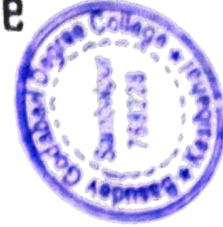


BASUDEV GODABARI DEGREE COLLEGE, KESAIBAHAL

Department of Political Science

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- Class - 1st Semester (2020-21) Admission Batch
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UNIT - 2 : STRUCTURE

- 2.1 Theories of Feminism : (Feminist and Postmodern)
- 2.2 Modern and Post-Modernism

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Theories of Feminism

Feminist theories first emerged as early as 1794 in publications such as *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* by Mary Wollstonecraft, "The Changing Woman",^[10] "Ain't I a Woman",^[11] "Speech after Arrest for Illegal Voting",^[12] and so on. "The Changing Woman" is a Navajo Myth that gave credit to a woman who, in the end, populated the world.^[13] In 1851, Sojourner Truth addressed women's rights issues through her publication, "Ain't I a Woman". Sojourner Truth addressed the issue of women having limited rights due to men's flawed perception of women. Truth argued that if a woman of color can perform tasks that were supposedly limited to men, then any woman of any color could perform those same tasks. After her arrest for illegally voting, Susan B. Anthony gave a speech within court in which she addressed the issues of language within the constitution documented in her publication, "Speech after Arrest for Illegal voting" in 1872. Anthony questioned the authoritative principles of the constitution and its male-gendered language. She raised the question of why women are accountable to be punished under law but they cannot use the law for their own protection (women could not vote, own property, nor themselves in marriage). She also critiqued the constitution for its male-gendered language and questioned why women should have to abide by laws that do not specify women.

Nancy Cott makes a distinction between *modern feminism* and its antecedents, particularly the struggle for suffrage. In the United States she places the turning point in the decades before and after women obtained the vote in 1920 (1910–1930). She argues that the prior *woman movement* was primarily about woman as a *universal* entity, whereas over this 20-year period it transformed itself into one primarily concerned with social differentiation, attentive to *individuality* and diversity. New issues dealt more with woman's condition as a social construct, gender identity, and relationships within and between genders. Politically this represented a shift from an ideological alignment comfortable with the right, to one more radically associated with the left.^[14]

Susan Kingsley Kent says that Freudian patriarchy was responsible for the diminished profile of feminism in the inter-war years,^[15] others such as Juliet Mitchell consider this to be overly simplistic since Freudian theory is not wholly incompatible with feminism. Some feminist scholarship shifted away from the need to establish the origins of family, and towards analyzing the process of patriarchy.^[17] In the immediate postwar period, Simone de Beauvoir stood in opposition to an image of "the woman in the home". De Beauvoir provided an existentialist dimension to feminism with the publication of *Le Deuxième Sexe (The Second Sex)* in 1949.^[18] As the title implies, the starting point is the implicit inferiority of women, and the first question de Beauvoir asks is "what is a woman"?^[19] A woman she realizes is always perceived of as the "other", "she is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her". In this book and her essay, "Woman: Myth & Reality", de Beauvoir anticipates Betty Friedan in seeking to demythologize the male concept of woman. "A myth invented by men to confine women to their oppressed state. For women, it is not a question of asserting themselves as women, but of becoming full-scale human beings." "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman", or as Toril Moi puts it "a woman defines herself through the way she lives her embodied situation in the world, or in other words, through the way in which she makes something of what the world makes of her". Therefore, the woman must regain subject, to escape her defined role as "other", as a Cartesian point of departure. In her examination of myth, she appears as one who does not accept any special privileges for women. Ironically, feminist philosophers have had to extract de Beauvoir herself from out of the shadow of Jean-Paul Sartre to fully appreciate her.^[21] While more philosopher and novelist than activist, she did sign one of the *Mouvement de Libération des Femmes* manifestos.

The resurgence of feminist activism in the late 1960s was accompanied by an emerging literature of concerns for the earth and spirituality, and environmentalism. This, in turn, created an atmosphere conducive to reigniting the study of and debate on matricentricity, as a rejection of determinism, such as Adrienne Rich and Marilyn French^[23] while for socialist feminists like Evelyn Reed,^[24] patriarchy held the properties of capitalism. Feminist psychologists, such as Jean Baker Miller, sought to bring a feminist analysis to previous psychological theories, proving that "there was nothing wrong with women, but rather with the way modern culture viewed them".

