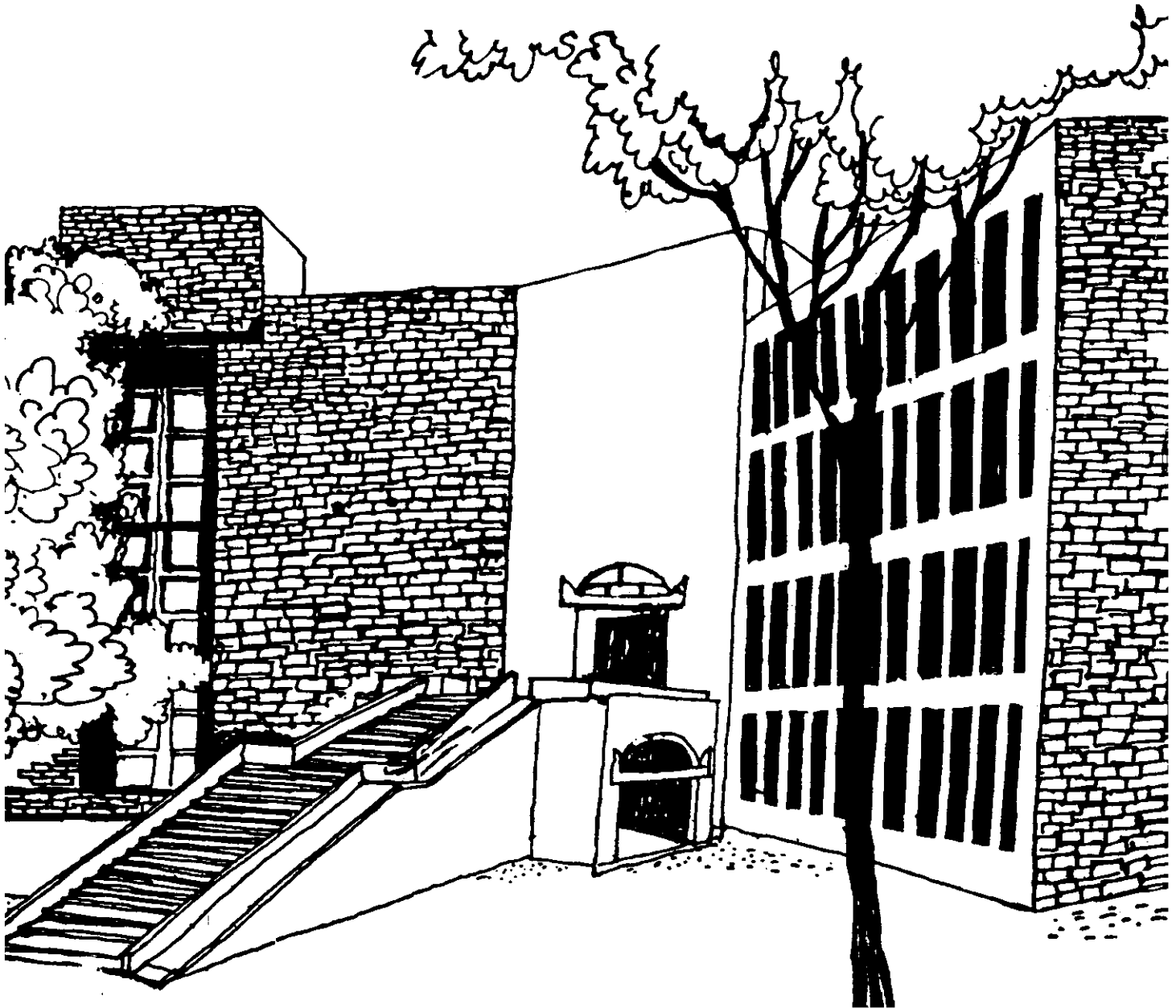विद्याविनियोगाद्विकास:

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PSYCHOLOGY AND THE CHALLENGE OF THE
POSTMODERN CONDITION

By

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Psychology and The Challenge of The Postmodern Condition

