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<tr>
<td>Paper Coordinator</td>
<td>Dr. Shewli Kumar and Dr. Swati Banerjee</td>
<td>Associate Professor, School of Social Work, Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>E-mail: Shewli Kumar - <a href="mailto:shewli4@tiss.edu">shewli4@tiss.edu</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Swati Banerjee – <a href="mailto:sbanerjee@tiss.edu">sbanerjee@tiss.edu</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Module Writer</td>
<td>Ms. IshaNaaz &amp; Dr Swati Banerjee</td>
<td>Dr. Swati Banerjee, Associate Professor, Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>E-mail: <a href="mailto:sbanerjee@tiss.edu">sbanerjee@tiss.edu</a></td>
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<td>Ms. IshaNaaz, PhD Student, Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai</td>
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<td></td>
<td>E-mail: <a href="mailto:isha.naaz17@gmail.com">isha.naaz17@gmail.com</a></td>
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<td>Summary</td>
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<tr>
<td>Content reviewer</td>
<td>Prof. Aruna Khasgiwala</td>
<td>Retired Professor, MSU, Department of Social Work, Baroda</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language editor</td>
<td>Ms Sudha Ganapathy</td>
<td>Manager, Publications Unit, TISS</td>
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POSTMODERN FEMINISM

INTRODUCTION

Postmodern feminism is a synthesis of postmodernism and feminist theory. It has emerged in feminist theory in last few decades. Like the postmodernist, postmodern feminist critiques the phallogocentric thought, meaning, ideas being shaped by absolute word which are “male” in style. They also dismiss all feminist thought which give single explanation for woman’s oppression or suggest steps through which could lead to woman’s liberation. In this way, post modern feminists promote the idea of multiplicity, plurality and difference. As they say that there is no single way of becoming a “good feminist”.

LEARNING OUTCOMES:

The overall aim of this module is help students to understand postmodern feminist theory. This module will explain the way postmodern feminist theories have developed over the period of time. In order to do so, the debates on poststructuralism and postmodernism has been discussed. It will help to understand the main arguments of postmodern feminist theories and the prominent theorist who helped in development of postmodern feminism.

TOPIC: 1 BACKGROUND OF POSTMODERN FEMINIST THEORY:

Postmodern feminism/feminist theory has been grounded in postmodernism, poststructuralism and French feminist theory. All these movements have emerged simultaneously. In order to understand postmodern feminist theory it is important to understand what each of these philosophies advocate.

1.1 Poststructuralism:

Structuralism attempts to study the organisational structure and its relations as complex system of interlinked parts. It was developed in 20th century by the Swiss linguist theorist Ferdinand de Saussure and was later used by sociologists, psychoanalyst, anthropologists etc. The structuralists advocate that thoughts and perceptions are not natural rather they are constructed by the language used to explain them as language gives meaning to everything. Therefore, structuralism studies signs, communication and symbols. (See http://www.philosophybasics.com/movements_structuralism.html) Some prominent structuralists are Marx, Levi-Strauss, de Saussure, Lacan, Piaget and Freud. These theorists
have emphasised the significance of language in building the power relations. To do so, they have developed and proposed a system of thoughts which provided lawful and explanatory deep structures. However, in 1970s a school, named poststructuralists, emerged that transforms structuralism by advocating that the meanings that language produces are unstable, multiple and open to interpretation; thus they cannot be fixed. So in order to analyse the meaning of language one needs to consider the political, social and historical context in which it is written or spoken. Thus, discourses and readers are situated; hence cannot be situated (Sands&Nuccio: 1992).

In order to understand the poststructuralism, it is important to understand some themes developed in these theories. Sands and Nuccio in their article, have discussed the following themes.

1. **Differences:** Derrida distinguishes between difference and “differance” that influence the way of reading texts. Logocentrism creates binary pairs that are opposite, exclusive and hierarchical. He suggests one maybe compelled to think within these dichotomous pairs but there are various meanings that do not fit in these categories. This categorical thinking stems from language. The meanings infused in this language are derived from logocentric culture. Derrida argues that our understanding of something is not dependent on “metaphysical presence” i.e. reality, but it is dependent on the other words- “signifiers”. Language symbolises and sustains the “Symbolic Order” which is patriarchal or “phallocentric”. (See [http://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/16827/10/10_chapter%203.pdf](http://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/16827/10/10_chapter%203.pdf)). Tong (2013) has discussed Helen Cixious ideas dichotomies which have placed woman at a subordinate position to man. She explains that Cixious critiques patriarchal system for creating binary oppositions. She says that man has coupled concepts and terms in pairs of opposite polar in which one has the authority over the other. By doing this, man has segmented the reality. Cixious in her essay, “Sorties” have given the dichotomous pairs like active versus passive, writing verses speaking, sun versus moon, day versus night, parole versus ecriture high versus low etc (pg 274).

