Structuralism

* Some basic/constituent aspects of structuralism:
  + System
  + Order
  + Structure
  + Rules
  + Units
  + Pattern
* Its basic ideas/tenets may be simplified as follows:
  + Every system/experience (any activity, organization etc) has a structure.
  + This structure is composed/made up of elements or units.
  + There are patterns (orders) specific to each system and its structure.

e.g., academic system, classroom, family

* + The position and function of each unit/element within the system determines its value. This value, importantly, also depends on the relation of the element to other elements.
  + There are specific rules governing the patterning of elements, the relationship among elements, their interaction etc.
* Structuralism as a tool or method of enquiry in humanities and social sciences goes back to Saussure’s work.
  + (NB: Draw upon your understanding and insights from the Linguistics class here suitably. That is your base.)

**Structuralism and Semiotics**

* Signs operate within a system and in relation to other signs within that system. The value/function of a sign is decided by its place within the system and in relation to other signs.
* The most common symbols that we recognize as such are the written and spoken symbols.
* Along with language, we use many other sign systems in our everyday life. Traffic lights, traffic signals, dress, food habits, all customs and mores etc. are sign/symbol systems. Analysis of any sign system gives us insights and understanding about the social contexts in which these systems operate.
* Saussure and Charles Sanders Peirce

**Structuralism in Social Sciences and Literary Studies**

* Claude Levi-Straus, French anthropologist, studied elements, patterning, rules etc in the kinship and food habits of various tribal groups based on Saussurean phonological/linguistic frameworks. He used the insights of structural linguistics (system, structure, units within the system, patterning, binary opposition, rules etc.) to study the family/kinship systems and food habits of Amazon Indian tribes, Trobriand Islanders in the Pacific etc. This was the route through which Saussurean structuralism became a tool in the study of social sciences and in socio-cultural and literary analysis.
* Understandably, structuralism developed in French academies and intellectual circles.
* It is chiefly because of the interest of the London University English Professor Frank Kermode (and his students) that structuralism became accepted/ fashionable in British academia.
* Structuralist critics/readers do not focus much attention on individual works in isolation. Rather, they analyze the work trying to understand how elements, patterns, rules, relations etc. bind the work to the larger system/structure of human experiences, myths, dreams, social orders etc.
* American structuralism goes back to the study of American Indian languages by anthropologists and linguists (most of them trained by Franz Boas).
* Levi-Strauss was influenced both by Franz Boas (and American structuralism) as well as Roman Jacobson (and European structuralism). He was close to both these people on personal and intellectual levels.
* A major structuralist who later went beyond those positions and interrogated them rigorously was Roland Barthes. The latter phase of his work is considered to be patently post-structuralist.
* For more material on Structuralism, please read M S Nagaraj, M H Abrams, Peter Barry and Pramod K Nayar.

\*\*\*\*\* BJ’s classnotes; typed by Dilsha K Das; 21/03/2016 \*\*\*\*\*