
UNIT 2 POSTMODERNISM

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2.0 OBJECTIVES

Postmoderns would look at history in three periods, namely, the pre-modern, the modern and the post-modern.

- In this Unit, you are expected to look at these three periods of history, as seen by postmodern thinkers. Since postmodernism is largely a Western cultural phenomenon, the history referred to is the intellectual history of the West. Postmodern thinkers want to differentiate themselves from the pre-modern and the modern ways of looking at life and ideas.

2.1 INTRODUCTION

Postmodernism is a much-used and even overused term today in a variety of disciplines. It is hard to define, since it is not really a doctrine, but rather a particular type of sensitivity, a way of looking at things that has influenced styles in literature, in art, in architecture, in religious writings and even in moral and social practices and preferences.

To clarify this rather confusing state of affairs, it may be helpful to know that postmodernism is used in contemporary writings in at least *four different meanings*:

- a) the state of affairs in a society, that is, how a particular society actually is or works;
- b) a style in art, as when we speak of a postmodern building or painting;
- c) a term loosely used to indicate any aspect of today's society that is different from how societies were in the modern period;

- d) the ideas and theories that try to understand or explain this “new” state of society and its way of organizing things.

Some people use the term postmodernity to indicate the state of society today, and the word postmodernism to mean the thinking or the philosophy typical of today. Others use the term postmodernism to mean both. Now we shall begin with the characteristics of the pre-modern age.

2.2 THE CHARACTERISTICS OF THE PRE-MODERN AGE

By “pre-modern” is meant the world before the arrival of modern science.

Religious dogma was the ultimate reference point in settling issues. Religious leaders held the most powerful posts in public life. Most people went to religious places of worship, not because of conviction or inner experience, but because society expected them to attend public worship and abide by the religious practices of the group, which could punish the person who did not observe the prescribed religious practices. The penalties could include social ostracism (being thrown out of the village or society) or fines, physical punishments or even death.

Religious texts were held to have all the answers, whether on matters referring to one’s spiritual life, or on other “secular” matters, such as social relationships (e.g., the way women were treated in society, or what authority the king had, or how the so-called higher and lower groups in society related to each other), or health and sickness, or the nature of the material world, or even travel. Matters that we today consider purely natural or scientific, were taken to be part of religious revelation. People believed that the nature of the sun, moon and stars or the shape of the earth were matters of religious dogma.

This can, and still does, happen in parts of the world where education has not spread. Many people today still live in cultures and settings that are pre-modern. In such settings, ignorance and superstition still rule. Matters are settled according to village tradition and the opinion of magicians or wizards. Fear of evil spirits and of curses keeps people frightened and easy to manipulate.

There were certainly many good aspects to this pre-modern or unscientific world. There was a great sense of belonging to a community or village. People helped each other in case of need. People knew their neighbours, visited each other frequently, or met often at places of worship or in the market place. Most people knew almost nothing of what happened outside their village or region (in this sense, their village was their world); mutual need and the absence of other resources made people depend on each other in sickness, natural disasters and special events, marriage, funeral or village festivals.

Much of this changed, for a significant part of the world, with the arrival of modern science. Science ushered in a world that was significantly different, in a number of ways. This is the world we refer to as the modern world.

2.3 THE CHARACTERISTICS OF THE MODERN AGE

The modern period is roughly the period lasting from the sixteenth century A.D.

up to the middle of the twentieth century—the last four hundred years or so. This period is marked by a strong confidence in reason, particularly scientific reason. Knowledge obtained through “scientific” methods were considered more reliable and higher than other forms of knowledge.

According to postmodern thinkers, the modern period is marked by these characteristics: rationality, dualism, the search for absolute knowledge, belief in progress, pride of place given to science, a centre-periphery division of cultures and nations. Here is a short explanation of each of these traits:

Rationality: A good model of the centrality of reason would be the philosophy of Descartes. For him and other rationalists, the surest and the most evident certainties came through reason. Reason is the highest arbiter of truths. There is nothing we cannot explore through reason. Reason was seen as more reliable and less biased than ordinary experience or religious dogma. Descartes, Kant, Leibnitz, Fichte, Schelling and Hegel would be typical representatives of this modern way of thinking.

