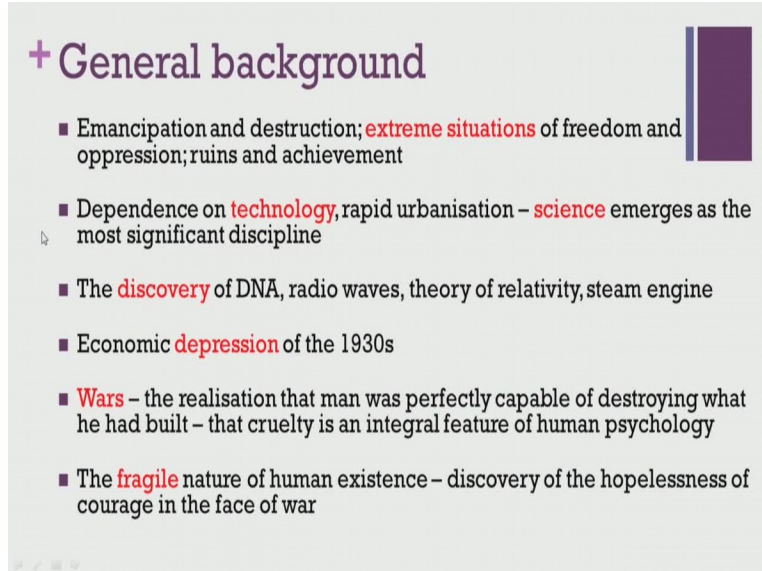
There is also a more or less a consensus that access about the fact the literary phenomenon of Modernism, it may choose during the 2 world wars, particularly the 2 world wars happening in

1914 to 18 and 1939 to 1945. These 2 world wars, they were also world changing events which began to change the understanding of the world in the ways which were hitherto unknown to the mankind. And in literature and in the general art forms in general, its implications has been tremendous which we shall be taking a look at in one of the later sessions.

Accordingly, the period of high modernism has been identified from the year 1910 till about 1930. It is again useful to remember that none of these dates are rigid. They are only placed here for the convenience of discussion and as and when we progress through our discussion of Modernism, we will begin to notice that there are multiple overlaps. There are also ways in which we will be forced to go back and forth through this age, through different periods and ages. Some of the important figures who were prominent in the modernist period were Elliot James Joyce, Pound, Woolf, Wallace Stevens, Gertrude Stein and also Marcel Proust, Malame, Kafka and Rilke though they did not really belong to the British literature.

And this is also the appropriate time to recall the fact that right at the outset of this course, this course had promised to deliver the set of literary events which happened from Beowulf till Virginia Wolf, from Wolf to wolf. In that sense, this lecture is also a culmination of what we had begun in the beginning of the course. In one of the earlier sessions, when we were talking about the early image literature, we had identified the significance to talk about the general background and the socio-political and the religious events which informed the figuration and the formation of particular literary ages and accordingly we have always been faithfully taking a look at the exhaustive background which informed a literary understanding as well. Accordingly we move on to look at the general background which categorised and defined the early 20th century. And as stated in the beginning of this lecture, this is going to be quite complex process as the influences and the determinants were not just limited but they were was and exhaustive in nature.

(Refer Slide Time: 5:11)



+ General background

- Emancipation and destruction; **extreme situations** of freedom and oppression; ruins and achievement
- Dependence on **technology**, rapid urbanisation – **science** emerges as the most significant discipline
- The **discovery** of DNA, radio waves, theory of relativity, steam engine
- Economic **depression** of the 1930s
- **Wars** – the realisation that man was perfectly capable of destroying what he had built – that cruelty is an integral feature of human psychology
- The **fragile** nature of human existence – discovery of the hopelessness of courage in the face of war

Keeping in continuation with the age of Revolution that we witnessed in the previous age, this age also continues to be an age of difficulty in terms of politics and society but at the same time, what makes the 20th-century or the age of Modernism more distant is the fact that it is also an age of contradictions. Accordingly from the beginning, we noticed that this is an age of emancipation and destruction in the same time. We come across extreme situations of freedom as well as oppression. This is a very promising period as well as a very destructive and a very regressive period as we would begin to notice.

