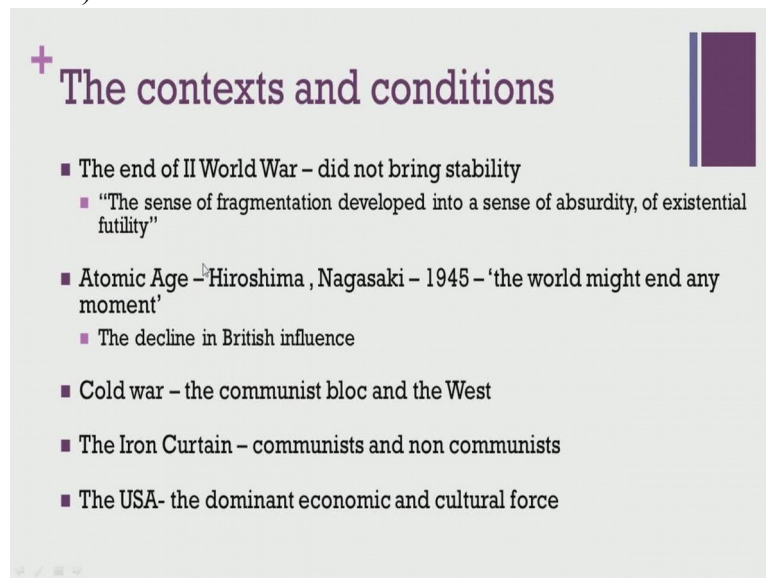


**History of English Language and Literature**  
**Professor Merin Simi Raj**  
**Department of Humanities and Social Sciences**  
**Indian Institute of Technology Madras**  
**Lecture No 25: Post-1945:**  
**Post-Modern Age**

Hello and welcome to the final lecture of the NPTEL course, the History of English language and literature. Today's lecture is titled, post-1945 or the post-modern age. This title is very important because we use post in the sense of after. As we have noted, even in the end of the previous session, we are entering an age that defies definition and classification. So it is important to classify this entire age as something that follows the previous age. So in that sense the placing of this post is of utmost importance.

And the other reason being, there are a lot of implications and a lot of means attributed to the term, post-modern and post modernism as it is entirely out of the scope, interest and canvas of this course. We shall only be focusing on this particular term in the sense of after 1945 or after modern age. Let us begin taking a look at the context and conditions which characterised the post 1945 period or the post-modern age.

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**+** **The contexts and conditions**

- The end of II World War – did not bring stability
  - “The sense of fragmentation developed into a sense of absurdity, of existential futility”
- Atomic Age – Hiroshima, Nagasaki – 1945 – ‘the world might end any moment’
  - The decline in British influence
- Cold war – the communist bloc and the West
- The Iron Curtain – communists and non communists
- The USA- the dominant economic and cultural force

And in this sense, we begin to notice that historically this is the timeframe that captures the end of the Second World War and contrary to the popular beliefs and the promises that many of the world leaders and many of the world systems had, the end of the world war did not bring any kind of stability or peace to different parts of the world. On the contrary, it only led

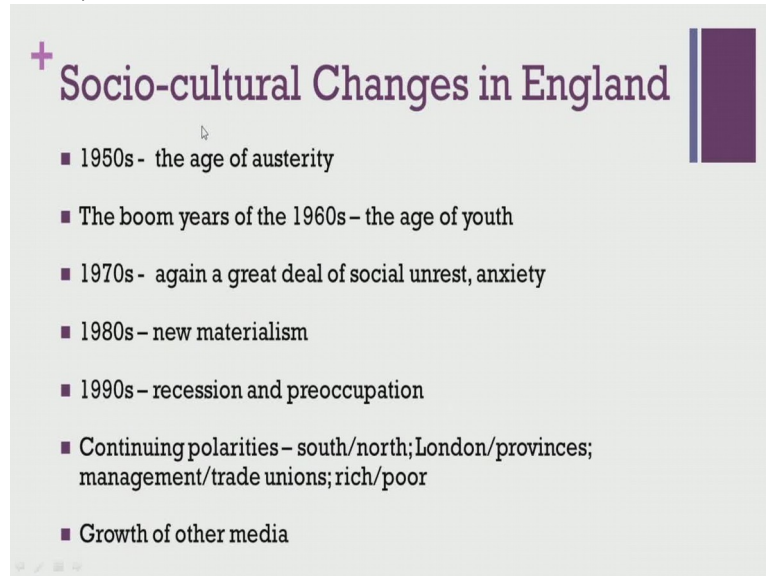
to further fragmentation and further confusions politically, culturally and even in terms of the relationships between nations and people.

