

Post-Modernism in Anthropology

The Philosophical Origin

Modernity began with the Renaissance. It refers to the way society became more rational, organized, and economically driven, especially with the rise of capitalist states. A key feature of modernity is questioning old knowledge.

Postmodernity means the time after modernity. It signals the weakening or breakdown of modern social structures. Philosopher Jean-Francois Lyotard defines postmodernity as “doubt toward big universal stories” or *metanarratives*.

Postmodernity is about the mix of cultures, ideas, and lifestyles caused by **globalization and capitalism**. People, goods, and information now move quickly across the world. This constant blending of local and global makes it hard to tell where one culture ends and another begins. Social critics say this happens because modern life is fast and stressful. According to **David Ashley (1990)**, people feel overwhelmed and struggle to stay connected to their values. As a result, they start thinking that no belief or value is better than another — everything feels equally true or meaningless. For example, someone might wonder, “If every culture has its own truth, is there any real truth at all?”

Postmodernism started as a reaction against the Enlightenment and modern ideas like trusting science, believing humans will always progress, and thinking reason can solve all problems.

Some key ideas of postmodernism are:

- **Language shapes our reality:** For example, how we describe people as "terrorists" or "freedom fighters" changes how we see them.
- **Questioning what is real:** For instance, is what we see on social media real life or just a filtered version?

- **Criticizing big universal ideas (metanarratives):** Like the belief that "science will solve everything" or "all countries will develop like the West."
- **Rejecting strict rules or methods:** Postmodernists avoid one-size-fits-all ways of studying things.
- **Questioning Western knowledge systems:** For example, challenging the idea that Western science is always superior.

Post-Modernism & Anthropology

The intellectual journey of anthropology started with a strong belief in **positivism**—the idea that human societies could be studied objectively using scientific methods. Early anthropologists aimed to observe, record, and explain cultural practices as neutral outsiders, assuming that facts could be separated from personal opinions or biases.

However, by the late 20th century, anthropology saw a major shift with the rise of **post-modernism**. Post-modernism argued that researchers are always influenced by their own backgrounds, beliefs, and the power structures they live in, which affect how they see and represent other cultures.

In simple terms, **post-modernism** is a theoretical and philosophical approach that questions the idea of absolute truth, scientific objectivity, and universal claims. It suggests that all knowledge is shaped by the values, views, and positions of those who produce it. In anthropology, post-modernism became a critical and self-reflective movement, making scholars ask important questions like: ***Whose voice is being heard? Who controls the story being told?***

For example, early anthropological studies often described tribal societies in Africa or India from a Western, colonial perspective. These studies claimed to present objective facts but mostly ignored the voices and viewpoints of the people being studied.

Post-modern scholars challenged this practice, arguing that no anthropologist can ever be fully neutral or detached. Every observation is influenced by the anthropologist's own culture, personal bias, and existing power relations.

The Emergence of Post-modernism

Like other social sciences, **anthropology** has developed over time, influenced by changing ideas and intellectual movements around the world. In its early stages, the discipline was guided by a strong belief in **scientific methods, objectivity,** and the search for **universal theories** to explain all human societies.

Famous scholars like **Radcliffe-Brown** and **Malinowski** promoted **Structural Functionalism**, which assumed that all societies work in similar ways to maintain social order. Likewise, thinkers such as **Lewis Henry Morgan** and **Edward Tylor** supported **Cultural Evolutionism**, arguing that every society passes through the same stages of cultural development.

However, by the **1970s and 1980s**, these broad, general theories came under heavy criticism. A new intellectual approach called **post-modernism** questioned the very idea of such large, universal explanations—often called **"grand narratives."**

One important post-modern thinker, **Jean-François Lyotard**, in his book *The Postmodern Condition* (1979), argued that people had started doubting these grand theories. He described this as **"incredulity towards metanarratives"**—meaning a growing disbelief in any single, all-encompassing story about human history or society.

Another major influence was **Michel Foucault**, who explored how knowledge and power are connected. Foucault argued that what we call "truth" is not always neutral or purely objective. Instead, it is often shaped by those in power. He introduced the concept of **"regimes of truth"**, meaning that certain ideas or knowledge systems dominate, while others are ignored or silenced.