Elaine Showalter describes the development of feminist theory as having a number of phases. The first she calls "feminist critique" – where the feminist reader examines the ideologies behind literary phenomena. The second Showalter calls "Gynocritics" – where the "woman is producer of textual meaning" including "the psychodynamics of female creativity; linguistics and the problem of a female language; the trajectory of the individual or collective female literary career and literary history". The last phase she calls "gender theory" – where the "ideological inscription and the literary effects of the sex/gender system" are explored". This model has been criticized by Toril Moi who sees it as an essentialist and deterministic model for female subjectivity. She also criticized it for not taking account of the situation for women outside the west. From the 1970s onwards, psychoanalytical ideas that have been arising in the field of French feminism have gained a decisive influence on feminist theory. Feminist psychoanalysis deconstructed the phallic hypotheses regarding the Unconscious. Julia Kristeva, Bracha Ettinger and Luce Irigaray developed specific notions concerning unconscious sexual difference, the feminine, and motherhood, with wide implications for film and literature analysis.

The standard and contemporary sex and gender system

The standard sex determination and gender model consists of evidence based on the determined sex and gender of every individual and serve as norms for societal life. The model claims that the sex-determination of a person exists within a male/female dichotomy, giving importance to genitals and how they are formed via chromosomes and DNA-binding proteins (such as the sex-determining region Y genes), which are responsible for sending sex-determined initialization and completion signals to and from the biological sex-determination system in fetuses. Occasionally, variations occur during the sex-determining process, resulting in intersex conditions. The standard model defines gender as a social understanding/ideology that defines what behaviors, actions, and appearances are normal for males and females. Studies into biological sex-determining systems also have begun working towards connecting certain gender conducts such as behaviors, actions, and desires with sex-determinism.

Psychology

Feminist psychology is a form of psychology centered on societal structures and gender. Feminist psychology critiques the fact that historically psychological research has been done from a male perspective with the view that males are the norm. Feminist psychology is oriented on the values and principles of feminism. It incorporates gender and the ways women are affected by issues resulting from it. Ethel Dench Puffer Howes was one of the first women to enter the field of psychology. She was the Executive Secretary of the National College Equal Suffrage League in 1914.

One major psychological theory, relational-cultural theory, is based on the work of Jean Baker Miller, whose book *Toward a New Psychology of Women* proposes that "growth-fostering relationships are a central human necessity and that disconnections are the source of psychological problems".^[32] Inspired by Betty Friedan's Feminine Mystique, and

other feminist classics from the 1960s, relational-cultural theory proposes that "isolation is one of the most damaging human experiences and is best treated by reconnecting with other people", and that a therapist should "foster an

atmosphere of empathy and acceptance for the patient, even at the cost of the therapist's neutrality". The theory is based on clinical observations and sought to prove that "there was nothing wrong with women, but rather with the way modern culture viewed them"

Postmodernism

Postmodernism is a broad movement that developed in the mid-to-late 20th century across philosophy, the arts, architecture, and criticism, marking a departure from modernism. The term has been more generally applied to describe a historical era said to follow after modernity and the tendencies of this era.

Postmodernism is generally defined by an attitude of skepticism, irony, or rejection toward what it describes as the grand narratives and ideologies associated with modernism, often criticizing Enlightenment rationality and focusing on the role of ideology in maintaining political or economic power. Postmodern thinkers frequently describe knowledge claims and value systems as contingent or socially-conditioned, framing them as products of political, historical, or cultural discourses and hierarchies. Common targets of postmodern criticism include universalist ideas of objective reality, morality, truth, human nature, reason, science, language, and social progress. Accordingly, postmodern thought is broadly characterized by tendencies to self-consciousness, self-referentiality, epistemological and moral relativism, pluralism, and irreverence.

Postmodern critical approaches gained popularity in the 1980s and 1990s, and have been adopted in a variety of academic and theoretical disciplines, including cultural studies, philosophy of science, economics, linguistics, architecture, feminist theory, and literary criticism, as well as art movements in fields such as literature, contemporary art, and music. Postmodernism is often associated with schools of thought such as deconstruction, post-structuralism, and institutional critique, as well as philosophers such as Jean-François Lyotard, Jacques Derrida, and Fredric Jameson.

Criticisms of postmodernism are intellectually diverse and include arguments that postmodernism promotes obscurantism, is meaningless, and that it adds nothing to analytical or empirical knowledge.

