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## UNIT 4 THEORETICAL CHALLENGES

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### Structure

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### 4.1 INTRODUCTION

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As you have seen in earlier units, literary studies have altered and changed because of the impact of emerging new fields and areas like women's studies and post-colonialism. The very term life-writing was formulated as a result of the challenges offered by new theoretical interventions. In this unit, we will see how the developments of new and radical theoretical frameworks have changed the contours of autobiographical/lifewriting studies. Influenced by the ideas of Foucault, Lacan and Derrida whose work you have already been introduced to in earlier courses (MWG 001, MWG 003), the whole terrain of life-writing studies has altered in the last couple of decades. The focus in this unit would be specifically on the impact of some of the major ideas ushered in by postmodernism, poststructuralism and postcolonialism on the field of lifewriting studies. As a result of these theoretical interventions, life-narratives, as we will examine, have become more responsive to and have assumed an increasingly political dimension. With this development, life-writing as a form or genre of writing has enabled the emergence of hitherto oppressed marginalized groups and minorities.

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### 4.2 OBJECTIVES

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After completing this unit, you will be able to:

- Explore challenges posed to life-writing studies by new and radical theoretical frameworks within social sciences;
- Trace the impact of the encounter with anti-humanistic theories of post-structuralism and postmodernism on life-writing studies;

- Examine the term ‘anti-humanism’ and its influence on the social sciences through the work of Foucault, Derrida, Lacan and others; and
- Discuss the ramifications of all of the above on the construction of gender within the framework of lifewriting studies.

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### 4.3 THE CHALLENGE OF POSTMODERNISM AND POSTSTRUCTURALISM

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Basic ideas associated with postmodernism have been dealt with previously in MWG 003 (Block 1, Unit 4) and MWG 007 (Block 2). The idea of the death of the author, the questioning of grand and over-arching metanarratives, i.e. narratives about narratives, constitutes common ground shared between poststructuralism and postmodernism. Both sets of theories point to the play of language in literary texts and their openness, both also point to the instability of language and the unreliability of any fixed or stable meaning.

#### *Poststructuralism*

The method that came to be labeled as ‘Deconstruction’ is associated with both theoretical movements. You would perhaps have come across this term in some of the other blocks. Let us try to recall the basic ideas of deconstruction: you could call it a pulling apart of the signifier (word) from its signified (the thing it refers to) to show that the relationship between words/language and the world (what language is supposed to denote) is relational and arbitrary. Language makes sense not because it refers to a given set of things but because it is a system where meaning gets attributed/constituted through difference and deferral. In other words, the signifier (language) refers not to a signified (thing) but to other possible signifiers along a chain of signification. So in effect what follows from this is that language is a system which does not refer to, or reflect, a preexisting reality, but shapes it, through a process of differentiation.

The idea of language as completely relational without fixed or innate meanings ties up with the idea of a de-centred universe, without fixed reference points. The situation can be compared to a gravity-less universe where everything is floating and there is uncertainty about the right way up. In the scenario visualized by poststructuralist thinking, language is hardly under the control of the user, signifiers float free of the signified, meaning is perceived as fluid, and concepts and ideas get disseminated (Barry, 2010, p. 62). This analytical insight about how language works has important implications for the study and understanding of gendered autobiographies. If language is unstable, plural and slippery, what about the identities and subjectivities that language and writing are supposed to bring into being? Obviously, the whole notion or idea of truth gets questioned or

interrogated and skeptically viewed as the truth effect or an illusion of imagined coherence and unity created by language. Put another way, certain effects get created without necessarily having reference to any truth outside the writing. Moreover, central to poststructuralism is what can be called a habitual skepticism which extends to the so-called universal and definite truths of science.

Further, the anti-humanistic orientation of many poststructuralist thinkers forced a rethinking and reconceptualising of notions of identity, subject and subjectivity. Since the human being is no longer the ground or foundation of all thinking, all these ideas have had to be re-visited and rethought keeping in mind the constructed notion of the subject which replaces “the idea of the human being as an independent entity” (Barry, 2010. p.63). The idea of the human being is seen as an essence the underlying basis of which is questioned in poststructuralist thought. This thinking assumes that the human being is not the origin or creator of language, that language is a system of which we are users.

Moreover, controlling our use of language is our unconscious. According to Freud and Lacan, whose ideas you would have come across in previous courses, language is part of the symbolic order, with its own rules of representation. Further, it is so highly mediated that any attempt to reflect experience through language is always partial and misplaced, somehow out of place. For Lacan, the key formative moment is the “mirror” phase, which is the moment of entry into language as also the moment that the infant thinks that it has recognized itself as whole and entire. This is however, according to Lacan, a moment of misrecognition, since the subject (preferring the term to human being) is not a unified entity, but a split subject. However, both Freud’s and Lacan’s ideas and theories were critiqued by feminist theorists like Luce Irigaray who voice a need for a feminist reappropriation of the mirror. Thus, as Brodzski and Schenck put it in *Lifelines*, an early edited collection on women’s use of the autobiographical: “After Irigaray, the question remains-how have women articulated their own experience, shaped their own texts artistically, met their own reflections in the problematic mirror of autobiography?” (Brodzski & Schenck, 1988, p. 87).