Reflexivity and Critique of Representation

Scholars like **James Clifford** and **George E. Marcus** added important ideas to this debate in their well-known book *Writing Culture* (1986). They argued that **ethnographies**—the written accounts of cultures—are not completely objective. Instead, they are shaped by the anthropologist's background, personal views, and writing style. Clifford called ethnographies “**partial truths**”, meaning no study can fully capture the complete reality of a culture.

For example, **Bronisław Malinowski's** famous study of the **Trobriand Islanders** was known for its detailed fieldwork. However, when his private diaries were later published, they showed his personal frustrations and biases. This example proved that even well-respected research can be influenced by the anthropologist's own emotions and background.

Principles of Post-Modernism

Post-modernism rejected the long-held belief that anthropology could act as a purely objective science capable of representing the "truth" of cultures. Instead, post-modern anthropologists argued that all knowledge is **subjective, partial, and influenced by power dynamics**.

Rejection of Objectivity

At the heart of **Post-Modern anthropology** is the idea that complete objectivity in research is neither possible nor necessary. Post-modern thinkers argued that every anthropologist brings their own cultural background, personal experiences, and biases into their work. This directly challenged the earlier belief that anthropologists could observe societies in a completely neutral and detached way.

For example, **Paul Rabinow**, in his book *Reflections on Fieldwork in Morocco*, explained how the presence of the anthropologist changes the very reality they

are trying to study. He noticed that local people often responded to him differently because he was an outsider, raising important questions about how "authentic" such observations really are.

This realization made anthropology understand that **fieldwork is not just about collecting facts**—it is also a **subjective interaction** shaped by both the researcher and the people being studied.

Reflexivity

Another important idea from **Post-Modern anthropology** is **reflexivity**. This means that anthropologists must also study themselves and think about how their own background—like their culture, gender, or political views—affects their research.

A well-known example is **Lila Abu-Lughod's** book *Veiled Sentiments*, where she shared how being a female anthropologist shaped her interactions with **Bedouin women**. Her position as both an outsider and a woman gave her special access but also influenced the stories women shared with her.

Power, Knowledge, and Representation

Post-modern anthropology also argues that **knowledge is closely linked to power**. Influenced by **Michel Foucault**, post-modernists believed that those who control the production of knowledge also control the way reality is described, often ignoring or silencing weaker or marginalized groups.

A powerful example of this is **Edward Said's** book *Orientalism* (1978). He showed how Western scholars and writers created an image of the "**Orient**"—places like the Middle East and Asia—as exotic, backward, and inferior. These ideas were not just academic but helped support **colonial and imperial rule**.

Polyvocality

Post-modernists challenged the idea of the anthropologist being the only voice in ethnography. They introduced the concept of **polyvocality**, which means including **multiple perspectives** and allowing the people being studied to **share their own voices**. This approach gives a deeper and more balanced understanding of cultures.

Anthropologists like **George Marcus** also supported **multi-sited ethnography**. He believed that to truly understand a community, especially in a globalized world, researchers must study it in **different locations**. This helps capture the diverse experiences of people affected by **migration, globalization, and changing identities**.

Partial Truths and the Fiction of Total

Post-modernism also stressed that **ethnographies are not absolute truths** but **subjective stories** shaped by what the anthropologist chooses to observe, record, or leave out. **James Clifford's** idea of "**partial truths**" means that no ethnography can fully capture a culture in all its complexity.

A good example is **Bronislaw Malinowski**, known as the father of functionalist anthropology. His famous study of the **Trobriand Islanders** gave a detailed account of their social life. But when his personal diaries were published later, they showed his hidden frustrations, biases, and emotional struggles—things missing from his official work. This example showed that even great anthropologists shape their research into a neat story, leaving out parts that don't fit.

Deconstructing the "Exotic Other"

Post-modernists also criticized how anthropology often described non-Western societies as "**exotic**" or "**primitive**". They argued that such descriptions created **harmful stereotypes** and supported **colonial thinking**.