In fact, it is said about this period that the sense of fragmentation developed into a sense of absurdity of existential futility. The Second World War which was considered as a war to end all wars did not really prove in that way. In fact, it only led to further battles and further confusions of not just physical nature but also a lot of ideological and other kinds of things happening at the abstract level as well. And in fact, with the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945, there was also this realisation that one was entering the atomic age.

So the threat was looming high over every nation that the world might end at any moment. So it was also the fear that perhaps the future of the world itself rests in the hands of a few world leaders who also perhaps have the power to put an end to the world anytime. And this period also witnesses interestingly the end of the British influence and from being a leading colonial empire, we find Britain on the whole getting quite overshadowed by the growing presence of many other economies, the most important one being the United States of America. We also find an articulation of Cold War between the communist block nominated by Russia and the entire Western nations who were practising active capitalist modes of economy.

There was also the presence of this Iron Curtain as the political theorists would call it. Between the communists and the non-communists, we also find the world entirely getting fragmented and divided into various segments because of this ideological and political affiliations. And we also find, by the end of the Second World War, the United States of America emerging as the most dominant economic and cultural force. We also find them dictating almost every important thing which was of any concern in the entire world.

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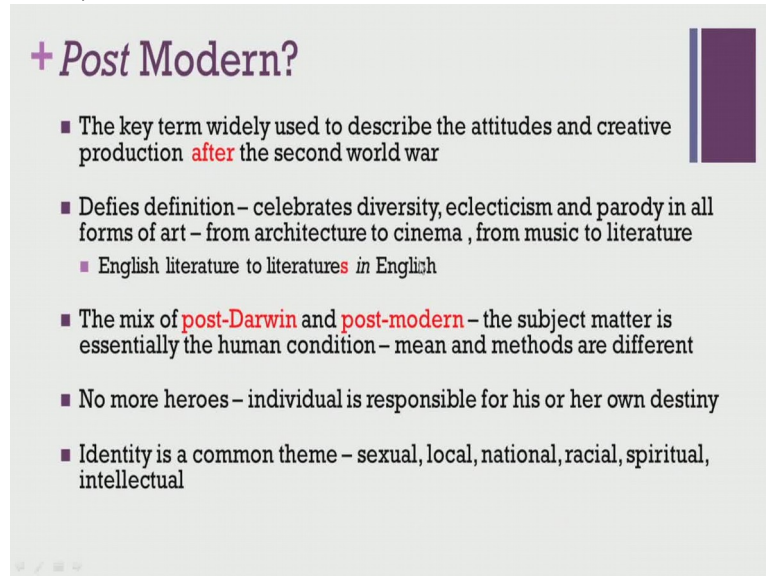


In terms of the socio-cultural changes which were happening in England in the 1950s after the world War, we find that there was a decade of austerity and this also had reflected heavily in the literature of those times and following this was the boom years of the 1960s which was celebrated as the age of youth. In the 1970s, we again find a lot of social unrest leading to the decade being characterised as a decade of anxiety. By 1980s, we find a new materialistic approaches getting more dominant.

This also had a lot of things to do with the impending global order which was to follow. In the 1990s, we find an engagement with recession and a preoccupation with a lot of the sinking tendencies of economy, politics and the general world orders. And we also find that during this time, there is a continuing way in which the polarities continue to operate in a very binary way. We find England getting divided into North and South into London urban centres and the more agrarian provinces, into management oriented governance and the emergence of trade unionism and also the obvious divide between the rich and the poor.

So we also find that it is no longer possible to address these growing polarities in the way that it was possible before. It only becomes all the more fragment and all the more anarchic. That is also the growth of other media which also ensures that literature was not the only means of articulation but it was only one among the many other forms of artistic expression. Now we come to take a closer look at the term, post-modern which has become the most important literary and cultural term in the period after the Second World War.

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## + Post Modern?