Structuralism and post-structuralism

Structuralism was a philosophical movement developed by French academics in the 1950s, partly in response to French existentialism,^[44] and often interpreted in relation to modernism and high modernism. Thinkers who have been called "structuralists" include the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, the linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, the Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser, and the semiotician Algirdas Greimas. The early writings of the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan and the literary theorist Roland Barthes have also been called "structuralist". Those who began as structuralists but became post-structuralists include Michel Foucault, Roland Barthes, Jean Baudrillard, and Gilles Deleuze. Other post-structuralists include Jacques Derrida, Pierre Bourdieu, Jean-François Lyotard, Julia Kristeva, Hélène Cixous, and Luce Irigaray. The American cultural theorists, critics and intellectuals whom they influenced include Judith Butler, John Fiske, Rosalind Krauss, Avital Ronell, and Hayden White.

Like structuralists, post-structuralists start from the assumption that people's identities, values and economic conditions determine each other rather than having *intrinsic* properties that can be understood in isolation. Thus the French

structuralists considered themselves to be espousing relativism and constructionism. But they nevertheless tended to explore how the subjects of their study might be described, reductively, as a set of *essential* relationships, schematics, or

mathematical symbols. (An example is Claude Lévi-Strauss's algebraic formulation of mythological transformation in "The Structural Study of Myth"^[46]).

Postmodernist ideas in philosophy and in the analysis of culture and society have expanded the importance of critical theory. They have been the point of departure for works of literature, architecture and design, as well as being visible in marketing/business and the interpretation of history, law and culture, starting in the late 20th century. These developments—re-evaluation of the entire Western value system (love, marriage, popular culture, shift from an industrial to a service economy) that took place since the 1950s and 1960s, with a peak in the Social Revolution of 1968—are described with the term *postmodernity*, as opposed to *postmodernism*, a term referring to an opinion or movement. Post-structuralism is characterized by new ways of thinking through structuralism, contrary to the original form.¹

Post-postmodernism

The connection between postmodernism, posthumanism, and cyborgism has led to a challenge to postmodernism, for which the terms *postpostmodernism* and *postpoststructuralism* were first coined in 2003:

In some sense, we may regard postmodernism, posthumanism, poststructuralism, etc., as being of the 'cyborg age' of mind over body. Deconference was an exploration in post-cyborgism (i.e. what comes after the postcorporeal era), and thus explored issues of postpostmodernism, postpoststructuralism, and the like. To understand this transition from 'pomo' (cyborgism) to 'popo' (postcyborgism) we must first understand the cyborg era itself.

More recently metamodernism, post-postmodernism and the "death of postmodernism" have been widely debated: in 2007 Andrew Hoberek noted in his introduction to a special issue of the journal *Twentieth Century Literature* titled "After Postmodernism" that "declarations of postmodernism's demise have become a critical commonplace". A small group of critics has put forth a range of theories that aim to describe culture or society in the alleged aftermath of postmodernism, most notably Raoul Eshelman (performatism), Gilles Lipovetsky (hypermodernity), Nicolas Bourriaud (altermodern), and Alan Kirby (digimodernism, formerly called pseudo-modernism). None of these new theories or labels have so far gained very widespread acceptance. Sociocultural anthropologist Nina Müller-Schwarze offers neostructuralism as a possible direction. The exhibition *Postmodernism – Style and Subversion 1970–1990* at the Victoria and Albert Museum (London 24 September 2011 – 15 January 2012) was billed as the first show to document postmodernism as a historical movement.

Question Bank

1. Which feminist thought suggest that gender equality can be realized by eliminating the cultural notion of gender?
Ans. Radical Feminism
2. Among the following women whose name is closely associated with Central Social Welfare Board?
Ans. Durgabai Deshmukh
3. Germaine Greer coined the term Female Eunuch to describe
Castration of women by aspects of patriarchy
4. Mark out the factor contributing to high maternal mortality rate
Early marriage.
5. Gender disaggregated data are the basis for
Gender sensitive policy formulation and programme planning.
6. The first Research Centre for women was established in 1974 by:
SNDT Women's University
7. Who introduced the first time feminism
French Philosheper Charls Foryer 1837
8. Which Country first time adopt women rights to vote
Newziland 1893
9. In oxford Dictionary when the Feminism is introduced ?
1894,1895
10. Ethics is the study of _____.
philosophical study

Short Types.

1. What is Feminism ?
2. What is Feminist Prospective ?
3. What are the fundamental element of Feminism?
4. Theory of Feminism.