Dualism: Reality was seen as divided into the world of reason or spirit, and the world of matter. Of the two, the rational was seen as superior to the realm of matter. Human beings, too, were seen as made of up the dual elements of matter and spirit, which were very different from one another. One of the philosophical problems that would grip many thinkers discuss is the mind-body problem. How can my thinking or decision, for instance, move my hand?

The possibility of, and the search for, absolute knowledge: Descartes and Kant in particular tried to establish unshakable foundations for their philosophy. Their belief or claim was that absolute knowledge was possible. What was needed was to develop a right methodology to discover it. When discovered, such truth would be absolutely valid and unassailable; it would be true for everyone, everywhere, irrespective of the conditions or times.

Belief in Progress: Belief in reason led moderns to believe in unlimited progress. Sigmund Freud, for instance, would speak of reason as “our real God.” He held that all problems could be solved by reason. If we do not have a solution today, human reason will discover the solution tomorrow. Moderns saw history as progression. The diseases which we cannot heal today will be treated by medicines which we will invent tomorrow. In social and political areas, too, moderns were optimists. A hundred years ago, that is, at the beginning of the twentieth century, a number of intellectuals and political leaders believed that there would be no more wars, since countries could now communicate with each other easily, and settle disputes rationally. Moderns, in this sense, were optimists about the future. Things were expected to get better and better.

Science as supreme: Modern thinkers generally accepted scientific knowledge and technology as the paradigm of knowledge or as the most perfect type of knowledge. The main tool for unlimited progress was science. Science, many moderns believed, will solve most of our problems and make our individual and social lives safer, more comfortable and better in every way. Compared to pre-modern times, the modern world seemed to have been so much better off, in every way. To be modern meant to believe in science and recognize its superiority. All other ways of knowing were considered somehow inferior to scientific learning. This belief in science and technology was at times taken to absurd lengths. In one

well-known tragic instance, when the Titanic was built, it was considered unsinkable; the ship did not, therefore, carry enough life boats.

Centre and periphery: Most of this progress and scientific advancement took place in one particular part of the world, namely, the area we refer to as the “West,” that is, Western Europe and North America, together with other nations where Europeans settled in large numbers, like, Australia and New Zealand. The average Westerner was proud of being white and richer than the rest of the world. Western culture considered itself as not only richer than other parts of the world, but as racially and culturally superior. They saw themselves as the “centre” and the rest of the world as “periphery.” In the colonized countries, such as India, they managed to influence a good number of the local people, too, to see Western culture as inherently superior and their own cultures as inferior. This cultural arrogance was used to justify colonization. Instead of seeing it as the economic and cultural exploitation of the rest of the world in extremely unjust ways, it was presented as a civilizing process. Many non-European nations were conquered and exploited by European nations, which became extremely wealthy in the process, while reducing old civilizations like India to extreme penury.

Thus, the centre-periphery contrast was not just a philosophical notion; it had deep economic and political repercussions.

Some call this the *Enlightenment Project*, linking these traits to the European Enlightenment Period, when reason was accepted as the supreme norm in society. People believed that the best way to discover the truth and to organize society was reason (and not, for instance, religious doctrine). Thus, the modern European nations are not organized around a religious dogma or sacred texts, but around reason. The French Revolution and the French Constitution (which, in its turn, influenced the American Constitution, as well as the Indian Constitution) are examples of this way of thinking. People believed that human reason is the best tool for solving human problems. They took a clear stand that was different from, and often in opposition to, pre-modern ways of thinking, which they considered outdated and obscurantist.

2.4 THE CHARACTERISTICS OF THE POST-MODERN AGE

The confident, progress-oriented, supposedly rational and scientific way of thinking that marked modernity came under serious shocks in the twentieth century. Far from being a time of peace and harmony, it was marked by the two most destructive wars of history. The blind faith in science was in for a rude shock for a number of reasons. (The Titanic sank!). Besides the two world wars, the human race witnessed atrocious cruelties, such as the genocide of millions of Jews, the exploitation and ill-treatment of human beings on the basis of race, caste and gender. The same human brain that invented medicines invented also the atom bomb. The intellect that composed music and literature was also used to build gas chambers where innocent men, women and children perished. The so-called superior cultures and nations treated others with contempt and created systems of exploitation. In cities, side by side with high rise buildings, slums and crime increased. There were now not only more efficient ways of healing the sick, but also more ruthless forms of torture and murder. Atomic energy created more possibilities for providing electricity; it also led to nightmares like Chernobyl in the

USSR, where a dysfunctional nuclear reactor led to the death and disfigurement of many people. The invention of plastic gave us many new useful products; it also created a never-ending problem of waste disposal. Chemicals can kill insects; they also damage our lungs and brain. They can increase the yield of a farm; they also cause cancer on a large scale.