- The key term widely used to describe the attitudes and creative production **after** the second world war
- Defies definition – celebrates diversity, eclecticism and parody in all forms of art – from architecture to cinema , from music to literature
  - English literature to literatures *in English*
- The mix of **post-Darwin** and **post-modern** – the subject matter is essentially the human condition – mean and methods are different
- No more heroes – individual is responsible for his or her own destiny
- Identity is a common theme – sexual, local, national, racial, spiritual, intellectual

In fact, if we try to attempt a definition of post-modern in the sense of after modern, this a key term notably is widely used to describe the attitudes and creative production after the Second World War. This term, as we noted before, it defies all kinds of definitions and classifications. On the contrary, it celebrates diversity, eclecticism and parody in all forms of art. In fact, when I say all forms of art, it ranges from architecture to cinema and from music to literature.

And also in terms of literature, the rest of particular transition that takes place. It is no longer possible to talk about a single English literature but it moves to literatures in English. If you remember, in the outset of this course, we had spoken about what exactly we mean by the history of English literature and I had asserted then that we shall be looking only at one particular geographical centre which is England and also talk about the kind of literatures which were being produced from England and for the English people.

But by the time we reached the 20<sup>th</sup>-century, we understand that literature had become not just a natural phenomena, it had moved to become a transnational and even an international phenomena. So in that sense, specially after the Second World War and after the breakdown of colonialism and also the rise of various Commonwealth nations, we find that it is only possible to talk about various literatures in English.

And we also find various other local languages and local cultures also competing with this international face that English had by then acquired. And altogether, in the post-modern phase, we can also note that there is a mix of the post-Darwin and the post-modern (( ))(7:14). What remains perhaps the as a constant is that just like it was during the modernist period,

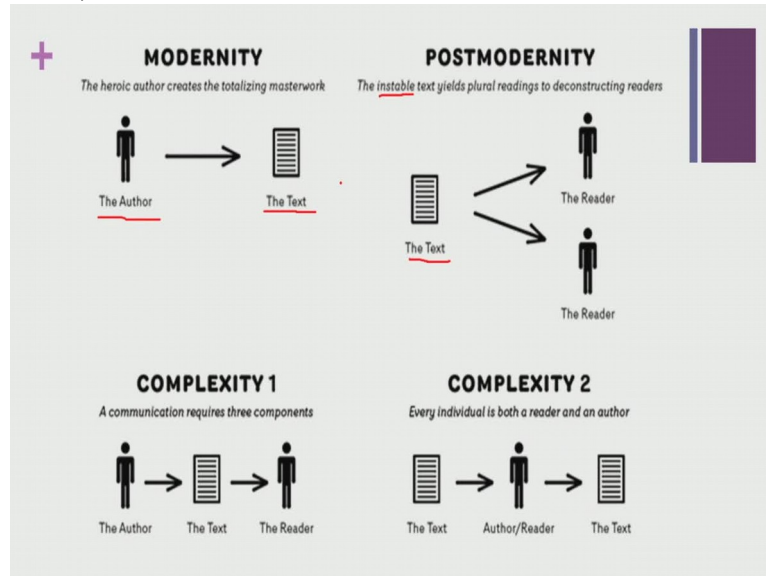
even in the post-modern period, the subject matter continues to be essentially the human condition.

We do not find that shifting considerably but however, the manner, the means and the methods of this treatment and the approach towards this human subject had become entirely and radically different in the post-modern period, specially after the Second World War. And in terms of the literary features, we find that it is difficult to identify heroes any longer and this also gets replicated in the other forms of art and media including cinema. We find that the entire idea of having a single hero had completely broken down and we also find the individual is being held responsible for his or her own destiny.

This constant end study moved towards individualism, it is perhaps the one singular characteristic that continues to dominate the entire period after the post-modern age. And in that context, it is also useful to ascertain remember that identity emerges as one of the common themes across all these forms of literatures. And this identity as in the earlier form, it is not a singular kind of identity because in the, until the modernist period, perhaps it was possible to talk about when particularity which was related to nation or related to a particular community.

But however but we find that in the post-modern period, this identity itself was quite contested. It could be in various forms including sexual identity, local identity, national, racial identities, or even spiritual and intellectual identity. We find all of these abstract elements playing a significant role in shaping the identity and even the affiliations and future of a single human being.

