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Lecture – 13a Critiques of Postmodernism

Hello everyone, welcome to yet another session of the NPTEL course postmodernism in literature. In today's session we continue to look at some of the critiques against postmodernism. In the previous session itself we started locating some of the ways in which postmodernism has been extremely criticized particularly from the Marxist perspective.

And who there has been a number of a ways in which postmodernism has been dismissed a number of ways in which many contemporary theorists and a critical writers have considered this as one of the bogus theories of the of the contemporary, which relies heavily on capitalism and does not really explore anything in depth or engage with any meaningful activity. And some of the common concerns in that a sense has been that postmodern theory has a no sense of agency no theory of agency no strategy of resistance.

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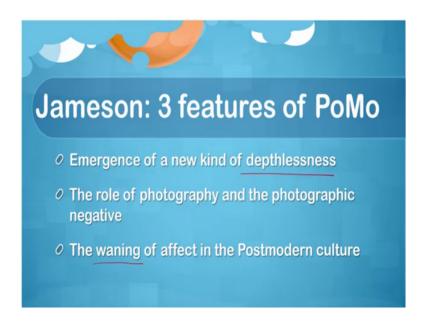
And absolutely no way to transform the structures of meaning that it so brilliantly exposes and critiques.

For example a number of theories such as Barton Foucault and also Baudrillard and a Lyotard they all have argued against the impossibility or they have rejected the notions of say for example, the text or the reality and metanarratives, but at the same time as a corollary to this rejection, they have not given alternative structures on which a meaning making process can rest. On the contrary they have they have entirely rejected not just a modernist notion of engaging with reality and enlightenment and ideas of reason they have also rejected the possibility of any meaning making process at all in the contemporary.

So in that sense the one of the a most pressing critiques against postmodernism is that; there are no conclusions about anything we only have an interpretation of everything. So, it also leads us to certain oomph in a multiple ways in terms of a methodology in terms of disciplinary concerns and also in terms of analyzing anything that we have in the contemporary as a text some are also of the opinion that postmodernism has eventually boiled down to a essentially a rule big breaking activity because it also challenges all kinds of ideas about truth, about a beauty, about the notions, about good notions, about a welfare notions about a humanity as well.

And though there have been sporadic ways in which postmodernism has been critically engaged with we can say that the sustained the most sustained form of criticism has come from the Marxist perspective, which is what we have all already started looking at in the previous session. So in continue in continuation with our discussion of Jameson who also argued that there are 3 major features of postmodernism.

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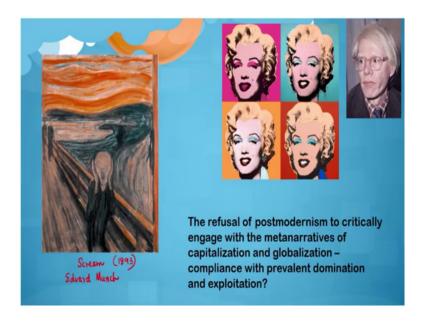


That are totally unsettles the notions and totally unsettles any possibility of a critical a process or any possibility of a political criticism in the contemporary. And he particularly talks about emergence of a new kind of deathlessness and a how the role of photography. And photographic negative has been assisting this depthlessness and how a waning of effect can be located in the postmodern culture.

And these we have already seen that he expresses these things in detail in his a seminal work postmodernism or the cultural logic of late capitalism. And while talking about the idea of depthlessness it is an example by comparing an Andy Warhol's work with a modernist of the typical modernist painting Vincent van gouges a pair of shoes and he also talks about how there was a way in which Vincent van gouge gives us a representation of shoes, which is not really about shoes, but which also as an insight into certain working class lifestyles and also about a different forms of agrarian activities. And all the contrary Andy Warhol's a painting of shows digital painting of shoes it does not have the capability to hide anything behind it. And in that sense, it does not uncover or lead us towards any other a process of criticism towards any other kind of insight.

And this essentially Jameson argues is also one of the fatalities one of the eventualities of the postmodern capitalist culture. Many of the things that postmodernism talks about Jameson argues it would it is also the result of a capitalist a commercialist ideology; in which the human beings have been transformed into mural consumers without any sense of agency when he talks about the third feature particularly the waning of effect in postmodern culture he again gives a 2 comparative examples.

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One is a painting titled the scream by Edvard Munch. Edvard munch was a Nnorwegian painter and this painting was published in this painting was presented in 1893. And as a corollary as a as a contrary example he also again gives Andy Warhols digital painting of Marilyn Monroe which is also become a cultural icon in the twentieth century.