Kirin Narayan, in her essay *How Native is a Native Anthropologist?*, questioned the idea that researchers are either complete "**insiders**" or

"**outsiders**". She said that identities are **fluid**, and cultures should not be seen as totally different or strange.

This idea is important when studying Indian tribes like the **Santhals** or **Nagas**, who are often **romanticized or misunderstood** in traditional ethnographies.

Writing as Power: The Responsibility of Representation

Post-modernists believed that **writing is an act of power**—the way anthropologists describe people shapes how the world sees those cultures. Their writings could, knowingly or unknowingly, **spread stereotypes or silence certain voices**.

For example, **Nancy Scheper-Hughes**, in her book *Death Without Weeping*, shared the heartbreaking stories of **child deaths in Brazilian shantytowns**. She also reflected on her own feelings during the research. Her work showed that **empathy and scholarship** can be combined to **respectfully represent people** without turning them into mere subjects of study.

The “Writing Culture” Debate

The rise of post-modernism in anthropology sparked the **“Writing Culture” debate**—a major turning point that questioned the very nature of ethnography. This debate, largely triggered by the publication of **“Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography” (1986)** edited by **James Clifford and George E. Marcus**, argued that ethnographies are not just objective accounts but are **crafted narratives, deeply influenced by the ethnographer’s choices, biases, and literary style**.

Ethnography as a Literary and Political Act

Post-modern thinkers argued that **ethnography** is not a clear window into another culture but a **constructed story**, much like a novel or creative writing.

Every ethnographic work involves:

- **Choosing** whose voices to include and whose to leave out,

- **Framing** people’s lives based on the anthropologist’s own views,
- Using **literary techniques** like metaphors, plots, and character descriptions.

James Clifford called ethnographies “**partial truths**”—they reflect the writer’s experience but can never tell the whole story. He explained that:

- Anthropologists, knowingly or not, write from their own position of **power, privilege, and cultural background**,
- They cannot fully represent the **insider’s (emic) perspective** without changing it through their own lens.

For example, **early British colonial ethnographies** of Indian tribes often described them as “**primitive**” or “**savage**”, showing the colonizers’ mindset rather than the tribes’ real lives.

Blurring the Line Between Fact and Fiction

The post-modern debate raised important questions: **Is ethnography pure fact, fiction, or a mix of both?** **Clifford Geertz** argued that ethnography is a form of “**thick description**”—rich in context but always interpretive. Every ethnographer creates a story by:

- Deciding what to focus on,
- Leaving some things out,
- Choosing how to present their findings.

Examples:

- In his famous work “**Tristes Tropiques**”, **Claude Lévi-Strauss** wrote his field experiences like a **memoir or novel**, full of personal thoughts and literary style, rather than as a dry scientific report.

The Politics of Representation: Who Has the Right to Write?

The “Writing Culture” debate also sparked deeper ethical questions: **Who gets to represent whom?** Does the ethnographer’s privilege silence the voices of the studied communities?

- Scholars argued that **Western anthropologists have historically dominated the writing of other people’s stories**, especially marginalized, colonized, or indigenous groups.
- **Lila Abu-Lughod’s famous essay “Writing Against Culture”** emphasized that anthropologists must stop portraying cultures as static or exotic and instead write about people as individuals navigating changing circumstances.

Key Criticisms of the “Writing Culture” Approach

While the “Writing Culture” movement brought valuable insights, it also faced criticisms for:

- **Over-literarizing ethnography:** Critics like **Ernest Gellner** argued that treating anthropology as fiction could **undermine its scientific rigor**.
- **Detaching from ground realities:** Excessive focus on narrative style sometimes took attention away from **real-world issues** like poverty, caste, and inequality.
- **Neglecting problem-solving roles:** If ethnography is reduced to a story, it may fail to guide policies or practical interventions, weakening anthropology’s relevance in **development programs and tribal welfare**.

The Middle Path

Modern anthropologists suggest a **balanced approach**:

- Acknowledge the **literary nature** of ethnography,

- Practice **reflexivity**, where the ethnographer is transparent about their biases,
- **Include voices of the people studied**, offering space for self-representation.