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So if we try to address the differences from the modern period towards the post-modern period, it would be useful to take a look at it in terms of the emergent literatures and shifting trends and tendencies. In the period of modernism, we find that there is a single author and he is considered as the supreme creator and a master of a particular text and he is responsible for creating his work which we can call as the text.

And he is the only one who has the complete authority for the text. He is the one who knows all kinds of interpretations that could be given to the text and he also is considered as the God in that sense. And he has all kinds of authority over the various forms of interpretations that could be given to a particular text. But in the post-modern period, we find that the text becomes a highly instable thing and it is no longer possible to attribute a single meaning to the text.

On the other hand, we find that the text yields itself to a various forms of reading, various forms of plural interpretations depending upon the reader. So here, the power in certain way or the other, it moves from the author to the reader and the reader himself or herself becomes the another creator of the text itself. And we also find that the reader is capable of giving his or her own interpretations and this need not be the kind of interpretation that originally the author had in mind.

And in the post-modern period, even this new interpretation that the reader could possibly give, that also becomes a more legitimate and a more acceptable version as well. In short, the primacy of the author is entirely lost in the post-modern period. If we try to analyse the differences in terms of the complexities that it rendered, the modernist period was complex

enough in the sense that there was, there were already 3 components in this process, the author, the text and the reader.

The author had to write the text and the text then had to become available to the reader. It is in this context that we also remember that certain texts such as *Ulysses* or *The Wasteland* had to be mediated by other scholarly interventions in order for the text to become more accessible to the reader. But in the post-modern period, we find this complexity further breaking down. We find another kind of relationship being introduced over here and here we find that every individual becomes both, a reader and an author.

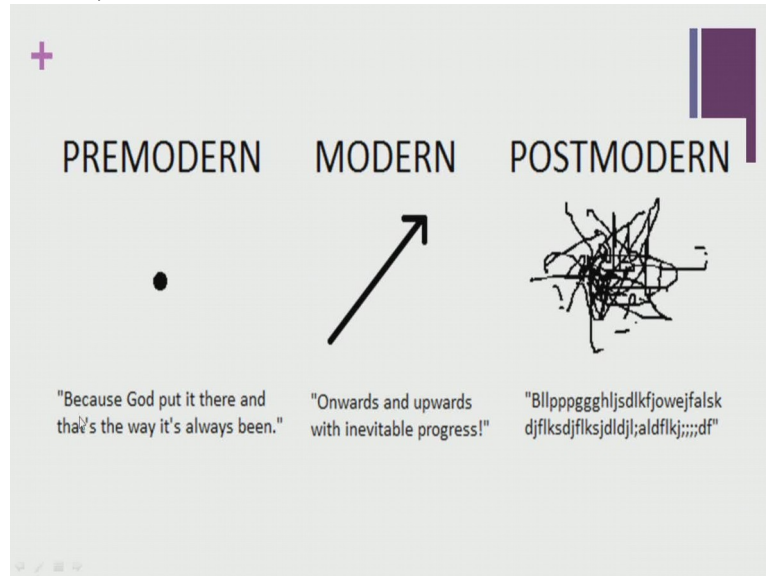
It works like this. There is one particular text which is accessed by the reader. It works like this. There is one particular text which is available to the reader and this text need not remain the same text that the author had authored. In a way, the author as Roland Barthes had famously put, the author is already dead. And once the text moves out of the author's hands, it is no longer his own text but it becomes the reader's text altogether.

In that sense, the original idea or the original interpretation does not hold much water. In fact, it transforms itself into another new text with a new interpretation by the time it reaches the reader. And here, what makes it distinctively different from the modernist period is that it is no longer important for the author to give one particular interpretation. Every reader, depending on his or her own context, is free to read the text in many different ways.

And this perhaps is the beauty of the post-modern age. While the modernist writers lamented the fact that the text is not accessible to the reader in the way that they wanted, we find the post-modernist writer celebrating the fact that many readers are able to access the text in multiple ways. In fact, if we look at it, we do find this phenomenon getting translated into various forms, into various other disciplines as well. This is significantly noticeable in various things such as architecture, painting, other forms of cultural practices, et cetera.

We do not find a single truth prevailing, a single correctness prevailing but we do find that each individual is free to choose one's own right thing or one's own truth based on the context in which they are placed. And this perhaps is the most liberating fact about post-modernism which also makes it quite acceptable to a lot of people in the contemporary.