And here one of the things that Jameson seeks to do is to identify the refusal of postmodernism to critically engage with a metanarratives of capitalization and globalization; even when postmodernism inherently talks about a rejection of metanarratives a rejection of all kinds of grand narratives. Jameson argues that Jameson rather complaints that they are the post-modernist and the idea of the postmodern in general they are also inherently affected with refusal to engage with the meta narratives of globalization and a capitalization. So, here a capitalism and different forms of globalization they are also seen as meta narratives with Jameson argues has not really fallen under the purview of the postmodern critics.

And this sort of a compliance with prevalent domination and exploitation is something that the Marxist critic within a Jameson is extremely uncomfortable with. And here when Jameson talks about the comparison between the paintings scream and the digital painting presented by Andy Warhol of Marilyn Monroe that a particular thing is that he highlights.

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He talks about how anxiety and alienation which the painting the scream very appropriately represents. it the, they though sort of emotions have become inappropriate to the postmodern world because it is also inherently a capitalist globalized commercial world.

And he asked this very pertinent question, where does one situate the canonical experiences of solitude of private revolt and such a private emotional experiences in the postmodern world because as and when we look at the many kinds of representations that come out from in terms of postmodern art in terms of postmodern culture. There is also an inability associated with those sites with those kinds of representations to talk about these private emotions, which are also articulations of revolt and revolution. And this Jameson argues is perhaps a result of the pronouncement of the death of the subject itself which he considers as extremely fatal, and munchs painting in Jamesons Marxist perspective it is a complex reflection of this a complicated situation.

And such complexities even if they exist in the postmodern world; just by a virtue of privilege in the post-modernist ideas there is an impossibility to engage with this sort of a complex reflection or to engage with such a complex such a complicated situation.

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He sums up the argument and here I quote his own words postmodernism presumably signals the end of this dilemma. This dilemma which was inherently a part of the early modernist and the late modernist a period where they could talk about issues related to individuality it issues related to anxiety and also about existent to (Refer Time: 08:05) which it replaces with a new one.

And this replacement which happens in the postmodern period is something that the post is something that the Marxist critics are uncomfortable with because this replacement was also a product of the globalized capitalist world. And moving on he talks about different ways in which in this moving away from anxiety is not necessarily a productive experience in the postmodern world. And he also talks about how the waning of effect; however, might also have been characterized in the narrow context of literary criticism.

As a waning of the high modernist thematics of time and temporality and here you know he holds his also bringing in the elements of literary criticism to talk about, how in the postmodern world literal criticism also suffers from a waning of effect and there is a a degradation that he begins to locate in these a different ideas of culture in these different ideas of critiquing of culture and literature.

And he then draws their attention to how; we now inhabit the synchronic rather than the diachronic. And this is a key element that we need to engage within the context of the postmodern criticism synchronic and diachronic are 2 terms that he uses from the context

of the linguistic analysis. And these are also a complimentary viewpoints and, but they differ in a one a central aspect which Jameson also uses to talk about the crisis in the postmodern theory. Synchronic synchronic talks about describing language at a specific point or a specific moment in time and here significantly it are frozen in time there is no engagement with history. It is talking about an approach which is looking it is particular moments in history particular time in history without taking into account the history of that particular moment.

On the contrary diachronic refers to development and evolution of a language, development and evolution of language through history. So, the distinctive determinants over here are the presence and absence of history. And this is also one of the central things that makes a postmodernism extremely incompatible with Marxist critical theories. And Jameson argues that in the contemporary we are being forced to live a life that is synchronic rather than the diachronic, life which the Marxist critics Andy Warhols and also gives us a possibility of engaging with history, in which he lies the possibility of engaging with and the possibility of critiquing capitalist culture itself.

The more when the culture becomes synchronic in nature; the moment we begin to talk about specific moments in history to which no kind of historical accounts are associated. Then we also lack the possibility we lock lack the opportunity of critiquing that kind of a culture. So, this experience Jameson identifies with the human beings identifying themselves as consumers and focusing on how we play rather than worrying about the real big problems which are part of late capitalism. And are significantly the most of the Marxist critics are in agreement with this fact that postmodernism is also one of the many representations of this capitalist society.

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So, what is Jameson really suggest through these discussions? He is perhaps seeking to recover concepts such as a dominance which are also central in talking about various Marxist concepts. And he is also proposing to study postmodernism as a result of capitalisms rise to maturity, and in that sense, it is also important to remember that the Marxist also as you see post structuralism as symptomatic to capitalism.