This deep disappointment with modernity's promises and the awareness of the double-edged nature of science and history, led many thinkers to question the certainties on which the modern period was built. This sense of un-ease with the unquestioned certainties of modernity is one of the marks of postmodernism, which, as we said, is not a fixed doctrine or a set of doctrine, nor an organization or dogma. Postmodern thinkers would take a conscious distance from the modern mental make-up in a number of ways. Rather than accept the ways of the modern period as universal norms valid for all times and places, more and more people started taking unbeaten or formerly unaccepted paths. This they did in art, in architecture, in philosophy, in social science, in politics, in mass media. Let us have a look at some of the traits that mark this new sensitivity. It is impossible to even summarize the main trends of this vast array of movements, but the following characteristics would be somewhat typical of doctrines, ideas and mentalities that call themselves post-modern. We will first look at the new situations and changes in awareness that led to this new type of thinking. Next, we will see how these new (post-modern) ways of thinking challenge earlier patterns of thought. After that, we will have a brief look at postmodernism's main contributions and limitations.

These are the world-changing events and thought patterns that challenged the confident, optimistic, Euro-centric vision of the world that marked modernity.

End of the colonial period: During the colonial period, it was easy for the European colonizing power to present itself as the norm for culture and morals, and present other cultures and civilizations inferior. Thus, European writings—from so-called scientific writings to children's stories and comic books—in general presented Asians as inferior and Africans as savage. British writer Macaulay, for instance, claimed that one shelf of Western books was superior to the whole literary output of other cultures. Western writings presented the European as more cultured, better, more benevolent, bearer of a superior culture. The end of the colonial period showed the world the cruelty and inhumanity that had sustained colonial rule. Colonization, far from being a benevolent arrangement benefiting the conquered peoples, was plunder on an incredibly large scale. The claim of the West to be a superior, caring ruler was exposed as largely false.

Awareness of pluralism: Travel, studies and exposure to different countries and cultures made many people more aware of cultural pluralism. Every human being starts life as a frog in a small well, but there are better chances today of seeing other frogs and other wells, and of seeing one's own way of speaking, living and judging as one among many ways of being human.

Historical and cultural conditioning of truth: This awareness of cultural pluralism also raised serious questions about the claims of particular ways of thinking to be universally valid. How do you judge, say, an Indian or Chinese or African marriage and family life with the criteria evolved in Europe? How far are our values and ethics universally valid? How far are they culturally conditioned?

Reality as evolving: The new discoveries in the sciences made us aware that the universe itself is a constantly changing reality, far more mysterious and incredibly more vast than we had imagined. The world changes; nature changes; our knowledge of nature changes. Subatomic particles change even as we study them.

The new world order: In the place of a world dominated by a few European nations, as was the case during most of the modern period (think of the massive migrations of Europeans to Australia or the Americas, with no thought given to the rights of the original inhabitants), we have a new world order, with rising powers. To give just two well-known examples, China has emerged as the world's largest manufacturing nation, and India is expected to become the world's third or fourth largest economy very soon. This is a far cry from colonial days.

International capitalism and a globalized economy: Multinational companies dominate the world economy today. A number of them have more power and money than most nations have. Globalization, for better or worse, is a powerful movement, enriching some nations and individuals beyond what could be thought of during the modern period, and impoverishing those who cannot compete in the world market.

New meaning and sources of knowledge: The printed word or even radio or television is not the most powerful source of knowledge today. It is the Internet. Knowledge is not only given and received in very different ways today; knowledge is the greatest source of wealth today. Today's IT firms based in Bangalore, for instance, are dealing in a product that was unknown in the modern period. This is where the strongest part of the economy is.