For instance, projects like “**Indigenous Peoples’ Ethnography**”, where tribal communities document their own culture, attempt to bridge this gap.

Criticisms of Post-modernism

1. Radical Relativism and Ethical Paralysis

One of the most prominent criticisms of post-modern anthropology lies in its embrace of **radical cultural relativism**. By arguing that every cultural viewpoint is equally valid and that no universal truth exists, post-modernism makes it difficult for anthropologists to judge or critique harmful cultural practices.

For instance, **female genital mutilation (FGM)** or **honor killings**—cultural practices documented in ethnographies—pose serious ethical dilemmas.

Can an anthropologist label these as human rights violations? Or must they remain silent, fearing they are imposing Western morality?

2. Crisis of Representation

Post-modernism rightly questioned the anthropologist's authority to represent another culture truthfully. However, critics argue that this constant self-questioning sometimes leads to **a dead-end—what scholars call "nihilism"**. If every attempt to represent the "Other" is flawed or exploitative, then how can any ethnography be written or any generalization be made?

This “**paralysis by analysis**” led to a situation where fieldwork reports were increasingly personal memoirs rather than systematic studies.

For example, the **Writing Culture movement**, led by **James Clifford** and **George Marcus**, stressed that ethnography is a literary construction. However, this spawned a generation of anthropologists who became so afraid of misrepresentation that **they stopped producing ethnographies altogether.**

3. Intellectual Elitism

Another significant critique is the **dense, jargon-heavy language** used in post-modern anthropological writings. Influenced by philosophers like **Michel Foucault** and **Jacques Derrida**, many post-modern anthropologists adopted complex theories that are **inaccessible to common readers.**

For example, phrases like “**de-centering of the subject**” or “**problematization of positionality**” dominate post-modern texts, making them less useful for applied anthropologists working on the ground with tribal or marginalized communities.

4. Ignoring Material and Economic Realities

Post-modern anthropology’s obsession with **discourse and symbolism** also led to the neglect of **material conditions** like poverty, land alienation, and economic exploitation. By reducing every issue to “**narratives**” or “**texts**”, post-modern scholars often failed to address the tangible realities affecting marginalized groups.

For instance, during tribal displacement caused by mining projects in India or land alienation among indigenous communities in Latin America, **material deprivation** is the core issue. However, post-modern analysis focusing solely on “**narratives of victimhood**” overlooks the economic and structural dimensions that actually perpetuate inequality.

Nancy Scheper-Hughes, known for her critical medical anthropology, argued that such “**textualization of suffering**” is unethical, as it romanticizes the pain of the poor without offering solutions.

5. Limited Practical Solutions

Perhaps the most practical criticism is that post-modern anthropology often **deconstructs existing knowledge but fails to build new frameworks or offer solutions**. Its emphasis on critique leaves anthropologists confused about:

- How to conduct fieldwork ethically.
- How to write without misrepresenting.
- How to contribute to policy or advocacy.

For example, while post-modernism criticizes development projects as “**neo-colonial**”, it rarely provides alternatives that balance **cultural respect with economic upliftment**.

Eminent Scholars and Works

Clifford Geertz

One of the most influential figures in post-modern anthropology is **Clifford Geertz**, who popularized the concept of “**thick description**” in his seminal work *“The Interpretation of Cultures”* (1973).

- Geertz argued that culture is **a web of meanings** spun by people, and the anthropologist’s role is to **interpret these symbols and actions** in their rich context.
- For him, anthropology was less about scientific laws and more about **reading cultures like texts**—an interpretive act filled with nuance and subjectivity.
- His analysis of the **Balinese cockfight** demonstrated how rituals, performances, and daily life carry deep cultural significance—an approach that deeply inspired post-modern critiques of reductionism.

James Clifford and George E. Marcus

The “**Writing Culture**” (1986) anthology, edited by **James Clifford and George E. Marcus**, became a foundational text in post-modern anthropology.

- It exposed how ethnographies are not neutral observations but “**partial truths**” shaped by the ethnographer’s biases, literary choices, and power positions.
- Clifford emphasized that the anthropologist is not a distant, objective observer but an **active participant shaping the narrative**.
- The book argued for **reflexive ethnography**, where anthropologists must be self-aware about how their identities and worldviews influence their work.