These sort of a moves Jameson also suggest that are important to revive Marxist criticism because Marxist criticism perhaps can be posited can be projected as a viable and effective method of critiquing globalised consumer culture and ideology. And I repeat in the postmodern scenario with the plethora of the postmodern theories and frameworks available, we actually lose the possibility lose the opportunity to propose a critiques against the globalized consumer culture and ideology.

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As and when we propose to continue our discussion of postmodern critiques by focusing next on a Terry Eagletons works and it is also important to see how Terry Eagleton particularly in his work beginning theory he begins to unpack postmodernism.

He first of all talk about the absolute negation of postmodernism with respect to meaning and the undefined ability and the lack of unity and lack of coherence associated with postmodernism. And goes on to talk about postmodernism in a rather cynical way, he argues that Terry Eagleton argues that a postmodernism promises to cover everything from Madonna to Meta narrative from a post Fordism to pulp fiction and if threatens thereby to collapse into meaninglessness. And this idea of meaninglessness can be read in continuation with Jamesons argument that postmodernism is about depthlessness.

So, Terry Eagleton introduces postmodernism as a form of culture that corresponds to post modernity, which he says it is signal by the end of modernity and in that sense by extension there by characterizing everything that is associated with modern thought from enlightenment onwards; perhaps a prime reason the primary reason of a discomfort of a Marxist against postmodernism is that; they challenge all kinds of meta narratives that emerge from the enlightenment period onwards and Marxism is certainly one of the most dominant forms of meta narrative which emerged during that historical period.

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And it is important to engage with some of the particular things that Terry Eagleton talks about it is also it also runs in runs of a parallel to some of Jamesons arguments. It also sums up the totality of Marxist criticisms against a postmodernism just like Jameson Eagleton is also uncomfortable with postmodernisms impatience with conventional aesthetic judgments and also the refusal to accept or respect a valued distinctions between say the sonnet and the soap opera. And this a modernist breaking down of all kinds of distinctions is something Jameson also had drawn our attention to.

And Jameson on the contrary is also drawing our attention to certain aspects of reality that cannot be refused or cannot be broken down or cannot be refused. And he is saying that it may be possible to ignore phenomenology or a semiotics or even reception theory and he is also saying that maybe half of the word does not even know; that these sort of ideas and these sort of discussions exist, but is not possible to ignore and it is not possible to negate elements such as consumerism mass media is that it is a aestheticized politics of sexual difference which are also a part of the realities of a number of people.

And this our rejection of truth or identity, totality, universality, foundations, meta narrative and the collective revolutionary subject all of these things which the postmodern is a very comfortably and conveniently reject and oppose and negate Eagleton says this sort of an approach it goes hand in hand with the defense of a status quo.

Because of calling to him and many other Marxist a critics, these sort of rejections the rejection of true the rejection of reality and the rejection of all kinds of meta narratives in the post enlightenment period these are only luxuries that many cannot afford. And he is here a positing a different kind of a reality which is also foundational to the understanding of Marxism and the many concepts and theories and ideologies that it had put forward.

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And taking off from there it also talks about certain consequence a certain fatal consequences that are associated with kind of a total rejection, to quote his own words if the idea of system or a totality can be discredited. Then there is really no such thing as patriarchy all the capitalist system to be criticized.

He is talking about a certain kind of a world where when we begin to reject all kinds of a meta narratives. It is also taking away the opportunity or the possibility to critique and certain existing rural derogatory practices it is patriarchy or the capitalist system because the moment we begin to deny the existence of say patriarchy or the capitalist system; it is also a kind of a it is also a way in which we are bailing out all of these systems out of any kind of scrutiny any kind of political criticism; in that sense also a also sees the absence of history as a root of a most of these problems because postmodern theories are not really based in historical developments.

And he is also of the argument that postmodernism are wrong in characterizing all post enlightenment philosophy as having a naive view of the self as prior to social context and this a like Jameson he also things that; the sort of an approach would only aid the promotion the development and the emergence of a capitalist structures as a totalitarian regime.

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Even while we attempted to agree with some of the postulations that are being posited by the Marxist critics, we cannot entirely agree with them because there are certain inherent dangers within the Marxist philosophy within the Marxist conceptual framework as well.

One is only too aware of the Eurocentric a patriarchy in Marxism which has been heavily critiqued especially in the, from the middle of the twentieth century onwards. And also, Marxism as a project Marxism as a as an as a force of enlightenment, as a means of empowerment, as a means of liberation it is also failed to consider the categories of identity and difference marginalized by European post enlightenment traditions. If we try to think of some such categories maybe the foremost ones will be gender ethnicity a nationality and a sexual preferences. So, in that sense Marxism as a meta narrative has failed and there are a number of ways in which we can support that argument as well.

