Post- Structuralism

* Post-structuralism should not be seen as the end of structuralism. It would be more fruitful to see post-structuralism as a collective body of enquiry which carries forward the structuralist enquiries, but with some major changes and emendations in concerns, methodologies etc.
* In other words, post-structuralism can be seen as a more rigorous and detailed project which tries to address many issues which structuralism did not successfully engage with.
* Post-structuralism = beyond structuralism (not really ‘after structuralism’).
* Most of the early post-structuralist writers were the pioneering structuralists: Barthes, Todorov, Genette, Foucault et al.
* Structuralism 🡪 Post-structuralism (in theory)

Modernism 🡪 Postmodernism (in literature/art)

* One of the major points of post-structuralist departure (from structuralism) is the lack of fixity of the linguistic sign (sign = signifier + signified) and lack of fixity of meaning.
* Thus, for many writers coming under the post-structuralist label, there is recurrent shifting of meaning due to a constant slippage of the signifier under the signified. (Lacanian concept)
* Linguistic sign = signifier ÷signified (+signification)

Meaning is created through the process of signification.

* According to many post-structuralists like Derrida, Lacan et al, total or complete signification is impossible because of the ‘endless free play of signs’, differance, aporia etc.

Signification = making/carrying meaning

Differance – term used by Derrida to refer to ‘gaps’ in what is intended, what is

expressed and what is understood.

Aporia – another Derridean term used to refer to a ‘dead end’ and no way forward; impasse.

(Originally, *aporia* is a figure of speech.)

* That is, distrust of language as a system and distrust of the certainties offered by language is a major characteristic of manystrains of post-structuralism. (Especially Barthes, Derrida, in some waysFoucault et al)
* Against logocentrism
* No fixed truths; only the truths we have constructed using language – that is, discourses (Foucauldian term).
* Any ambiguity, multiple meanings etc. must be examples of differance, demonstrating to us that the relationship between the signifier and the signified is not fixed/universal/intrinsic.

For example,

Pot (in Malayalam)

കലം Pen (in Hindi)

/s/ (in English)

S

/ta/ (in Malayalam)

എന്നാല്‍കഴിയുന്നതുo (‘If so’ or ‘by me’)

* ‘No, that’s not what I meant!’

‘Oh, I thought otherwise.’

Such statements must be indications of differance.

Any unsuccessful attempt at communication must be an example of an aporia. You stop at a dead end; then, resume the attempt along another tangent – much like trying to find a new path after encountering an insurmountable obstacle before you.

* In the case of identities also there is no such permanence:

In your workplace/school

In your locality

In your religious community

In an alien culture

Now, it gets further complicated if you impersonate someone or if you take on a new identity.

The various cosmologies, theologies and god concepts that people’s lives are built around also give credence to the post-structuralist notion of no fixed/finite/permanent centre. That is, each of these is a separate ‘centre’ around which a ‘system’ built of ‘units’/’elements’ in a ‘pattern’ and governed by its own ‘rules’ is constructed. The moment you move out of the system, its rules become irrelevant, the structure disintegrates/ falls apart and the constituent elements come unhinged. Thus, there is no (fixed/permanent) centre, but only the ones we have elevated to that status.

This is how post-structuralism opens up greater possibilities to pluralities and multiplicities – an inclusive opening which admits and accommodates differences, diversities, oppositions etc. Greater tolerance?

‘Decentering’ and ‘no centre’ refer to no permanent/fixed centre. Not that there is no relative or shifting centre at all.

……………

Geocentric and heliocentric universes, from different centuries, have different patterns, units and rules.

In ancient Rome, the state religion had many gods including Caesars deified. Christians were persecuted up to AD 313 when Emperor Constantine declared Christianity as the state religion. Here also we see shifting centre and patterns and rules.

Akira Kurosowa’s 1954 film *Rashomon* is perhaps a telling analogy for post-structuralist admittance of pluralities, multiplicities and non-fixity/non-permanence (or even non-fixability) of ‘truths.’ The film is built on eyewitness accounts of the murder of a Samurai; but the accounts by his wife, a bandit, a woodcutter and a commoner are all at variance with one another.

So, according to the film, truth is a convenient fiction we construct in a very self-serving manner to suit our interests. Or, we should perhaps remove the acting subject and agency ‘we’ and say we are also ideologically/ culturally constructed in a shifting manner at different times and in different contexts. (Greenblatt has observed how, as he delved deeper into the study of Renaissance drama he lost his confidence in ‘human autonomy’ and instead came to see the human subject more as a product/construct of sociocultural contexts and forces.)

At the end of the film, the priest chooses to continue believing in human goodness when the commoner volunteers to look after the orphaned baby they have found. Do we construct our beliefs and trust and facts and truths suitably because we need them?