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If we try to further understand the shifting worldviews from the premodern times till the post-modern times, as we know in the premodern times this is something that we have noted in our discussions of the literary periods as well. It was a pure centric world. It was a world view which was dictated by and dominated by church and similar establishments. And there was this belief that because God put it there and that is the way it has always been, there was a certain inherent acceptance for many of the things that followed.

And we also know that in our discussions about various literary periods and the transitions of various governments and the shifting tendencies through various political and other historical elements, there was always a way in which the church or the supreme authority could intervene and sort things right but we find that in the modern times, that is not really possible. It is no longer the assertion of the divine right of kings, it is no longer the divine right of any particular political power or a political party.

But it is generally about an individual tendency and an individual goal towards an upwards and then onwards growth. So we find this radical thing shifting from the premodern to the modern times. And when it comes to the post-modern times, it becomes all the more chaotic because there is no single centre which can hold this movement upwards. It also becomes not very urgent or not very imminent to have this particular centre.

In fact, again the beauty of post-modernism is that in literature, in architecture and in all various kinds of worldviews that are getting dominant, it is no longer needed or it is no longer a pejorative to consider a single option as the truth or as the correct way. And in the post-modern times, accordingly we also find an inherent celebration of a lot of anarchic practices



and also a celebration of a lot more freedom and secular practices and this is particularly important in the context of the newer forms of articulations which are coming into place.

And this was particularly the period which made it possible for the black writers, for the women writers, for many of the downtrodden, writing practices to be foregrounded. In the context of our own nation, we can see that it is in the post-modern times that the Dalit writings, the women writings, the feminist movements and many of the things which were otherwise not part of the mainstream, they were able to be foregrounded only because of this moving away from a sense of hierarchy, a sense of order and these differences between high art and low art.

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Modernism	Postmodernism
Form (conjunctive/closed)	Antiform (disjunctive/open)
Purpose	Play
Design	Chance
Hierarchy	Anarchy
Art object/finished work	Process/Performance/Happening
Presence	Absence
Centering	Dispersal
Genre/Boundary	Text/Intertext
Root/Depth	Rhizome/Surface

And if we take a closer look at some of the differences that may differentiate modernism from post-modernism, in the modernist to worldview, though there were a lot of chaos and a lot of difficulties in terms of the shifting socio-political tendencies, there was definitely a proper rigid form in place. But post-modernism is more open and it is anti-form, it does not really adhere to strict principles. In modernism, there is a purpose for every single thing that is being done but post-modernism is more playful in that respect.

While modernism relied heavily on all things by design, post-modernism celebrated the aspect of chance. In that sense, we also find a lot of criticisms against post-modernism because by leading many things to chance, there was also a possibility of jeopardising many things which were quite central to the human understanding. Here, one is not trying to prioritise one over the other but only to showcase the many things which are falling apart and also the significance or the irrelevance of certain things in comparison to the other.

While modernism believed in a very strict sense of hierarchy, we find post-modernism celebrating anarchy, we find this especially in the commercial establishments of the contemporary. We do find that it is no longer possible to have a strict hierarchy in all the establishments of the world. We also find the world order in general moving towards a more level playing ground than ever.

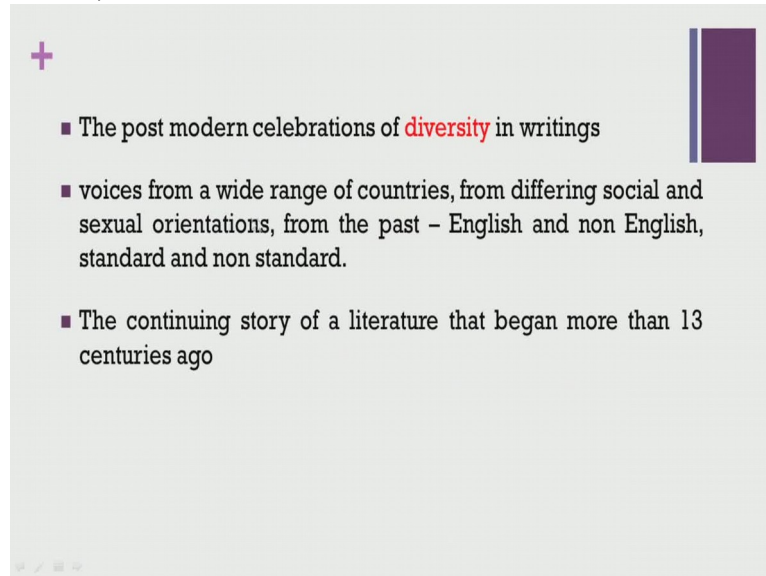
Though there are still a lot of establishments in place which do reinforce the grand narratives and the old order, we do find a more playful, a more freer form of articulations happening in many parts of the world as well. In post modernism, the focus is on the process or the performance while earlier times, the focus was only on the finished art product. In that sense, this also an advantage and a possibility in the post-modern times because one could also enjoy the process and not really worry about the end product alone.