Long Types

1. Discuss the feminism and its element
2. Describe the theory of feminism.
3. Describe the Post-Modernism and its characteristics.

Ans.

Feminism advocates social, political, economic, and intellectual equality for women and men. Feminism defines a political perspective; it is distinct from sex or gender. Feminism means very different things to different people. The many variants of feminism are associated with a variety of philosophical and political outlooks. Sue V. Rosser has distinguished at least ten different feminist approaches to science and technology (Rosser, 2008). Many people in Europe, the U.S., and elsewhere practice feminism without self-identifying as "feminists." The vast majority of Europeans and Americans are feminists, at least liberal feminists—that is to say, they support equality and professional opportunities for women. It is important to recognize that what is labeled "feminist" in one time and place becomes business as usual in another. It is a curious phenomenon that when feminist practices or points of view become widely accepted in science, medicine, engineering, or the culture more generally, they are no longer

considered "feminist," but simply "just" or "true." The result is that the term "feminist" continues to refer to people and policies on the radical cutting edge (Schiebinger, 1999). Here we present four broad feminist approaches. Although these approaches differ, they are not mutually exclusive, nor does one supersede any other. These approaches represent basic strategies guiding research, legislation, and policies.

1. Liberal Feminism, or the Equality Approach, has been the leading form of feminism in the U.S. and much of Western Europe since English feminist Mary Wollstonecraft's vigorous call for equality for women in her 1792 *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. It has informed major legislation guaranteeing women equal rights, education, pay, and opportunity (in Europe the Amsterdam Treaty of 1999; in the U.S., the Equal Pay Act of 1963, Title IX of the Education Act Amendments of 1972, and the Equal Opportunity Employment Act of 1972). Liberal feminism has been criticized for not recognizing sex and gender differences. It is often considered "assimilationist," meaning that women, and not society or culture, are required to change in order for women to succeed.

2. Difference Feminism represents a broad spectrum of feminisms that emphasize differences between women and men. This approach arose in the 1980s and 1990s in efforts to revalue qualities traditionally devalued as "feminine"—such as subjectivity, caring, feeling, or empathy. This approach identifies bias in science and technology by seeing what has been left out from feminine perspectives—sometimes expressed as "women's ways of knowing." Difference feminisms have been criticized as being essentialist. Difference feminism tends to romanticize traditional femininity and masculinity and to reinforce conventional stereotypes. This approach fails to take into account that women and men across classes and cultures hold many different perspectives and values.

3. Co-Constructionism analyzes how science/technology and gender mutually shape each other (Faulkner, 2001; Oudshoorn et al., 2004). Gender identities are produced simultaneously with science and technologies; neither precedes the other. Gender is understood to be material, discursive, and social; it permeates artifacts, culture, and social identities. Co-constructionism seeks to avoid both technological determinism (seeing technology as the prime driver of modernity) and gender essentialism (seeing gender characteristics as innate and unchangeable).

4. Sex and Gender Analysis enriches science, health & medicine, and engineering research by analyzing how sex and gender influence all phases of research, including setting priorities, making funding decisions, establishing project objectives and methods, gathering and analyzing data, evaluating results, developing patents, and transferring ideas to markets (Schiebinger et al., 2011). This approach prioritizes analysis (not prescription) to guide efforts to achieve gender equality. Simultaneously, this approach employs sex and gender analysis as a resource to stimulate creativity in science and technology, and by doing so enhance the lives of both women and men.

2.

The term feminism can be used to describe a political, cultural or economic movement aimed at establishing equal rights and legal protection for women. Feminism involves political and sociological theories and philosophies concerned with issues of gender difference, as well as a movement that advocates gender equality for women and campaigns for women's rights and interests. Although the terms "feminism" and "feminist" did not gain widespread use until the 1970s, they were already being used in the public parlance much earlier; for instance, Katherine Hepburn speaks of the "feminist movement" in the 1942 film *Woman of the Year*.

According to Maggie Humm and Rebecca Walker, the history of feminism can be divided into three waves. The first feminist wave was in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the second was in the 1960s and 1970s, and the third extends from the 1990s to the present. Feminist theory emerged from these feminist movements. It is manifest in a variety of disciplines such as feminist geography, feminist history and feminist literary criticism.