But when Marxist critics when they line up against the postmodern theories, when they talk in defense of the meta narratives because it is also a way in which you can rescue culture you can emancipate culture from the clutches of a say globalization. One is also

one also needs to be aware of the dangers inherent in the meta narratives of Marxism. There are too many examples that if we can cite if you look around you may particularly recall Jamesons eurocentrism which was rejected by ages have met another fellow Marxist a critic because a Jameson had used the term a third world talk about certain countries in a way that the Marxist a critics such as Aijaz Ahmad did not agree with.

So, even while we even a while we are sympathetic to certain arguments that a Marxist critics put forward, one also needs to be a very well aware of the inadequacy of the Marxist theory in engaging with a theory of human difference. And herein perhaps lies the value of postmodern approaches because they also give us certain tools to engage with certain tools to expose, what is inherently problematic about the meta narratives which has been hitherto surviving without any sort of a criticisms.

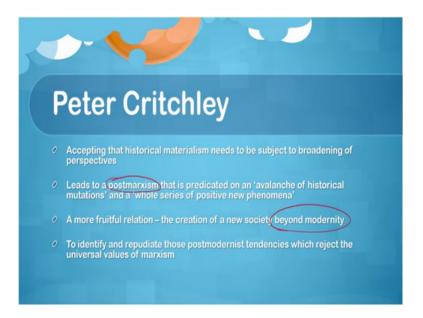
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To some of the Marxist response to the postmodern could be seen in 2 ways, first of all to treat postmodernism as a species of political and cultural conservatism of little or no analytical political consequence; and this in fact, is also a very useful tool for Marxism because it would help keep in intact the emancipatory potential of modernity and Marxism.

At some level keeping intact the ideals of paternity keeping intact the ideals of post enlightenment period is very central to the preservation of Marxism as well because the moment postmodern theories are used against Marxism it completely negates the possibility of any kind of a such; any kind of emancipatary potential existing within framework such as Marxism.

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Certain critics such as a peter critchley they also have a different sort of a thing in the offing especially in the context of postmodernism and a Marxism. And he is also talking about a revision which is needed within Marxist theory by accepting that historical materialism needs to be subject to the to the broadening of perspectives.

And he used that this sort of an approach by accepting the certain kinds of limitations within historical materialism. There is a possibility that one can be led to a certain kind of a post Marxism. And this is very important with because that is also predicated on an avalanche of historical mutations and a whole series of positive new phenomena. And this sort of an association this sort of a revision within Marxism Peter Critchley argues, it has a more fruitful relation and it can also focus on the creation of a new society beyond modernity because if the Marxist critics have a problem with postmodernism moving away from modernity, then maybe it is high time that the Marxist also think about engaging with the society which is moved beyond modernity.

And once and if there is a failure to engage with the society or certain kinds of societies and certain kinds of subject positions, which have moved away from the ideas of modernity. And if one fails to engage with the, those sort of systems and those sort of individuals maybe there is an inherent problem in transforming or in reviving those

tenants which were originally part of a modernity for example, Marxism. And Peter Critchley also gives a more viable solution to the Marxist critics, rather than being totally dismissive of a all kinds of a postmodern tendencies and all kinds of postmodern worldviews and theoretical frameworks maybe it is important to identify and repudiate those postmodern tendencies which reject the universal values of Marxism.

And the critics like Peter Crutchley they see still see certain inherent a values in the Marxist criticism and they also feel that maybe in the a postmodern world what is needed is a post Marxist of thinking a post a Marxist thinking which can also engage with societies which have moved beyond modernity.

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There have been other forms of criticisms as well against a postmodernism, the most important one are being leveled by a Noam Chomsky who also argued that postmodernism has perhaps only the potential to encourage moral relativism and deviant behavior, which he argues that essentially may not lead to any good.

And it also certain others such as a Christopher Hitchens, Richard Hawkins for clear and meaningful answers which according to them the postmodern critics do not offer.

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And there are certain specific quarrels particularly against a Lyotards idea about the collapse of grand narratives and because a some critics roles of the opinion that, the moment Lyotard proposes this idea against a grand narratives or proposes this idea which foregrounds the rejection the refusal and the complete collapse of grand narratives; that itself has the inherent potential to become a grand narrative.

And in this they also locate certain contradictions and certain paradoxes which are part of the postmodern critiques because since they do not talk about any alternative structures in place, there is a possibility that the arguments that they are making the dismissive arguments the negating arguments or the arguments of refusals that we are making can in turn become grand narratives by itself and the same applies with Foucault Bart and many others who have spoken about different kinds of realities different kinds of texts and different kinds of meaning making processes.

