

**Twentieth-Century Fiction**  
**Prof. Avishek Parui**  
**Prof. Sukruti Shannel**  
**Department of Humanities and Social Sciences**  
**Indian Institute of Technology, Madras**

**Lecture - 55**  
**Modernist Poetry**

Hello everyone welcome to this NPTEL course on Twentieth Century Fiction conducted by Dr. Avishek Parui. My name is Swikriti Sanyal and I am one of the TAs or Teaching Assistants for this course. Today we will be discussing Modernist Poetry with reference to the two poems of T S Eliot that sir has already previously discussed; namely the Preludes and Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock.

So, before getting into the poems, just we would like to I would like to discuss some of the key features of modernist poetry in general and why it is so relevant in the current settings. So, in the recent years we see that there is a renaissance of revival of interest in modernist literature and specifically in modernist poetry. And the new modernist studies greatly differ from the new critical approach of the 1940s with this insistence in the historical juncture and the conjecture in which modernism developed against the understanding of the text as an autonomous entity or a body. And the focus was in the material culture of modernity and the questions of race and gender which were previously neglected came to the foreground.

We also see that in the new modernist research the panorama of the genre of modernist studies itself expanded; so there was this expansion of modernist canon which now incorporated the writers of Harlem Renaissance and also female writers such as Mina Loy and Hilda Doolittle. With when we talk about modernism or modernist writing in the sense of this course, we are referring to a set of ideas and beliefs and attitudes about life that are emerging in the period of time in the first half of the twentieth century.

But we are not interested in taking all the authors or the writers who were writing during this period; because modernism is more like an umbrella term which incorporates the different schools of modernism. But under one chain of or multiple sets of beliefs and habits and styles of writing; but we which have a common affiliation and which come together to and when writers come together and become affiliated to a certain movement.

So, when we talk about the term modernism or when we talk use the term modernist poetry, so we are using modernist not as a label to that to the particular authors writing in that particular period of time; it is a commentary on their ideologies and beliefs and the styles of writing that was coming together to propose an idea of society and a idea of art.

The term modernism, the label or the title modernism was given to these artists or authors and writers by American and English critics in the 1920s and this is not a term that they themselves, they coined for themselves. So, again to repeat myself, the idea of modernism or modernist writing is more of an umbrella term which incorporates different sets or schools of modernism which come under a general generic label and reproduce certain thoughts and styles of writing that are very unique to that particular age.

So, in 1921 T S Eliot declared that and I quote, “poets in our civilization as it exists as at present must be difficult” unquote. And precisely when we see in the later subsequent year when the *Wasteland*, Eliot’s poem is published; we see what he actually means, with its multiple references and allusions and several pages of notes which come in the end of the poem. They somehow take this poem back to the classroom and something that needs to be seriously worked on and studied and something that does not have the fluidity of that the Elizabethan kind of Elizabethan poetry or it does not have the framework or the structure of say Victorian writing.

So, when we talk about the modernist poems, we see that there are two schools of thoughts believe that they come for two different reasons. So, one school believes that, because modernist poetry talks about the sense of isolation and fragmentation and it is telling you telling us a hard story or truth that it is unable to tell itself and it does not have the classical realist framework or any other you know contemporary frameworks that we are aware of. So, it plays with its style, with its structure and form.

So, writing becomes difficult, so that there are allusions to different themes and meanings that are at the same time historical and as well as contemporary and the banal and the profound are juxtaposed together. And this constant juxtaposing of different elements can be shocking, it can produce an affective shock like the metaphysical conceit for example; but it also a certain school of theorists believe or critics believe that, this just shows the high handedness of the modernist poets and their insistence on being a

class apart. And it is this difficulty that we are going to; we are trying to understand through this particular session today in our discussion of the poems in hand.

So, experience or when we talk about modernist poetry and the reading of modernist poetry no matter how difficult, it there is a feeling of immersion in the text that we have. So, there is no clear distinction between what we are seeing and what this position from which we are invited to see it.

So, when we talk about the subject and the object of the poetry, there is no clear distinction between who is the subject and who is the object, what are the central features and what are the marginal ideas, which is the whole and which is the fragment. So, all these distinctions and binaries that generally or conventionally hold our understanding of any text or any narrative, we see a complete dissolution of these boundaries in the text that we read; specially if we take into account the two texts that we are talking about the Preludes and the Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock. We see that when in the both the poems and the things are being said and things are being done; but most of the times they are not sure who is saying those things or what is the importance of what is being done.