Under the influence of these changes that marked the twentieth century, thinkers and artists started looking at theory and life differently, a kind of difference that came to be known as postmodernism. Here are the challenges raised by this new form of thinking.

Check Your Progress I

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer.

b) Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit.

1) What do you understand by 'rationality'?

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2) Write a short note on a "New World Order."

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2.5 THE CHALLENGE OF THE POSTMODERN

Although postmodernism has no founder nor a fixed set of doctrines, most postmodernist thinkers and artists would raise (or have sympathy for) for the following types of criticisms of modern thought.

Critique of metanarratives: Jean-Francois Lyotard, the name most associated with postmodernism, would define postmodernism thus: “I define *postmodern* as incredulity toward metanarratives.” What did he mean? Lyotard sees any branch of knowledge as just one type of knowledge. In fact, he said, “Scientific knowledge is a kind of discourse.” He does not see science as inherently superior to others. To present one’s position or doctrine as superior or as valid for everyone, everywhere, one needs what Lyotard calls “metanarratives.” By meta-narratives he meant general theories or unexamined world views that would justify a particular position. Thus, if I want to promote science as the best type of knowledge, I would need a meta-narrative that tells me that scientific truths are superior to common sense or that all scientific work is done for the benefit of human beings. Or, when Karl Marx wrote about the exploitation of workers and children in nineteenth century mines and factories, he was narrating a fact. When he proposed Marxism as a solution for economic exploitation everywhere, he is claiming to have a universally valid theory, a diagnosis and prescription that should work in all settings. This would be, for post-moderns, a meta-narrative, and hence suspect. In general, postmodern sensitivity would lie in suspecting any doctrine or view that places itself above criticism and makes absolute claims, and in listening rather to the little stories that lie behind the big theory. This brings us to another important movement associated with postmodernism, namely, deconstruction.

Deconstruction: This term, as well as the intellectual movement it represents, is associated with the French thinker Jacques Derrida. Derrida’s ideas are proverbially hard to understand or summarize. In a few words, deconstruction would refer to a critical study of a subject, examining the language used and the assumptions involved in the writing. To deconstruct a text means to take it apart into its constitutive elements, and see how the text itself in a way undermines the doctrines it holds. We have to use words, since we have no other way of communicating ideas; at the same time, the words we use are inadequate to express what we want to. In this sense, words are both right and wrong. They need to be used, and at the same time, unused (he said much about the need to “erase” what we write.)

End of the autonomous subject, of history and of absolute truth: This is another well-known “slogan” associated with postmodernism. The meaning is this: By “*end of history*,” postmoderns mean three things: They question the assumption that human beings are progressing to an ever better state of being or society. A later stage of history can be worse than the previous one. Secondly, they look at historiography (the writing of history) critically. What we have is not raw history, but historiography done by particular nations or persons or cultures. We do not have any one objective of knowing or writing history. Thus, the history of the British Period in India would look different when written by an English historian—especially one who believed in the superiority of British culture or in the right of conquest—or by an Indian who saw colonization as immoral. Thirdly, postmoderns do not believe that history has a direction or unity. They think rather that the

events that make up history are of too many different kinds to fit into any one coherent whole.

When they mention *the end of the isolated subject*, what they mean is this. In Descartes, for instance, we have a philosopher claiming to identify the nature of the thinking subject. Descartes' claim would be that his conclusions would be valid for all human beings, everywhere. The same is true of other philosophers, like Kant. In these (and other thinkers), we see an attempt to make statements about any human being, anywhere. The abstract conclusions a particular philosopher comes to, are held to be valid for all human beings everywhere. This view is largely discarded by postmodern thinkers.

Why speak of *the end of absolute truth*?

This, too, is because postmodernists are in general more sensitive to the particular situations and conditions under which a so-called truth is developed. They are more reluctant than people in the modern period to think that anyone can propose universally valid abstract truths which cannot be challenged or changed, and which do not depend on the circumstances under which they discovered or proposed.