And this was also in that sense, a period of rules as well as achievements. So it is with this inherent understanding of the complexity and the contradictions of this age that we move on to take a look at the various socio political, historical, religious and cultural background of the 20th century. We noticed in our discussions of the Victorian period and the 19th-century that scientific inventions were dominating the age. So this trend continues even into the 20th century and needless to say that the dependence on technology also increased rapidly.

It was followed by a rapid organisation process and we also find people migrating in large scale to the city centres and also moving away from an agrarian-based economy towards a more urban technology-based economy. Science during this time also emerges as the most significant discipline and it is no longer is about a fascinating subject but it is also about the one principle that underlies human existence and redefines various ways of existence. Some of the important

discoveries of the early 20th century include the discovery of DNA, of radio waves, and theory of relativity and steam engine and now we know that all of these things had revolutionised the way in which mankind had been beginning to look at itself in radical revolutionary ways.

However it was not altogether a smooth run in the 1930s. Worldwide, the modern economies were hit with a recession, with an economic depression which was also a difficult time during the World War. So we notice that this period was at the same time a period of much promise in terms of science and technology as well as a rapidly changing atmosphere. What made this modernist period more challenging than ever was the presence of wars and conflict and violence throughout.

The wars, specially the world wars fought between different nations, it was not tragic on its own but it was also about the realisation that man was perfectly capable of destroying what he had built and this was a very painful realisation for most of the thinkers, writers and the artists of those times and even the common people began to see the kind of dimensions with which wars could affect them. It was no longer the kind wars that two nations fought with each other and it was no longer the greed for power and money which was driven and triggered by 1 or 2 monarchs or people in power but it had gone out of proportions and the kind of implications and the consequences were also quite uncontrollable.

And follow this was the realisation that cruelty is an integral feature of human psychology. This again was something that the modern thinking man had to come to terms with. And this obviously highlighted the fragile nature of human existence and we also begin to notice that around this time, following the scientific discovery of those times and also the rapid ways in which people were trying to conquer each other through commerce, through trade and also various forms of colonisation there is also a subtle realisation that human existence in spite of all these powerful strides made ahead, it is a very fragile form of existence.

So towards the end, what the wars left behind was not a sense of success or a sense of national satisfaction but only a sense of the discovery of hopelessness of courage in the face of war. This was a very new realisation given the fact that in the early times, if you remember the discussions that we have had about the various wars that England had fought with France or with Spain, always at the end of the war, there was a sense of national accomplishment, national

consciousness was getting cemented after every success that they have reached. But from the time onwards, the result of war was not about success or of happiness but was an inherent sense of loss that one had to face with irrespective of whether one was in the winning side or in the losing side.

(Refer Slide Time: 9:38)

- 
- Artists prefer to explore the **mind**, rather than the real world – a literature of **escape**
 - **Entertainment** industry – American mass culture
 - **Publishing** industry – lower priced editions, paperbacks
 - **Ideological conflicts** – the world divided along capitalist/communist lines – Cold War – excessive militarisation
 - **Nationalist** movements – **decolonization** – Commonwealth / Postcolonial literatures
 - Beginning of rebellion against British imperialism

And keeping in tune with this hopelessness of those times, the artists preferred to explore the mind rather than the real world. This also allowed them to escape from the real world which they found difficult to comprehend and difficult to negotiate with. In that sense we also find the emergence of a literature of escape which we shall be looking at in detail in the following sections. Entertainment industry dominated by various forms of entertainment such as radio, cinema and other kinds of mass cultural productions began to flourish in different parts of Europe including Britain and this was also the time that the onslaught of the American mass culture was becoming fascinating as well as quite threatening to the entire world culture.