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We are living in the midst of fundamental processes of transformations which are global in nature and which touch almost all the domains of our lives, transforming both the contours of our social structures and the horizons of our cultures. Postmodernism is a descriptive label for some of the processes of restructuring, at work in contemporary advanced societies. Even though as a framework for understanding contemporary structural as well as discursive transformation, postmodernism has originated in Western Europe and North America, as a perspective it has a global relevance partly because of the globalization of the cultural and structural change that started decades ago in advanced societies. Contemporary Indian society is as much a part of the postmodern condition as North America is even though the degree of belongingness might vary. In this context, what is the challenge of the postmodern condition - the crisis of representation and the crisis of social organization it entails - for the way we think about issues and imagine our universe? Indeed, we are now living in a time of structural and discursive liminality where our familiar categories are collapsing and our ways of world-making are disintegrating beyond recognition. This collapse of our familiar boundaries calls for a readjustment in our rhetorical habits which would enable us not only to study the word of "difference" that postmodernism creates, but also to live more meaningfully in this changing world. Contemporary transformations in culture and consciousness, politics and social structure pose the greatest challenge to social science as a community of discourse, as a community of imagination. This calls for an alternative process of knowledge formation where we celebrate interdisciplinarity at the very level of our being, realizing that the constitution of reality - the constitution of both society and subjectivity in contemporary period - defy any bounded disciplinary signification. If post-modernism, as the sociologist Scott Lash would argue, refers primarily to a new "mode of signification,"[1] then its significance for social science lies in challenging us to transcend our disciplinary boundaries and to cultivate what the noted anthropologist Clifford Geertz calls "imaginative entry into an alien turn of mind."[2]

What does postmodernism mean? Philosophers and literary critics would like to treat it as simply a philosophical movement built around the deconstructionist enterprise of people like Jacques Derrida. But as a cultural anthropologist, I do not treat postmodernism as an isolated movement of doubt and reinterpretation in metaphysics. I treat postmodernism as a part of the total field of contemporary transformation; hence, I prefer the word "the condition of postmodernity" to postmodernism. This method of looking at postmodernism as a total field has drawn inspiration from some of the most insightful commentaries on the postmodern condition such as geographer David Harvey's, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, sociologist Scoot Lash's *The Sociology of Postmodernism*, and historian Mark Poster's *The Mode of Information: Post-Structuralism and the Social Context*.[3]

But even after all these prefatory remarks, the fundamental question still remains: What does exactly postmodernism mean? My intention here is not to provide a definition of postmodernism but to attempt a description of it. In describing postmodernism, I would use two differentiating (not

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diametrically opposed) notions; flexibility and differentiation. Postmodernism is a total movement both in the field of culture as well as in social structure which strives towards flexibility from a centralized and standardizing regime and to recreate de-differentiation in a world already differentiated by the modernizing process. As a movement towards flexibility, postmodernism in economic activity breaks away from a regime of standardized mass production to a flexible regime of production, distribution and exchange.[4] This movement towards flexibility is being accompanied by the rise of the 'informal economy,'[5] by the reorganization of "the internal labour market" of the industries and by the deregulation and transformation of bureaucracy. In the realm of politics, postmodernism strives to create a flexible relationship between state and civil society through the transformative politics of grass-roots movements. These movements are different from conventional political parties insofar as they are motivated less by "questions of distribution than by the concern for the grammar of forms of life."[6]

But this incessant striving towards flexibility is not simply confined to economy and politics, it has not left untouched the script of life in modern society. Postmodern restructuring not only creates a flexible specialization on the shop floor; it also necessitates a flexible life course. As Buchman in his study "*The Script of Life in Modern Society: Entry into Adulthood in a Changing World*" writes: "Unemployment due to structural (technological) change or economic factors undermine the life long integration in the occupational system that has characterized male occupational careers since World War II. Thus, the individual's movement through the occupational system is gradually losing its highly standardized form."[7] This loss of a standardized and predictable life course on the part of the blue collar workers is accompanied by the rise of a "postmodern self" in case of the professional and the new middle class in advanced societies. Wood and Zurcher in their study, *The Postmodern Self*, write that this embodies a "Post-individualist" "charismatic reaction to the contradiction between formal and substantive authority embodied in the modern self."[8]

There are, however, two broad approaches to the nature of self and subjectivity in the postmodern condition. One approach celebrates the coming of a new form of subjectivity which is, to adapt the word of philosopher Fred Dellmayr, "post-individualist"[9] and which is able to transcend the dualism between structure and agency, collective and the individual. Social movement theorist Alain Touraine discovers in this new subjectivity "The Return of the Actor,"[10] an actor who is not simply an egoistic moned, but who realizes his or her own individuality through community and transformation. The other view looks at the post-modern self as a sign and a simulacrum without having any foundation whose solidarity is only a product of the frivolous play of irony and contingency.[11] Mark Poster writes: "In electronically mediated communications, subjects now float, suspended between points of objectivity, being constituted and reconstituted in relation to the discursive arrangement of the occasion."[12] In the electronic stage, "the self is decentred, dispersed, and multiplied in continuous instability."[13] In this context, sociologist Scott Lash speaks about the double identity of the new middle class in advanced societies: one built on the model of distinction and the other built on the model of difference. In Lash's insightful words: "Their identities and habitues can be fixed, rigid, status conscious on the caricatured model of the yippie that is on the model of 'distinction.' On the other hand, these same social groupings also form in large part a constituency of the new social movements. Their habitues and identities can thus be constructed importantly along lines of gender,