Language games: "Language games" is an idea mentioned earlier by distinguished philosophers like Wittgenstein. The point made here is this: Each branch of knowledge has its own rules. We cannot see experimental science as the highest form of knowledge, nor judge other areas of learning by the criteria of science. Thus, music or religious writing or architecture play by different rules when compared to physics or astronomy. This idea frees each discipline to follow its own language and rules. Science is no longer seen as the highest discipline, nor as the arbiter of truth. Thus, how we judge art or the truth of a mystical statement will be different from how we judge the validity or the veracity of scientific statements.

Periphery and centre: The centre and the periphery of the modern and colonial era have largely lost their meaning. What was once periphery can become the centre (e.g., the United States when compared to U.K.), or the world can be seen having many centres of power and influence rather than as having one economic or political or cultural centre. This change in the "pecking order" and the consequent change in international relations and the perception of cultures and peoples will be welcomed as empowering by formerly oppressed and excluded groups, or as threatening and destabilizing by groups that benefited from the earlier hierarchies (whether they be hierarchies of race or nation or caste or whatever).

Pluralism of cultures: No one culture can propose itself as the norm or as inherently superior. Recently, the Australian government apologized for the appalling injustices committed against the original inhabitants of that continent. Such a stand would have been unthinkable earlier. In the modern period, white settlers saw it as their right to take over a continent, exploit the Aborigines (whom they despised as inferior). Today, there is much greater awareness of the richness of different cultures, together with the acceptance of the human rights of all.

Historical nature of many truths: Unlike the quest of Descartes or Kant or Hegel to build a system of universally valid truths, postmoderns are sensitive to

the historical conditioning of many truths. So, the question to ask about a doctrine would not simply be: “What is the truth?” We would also need to ask: “In what setting was it said? Why was it said? Would it be valid for me/us/our setting?”

2.6 CONTRIBUTIONS OF POSTMODERNISM

As we have repeatedly stated, postmodernism is not a system or coherent set of doctrines. Hence, it cannot be presented, or defended or rejected as such. We need to see it as a new set of movements that arose independently in different fields, and influenced each other. These new ways of thinking can be credited with the following merits or contributions to the world of thought and culture.

Listening to the forgotten little narratives: The postmodernist suspicion of meta-narratives (accepting an unexamined grand theory that supports many particular doctrines and practices) can help us to listen to the many forgotten stories of ordinary people, smaller nations, less powerful cultures. For instance, colonization supported itself with the metanarrative of European cultural superiority and the claim of bringing civilization to the colonized peoples. In the process, the voices of the conquered peoples were not listened to. The so-called discovery of America in 1492 would mean different things to the conquering European settlers and to the Native Americans who lost all their land. The same can be said about the “progress” made by India by building huge dams; we do not normally hear the voices of the millions of people who lost their homes and land in the process.

The uniqueness and independence of different fields: Postmodernism frees each discipline to be itself, rather than compare itself to experimental science and be treated as inferior. Thus Kalidasa’s writings or the Ajanta-Ellora paintings or the Bhagavad Gita or the Bible cannot be judged by the canons of science. Each field is unique and independent. (And has the right to exist, provided it does not violate the rights of other human beings.)

From a centre-periphery world to a pluri-centric world: No culture (e.g., European) or race (e.g., white) or caste (e.g., Brahmin) has the right to propose itself as superior or as the norm to judge others. Who is to decide who is superior, and on whose criteria? Why should we have this superior-inferior hierarchy at all? Can’t human beings live and treat each other as human beings, different in some ways (in race or gender, in looks or language or customs), but equal in dignity and worth?

Critique of doctrines with culturally insensitive claims: Postmodernism invites us to look the background of doctrines that claim to be universally valid.

Influence of the non-rational: Reason, the queen in modernity, is seen as just one of the paths for reaching the truth. Postmodernism gives an important place to the role of the non-rational. This is partly because of the frightening truth that very brilliant people did some horrible things to others during the wars or during inter-racial or inter-religious fights. Reason alone does not seem to be a reliable guide and teacher in human affairs. We need to listen to other areas, such as, our emotions, our aesthetic sense, our traditions, our dreams.

Analysis of language: Language is used and abused. We need to examine it critically. Words express ideas; words also betray the ideas they claim to represent. A language is not merely a tool of communication; it is also the bearer of a culture,

and defender of particular values. Words can never express human experiences exactly or exhaustively.