While modernism focused on presence, in post-modern period, it is also about absence. In fact it is this focus on absence which also made it possible for all the forgotten writers, the forgotten communities and the otherwise neglect and people to come into the forefront not just in literature but also in politics and all other spheres of life. And while modernism was about centring and also having a centre, post-modernism was more about the celebration of the dispersal.

In fact, post-modernism does not insist on having a proper centre. But it rather celebrates the fact that there is no centre which becomes the priority or the mainstream. While modernism is concerned with genres and a lot of disciplinary boundaries, we find post-modernism more engaged with text and inter-text. And in terms of this breaking down of boundaries, we do find this having a lasting impact in a lot of non-literary elements as well because we do find the disciplinary tendencies breaking down a lot.

We have in terms of academic pursuit, in terms of professional pursuits, we do have a lot of interdisciplinary activities in place. And while modernism focused on going to the depth of things or trying to get to the root of things, post-modernism focused only on a more rhizomatic understanding of many of the things which were happening. So this is not a comprehensive understanding.

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Let us just move on to state that the post-modern celebrates the diversity in writings and in all other spheres of life. And in fact, it is possible now to include a wide range of voices from different countries. It is no longer the prioritisation of one country over the other. If we look at the modernist period, there was still the sense that one country or one community was more important than the other.

Though these sort of differences continued to exist, there was also a sort of moving away from these inherent sense of order and hierarchy. And we also find a possibility of articulating and foregrounding voices from different social orientations, from different sexual orientations. There is also a possibility of bringing back forgotten voices from the past as it has been happening in the case of race, caste and gender. And we also find an equal level playing ground for English and non-English traditions.

It is no longer the works written in English which gain visibility and acceptability but we also find other forms of writing also invading into this into this space of visibility and a space of acceptance. We also find a breaking down of the differences between standard forms of writings and practices and non-standard forms of writings and practices. In fact, it is time for us to wind up this journey which we began few sessions back.

And this was a journey where we continued to look at the progress of a literature which spanned over 13 centuries. In that sense, what is more important for us to now look back at the continuities and the inherent way in which a certain coherence was built into this narration. When we look back at the kind of journey that we took from the beginning of the old English period till this post 1645 period, we note that this was a story of a literature, the

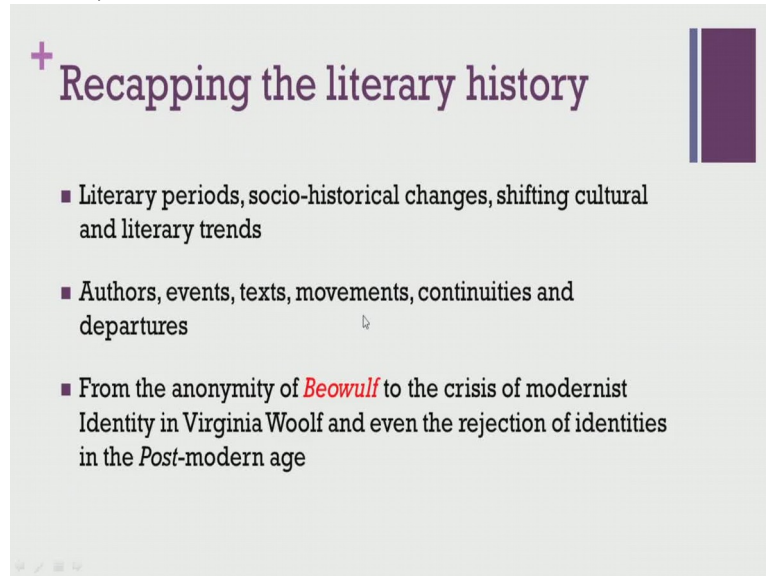
story of a nation and the story of a community which began writing from the premodern times and continued to write and continue to articulate and assert itself till the post-1945 period.