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minority ethnicities, minority sexual politics, environmentalism....... . That is, along lines of difference rather than of invidious distinction."[14]

Indeed difference is the new language of self and society in the post-modern condition, a new mode of talking and thinking about the human condition made sacred by the deconstructionist enterprise of philosopher Jacques Derrida. Derrida challenges "hierarchy" and "opposition" as fundamental categories of human existence, the categories which provided focal metaphors during the modernist regime. Derrida argues that "such philosophical opposition as nature/culture, theory/practice, mental/manual and life/death are differentially constituted."[15] These differences are not simply passive signs or lifeless categories in a system of classification. Derrida helps us to understand the critical power of differences in resisting incorporation into a totalizing system of inequality through both "spatial and temporal deferral."[16] If human reality is differentially constituted rather than hierarchically constituted, then what about human needs? Are these still hierarchically constituted? How to think about Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs in the face of Derrida's postmodern differential onslaught? Its implication for psychology is, perhaps, to supplant the hierarchy of needs with a vision of simultaneity and difference which would have more a spatial configuration rather than a simple linear ordering. I think postmodernism does pose a question to Abraham Maslow when Scott Lash writes: "... postmodernism can promise a subjectivity whose classificatory schemata have more in common with difference than they with the hierarchy or 'distinction.'"[17] Ronald Inglehart has studied at great length the question of value and valuational ordering in case of the postindustrial societies. Inglehart writes: ".... people tend to give priority to the safety and sustenance needs on the one hand, or to higher order needs, on other hand without assuming that there is any specific ordering within the latter group."[18] For Inglehart, who has studied at depth the contemporary culture shift in advanced industrial societies: "There does not seem to be clear hierarchy within the last set of needs, which Maslow called 'self actualization needs.'"[19]

Ashish Nandy, also provides us a contemporary critique of Maslow's hierarchy of needs.[20] For Nandy, a hierarchical construction of human needs and the separation of the higher from the lower needs can obscure the fact that the pursuit of higher forms of need by those who have already fulfilled their basic needs can be carried out in a social and cultural context of narcissism and deprivation. Nandy sensitizes us to the sociological structuration of hierarchy of needs. The privileged, having had fulfilled their basic needs, can pursue their "Being Love" with a total unconcern for the deficiency needs of the majority."[21] Moreover, for Nandy, such asceticism of the rich "can become in the psychological sense, a defensive denial of real life suffering."[22] Nandy makes his argument clear: "But the spirit denying consumerism of the rich and the obsessive compulsive concept of monetized work of the powerful too, can be neurotic defenses against recognizing the decadence and degradation of the privileged. Concretization of happiness, success, morality, creativity and work can be pathological too. As this century has shown, there is not only Maslow's theory of hierarchy of needs but also a half articulated anti-Maslowian logic which says that if freedom can be an ego-defense and not a real substitute for bread, bread too can be an ego-defense and not a real substitute for freedom."[23] Thus for Nandy ".... the so called deficiency needs and growth needs can be, indeed must be, pursued synchronically because the two kinds of needs are vital to each other.[24]

But even though postmodernism questions Maslow's hierarchy of needs, some trends in postmodernism can corroborate Maslow's psychology of Being.[25] Maslow's being is not simply a Fruedian Id full of instincts to start with and then socialized into a new cultured being through familiar processes of psychological internalization and cultural socialization. It is a Being which is full of possibility to start with and socialization process is a process of mutual unfolding of this potentially Divine Being, and the patterns of culture. Sociologist Anthony Giddens 'new vision about socialization which he calls 'structuration' is very much along similar lines.[26] For Giddens, the process of growing up involves not the dualism of structure and agency, but the duality of structure and agency where the individual is not simply a product of either society or culture. This way of conceptualizing the individual and the socialization process helps us to understand the process of moral development in a new way where morality refers not simply to an obedience to a collective norms, but to have the critical faculty of one's being regarding a proper and a good life, a faculty which might question one's own cultural construction of such a good life. In a hierarchical society, patterns of culture might, and in fact, support structures of in-human inequalities, but it is the Being which has the critical faculties to transcend the givens of one's own exploitative culture and celebrate Eros rather than Thanatos.