Creativity in the arts, architecture and other fields: Refusing to follow the canons of modernity blindly, postmodern thinkers, artists, architects and writers have walked on untrodden paths, exploring new themes and new styles in new ways.

2.7 LIMITATIONS OF POSTMODERNISM

Postmodernism has both strong admirers and adamant critics. Here are some of postmodernism's weaknesses

Theoretical critique of theory: This is an age-old issue in philosophy. To criticize a theoretical position, you are using other theoretical assumptions. Thus, for instance, to state that we should reject all meta-narratives is itself a meta-narrative. Human beings cannot speak or survive without some grand theories, whether religious or social or economical. Even to state that there are other avenues to the truth besides reason, is itself a rational, theoretical statement. We cannot escape the use of reason.

Claiming more than it can prove: Postmodernism's claim that we live in a very different kind of age cannot be proved. Some would see postmodernism itself as a continuation of modernity (as another type of rational critique) rather than as something different from modernity. There are differences among periods of history and among cultures. This does not prove that what human beings have in common from one century to another or from one setting to another is less than the differences. A person living in the third or tenth or eighteenth century has more in common with us than there are differences between that world and ours.

Neglect of the essential and permanent: Why people read old religious books, or respond to a novel or movie from another culture, is because there is something essential and permanent we all share. Each of us is not so unique as to be completely different from others. This essential and permanent element is largely ignored or denied by postmodern thinkers.

Overlooking the contributions of modernity: While there were many flaws in modernity, it had its undeniable achievements. Psychiatric treatment of mental patients, for instance, is certainly an improvement over seeing the mentally sick as possessed by demons and subjecting them to cruel punishments. So, too, our modern means of travel, our mobile phones and computers, the spread of books, the many medical treatments available, are some of the advances the human race made using the gift of reason. Even the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is a great achievement. Whatever one's religious faith (or lack of it), people have certain inalienable rights as human beings. The common basis is our human nature, as seen by our reason. Modernity was a greatly beneficial and freeing change for most people living in pre-modern settings. Would any of us like to go back to the pre-modern era?

Neglecting Social reforms: Whether it is the abolition of *sati* in India or of slavery in the West, while one's religious faith was often the motivating force, the real arguments against injustice were based on an appeal to reason. Think of the fight against untouchability or the political action against the enslavement of Africans

or for the better treatment of women, or the respect afforded to persons of different religions in a multi-religious society. A modern, rational outlook was a key element in bringing about such changes. Without a common rational forum for exchange, what would a society's decisions be based on? We cannot leave everything to the preferences of individuals or small groups.

Moral relativism: A number of people who study postmodernism accuse it of having no strong ethical principles, of making everything a matter of private opinion. We should not forget that the position, "Everything is relative," is itself a self-contradictory statement. No one can logically hold it without contradicting oneself. To say that we need to respect cultures and that all our learning is conditioned by history and setting, is one thing. To jump from that to the conclusion that everything is relative, and that there are no universally valid truths, is an illogical step. Postmodernism seems to make this mistake.

Unnecessarily complex and obscure language: While studying the use of language and pointing out its limitations, several postmodern writers are notorious for excessive use of complex jargon, and writing in a way that is hard for even an educated person to follow, or for a reader to pin down.

Check Your Progress II

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer.

b) Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit.

1) What do you understand by 'metanarratives'?

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2) Write a short note on 'periphery and centre.'

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2.8 LET US SUM UP

This short presentation aimed at an introductory, non-technical look at the influential contemporary cultural phenomenon called postmodernism. There is already a vast literature about, and within, postmodernism. A good library or the Internet can put the student in touch with more material.

Postmodernism is more a mood or sensitivity than a doctrine or organization or dogma. It can be seen as progress or as regression, depending on one's style of life, preferred values, close associates and point of view. There are authors who see it as a bold critique of the excesses of modernity; others see it as a return

to the pre-modern; still others look on it as an extension of modernism or even as a faulty abandoning of much that is valid in modernity.

Human beings can be said to be the same all over, and at all times, or very different, depending on what you want to stress. The same can be said of the similarities and dissimilarities among people. Postmodernism stresses the differences more than the sameness or continuity with modernity.