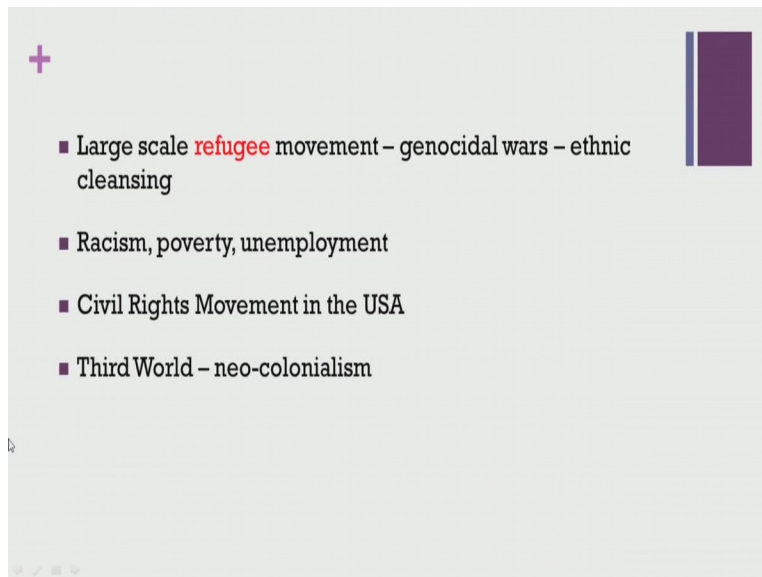
The publishing industry was also flourishing in a hitherto unseen manner and we find the publishers coming up with a number of low price editions and paperbacks in order to make books cheaply available to everyone across and we also find a growing interest in reading and also in procuring books. The circulating libraries which had begun in the 19th-century, they also

began to be state owned and also libraries begin to define the pride of a nation and the pride of a thinking and a reading community.

And we find a lot of revolutionary aspects being transmitted and carried to different parts of the world through the dissemination of knowledge and books as well. Again keeping in tune with the contrast and the complexity that we spoke about in the beginning, this age continues to be an age of contradictions and rightfully this is an age of ideological conflicts of different nature. We find the world getting divided along capitalist and communist lines. There was also the emergence of Cold War after the Second World War and also most of the modern nations, we find them resorting to an excessive form of militarisation.

And this period also witnessed the beginning of rebellion against the British imperialism. Accordingly, there is a growing national sentiment in most of the colonies and there is also a progress and a move towards decolonisation. We find many of the countries in Africa and Asia responding to this call and also the emergence of the Commonwealth and the postcolonial literatures also follow. This time was a critical period and a period of crisis for different populations across the world.

(Refer Slide Time: 11:50)



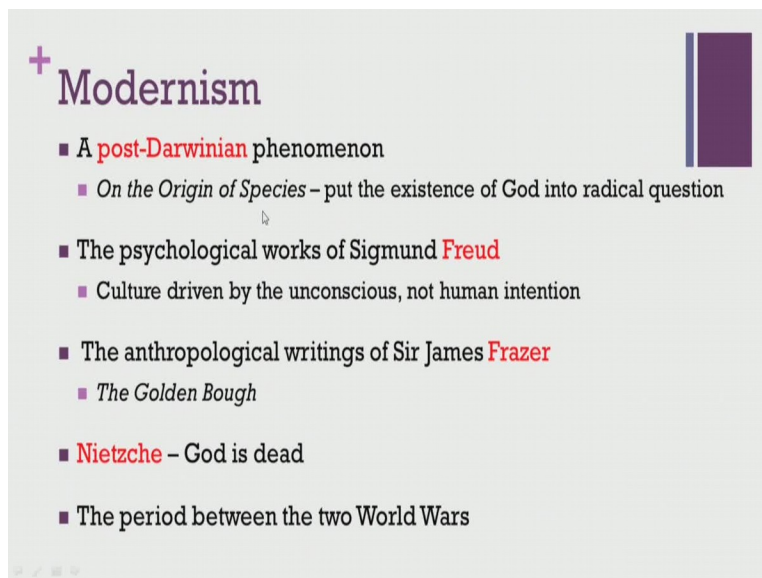
We find a large-scale refugee movement and genocidal wars happening in different parts of the world. This was also the time of ethnic cleansing in different tribes and communities across the

world. Though this did not affect Britain or the urban modern economies placed in the continent of Europe, we find all intellectually responding to many of these adverse things happening across the world. It was no longer possible to stay aloof from whatever was happening outside the geographical territory of one's own country.

In that sense, Britain continues to be affected by many of these things happening and we find the writers and thinkers, the statesman, the actors and all thinking people of the island of Britain responding to many of the things which were happening. This was also the time worldwide many nations were trying to deal with issues such as racism, poverty and unemployment and this was significantly also the beginning and the progress of civil rights movement in the USA which also had a direct implication within Britain.

And gradually, we find the emergence of another power block together identified as the Third world and also the beginning of the ideals of neo-colonialism. Coming back to the main focus of our discussion, we come back to take a look at what exactly Modernism is.