Even grammatically there is an inconsistency of the subject and the object, and most of the times it becomes hard for us to discern who the subject of the poetry is and who the object is. So, in the absence of a traditional framework, a literary framework; for example, like the classic realist literary framework, it is very difficult often for the readers to understand what is coming next and that this unpredictability is something that is very key to the modern, modernist poetry.

So, we see in the sense that modernist poetry is one that does not believe in offering a frame, a framework or a lens from which to read the poetry; it is more interested in immersing the readers in the work that is in the work in question. And we see there is this dissolution of the subject object of the you and I and there is a sort of continuity and fluidity in these ideas that they represent. And the readers might sometimes find it difficult to understand the poetry or it might become difficult to read the poetry of this kind or sort; because our understanding of things and the world is always marked by these distinctions that are dissolved in the poetry, the distinctions of you and I, the self and the other, the here and there.

So, all these distinctions that make up our everyday life and our understanding, our rationale is dissolved and they are challenged by modernist poetry where you cannot make these clear-cut distinctions and that is also not the objective of the poetry.

Modernist poetry is written in fragments, and the fragments - these disorienting or disorganized fragments that make up the sections of poetry they can be challenging themselves; but they serve a very unique purpose and they are very much needed for the kind of writing that is represented or the kind of writing that is articulated by these authors and poets.

So, when specially talking about poetry, when even when you read Preludes or the Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock you see that; there is a very strange or queer sense of fragmenting that is at play when human beings are described as merely say hands or feet and that chief or key feature of modernist poetry is the idea of the fragments. And the poem are arranged as, most of the poems are arranged as disorganized or disoriented presentation of fragments. And this fragmentation is important; because it refers to the isolation of the modern world and the metropolitan society, which is consumerist, which is alienating in its structures and in its quality. And this fragment, because there is no clear-cut syntax or there is no hard, rigid boundary or framework as I previously mentioned; it is easier for these fragments to play with themselves and they do not have to be associated or their meanings do not have to be associated to the immediate context in which they are the presented, meaning the fragments.

They can afford to connect and interconnect with themselves in multiple ways, sometimes that are not very obvious ways and a lot of reading has to go into it. Since there is no self-defining meaning and there is no pre-conceived idea of meaning and concept or even any obligation to explain a moral truth. So, these fragments can become multiple and they can play and touch various discourses and undercut their, undercut the meanings of different discourses and in multiple ways that that are not conception of any fixed nature of truth or what is the center of the universal idea of truth.

The fragments are not a subcomponent of any you know larger idea or of any grand narrative or the any narrative master plot. So, the fragments have their own function, functionality and they function or they perform the job to bring out the isolation and the alienation that is rooted, deeply rooted in the metropolitan, the modern metropolitan

society and they have the ability to merge the distinction between the center and the margins, the important and the unimportant. And the and these varied differences and binaries that are that mark previous poetries of previous generations.

Modernist poetry therefore, is both an account of the individual's journey in society and also the individual as a collective entity and which represents the collective life of the modern, collective life of the modern metropolis. So when we talk about the time, the idea of time in modernist poetry we see that, time is represented in a continuous fashion, in a sense of the past being a continuity to the present. And the time here is continuous, it is simultaneous and it does not believe in leaving the past way back and it carries the past almost to the present.

So, the experience of reading the modernist poetry is that of an ongoing process and one does not have to look back and forward, back and forward every time and then there is this fluidity and the flow which you know Gertrude Stein calls the continuous present. And even Ezra Pound talks about all ages are being contemporaneous, where we have the idea of the ever present or the past that is ever knew.

So, in the context of the modernist poetry we live among simultaneous present times, which is again a very important or a very unique feature of modernist poetry. And this brings us to what Doctor Parui has previously discussed with us in the context of the Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock; the idea of the clock time and the psychological time.

So, which is obvious something that is very important and again something unique to the poetry of the modernists, where we see that there is a difference or there is a distinction between what is the universal time or the worldly time and what is the personal time. So, this is personal versus a political time that is often being used here; even in the sense of the continuous present, there is this break between the personal and what is the impersonal time. And this is very crucial in the context of poetry; because it shows us that how our inner world, the time of our psychological time, the time of our inner world does not have the same rhythms and the same patterns of the time of the universal time or the clock time. And that can create a friction and that friction makes it again difficult for us to make sense of our, the narrative of our own life. And when we follow the, when we present an objective perspective following the clock time; narrating our life events chronologically, there is a gap which is the gap that is not addressed; there is a there is a

space which is not addressed when we are talking about the subjective experiences. And these experiences, the subjective or the personal understanding or interactions with the world and other human beings cannot be tapped into the clock time or the universal time; and if it is, it only gives a partial view of those experiences and those lived felt emotions.