And if we try to recap the sense of literary history that we have been trying to capture of the last few sessions, we understand that our discussions spanned over various literary periods and in that sense, it was not just about literature, it was also about the mapping of socio-political changes. And here we also take this time to remember and recall that we had taken a look at various shifting tendencies in politics, in other historical elements, we had also seen how dynasties rise and fall, we had seen how the relationship across nations and within the nations had implicated various forms of writing and also the various ways in which the particular nations were progressing ahead.

We also noticed that whatever was happening in the social political context had a very direct impact in the shifting cultural and literary trends. And we also noticed that there was a gradual shift from the monopoly of the Church towards the commercial establishments and then gradual way in which the shift had taken place from absolutist monarchy towards a Parliamentary rule. We also saw how there was a shift from the Kings and the Queens towards the lives and works of the ordinary people.

If you recall the journey that we had undertaken, it was a gradual and a continuing kind of a transformation. Though some of the changes did appear rather certain, we find that a continuity and a coherence was always in the framing all of these shifting tendencies. And if we again look back at the journey that we have undertaken, it was about a discussion about authors, various socio-political and historical events, about various kinds of text across genres and across languages.

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## + Recapping the literary history

- Literary periods, socio-historical changes, shifting cultural and literary trends
- Authors, events, texts, movements, continuities and departures
- From the anonymity of *Beowulf* to the crisis of modernist Identity in Virginia Woolf and even the rejection of identities in the *Post-modern* age

We also had taken a look at movement and this could be literary as well as nonliterary. And in all of these things, when we moved from one age to the other, from one literary age or bon historical age to the other, we also ensured that we noticed the continuities and also the departures which were in place. In that sense, if wetake a look at the kind of discussions that we have had, always wetried to highlight the continuities from one session to the other and also the differences which highlighted and made one particular age distinctive from that of the other.

And if we try to sum up this journey as we had put itright in the beginning in one of the introductory sessions, this course was a journey from Wolf to Wolf, from Beowulf till Virginia Woolf. So in that sense, from the anonymity of Beowulf, we have moved through the crisis of modernist identity in Virginia Woolf and eventually with the post-modern period, we have seen the rejection of identities and the rejection of all accepted practices. And how do we begin to locate the relevance and scope of this eventful journey?

As we have stated before, this is an important course and one of the foundational course for any student of literature, in fact if you have been a student of literature or if you are pursuing any of literary studies, you would also knowthat without an understanding of the context and conditions that produced particular text and particular kinds of writings and movements and cultural tendencies, it would be impossible to access any text or even understand what society, culture and literature is all about.

In fact, this course would also help you in giving a kind of a training to understand various concepts that would shape particular forms of writing and also give yousome kind of support

in giving you an aid for literary critical practices. In one of the former sessions if you remember, we had spoken about the significance of taking a look at the various socio-political backgrounds. And here through this course I hope to have been equipped to analyse the historical and the political and social tendencies in order to read a text in a particular way.

We have also taken a look at how all of these things together inform our understanding and also our reception of particular text and authors. And we have also been alerted to the various devices which are built in to this system because time and again we have been taking a look at some of the forgotten authors, we have taken a look at some of the works that do not make into the proper canonical history for various reasons.

So this course I hope has not just alerted you to the continuities and the discontinuities inherent in the literary tradition, I hope it has also alerted you to the various things that literary history has not taken into account. As students of literature, it is imperative that we stay quite tuned to what has been included and what has not been included.

If this course has given you a sense of what literary history is all about and how literature has become the expression and the articulation of various socio-political tendencies and shifting historical trends, I would say that this course has become quite useful as a student of literature or even as a general person who has got some inclination and interest in literary studies.

So overall, I hope that this was a very fruitful and beneficial journey for you and I do suggest that you continue this journey by taking a look at the other reference texts that are available and also focus more on making a practical use of whatever that we have discussed in forms of theory and discussions throughout. So thank you for being a part of this course. I hope you all had a wonderful journey together. That is all we have from this course and we begin to wrap up this. Thank you for listening.