(Refer Slide Time: 13:14)



+ Modernism

- A **post-Darwinian** phenomenon
 - *On the Origin of Species* – put the existence of God into radical question
- The psychological works of Sigmund **Freud**
 - Culture driven by the unconscious, not human intention
- The anthropological writings of Sir James **Frazer**
 - *The Golden Bough*
- **Nietzsche** – God is dead
- The period between the two World Wars

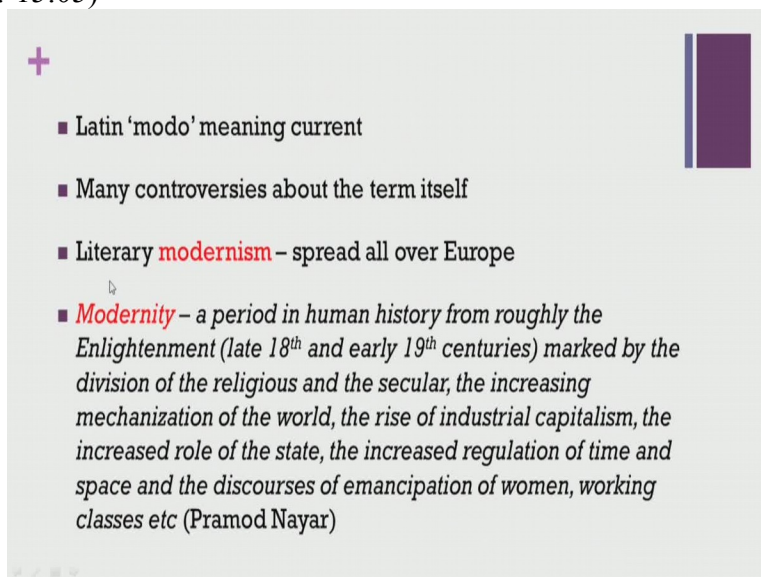
It would be perhaps appropriate to begin by locating Modernism from the publication of Darwin's *On the origin of species*. This was the time put the existence of God into radical question. And accordingly, perhaps it is quite right to say that Modernism is a post Darwinian phenomenon. Some critics and historians were also to opinion that it will be difficult to locate

Modernism without trying to understand the significances that Darwin and his theory of evolution had on the history of mankind.

Another important work was the psychological works of Sigmund Freud and this again adding to the helplessness that the mankind in general was feeling during that time, it gave another impression that culture in general is driven by the unconscious and not by human intention. This made the human beings a mere passive observance in the face of many things which were happening and being dictated by the unconscious elements of the mind. Sir James Frazer's anthropological writings were also quite influential in changing the ways in which the idea of a culture, of community and mankind in general was being fashioned.

Frazer's Golden Bough had since become a very significant and a definitional work in trying to bring about new sorts of changes. Nietzsche, the philosopher, he came up with this idea that God is dead and again we find a way in which the ideals which were being questioned by Darwin from the 19th century onwards being further cemented and also a growing interest of the population from different parts of the world on the various forms of atheism. And all of this again that we reiterate was happening between the 2 world wars and the world wars also made it all the more difficult for the people to engage with and negotiate with the new sorts of intellectual challenges which were coming up in the of psychology, in the form of atheism and also in the form of newer forms of anthropological understanding.

(Refer Slide Time: 15:05)