Michel Foucault

Although not an anthropologist, **Michel Foucault** profoundly influenced post-modern anthropology with his theories on **power, knowledge, and discourse**.

- Foucault argued that **knowledge production is always linked to power structures**—what we know is shaped by who has the authority to speak and define truth.
- His ideas on “**governmentality**” and the “**archaeology of knowledge**” pushed anthropologists to examine how state systems, institutions, and discourses regulate societies, especially marginalized groups.

Lila Abu-Lughod

Lila Abu-Lughod, in her famous essay “*Writing Against Culture*” (1991), criticized the tendency of anthropology to portray cultures as **static, bounded, and exotic**.

- She argued for **feminist and decolonial approaches** that focus on individuals rather than homogenizing groups.

- Abu-Lughod insisted that anthropology must **humanize its subjects** by showcasing their **agency, struggles, and changing realities**.

Paul Rabinow and Talal Asad

- **Paul Rabinow's "Reflections on Fieldwork in Morocco" (1977)** emphasized the **constructed and negotiated nature of fieldwork**, showing that the anthropologist's presence inevitably shapes the data.
- **Talal Asad**, in "*Anthropology and the Colonial Encounter*", highlighted how anthropology historically served **colonial interests**, influencing how cultures were represented and governed.

Arjun Appadurai: Globalization and the Post-modern Condition

Indian anthropologist **Arjun Appadurai** contributed significantly to post-modern thought through his concept of "**global cultural flows**" in "*Modernity at Large*" (1996).

- He argued that in the age of globalization, culture is no longer confined to place but flows through **ethnoscapes, mediascapes, technoscapes, financescapes, and ideoscapes**.

Contemporary Relevance of Post-modernism

1. Toward Collaborative Anthropology

One of the most lasting influences of post-modernism is on how anthropologists conduct fieldwork and write ethnographies today. It led to the **rise of collaborative anthropology**, where:

- **Informants are treated as co-authors** rather than passive subjects.
- **Multiple voices are presented** in ethnographies instead of a singular anthropologist's interpretation.

- Greater sensitivity is shown toward **gender, caste, race, and indigenous identity**.

2. Shaping Feminist and Indigenous Anthropologies

Post-modernism's focus on power, positionality, and the politics of representation has deeply influenced **feminist anthropology** and **indigenous anthropology**:

- Feminist anthropologists like **Lila Abu-Lughod** challenged the tendency of Western scholars to present "**Muslim women**" as **homogenous, oppressed victims**. Her famous work "*Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving?*" questioned these Orientalist portrayals, advocating for more nuanced, locally grounded representations.

3. Rethinking Development and Globalization

Post-modernism's critique of **grand narratives** like development, modernization, and globalization has reshaped anthropological engagements with **policy and planning**:

- **Arturo Escobar's** critique of development discourse in "*Encountering Development*" highlighted how Western development projects often **reinforce neocolonial hierarchies**, depicting the Global South as backward and in need of saving.

Beyond Post-modernism?

As anthropology grows, a key question arises—**have we moved beyond post-modernism, or is its influence still essential?**

Post-modernism brought powerful critiques. It challenged grand theories, exposed the role of power in research, and forced anthropologists to reflect on how they represent others. It replaced universal claims with **multiple voices, fragmented stories, and reflexivity**.

However, scholars soon realized that just **critiquing everything was not enough**. Anthropology also needs to engage with real-world issues—**the struggles of indigenous people, marginalized groups, and nations facing development challenges**.

Today, many anthropologists talk about “**moving beyond post-modernism**”—not by rejecting it, but by **using its insights to build more ethical, action-oriented research**. This is seen in areas like:

- **Public Anthropology**
- **Feminist and Indigenous Anthropology**
- **Medical and Ecological Anthropology**

Here, scholars remain critical and reflexive but also **work with communities** to create knowledge and push for social change.

Example: In India, some anthropologists support **tribal rights movements**, helping communities displaced by **dams or mining projects**. They stay aware of their outsider position but also advocate for **policy changes, legal rights, and participatory development models**.