Feminism has altered predominant perspectives in a wide range of areas within Western society, ranging from culture to law. Feminist activists have campaigned for women's legal rights (rights of contract, property rights, voting rights); for women's right to bodily integrity and autonomy, for abortion rights, and for reproductive rights (including access to contraception and quality prenatal care); for protection of women and girls from domestic violence, sexual harassment and rape; for workplace rights, including maternity leave and equal pay; against misogyny; and against other forms of gender-specific discrimination against women.

During much of its history, most feminist movements and theories had leaders who were predominantly middle-class white women from Western Europe and North America. However, at least since Sojourner Truth's 1851 speech to American feminists, women of other races have proposed alternative feminisms. This trend accelerated in the 1960s with the Civil Rights movement in the United States and the collapse of European colonialism in Africa, the Caribbean, parts of Latin America and Southeast Asia. Since that time, women in former European colonies and the Third World have proposed "Post-colonial" and "Third World" feminisms. Some Postcolonial Feminists, such as Chandra Talpade Mohanty, are critical of Western feminism for being ethnocentric. Black feminists, such as Angela Davis and Alice Walker, share this view.

First wave

First-wave feminism refers to an extended period of feminist activity during the nineteenth century and early twentieth century in the United Kingdom and the United States. Originally it focused on the promotion of equal contract and property rights for women and the opposition to chattel marriage and ownership of married women (and their children) by their husbands. However, by the end of the nineteenth century, activism focused primarily on gaining political power, particularly the right of women's suffrage. Yet, feminists such as Voltairine de Cleyre and Margaret Sanger were still active in campaigning for women's sexual, reproductive, and economic rights at the time. In 1854, Florence Nightingale established female nurses as adjuncts to the military.

In Britain the Suffragettes and, possibly more effectively, the Suffragists campaigned for the women's vote. In 1918 the Representation of the People Act 1918 was passed granting the vote to women over the age of 30 who owned houses. In 1928 this was extended to all women over twenty-one. In the United States, leaders of this movement included Lucretia Mott, Lucy Stone, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Susan B. Anthony, who each campaigned for

abolition of slavery prior to championing women's right to vote; all were strongly influenced by Quaker thought. American first-wave feminism involved a wide range of women. Some, such as Frances Willard, belonged to conservative Christian groups such as the Woman's Christian Temperance Union. Others, such as Matilda Joslyn Gage, were more radical, and expressed themselves within the National Woman Suffrage Association or individually. American first-wave feminism is considered to have ended with the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution (1919), granting women the right to vote in all states.

The term first wave was coined retrospectively after the term second-wave feminism began to be used to describe a newer feminist movement that focused as much on fighting social and cultural inequalities as political inequalities.

Second wave

Second-wave feminism refers to the period of activity in the early 1960s and lasting through the late 1980s. The scholar Imelda Whelehan suggests that the second wave was a continuation of the earlier phase of feminism involving the suffragettes in the UK and USA. Second-wave feminism has continued to exist since that time and coexists with what is termed third-wave feminism. The scholar Estelle Freedman compares first and second-wave feminism saying that the first wave focused on rights such as suffrage, whereas the second wave was largely concerned with other issues of equality, such as ending discrimination.

The feminist activist and author Carol Hanisch coined the slogan "The Personal is Political" which became synonymous with the second wave. Second-wave feminists saw women's cultural and political inequalities as inextricably linked and encouraged women to understand aspects of their personal lives as deeply politicized and as reflecting sexist power structures.

Simone de Beauvoir and The Second Sex

The French author and philosopher Simone de Beauvoir wrote novels; monographs on philosophy, politics, and social issues; essays; biographies; and an autobiography. She is now best known for her metaphysical novels, including *She Came to Stay* and *The Mandarins*, and for her treatise *The Second Sex*, a detailed analysis of women's oppression and a foundational tract of contemporary feminism. Written in 1949, its English translation was published in 1953. It sets out a feminist existentialism which prescribes a moral revolution. As an existentialist, she accepted Jean-Paul Sartre's precept existence precedes essence; hence "one is not born a woman, but becomes one." Her analysis focuses on the social construction of Woman as the Other. This de Beauvoir identifies as fundamental to women's oppression. She argues women have historically been considered deviant and abnormal and contends that even Mary Wollstonecraft considered men to be the ideal toward which women should aspire. De Beauvoir argues that for feminism to move forward, this attitude must be set aside.

Ans.

3. In art, postmodernism refers to a reaction against modernism. It is less a cohesive movement than an approach and attitude toward art, culture, and society. Its main characteristics

include anti-authoritarianism, or refusal to recognize the authority of any single style or definition of what art should be; and the collapsing of the distinction between high culture and mass or popular culture and between art and everyday life. Postmodern art can be also characterized by a deliberate use of earlier styles and conventions, and an eclectic mixing of different artistic and popular styles and mediums.