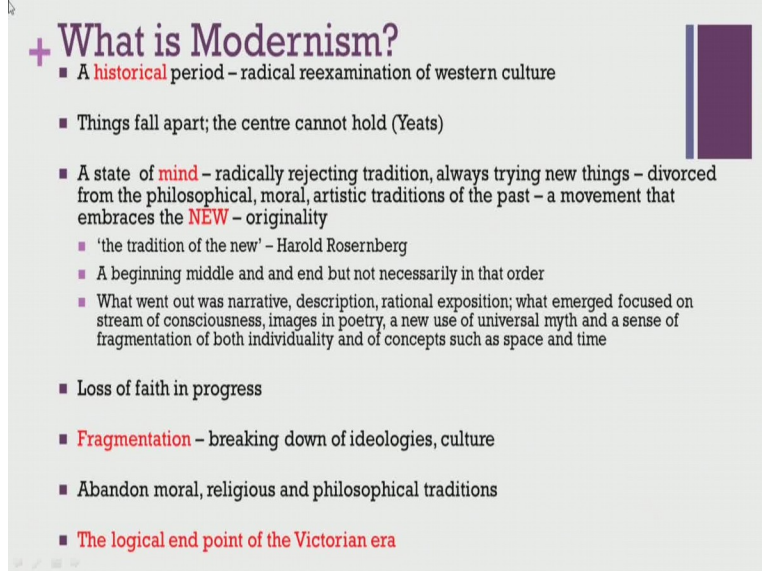
- Latin 'modo' meaning current
- Many controversies about the term itself
- Literary **modernism** – spread all over Europe
- **Modernity** – a period in human history from roughly the Enlightenment (late 18th and early 19th centuries) marked by the division of the religious and the secular, the increasing mechanization of the world, the rise of industrial capitalism, the increased role of the state, the increased regulation of time and space and the discourses of emancipation of women, working classes etc (Pramod Nayar)

If we try to analyse the term Modernism, it derives from the Latin term, modo meaning current. There are many controversies about the company and the ways in which the term be defined and understood. And a number of writers have written about it and they continue to engage with the various forms of Modernism which was available for consumption. Literary Modernism instantly was spread all over Europe and accordingly as we stated at the beginning, it is very difficult to situate one particular influence or one set of influences which led to the event of Modernism. And at this point, it is also very important to differentiate the term Modernism from that of modernity which we will here try to define modernity based on the understanding given by Pramod Nayar's literary history.

It is yes, modernity is a period in human history from roughly the Enlightenment which happened in the late 18th and early 19th centuries marked by the division of the religious and the secular, the increasing mechanisation of the world, the rise of industrial capitalism, the increased role of the state, the increased regulation of time and space and the discourses of emancipation of women, working classes, et cetera. So we, one should always keep this inherent distinction in mind as we progress to discuss Modernism. Modernism is not modernity.

Modernity is a long-standing phenomenon, a more abstract kind of thing which a more extract sort of phenomenon, a term which is used to talk about the a wide ranging multiple forms of influences which began to shape and reshape the world from the period of Enlightenment onwards. But Modernism is a particular period which could be historically and chronologically situated just in the beginning of the 20th century. So moving on, we need to have a better understanding of what exactly this term Modernism is.

(Refer Slide Time: 16:53)



+ What is Modernism?

- A **historical** period – radical reexamination of western culture
- Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold (Yeats)
- A state of **mind** – radically rejecting tradition, always trying new things – divorced from the philosophical, moral, artistic traditions of the past – a movement that embraces the **NEW** – originality
 - 'the tradition of the new' – Harold Rosenberg
 - A beginning middle and end but not necessarily in that order
 - What went out was narrative, description, rational exposition; what emerged focused on stream of consciousness, images in poetry, a new use of universal myth and a sense of fragmentation of both individuality and of concepts such as space and time
- Loss of faith in progress
- **Fragmentation** – breaking down of ideologies, culture
- Abandon moral, religious and philosophical traditions
- **The logical end point of the Victorian era**

It could be understood in 2 different ways. One, as a historical period and secondly as a state of mind. And we have already noted what the historical period meant. We have taken a look at the periodisation, the rough chronological understanding of the term and also the various events which were dominating the period in the beginning of the 20th century. Altogether, we also noticed that historically, it is a period which called for a radical re-examination of Western culture. One of the oft quoted line from the poet Yeats would be quite appropriate to talk about this historical condition, “Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold”.

So keeping this in mind, we will try to understand what exactly a modernist state of mind is. A modernist mind had much delight in radically rejecting tradition and it was always trying out new things. And Modernism was completely divorced from the philosophical, moral and artistic traditions of the past. And in that sense, keeping in mind the many discussions that we have had about the transition from one age to the other, we often find that there is a way in which at least some of the aspects of the previous age would come into the following age by enabling us to identify certain thread of continuity.

But here the continuity is found in a radically different way in the sense that Modernism comes into being by rejecting whatever had been happening in the previous decade and in the previous century. Altogether, it was a movement that embraced the new and also create a lot for originality. Most of the times, we also notice that this craving for the new was also a very

deliberate, conscious decision and it was not about whether one was capable of making it new or not but one had to make it new whatever the case be. As Harold Rosenberg puts it, it was the tradition of the new.