Tong further explains that according to Cixous, each of this pair is associated to man and woman. Man is considered to be active, high, cultural, light and positive while woman is considered to be passive, low, natural, dark and negative. Thus, we can see that in these
hierarchical oppositions woman is given a subordinate position. Man is considered to be the “self” whereas woman is considered to be the “other”. Thus, woman’s existence in man’s world is according to his terms. Either she is “other” or she is “unthoughtful”. “After man is done thinking about woman, what is left for her is unthinkable” (Tong: 2013).

2. **Deconstruction:** It is a way to analyse text by taking into consideration the marginalised voices and contextual dimensions. By doing so, we do not accept the construct as given rather we take social, historical and political context into consideration. This helps in identifying the biases present in the text. Hence, the marginal perspectives are centred and meanings, outside the polarities, are identified. In this way deconstructions helps in destabilizing the fixity of the current social order and express the perspective of marginalised.

3. **Logo-centrism:** Sands and Nuccio (1992) explains logocentrism argument that there is one single fixed logical order which can be found in “real”, “true” and “unmediated” forms. Poststructuralists find this assumption problematic. They argue that it can be criticised on two grounds. First, there is an assumption that there are inherent qualities in the categories of thinking which are “essential”. To further explain this they take on Derrida argument who advocates that there is no single truth or essence that could give meaning, in or to itself, exists. He argues that definitions, categories and constructs vary from one particular historical, political and social situation to another. Therefore, definitions depend upon the context and hence, it cannot have any inherent “essential” meaning. Second, logocentrism rely on the binary opposite pairs for knowledge production. This is linked to the role that language play in the production of meanings (Also see [http://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/16827/10/10_chapter%203.pdf](http://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/16827/10/10_chapter%203.pdf)).

4. **Multiple Discourses:** Deconstruction reveals that history fails to take into account the perspective of those people who not mentioned in the text. To elucidate this Sands and Nuccio (1992) uses Foucault perspectives on this. They say that according to Foucault, there are multiple discourses and perspective present at a particular time; however, only few among them are heard. As he says, “To be more precise, we must not imagine a world of discourse divided between accepted discourse and excluded discourse, or between the dominant discourse and the dominated one; but as a multiplicity of discursive elements that can come into
play in various strategies. It is this distribution that we must reconstruct, with the things said and those concealed, the enunciations required and those forbidden, that it comprises ……”(pg 491)

Hence, the discourses that are mostly heard are of those in power. They are the strategies that help in maintaining power. However, the discourses which are silenced are more meaningful.

5. **Subjectivity:**To elucidate subjectivity they borrowed Weedon’s ideas on subjectivity. According to Weedon, subjectivity means “the conscious and unconscious thoughts and emotions of the individual, her sense of herself and her ways of understanding her relation to the world”. In logocentric thought, individual is considered to have “essential” identity, subjectivity and personality which is unique, stable and integrated. However, Weedon argues that in poststructuralists perception subjectivity is contradictory, problematic and is continuously reconstituted everytime one speaks or thinks. This is because changes and contradictions are bound to occur over a period of time. Thus, depending on the context, the subject can speak in many voices. Hence, it is multifaceted. In addition to this, subjectivity also leads to the social construction of one’s own identity. Therefore, it is dependent on the sociocultural, historical and interpersonal context in which one is located (pg 491).

1.2 **Postmodernism:**

Using poststructuralist concepts of difference, deconstruction and criticism of logocentricism, postmodern theorists critique the universalisation of knowledge put forth by structuralists during the enlightenment era. Poststructuralists view structuralists as “essentialists” who believe that meanings are universal rather than historically constructed. To understand postmodernism, we must examine what are the arguments of Enlightenment.