Two contemporary philosophers help us to put in perspective this treatment of culture and Being vis-a-vis the striving for a good and meaningful life understood intersubjectively rather than simply through the prism of "possessive individualism." Agnes Heller argues in her "Beyond Justice": ... a just procedure is the condition of the good life.... of all possible good lives.... but it is not sufficient for the good life.... All the elements of the good life are beyond justice."[27] Heller stresses that the pursuit of a good life cannot simply be a matter of particular cultural convention; it requires that vision of the Being which has the capacity of going beyond a particular cultural construction of justice which to an outsider might seem very unjust. Heller also writes that "... Beyond has the connotation of 'higher', and not only being different.[28] Jurgen Habermas further illumines this process of critical consciousness of the Being which has the critical power to question cultural convention. Habermas develops his notion of "discourse ethics" where individuals are participating in a transformational process of moral argumentation not simply with the model of the socialized cultural convention but with a "moralizing gaze" which is, to some extent, beyond culture. To quote Habermas: "Under the unrelenting moralizing gaze of the participant in discourse, ... familiar institutions can be transformed into many instances of problematic justice."[29] Habermas makes this clear in his *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*: "Within the horizon of the life-world, practical judgements derive both their concreteness and their power to motivate action from their inner connection to unquestioningly accepted ideas of the good life, in short, from their connection to ethical life and its institutions. Under these conditions, problematization can never be so profound as to risk all the assets of the existing ethical substance. But the abstractive achievements required by the moral point of view do precisely that. This is why Kohlberg speaks of a transition to a post-conventional stage of moral consciousness. At this stage, moral judgement becomes dissociated from local conventions and historical coloration of a particular form of life."[30]

Post-modern challenge to psychology is not confined solely to the reconceptualization of the human need and rethinking the process of moral development. It is a challenge to the very authority of psychology itself - particularly to the authority of psychoanalysis. In this way, it is a part of the global

decentering of authority - be it the authority of the state or the authority of the anthropologist or authority of the psychoanalyst.[31] Postmodernism argues that our clinical ground is not as absolute as we once thought. In his essay, "The Unconscious in a Postmodern Depth Psychology," Paul Kugler argues that modernism refers to a central focus on "Authorial Intention" while postmodernism refers to "an epistomological crisis" emerging out of the crisis of this modernist authority and textuality. Kugler writes:

"The modernist hermeneutic was guided by the implicit assumption that the real meaning was to be found in authorial intention. What the creature intended in the process of the text is the 'real' meaning. In depth psychology, during the same period, a similar interpretive attitude was cultivated in the case of the interpretation of dreams. The analyst, as detached observer, "objectively" viewed and interpreted the patient's dream text through a knowledge of the person's psychiatric history, psychodynamics, and free associations. Through an "objective" analysis of the clinical material, it was thought to be possible to discover the patient's unconscious intentions and therefore, the 'true' meaning of the dream text."[32]

Kugler further tells us:

"The tendency to ground the act of interpretation in a transcendental signified is characteristic not only of Western metaphysics but of depth psychology as well. Psychoanalysis has traditionally grounded clinical diagnosis and therapeutic understanding on just such absolutes. To understand a symptom, we look to one of these ultimate to give authority to our diagnosis and interpretation. We look for the 'origin' of the symptom, or we attempt to discover what 'really' happened in the patient's 'history,' or we view the symptom from the point of view of the 'self' and its innate tendency to 'centre' or bring 'unity' to personal life. For these 'absolutes' to perform their interpretative function, they must themselves transcend the very clinical phenomena they seek to explain."[33]

But these absolutes are not only temporally located in the past, "the authorities for clinical interpretation might also be grounded in a posited absolute located in the future."[34] This kind of psychoanalytic explanation in terms of the transcendental absolute and 'first principles' works teleologically and like Western linear historiography does violence to the case in hand. "For example, the clinical material might be interpreted as moving toward and referring to a posteriori ultimates such as the self, archetypes, wholeness, unity, spirit, soul, death and so forth. For these first principles to perform their explanatory function, they cannot be implicated in the very system of thought and language they are being used to explain; nor can their meaning have the same semantic status as other meanings within the system."[35] In this context, "postmodernism, with its intense focus on the problematic of self-reflection, textuality and the process of psychic representation has revealed that these unquestionable 'absolutes' are not eternal, archetypal structures we once thought them to be, but are rather temporal and linguistic by-products resulting from a representational theory of language.