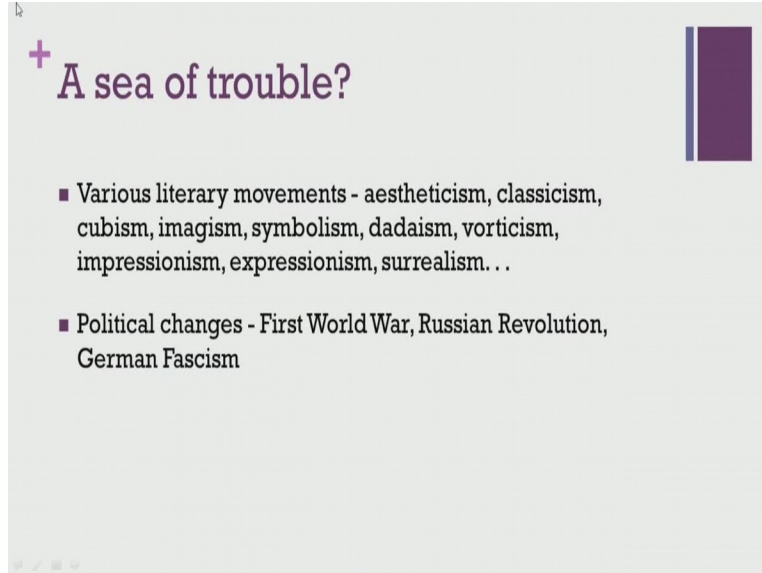
We find how interesting with this race is coined. It was not about the existing traditions but it was about introducing a new thing which itself will become a tradition on the whole. Some of the historians also used to jokingly point out that Modernism as a chronological state of mind, it could be understood as the beginning, middle and then end but not necessarily in that order. So we also find the modernist writers and artists challenging the sense of order in multiple ways and do not resorting to any form of traditional understanding of any literary genre or any form of writing or any thematic understanding.

The Rucklet's history of literature, it has got an interesting description to talk about the state of mind in the Modernist period. It goes like this. What went out was a narrative, description, rational exposition; what emerged focused on stream of consciousness, images in poetry, a new use of universal myth and a sense of fragmentation of both individuality and of concepts such as space and time. So we notice that everything which was traditionally understood as literature, is also driven out and in its place, we find uniforms, newer techniques and newer genres taking place.

This particular frame of mind which rejected the tradition did not have any faith in the idea of progress which was being defined in the beginning of the 20th century. So there was also a radical rejection of whatever is seen as progressive and revolutionary and we also find accordingly a progressive move towards the idea of fragmentation. So because a breaking down of all the traditional systems necessarily had to lead to a sort of fragmentation and we find a breaking down and the fragmentation of a lot of things including ideology, culture and whatever was traditionally acceptable.

And we find most of the people abandoning moral, religious and philosophical traditions as well. And this is what led to the crisis and dilemma of the Modernist period. Here, there is a continuity that we can begin to identify from the Victorian era and some of the historians have also pointed out that Modernism is the logical endpoint of the Victorian era.

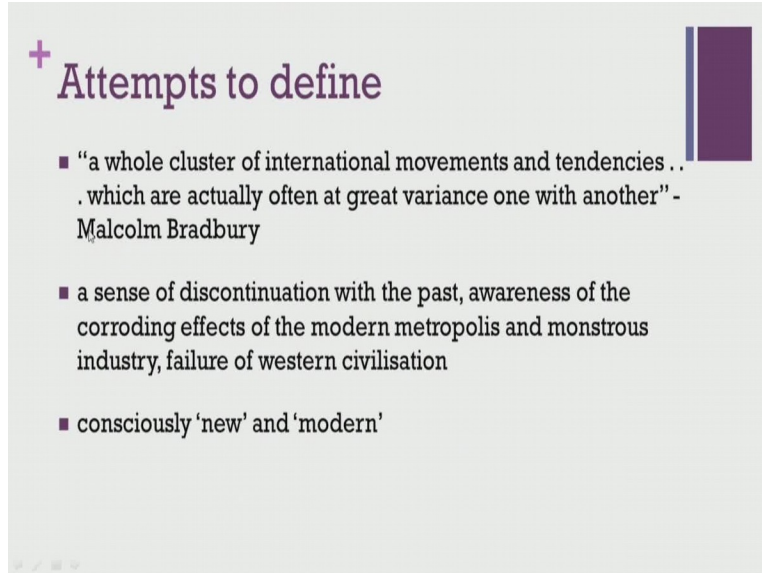
(Refer Slide Time: 20:52)