Jane Flax in her article “Postmodernism and Gender relations in Feminist theories” has summarised the main tenets of Enlightenment as following:

1. The perception about “stable, coherent self” who knows what it thinks and why does it think so.
2. The opinion that rational power i.e. reason provides basis to “objective, reliable and universal knowledge”
3. The knowledge acquired through reason is always “true” and universal.
4. The notion that reason has “transcendental and universal qualities” which means that reason is exclusive of the historical and social experiences.

5. Reason, autonomy and freedom are interconnected in a complex manner.

6. The belief that power can be claim only through reason. Whenever truth comes in conflict with power, reason decides the case in favour of truth. Thus, it cannot trump reason.

7. The idea that science is the paradigm for true knowledge. This is because science is objective and neutral in its methods. Due to this, it is also socially beneficial.

8. In order to mediate the knowledge produced by science we use language. As language reflects the world which the rational minds of human beings observe (Flax: 1987: pg 624-625).

Tong (2013) argues that these tenets of Enlightenment dominate the thinking of most of the people. Hence, in the postmodernists opinion “Enlightenment world” is fabrication of people’s imagination. She explains that for postmodernist, neither the stable, coherent self nor the rational power is capable of generating universal knowledge. Therefore, the emphasis should be on generating local meanings as they are socially constructed rather than searching for universal laws and theories. Thus, they criticize science for providing “objective” knowledge. She asserts that power actually defines the truth and freedom is being able to do what one pleases to. Science is as subjective and contextual as politics and ethics. Often it is used to serve one’s own interest. Likewise, language too doesn’t portray the reality rather it constructs the reality. Hence, the postmodernism critiques “legitimate” narratives of humanists and propagate “legitimate” philosophy. This philosophy believes that there can be many discourses which should be viewed in historical, social and political context. Further, they object the binary categorisation such as class, gender and race as too reductive. Hence, they advocate multiplicity, diversity and pluralism (Tong: pg273-274).

TOPIC: 2.POSTMODERN FEMINISM:

Postmodern feminism is a new branch of feminism that strives for equality for women within the category of women. While doing so, they take into account the differences among the
women on the basis of class and race. Hence, it is intersectional in its approach. According to Flax, the postmodern feminist theorist intend to:

1. Identify feminist perceptive of society.
2. Examine the way social world affects women.
3. Analyse the role played by power and knowledge relationships in shaping the women’s perception of the social world.
4. Devise the ways through which social world can be changed (Anonymous).

Helen Cixous, Luna Irigaray and Julia Kristeva are the most prominent writers of postmodern feminist philosophy. Rosemarie Tong in her book, “Feminist Thought: A more comprehensive introduction” has discussed Helen Cixous. Helene Cixous is a novelist. She is inspired by Derrida’s concept of “differance”. Applying Derrida’s idea of “difference” to writing, she differentiated feminine writings form that of masculine writings. She argues that in psychoanalytic framework, masculine writings are grounded in their genitals and libidinal economy, which are symbolised by phallus. Therefore, Cixous request women to put themselves in words. She urges them to write about themselves outside the world that man has constructed for them. She describes woman’s writing as scribbling, scratching markings whereas man’s writings are composed and full of so called human wisdom. Thus, masculine writings are stamped with social approval. Hence they are too heavy to be changed. Cixous insists women to write as their writings will transform the way western world “thinks, speaks and acts”. This will eventually change the cultural and social standard. However, she warns women that writing about nonexistence as existence i.e. to “foresee the unforeseeable” is a straining and difficult task (pg 275-77).

Luca Irigaray is a psychoanalyst who was inspired by Lacan and Derrida. She developed “feminine” philosophical thought as her main aim was to liberate feminine philosophy from men’s philosophies. She argues that the kind of women that is known to us is “masculine feminine”. She is not the real women rather the women that men see. This is because in masculine discourse woman is not a women but a reflection of man’s imagination of her. Hence, she urges that there is a need to see another woman who is “feminine feminine” i.e. the woman as women see. This woman cannot be defined. If woman wishes to see themselves as woman then they need to take three steps. Firstly, women should stop using masculine language and develop female language which gender neutral. Secondly, woman should develop female sexuality. With the help of lesbian and autoerotic practises women can
identify their potential. By exploring multifaceted body, women will be able to speak words, think thoughts and do deeds that will displace the phallus. Thirdly, “women should mime the mimes men have imposed on women. Women should take men’s images of women and reflect them back to men in magnified proportions. Through miming, women can “undo the effects of phallocentric discourse simply by overdoing them.” (Tong: 2013, pg 226-29; Irigary:1987; also see http://pages.uoregon.edu/munno/OregonCourses/REL408W03/Tong06/chap6a.htm)

Julia Kristivais a psychoanyast inspired by Lacan’s work. She adopts Lacan’s idea on Oedipal and post-Oedipal stages with the Symbolic order and takes them further. She rejects the idea of identifying “feminine” with female biology and “masculine” with male biology. She argues that when the child enters Symbolic order, he/ she start identifying himself/herself with their mother or father. On the basis of their choice they become masculine or feminine.