When we look at modernist poetry, its key feature is often a critique of society, but critique that is not a direct critique; the critique of society or the contemporary civilization, contemporary modern world of metropolis comes through the idea the different imageries and the fragments that we were talking about earlier.

So, these imageries and symbols and fragments try to bring out the distorted and the disorderly nature of life in the metropolis, which is filled with the drudgery and alienation and repetition of everyday life and things that are mostly not in our control. So, we see life moving on in its own pace and humans are mere performers, who wake up and put on a mask and perform their day to day activities in a much routine fashion.

So, the repetition and the drudgery of the society of the metropolis is translated to the repetition and drudgery of the everyday life of the characters or the subjects that we read of in the poems. There is the social disintegration and the personal and the social disintegration which comes with contemporary civilization, which comes with bureaucracy and technocracy. The idea that the contemporary civilization is a recipe for disintegration both personal and social is very evident in modernist poetry.

Modernist poetry, in modernist poetry we see a sense of disintegration of both the personal and the social and the disintegration comes with the contemporary civilization. Though modernist or modernism has the word modern in it; we see that, most of our writers and poets and critics are very critical of the bureaucracy and the technocracy that has overtaken the human world and which has led to a reification and alienation of human beings, which again, Doctor Parui has talked about in great details.

So, when we when we say that, due to the technocracy and the advancement of technology and machinery, the human life has become segregated and alienated and again very repetitive. And so, these and when we try to see human beings as a collective force; as you know as not individual human beings, but a collection or a section or group of people who are invested in a particular area to reap some benefits for the society as well or the society at large, we see that there is a commodification of the human beings

themselves. Even in the poems concerned we see the inanimate objects like the streets or the birds, they are animated, they are given human attributes; while the human beings are described as inanimate objects and just human beings are described in fragments, just referring to their hands and feet's or some part of their body or different movements.

So, these again coming back to fragments, so these fragments or this fragmented nature of poetry; defines or highlights the way the society and the personal life of human beings are also being disintegrated due to this advancement in technology. The bureaucratic systems or the structures that are operational in society or were operational society during that time, they completely disregarded the individual differences. And they projected human beings as a collective monogamous identity, which is only the objective of which is only to produce material or meet material needs and they are driven by exterior ends.

So, this culture of emotional represent repression and social atomization and the this kind of structure that fits for all; the this kind of structures are the ones that are critiqued in this modernist poetry and shows highlights the personal sides of these, the emotional sides of the side effects or as we can say the sociopolitical implications of living a life that is compartmentalised or segmented in this particular fashion of the modern day; where human beings lose their individuality and agency and they any charge or responsibility of their own life. And what we have is a image of a man who is suffering, a man who is helpless and just a victim of the forces of society and culture and performing his day to day life without any subjective investment in it, you know in a very objective and superficial fashion.

Talking about modernist poetry we see that, because of the difficulty of the subject that they are dealing with, the expression of the subject that they are dealing with and in the absence of any fixed framework or structure; because modernist poets like to play with their writing and a hope to find or they are constantly seeking for a new mode or a new medium through which to articulate their writings. Because the structures of the previous eras or generations just would not work anymore or would not suffice; because the problems of the modern times or the times that they were writing are very different from those of say the romantic or the Victorian or the Elizabethan times.

So, but when we talk about the major symbols and the different styles or techniques that are incorporated by the writers or the poets of the time, especially we are talking about Eliot; we see that the use of the metaphysical conceit is very evident and prevalent in their writing as sir has previously discussed. The metaphysical conceit - Eliot has always been a great admirer and critique of the metaphysical writers like Donne and Marvel. And the idea of the conceit is very important and relevant to the modern times as well, because of its shocking kind, shocking characteristics and its attributes that can shock you or catch you unawares.

So, this is a very useful technique that Eliot uses in both the poems that we are talking about today; say Preludes when he talks about to give you the exact line and he talks about the burnt out ends of smoky days, where the end of the day is compared to the end of a cigarette and which is an image, which makes a lot of sense the time of the modernity or the time of sorrow in the modern times or in the metropolis setting, where you see at the end of the day people after work or after working hours smoking in the streets. And almost that the like the cigarette and the day and the activity of the and the humdrum of the day comes together ends together almost. And so, but this is this kind of imagery is very different from comparing the end of the day than the usual comparisons that we have seen before; and this end of the cigarette and the end of the day comes together to produce this beautiful yet shocking effect.