**Deconstruction** is not really destruction but is a very rigorous reading/re-reading project which goes beyond the traditional dynamics of the interpretation of literary texts to reflect on the epistemological difficulties inherent in any textual, literary or critical activity.

**Foucault**

* Major concepts: Language/knowledge&power, discourse&counter-discourse etc.
* He studied the relationship between power and language and the construction ofdiscourses using language. He studied history and knowledge as constructed discourses.
* For Foucault, a textalso is a discourse. A set of beliefs, an ideological framework or even an opinion is a discourse in this sense.
* *The Archeology of Knowledge*
* *Discipline and Punish*(about insanity, asylums etc.)
* *History of Sexuality*
* He studied how the mainstream society ‘constructs’ mad people or criminalsin order to define itself as sane/normal and virtuous/good.
* This is how we construct ‘the other’ or our opposites in order to define ourselves and our identities.
* These discourses are constantly used in interactions. Power, inequalities etc are built on these discourses.
* Language and representation using language are primary ways in which we make discourses.
* Later, many thinkers like Edward Said used Foucault’s ideas (of power, discourse, representation etc.) to study political issues like colonialism, Palestine problem, geopolitics, issues of social injustice etc.

**Edward Said**

* Said was a Palestinian Christian born in Egypt.
* He taught Comparative Literature in Columbia University in the U.S.
* A major postcolonial critic. He was influenced greatly by Marxism, structuralism, Foucault, continental philosophy and many other strains of thought and enquiry.
* Major works
* *Orientalism*
* *Culture and Imperialism*
* *The World, the Text and the Critic*
* Concept of ‘the other’

East = savages; West = civilized, repository of good qualities

* Said studied the unequal relationship between the Occident (West) and the Orient (East), focusing on the way cultural discourses were used very deftly in the colonial/imperial project. The East was almost always represented as savage, barbaric, indolent, lazy, pleasure-seeking, corrupt, easily corruptible etc; the West was always represented as virtuous, strong, courageous, just etc. The East was the West’s ‘other’.

**Structuralism & Post-structuralism: General Observations**

* Astructuralist would say that the Earth has an axis; a post-structuralist would say that the axis is a construct, something that we have artificially made for us to be able to understand the world.
* Here, we can say that the axis is the ‘center’ of the system/structure called earth/world.
* The geocentric model of the universe of Ptolemy (with the Earth in the centre) and the heliocentric model of Copernicus (with the Sun in the centre) are also two different ‘systems’ with different configurations.
* There is no such fixed or finite center, the post-structuralist would say.

There is no fixed identity, meaning etc. (*Mricchakadikam*- Sanskrit play about transposed heads and divided identities)

* The notion of singular truth is absurd; there exists no universal or fixed truth.
* Binary opposites:

black white

male female

in-between areas/ interstices

Post-structuralist thought goes beyond the fixed points of binary oppositions and tries to see the in-between areas/spaces and experiences. That is, it sees the grey areas, in-between sexuality(LGBT) etc.

* Thus, post- structuralist thought becomes more inclusive and accepts the hitherto marginalized into the mainstream fold.
* This is perhaps one of the most important political dimensions of post-structuralist thought, i.e., it goes against the totalizing grand narratives which usually reject and exclude all except the select few.

Grand narratives have a universalist and totalizing tendency which can very easily turn fascist.

* Another important post-structuralist idea is ‘the death of the author’ as the final authority over the text and its meaning.(Barthes, Derrida, Foucault)
* In fact, the New Critics also proclaimed the death of the author in their insistence upon the text and the exclusion of the author. But they still held ‘meaning’ as a central, fixed truth. Post-structuralism debunks this ‘truth’ of a fixed meaning.
* Even Liberation Theology canbe included under post-structuralism in its opposition to deeply entrenched traditional sociopolitical and religious positions, in its siding with the marginalized and the underprivileged etc.
* **NB: At some point, theory can/should be translated into action which touches upon daily lives and lived experiences. This is the relevance of theory in daily life, which begins at the nodal point where theory starts to become praxis.**

**Afterthought:**

Instead of seeing literary and cultural theory as a contested and mythified field of many -isms, it would be more fruitful to see it all as an epistemological project asking very penetrating and valid questions about knowledge, ways and possibilities of knowing, veracity and truth, ideological constructs, social facts etc. That is, how at all we can be sure of the content, forms and methodologies of what we know and believe and represent.

Concentrating too much on labels, names and rules often makes theory a very rarefied field which people can only approach warily and with trepidation. It would perhaps be more fruitful to look for the (dis)continuities and developments in the enquiries and strains of thought.

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