"The belief that 'one is a woman' is almost as absurd and obscurantist as the belief that 'one is a man.' I say 'almost' because there are still many goals which women can achieve: freedom of abortion and contraception, daycarecenters for children, equality on the job, etc. Therefore, we must use 'we are women' as an advertisement or slogan for our demands. On a deeper level, however, a woman cannot 'be'; it is something which does not even belong in the order of being." (Tong: 2013 pg 230)

Thus, she argues that “women” is not natural rather a socially construction’. Therefore, it cannot be and shouldn’t be defined.

Sands and Nuccio in their article, “Postmodern feminist theory and Social work”have explained the difference as well as the similarities between postmodernism, poststructuralism and postmodern feminist theory. They argue that though postmodern feminist theory is akin to postmodernism, poststructuralist theory and French feminist theory; however, it critiques both feminism as well as postmodernism. Like postmodernists, postmodern feminists also criticised essentialism and categorical knowledge. They also highlighted that the earlier feminist assumed that when they were using “women” they were speaking for all the women including black women, women from the third world, lesbians etc. Therefore, they deconstructed the category of “women” and argued that “woman” is culturally constructed category with which only few women can be identified. In order to avoid this mistake, they emphasize that it is necessary for feminists to specify the women about whom they are talking. In this way, they will be speaking of about a particular “woman” rather than about
universal “women”. They explain that postmodern feminist also agree with postmodernists that fixation of categories as universal explanation of reality is problematic. However, they critique postmodernists for failing to take into account the importance of race, class and gender. They argue that these are also categories which should be viewed as diverse. Postmodern feminists were primarily concerned with diversity as they put emphasis on differences.

Further, they advocate that postmodern feminists share a political agenda with the American feminism who believe that regardless of one’s perspective each feminist aims to change social and political order to end women’s oppression. Thus, they believe that political action is a necessary step to redress the injustices done to women. Unlike the postmodernists, they believe in developing a theory and practicing it. In this process, the practise should predominate the theory.

Sands and Nuccio describe that postmodernist’s emphasis on differences put feminists in dilemma. However, this is acknowledged by postmodern feminists who also believe in diversity and multiplicity. They argue that there is multiplicity and diversity of women; therefore women’s movements reflect divergent and diverse interests. The postmodernist emphasis on multiple and diverse voices is contradictory to feminist political action. Feminist political action demands unity and action on defined women’s issue. In order to do so, the political entities, based on categorisation, are necessary for organising collective action on women issue. They argue that this tends to be overlooked by the postmodernists while advocating diversity. On the other hand, the postmodernists argue that when feminists command unity among women for political action they tend to assume that women are homogenous group who share “essentially” same interest. By uniting women as one category, feminists reflect the interests of the higher status women. As a result, they ignore the interests of the black women, women from the third world and lesbians.

**TOPIC: 3 Critiques of Postmodern Feminist theory:**

Tong (2013) has summarised the different critiques of postmodern feminism in the following manner. Feminist criticise postmodern feminist for their idea of diversity. Though, few
feminists support their idea of diversity but most of them view it as potential threat to feminist community as a whole. They argue that in the absence of an essentialist philosophy, political action cannot be taken.

Postmodern feminist have been criticised for being overtly academic. The language and the ideas are used in a specific manner that no one is able to understand what they are trying to do. Hence, they are called as “feminism for academicians”.

Gloria Steinem says "I always wanted to put a sign up on the road to Yale saying, 'Beware: Deconstruction Ahead'. Academics are forced to write in language no one can understand so that they get tenure. They have to say 'discourse', not 'talk'. Knowledge that is not accessible is not helpful. It becomes aerialised.” (see https://www.theguardian.com/world/2005/jan/17/gender.melissadenes)