So maybe we begin to sense that this was a sea of trouble. It is difficult to identify particular moments or particular influences but rather, it is an amalgamation of many different crisis coming together. We also accordingly find the coming together of various literary movements such as aestheticism, classicism, cubism, imagism, symbolism, dadaism, vorticism, impressionism, expressionism, surrealism and one could certainly come up with a few more and this we shall be taking a look at when we progress with the discussion on Modernism.

The political changes were also varying in nature. This was the time of 2 world wars and also the Russian Revolution and the German Fascism. We find that the move towards democracy which was being celebrated in the Victorian era, it did not really culminate in a proper democracy but it had to go through a very turbulent path leading to a lot of crisis in many nations.

(Refer Slide Time: 21:54)



+ Attempts to define

- “a whole cluster of international movements and tendencies . . . which are actually often at great variance one with another” - Malcolm Bradbury
- a sense of discontinuation with the past, awareness of the corroding effects of the modern metropolis and monstrous industry, failure of western civilisation
- consciously 'new' and 'modern'

Many critics have tried to define coherently this complex Modernism. Malcolm Bradbury, one of the well-known critics of the 20th-century, he says Modernism is a whole cluster of international movements and tendencies, which are actually often at greater variance with one another. We begin to see how confusing the definitions also are and altogether, this is a sense of discontinuation with the past and the awareness of the corroding effects of the modern metropolis and monstrous industry and the failure of Western civilisation.

And what continues to dominate this period is the conscious sense of new and modern because there was an understanding with the writers and thinkers of the time that only if one moves away from the past which has not really resulted in many good things only then perhaps one could save humanity from the many perils that were imminent.

(Refer Slide Time: 22:48)

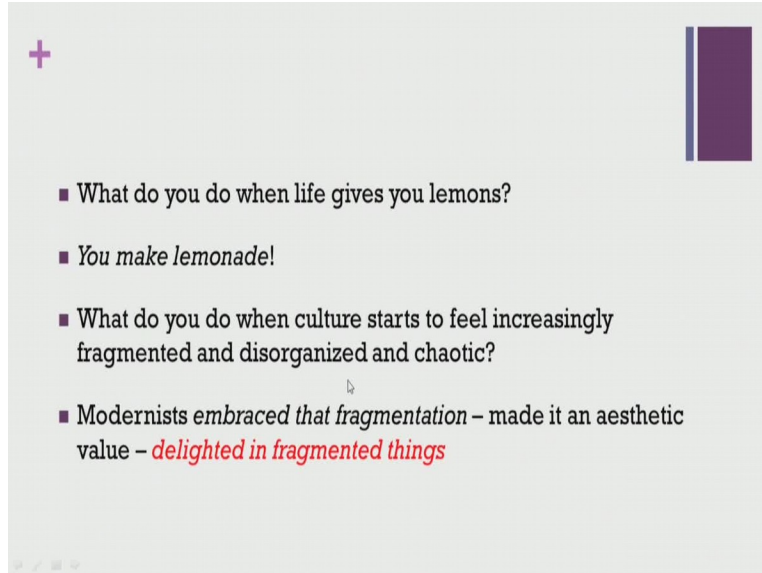
+ Modernism – Peter Barry

- Modernism is the name given to the movement which dominated the arts and culture in the first half of the twentieth century. Modernism was that **earthquake** in the arts which brought down much of the structure of pre-twentieth-century practice in **music, painting, literature and architecture**. One of the major epicentres of this earthquake seems to have been Vienna during the period of 1890-1910 but the effects were felt in France, Germany, Italy, and eventually even in Britain, in art movements like Cubism, Dadaism, Surrealism and Futurism. Its after-shocks are still being felt today, and many of **the structures it toppled have never been rebuilt**. Without an understanding of modernism, then, it is impossible to understand twentieth-century culture”

One of the most accepted definitions of Modernism is by Peter Barry. Modernism is the name given to the movement which dominated the arts and culture in the 1st half of the 20th century. Modernism was that earthquake in the arts which brought down much of the structure of pre-20th-century practice in music, painting, literature and architecture. One of the major epicentres of this earthquake seems to have been Vienna during the period of 1890-1910 but the effects were felt in France, Germany, Italy and eventually even in Britain, in art movements like cubism, dadaism, surrealism and futurism. Its after-shocks are still being felt today and many of the structures it toppled have never been rebuilt. Without an understanding of Modernism, then it is impossible to understand 20th-century culture.