Postmodernism is largely a reaction against the intellectual assumptions and values of the modern period in the history of Western philosophy (roughly, the 17th through the 19th century). Indeed, many of the doctrines characteristically associated with postmodernism can fairly be described as the straightforward denial of general philosophical viewpoints that were taken for granted during the 18th-century Enlightenment, though they were not unique to that period. The most important of these viewpoints are the following.

1. There is an objective natural reality, a reality whose existence and properties are logically independent of human beings—of their minds, their societies, their social practices, or their investigative techniques. Postmodernists dismiss this idea as a kind of naive realism. Such reality as there is, according to postmodernists, is a conceptual construct, an artifact of scientific practice and language. This point also applies to the investigation of past events by historians and to the description of social institutions, structures, or practices by social scientists.

2. The descriptive and explanatory statements of scientists and historians can, in principle, be objectively true or false. The postmodern denial of this viewpoint—which follows from the rejection of an objective natural reality—is sometimes expressed by saying that there is no such thing as Truth.

3. Through the use of reason and logic, and with the more specialized tools provided by science and technology, human beings are likely to change themselves and their societies for the better. It is reasonable to expect that future societies will be more humane, more just, more enlightened, and more prosperous than they are now. Postmodernists deny this Enlightenment faith in science and technology as instruments of human progress. Indeed, many postmodernists hold that the misguided (or unguided) pursuit of scientific and technological knowledge led to the development of technologies for killing on a massive scale in World War II. Some go so far as to say that science and technology—and even reason and logic—are inherently destructive and oppressive, because they have been used by evil people, especially during the 20th century, to destroy and oppress others.

4. Reason and logic are universally valid—i.e., their laws are the same for, or apply equally to, any thinker and any domain of knowledge. For postmodernists, reason and logic too are merely conceptual constructs and are therefore valid only within the established intellectual traditions in which they are used.

5. There is such a thing as human nature; it consists of faculties, aptitudes, or dispositions that are in some sense present in human beings at birth rather than learned or instilled through social forces. Postmodernists insist that all, or nearly all, aspects of human psychology are completely socially determined.

6. Language refers to and represents a reality outside itself. According to postmodernists, language is not such a "mirror of nature," as the American pragmatist philosopher Richard Rorty characterized the Enlightenment view. Inspired by the work of the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, postmodernists claim that language is semantically self-contained, or self-referential: the meaning of a word is not a static thing in the world or even an idea in the mind but rather a range of contrasts and differences with the meanings of other words. Because meanings are in this sense functions of other meanings—which themselves are functions of other meanings, and so on—they are never fully "present" to the speaker or hearer but are endlessly "deferred." Self-reference characterizes not only natural languages but also the more specialized "discourses" of particular communities or traditions; such discourses are embedded in social practices and reflect the conceptual schemes and moral and intellectual values of the community or tradition in which they are used. The postmodern view of language and discourse is due largely to the French philosopher and literary theorist Jacques Derrida (1930–2004), the original and leading practitioner of deconstruction.

7. Human beings can acquire knowledge about natural reality, and this knowledge can be justified ultimately on the basis of evidence or principles that are, or can be, known immediately, intuitively, or otherwise with certainty. Postmodernists reject philosophical foundationalism—the attempt, perhaps best exemplified by the 17th-century French philosopher René Descartes's dictum cogito, ergo sum (“I think, therefore I am”), to identify a foundation of certainty on which to build the edifice of empirical (including scientific) knowledge.

8. It is possible, at least in principle, to construct general theories that explain many aspects of the natural or social world within a given domain of knowledge—e.g., a general theory of human history, such as dialectical materialism. Furthermore, it should be a goal of scientific and historical research to construct such theories, even if they are never perfectly attainable in practice. Postmodernists dismiss this notion as a pipe dream and indeed as symptomatic of an unhealthy tendency within Enlightenment discourses to adopt “totalizing” systems of thought (as the French philosopher Emmanuel Lévinas called them) or grand “metanarratives” of human biological, historical, and social development (as the French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard claimed). These theories are pernicious not merely because they are false but because they effectively impose conformity on other perspectives or discourses, thereby oppressing, marginalizing, or silencing them. Derrida himself equated the theoretical tendency toward totality with totalitarianism.