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And there are also particular critics which is Zygmunt Bauman who argues that capitalism has produced in this unstable postmodern world. And here we also find him in agreement with the Marxist critics and he is also extremely critical of lyotards idea which extols us to be free from the tyranny of meta narratives. And Sigmund Bauman also feels that the sort of a move away from the meta narratives it has another danger associated with it because it denies their capacity as humans to act collectively for the common good. And this can also be tied up with the criticism that Noam Chomsky had that it only promotes a certain kind of a deviant behavior.

And many of those critics are collectively of the opinion that postmodernism is a middle class intellectual point of view a luxury that many others cannot afford. For example, it is said to have been suffering from a myopia of the visible because there are certain very visible realities which cannot be rejected no matter what kind of theoretical frameworks that you use. And as they would say just because a world appears more fragmented it does not mean that there is not a reality out there. They also talk about what situations about poverty about different kinds of day to day turmoils, that people are engaging with to talk about; how it is impossible to reject reality in totality as opposed modern critics would say.

In this lecture we do not attempt to give an evaluation of either the Marxist criticism or the postmodern theories, we only propose to present certain differing viewpoints which have been in circulation ever since the postmodern theories emerged. It is also important to be alert to be aware of these different kinds of criticisms which are being leveled against postmodernism even when we are talking about the various theories awareness our theoretical positions and the various our conceptual frameworks which are available in terms of postmodernism, what is also especially in significant is that? Though a different though different kinds of criticisms have been leveled against postmodernism, especially from the Marxist point of view. We do not find the postmodern critics radically defending their stance or responding to these criticisms in a systematic manner.

It is also because most of these critiques a most of these criticisms have also been extremely dismissive of a postmodernism, they have not really engaged with particular elements they have only when dismissing postmodernism for being either depthless or a meaningless or being a merely nonsensical and passing of as a particular kinds of theories and frameworks.

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As in when we wind up this course we recall certain discussions that we had about Habermas in the in one of the earliest lectures. Habermas also was one of the bohemian critiques a, critics of a postmodernism, but what distinguishes Habermas from the other line of critics against postmodernism is that Habermas Habermas was willing to engage with certain postmodern theories, he was willing to engage with particular concepts, he did not encourage a certain dismissive approach towards postmodernism.

When he saw a Habermass approaches towards modernity and post modernity we know that Habermas was not in favor of the rejection of modernity in totality because he also thought that the project of modernity was yet incomplete. And it also needed some more time for it to reach it is completion to deliver all of it is promises. And that the postmodernism had taken off even before modernity had completed even before modernism had completed whatever it had begun, but a one of the ways in which Habermas differs from most of the other dominant critics of postmodernism is that; he talks about a way in which a postmodern critique can be incorporated into the idea of modernity.

How postmodernism post modernity can become can exist as part of as an extension of modernity. And he also takes postmodernism seriously and does not reject it as a mere nonsense. And he also agrees that the focus of a debate should be on modernity as it is realized in social practices and institutions, unlike many other defenders of modernity and the critics of a postmodernism he is not entirely supporting everything that modernity signaled everything that modernity are stood for, on the contrary Habermas is willing to engage with the many flaws which are inherent in modernity and move towards an approach a postmodern approach perhaps; which would also give us the tools to talk about the meta narratives to reject the meta narratives which are not really useful.

And in that sense maybe in the postmodern critics have also been willing to engage with Habermas they have been responding they have been in dialogue with the many things that Habermas had put forward. So, in order to take a balanced view perhaps when we talk about the criticisms against postmodernism it is important for us also to adopt a position, which perhaps Habermas exemplifies maybe it is important not to accept either of these frameworks in totality.

And it is again important not to dismiss them in totality either because each of these have certain practices which would be useful to understand the text of cultures and contexts. And they are also certain elements which will be which will seem a bit farfetched which would seem a bit difficult to understand difficult to comprehend, but at the same time it is important to agree that postmodernism gives us a tools, gives us a frameworks to to engage with to critique modernity in ways in which in the earlier century in the beginning of the century it was not possible.

And this sort of a rejection this sort of a refusal of meta narratives this sort of a move away from modernity is also important because it gives a space to alternative articulations, it gives rise to it gives a visibility to a many other practices which were hitherto taboo or hitherto unacceptable. It more importantly gives a more holistic approach a more inclusive approach which is perhaps also the need of the arm. So, with that positive note we also end this lecture.

Thank you for listening and I look forward to seeing you again in the next session.