As Barry points out, this is not something limited to literature but it had a wide-ranging impact and again, as contrary to how we have been taking a look at the British literary history, this is again not something limited to Britain but a worldwide movement in which Britain is also instantly a participant. So this is a way in which some historians have tried to approach the event of Modernism.

(Refer Slide Time: 24:06)




- What do you do when life gives you lemons?
- *You make lemonade!*
- What do you do when culture starts to feel increasingly fragmented and disorganized and chaotic?
- Modernists *embraced that fragmentation* – made it an aesthetic value – *delighted in fragmented things*

It is about how to respond when life is continuously giving you only troubled and challenging things. What do you do when life gives you lemons? You make lemonade. In the same way, in the Modernist period, what was one supposed to do when culture starts to feel increasingly fragmented, disorganised and chaotic? The Modernist writers and the Modernist thinkers embraced this fragmentation, they made it an aesthetic value instead of lamenting about it and they delighted and fragmented things and which is why we have a series of things which defy convention and also cannot be placed within any form of traditional art. So some examples could be found in various other art forms.

(Refer Slide Time: 24:43)

+ Painting

- Picasso's painting in 1907
- The influence of **cubism**
- Move away from realistic depiction of human figures
- Chooses **NOT** to depict realistic figures
- Breaking with tradition and experimenting with new methods




Just take a look at this painting by Picasso in 1970. In this, we find the tremendous influence of principles of cubism. We find that Picasso is deliberately moving away from realistic depictions of human figure. In fact, it is not because we did not know how to depict realist figures but he chooses not to go by that form of representation. Instead, he chooses to depict the artform in a more abstract manner. And here, there is a deliberate tendency to break away from the tradition and also experiment with newer methods.

(Refer Slide Time: 25:18)

+ Art

- Marcel Duchamp – 1917 – **Fountain**
 - Dadaism
- Exhibition at the *Society of Independent Artists*
- Dramatic rejection of tradition
- Radically changes the notion of art
- Declaration of hostility towards audiences, to art itself
- Finding beauty in unlikely objects, situations



This was another revolutionary moment that would be helpful to define what Modernist art is. And this was a kind of an art installation by Marcel Duchamp in 1917. This was titled, the fountain. This was placed in an exhibition at the Society of independent artist. Marcel Duchamp was an American artist and painter and he wanted to deliberately break away from the conventions of all traditional representative forms. So in an art exhibition, he chose to come with this men's urinal which he named as the fountain and said that this was a form of art.

And needless to say, this did provoke a lot of outrageous reaction but nevertheless, it was a statement being made that anything could be made into an art. That one need not stick to any particular convention or any traditional form for it to be accepted as an art form. So here in Marcel Duchamp's fountain, we find a dramatic rejection of tradition and though not very explicit, we find similar forms of rejections happening in different art forms including literature.

And here we also find him radically changing the notion of art, forcing us to even wonder within which critical framework to place this particular form that he calls as art. And what is markedly different in this piece known as the fountain is a declaration of hostility towards audiences and to art itself. We do not find a very friendly artist coming and presenting his work of art but rather a very hostile artist who was quite indifferent to the responses of the audience. He does not seem to care for the critic or for the audience but only is concerned about dramatically rejecting and making things radically new.

And another significant factor which also will eventually get translated into the literary expressions of the time was that the artist were capable of finding beauty in unlikely objects and in situations. And this is evident in a lot of other forms of art as well. Though Marcel Duchamp's was a very revolutionary and a challenging form of rejection of art, we do find that this also inaugurated a different moment in forcing people to accept art without sticking to particular forms of boundaries. So with this understanding of the revolutionary and the challenging form of modernist literary form that lies ahead, let us close this lecture in anticipation of what lies ahead. So that is all we have for today. Thank you for listening and I look forward to see you in the next session.