We also see conceit in Love song of J Alfred Prufrock where for say for example, many conceits for; but one for example, is measured out, I have measured out my life with coffee spoons. Again, the idea of measuring out life with coffee spoons is a very unique way of putting it and it also significantly shows the negligible quality of life in the sense that it can be measured in coffee spoons; that is as much as relevance or importance that life needs or life has in the modern times.

So, and also when we talk about again in the context of the in talking about the difficulty of writing and reading modernist poetry; we see the question of the neurotic narrator coming in, which again we see in the Love song of J Alfred Prufrock as well as a we can draw parallels or connections with Heart of Darkness by Joseph Conrad, where we see the same kind of a very nervous, a very unsure kind of narrator which is very different from what we what we know of the you know a very strong narrator of say a Victorian novel.



So, this the narrators in the modern modernist texts, they are you know very different from the usual narrators that we are with that we usually see. And these narrators are presented or they present themselves as again neurotic, very unsure, very nervous and often with very low skill, very low skill level for narrating. And so, which again points to the fact that, to the futility of life, to the futility of meaning itself. So, even words that are coming out of the narrators and the writings and the narrate, their narrative often is futile and does not make any sense.

So, even these poets, in the two poems especially in the Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock; he says dare I say. Even if I say you would not understand me; so this confusion between the experience and the narration of that particular experience, we see find it in both heart of darkness in the character of Marlow and we also see it in the person, the first person subject of the Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock; where both are unsure of how they are going to say and what they are going to say and they are pretty sure that in the end, no meaning or no fixed concrete meaning is going to come out of the dialogue or the discussion or their narration of the poem.

So, other key features or elements that we find in our readings of the poems are that of synaesthesia, where they beautifully crisscross or interconnect different sensory cognitive senses and cognitive understandings; where the smell and the sight and the touch, so the tactile and the sensory images every our senses come together to produce an effect that is a very different from the conventional understanding of things. And we also see the idea of the pathos in modernist poetry, where two very different terms or contradictory terms are taken together or expressed in the line.

When we talk about the Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock we see that there is a crisis of inhabitation; the subject wants to inhabit a particular space, where and that particular space is a high society, a high-cultured space where as he says women come and go talking of Michelangelo. Michelangelo here becomes a stereotypical image of high art and cultural sophistication and everything that is that belongs to the aristocracy and that belongs to the fashionable part of society and the subject wants to belong to that space. But there is a constant duality between his subjective understanding of himself the eye and the objective eye as in the sense the world understands him. And this difference is barely reconcilable and that is another reason why the speech or the speaking or articulation is so difficult and the author exhibits or the narrator exhibits a kind of neurotic

temperament and a kind of nervousness, a kind of incompatibility with the flow of you know, with a narrative flow that one would expect in a writing.

So all these, the different techniques that we discussed that of the conceit and that of the neurosis in the narrative technique and the synaesthesia and pathos; so all these are different ways of trying to articulate the complexity that modern life is, the metropolis setting is. And it talks about the crisis of inhibition and the crisis of being able to have meaning, then therefore, there is this constant deferral, there is this constant procrastination; because one never arrives at anything and one is constantly waiting for something to happen, but nothing happens and nothing of importance ever happens.

And because there is no possibility of life itself, it is measured by coffee spoon; so the relevance or the importance or the grandness of life and the concepts such as life and meanings and narratives are lost in a setting, in a modern day setting where everything is alienating, everything is decadent and there is a inertia, there is this boredom and there is a repetition of the everyday consuming and everyday living the same life and becoming consumable and becoming a commodity, humans becoming commodity themselves and humans consuming commodities outside. So, the entire material setup of the modern-day life is highlighted through these different techniques that we find in modernist poetry.

The wasted quality of metropolis is what is highlighted in both these poems and we have; even when we talk about fragmentation of the say presentations of the human beings, we see there is this fragmentation in the presentation of life itself and which comes from a very beautiful montage-like technique of capturing the moments and capturing the different activities of everyday life and where a complete picture is never possible. But then all the snippets and the montages and the you know clippings are only that we have at hand and they are representative of the life in a metropolis; the drudgery and the monotony and the alienation that every human being bears in their hearts and souls.