Any such transcendental term is a fiction heuristically and clinically valuable perhaps, but nonetheless fictional."[36]

In situating postmodernism in psychology in the linguistic turn in psychoanalysis, Kugler is building upon the seminal work of Jecques Lacan. Speaking about "Depth Psychology's Turn Toward Language" Kugler writes:

> "The importance of Lacan's contribution to theories of textual interpretation lies in his emphasis on the process through which personality development is dependent on and invented in a matrix of culturally determined 'symbols' (signifiers) making up our textural environment. For without the capacity of the self to represent itself, either as an image or as a word, and thereby look back at itself from another vantage point, the construction of personality and its characteristic capacity for consciousness and self reflexibility would be impossible."[37]

But in the text cited above, Kugler is referring to the representational theory of language. But postmodernism, in a way, questions this representational theory of language -- the view that language represents reality. In a way the whole postmodern movement questions the very distinction between representation and reality not only in contemporary communicative practices, but also in contemporary cultural practices. In the context of the contemporary electronic "mode of information," "The representational character of language is especially fragile and problematic."[38] As Mark Poster writes: "The function of representation comes to grief when words lose their connection with things and come to stand in place of things, in short, when language represents itself. The complex linguistic worlds of the media ... are each realms in which the representational function of language has been placed in question by different communicational patterns each of which shift to the forepoint the self-referential aspect of language."[39] But to be fair to Kugler, even though Kugler is using the word "the representational theory of language," he is going beyond the divorce of reality and representation associated with it. In the same text, Kugler writes: "There is no linguistic concept that is exempt from the metaphorical status of language. No mode of discourse, not even the language of science, can be literally literal. All writing is, by its very nature ironic, simultaneously literal and figural."[40]

The very occurrence of the word "discourse" and "figure" in Kugler's above text prepares the appropriate context for introducing French postmodern philosopher J.F. Lyotard who, I believe, has something important to say regarding psychology viz-a-viz the emergent postmodern condition. In imaging the postmodern condition, Lyotard is operating with two differential (not oppositional) notions: discourse and figure. For Lyotard, modernist sensibility accords primacy to discourse; it gives central emphasis to words. But postmodernism gives primacy to figure, the figural, image and the visual. Lyotard's differential distinction between discourse and figure is parallel to American cultural critic Susan Sontag's distinction between the modernist "interpretation" and the postmodernist "sensation." For Lyotard, the figural sensitivity in the condition of postmodernity has, indeed, something to do with the creative manifestation of sensation where the "pleasure principle" is not slavishly subordinated to the "reality principle." Scott Lash tells us about the psychoanalytic implication of Lyotard's postmodern philosophy: "Lyotard's discourse is the Freudian secondary

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process, the ego operating in terms of the reality principle. The figural, by contrast, is the primary process of the unconscious which operates according to pleasure principle.[41] Furthermore, "Discourse discharges energy through the transformation of the external world, while "figures" are perceptual memories through which psychic energy is straightaway discharged by investment in them."[42]

In this context, Lyotard is speaking about "libidinal politics" where desire becomes real. Here "desire is not self-effacing.... desire does not need to be infused with reason in order for society to survive; creativity is a sufficient political motive."[43] This is politics of a new kind where the body politic is not only instituted anew in the human body, but the body itself is participating in a politics of transformation. John Murphy sensitizes us to the politics of embodiment in the condition of postmodernity which may make desires real. Murphy writes in his insightful study, *Postmodern Social Analysis and Criticism*: "Postmodernism is consistent with what might be called radical democracy. With the periphery suddenly everywhere, a decentralized polity is not an anomaly. With the omnipotence of authority placed in question, decisions can finally be made that embrace public sentiments. The body politic is thus instituted."[44]

Thus, postmodernism does offer a set of challenges to psychology for rethinking its assumptions in the light of the contemporary transformation of self, society, and culture. If psychology is to continue to act as an emancipatory perspective, then it has to help us articulate a new language about ourselves describing anew what we ought to be and redescribing what we take for granted about ourselves in our present-day world. It has to help us understand both the work of culture and the work of the unconscious in our lives as both of these continue to be profoundly affected by the challenge of the postmodern condition -- by the challenge of its structural and discursive transformation. For this, psychology has to renew itself, by participating in a genuine "blurring of genres" and transform itself in a way that would enable us to live healthily, meaningfully and with dignity in a word increasingly marked by fragmentation and chaos.

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