As a call not to let the big voices (meta-narratives) drown the little voices, or to allow the self-styled centre (Europe, or the US, or Western culture or a so-called higher caste) ignore the dignity and voices of the less powerful, it is a bold and challenging critical voice.

How far these ways of thinking, living and looking at the world are widespread, and who are the votaries, are moot questions. In our own country, we have people living in the pre-modern age (think of people looking for religious explanations of diseases like small pox, or the killing of women as witches to ward off evil in a village), in modernity (e.g., our study of mathematics and science, our use of phones and computers and trains and planes, our access to vaccination, blood tests and heart surgery) and in post-modern settings (generally smaller groups found on college campuses and in research circles). No person or country or culture is totally pre-modern or modern or post-modern.

To understand some of the changes taking place in our world, it is good to listen to voices that consider themselves postmodern, so that we may never deify science and reason and progress and a particular culture, not deny its achievements, but have a realistic idea of the power of reason to do good and to do evil, the ambiguous nature of scientific progress, the unclear direction of history, the good and bad found in every culture (no culture being intrinsically superior or inferior), the need to listen to the little voices and not just to the dominant ones, to examine texts and language critically, to be willing to learn from those who are different from us... In all this, postmodernist thinkers have been pioneers inviting us to listen, question, adapt, learn, and not be dazzled by the achievements of reason, science, technology, capitalism and colonial expansion. In taking such bold steps, this trend itself has neglected or denied important and essential aspects of what it means to be human. Postmodernism tends to deny ultimate principles or philosophical or religious truths that are perennially valid.

But then, following the same logic, postmodernism's own ways of thinking cannot be defended or validated. This is why philosopher Richard Tarnas says of postmodernism, "[It] cannot on its own principles ultimately justify itself any more than can the various metaphysical overviews [meta-narratives] against which the postmodern mind has defined itself."

To conclude, just as postmodernism invites us to look at modernity critically, common sense and human wisdom remind us to look at postmodernism itself with critical appreciation, seeing its strengths and not denying its weaknesses.

2.9 KEY WORDS

Dogmatism : locks itself within systems expressed in absolute formulas of supposed universal value.

- Skepticism** : maintains a position of doubt and asserts that truth does not exist or that it cannot be discovered by the human mind.
- Relativism** : sees truth as partial and changeable, depending on the knower's mode of perception and varying according to the circumstances of place and time.

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2.11 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Answers to Check Your Progress I

1. *Rationality*: A good model of the centrality of reason would be the philosophy of Descartes. For him and other rationalists, the surest and the most evident certainties came through reason. Reason is the highest arbiter of truths. There is nothing we cannot explore through reason. Reason was seen as more reliable and less biased than ordinary experience or religious dogma. Descartes, Kant, Leibnitz, Fichte, Schelling and Hegel would be typical representatives of this modern way of thinking.

2. *The new world order*: In the place of a world dominated by a few European nations, as was the case during most of the modern period (think of the massive migrations of Europeans to Australia or the Americas, with no thought given to the rights of the original inhabitants), we have a new world order, with rising powers. To give just two well-known examples, China has emerged as the world's largest manufacturing nation, and India is expected to become the world's third or fourth largest economy very soon. This is a far cry from colonial days.

Answers to Check Your Progress II

1. 'Meta-narratives' means general theories or unexamined world views that would justify a particular position. Thus, if I want to promote science as the best type of knowledge, I would need a meta-narrative that tells me that scientific truths are superior to common sense or that all scientific work is done for the benefit of human beings. Or, when Karl Marx wrote about the exploitation of workers and children in nineteenth century mines and factories, he was narrating a fact. When he proposed Marxism as a solution for economic exploitation everywhere, he is claiming to have a universally valid theory, a diagnosis and prescription that should work in all settings.
2. The centre and the periphery of the modern and colonial era have largely lost their meaning. What was once periphery can become the centre (e.g., the United States when compared to U.K.), or the world can be seen having many centres of power and influence rather than as having one economic or political or cultural centre. This change in the "pecking order" and the consequent change in international relations and the perception of cultures and peoples will be welcomed as empowering by formerly oppressed and excluded groups, or as threatening and destabilizing by groups that benefited from the earlier hierarchies (whether they be hierarchies of race or nation or caste or whatever).