The work of Freud, Lacan and others, also known as psychoanalysis, was one of the discourses or set of theories which contributed to the development of poststructuralist thought. Its radical questioning of essences not only de-centers the individual as mentioned earlier, but also makes it impossible to retain the human being as the originating ground of any thinking. According to this view, the human being is understood as the product of discourses and discursive networks. To give an example from the Indian cultural context, we can detect some of the discourses in circulation in the shaping of

normative construct of the Indian woman: mythology (e.g. Sita and Savitri), religion (the mother goddess), tradition (the ideal Hindu woman) and history (Lakshmibai, Rani of Jhansi) are all deployed in constructing the Indian woman in a certain mould. This example can help us unpack the link between poststructuralism and construction of gender through life-writings. By declaring the death of the author, poststructuralism facilitates the process of laying bare the construction of the self, which is exposed as a “tissue of textualities” (Brodzki and Schenck, 1988, p. 87).

You have read accounts of Roland Barthes’s essay on “The Death of the Author” (1968) and Derrida’s essay on “Structure, Sign and Play” (1966) in MWG 007 (Block 2, Unit 3). We have discussed the basic ideas and tenets of poststructuralist theory, which illustrates the method of deconstruction. Both Derrida and Barthes emphasize the liberative aspects of releasing the text from its anchoring in fixed, given systems of meaning in order to release the (potentially) endless possibilities of free play and interpretation. Thus, most texts which were earlier seen as unified artistic artifacts are seen in the light of deconstructive theory as fragmented, self-divided and contingent upon the contexts and biases of reading and interpretation.

#### Box No. 4.1: Poststructuralism

*Let us now recapitulate the main ideas of Poststructuralism:*

- *It accords primacy to language by stating that language does not record the world but shapes it.*
- *It opposes the importance given to reason in Western thought.*
- *The status of the self is a divided and fragmented one, the human being is not seen as an independent entity or as the origin of thought.*
- *It puts forward the idea of a dispersed subjectivity created through discourses.*

#### **Postmodernism**

Postmodernism generated a set of ideas which challenged the dominant paradigms of modernity (the idea of a rational universe of which man is the prime example), in the era of what might be called late capitalism. Like poststructuralism, it sought to offset the centrality of ‘man’ in various systems of thinking and to think through binary divisions with which we make sense of the world, notions of the real/artificial, true/false. It argues that there is no reality outside representation. From the perspective of lifewritings and/or autobiography, the focus is on writing and ‘graphy’, at the cost of ‘bios’/life and of ‘auto’ or the ‘I’. Both of these terms are

radicalized beyond recognition. By now, you would perhaps begin to understand the idea of the death of the author. The author is dead because there are no ultimate truths s/he can write about, no fixed and final self s/he can communicate the truth about. Instead, the self is a process constantly in flux and its only fixity comes in and through writing.

Both these 'isms' also display an incredulity towards, and suspicion of, what can be called **metanarratives** or **grand monumental narratives**. An example of such a narrative would be monumentalist historiography which looks at history in terms of grand overarching narratives or through the lens of linear and monolithic perceptions, like the use of concepts such as modernity, enlightenment etc. In this narrative, the everyday lives of the common people would be overlooked and ignored, resulting in a situation where every historical detail runs the danger of being subsumed into these overarching schemes. The inadequacy of such interpretive schemes was realized and it was increasingly felt that totalizing concepts like modernity did not completely sum up the complex historical conditions of a bygone era or its internal dynamics. Our knowledge of the past was influenced by these filters and very little was actually known about the actual conditions in which men and women lived out their lives. By the late 1970s and early 1980s, however there emerged new trends which challenged the way history was being conceptualized and narrated. It was gradually understood that first, any historical account was not a single or linear and one-dimensional narrative, and second, that any account of the past was not neutral or objective but narrated from a specific point of view. Further, there emerged a critical consciousness (for a number of reasons too diverse to trace here) of what could be called the **textuality of history** and the **historicity of texts**. History writing did not happen in a vacuum and this historical writing was fashioned by writers who were analyzing their times in terms of past historical periods or past periods in terms of their own. Other examples of metanarratives of this kind could be the narratives of nationalism and patriotism, of scientific progress and positivism (broadly speaking, a theory which believes that scientific societies are superior to traditional societies).

In contrast to grand narratives of the kind discussed above, **little narratives** or **micro-histories** assumed a new significance, since it was felt that these narratives contained the 'truth' about the 'lived experience' of people of any age and time. **However, postmodernism instills a deep suspicion of and questions the validity of notions of truth and experience.** For one, there is no universal truth; second, in any situation involving people or groups, your truth may be (and is very likely to be) different from mine. Experience, similarly, has to be grasped in as something provisional, contingent and shifting, leaving it open to a host of myriad and different interpretations.

Further, the postmodernist focus on fragmentation also served to break up the idea of the single, unitary and undivided self. While fragmentation was a feature of modernism as well, postmodernism, unlike modernism, viewed the experience of fragmentation, in a positive light as a welcome “escape from claustrophobic systems of thought” (Barry, 2010, p. 63). This escape had a further corollary that the distinction between ‘high’ and popular art was increasingly questioned and erased. Thus, the minimalist, spare, somewhat elite forms of modernist art yielded to parody and pastiche, to the mixed genres of kitsch, to the music of vaudeville shows and the music-hall.

What relation does this have to women’s and other lifewritings? While the pronouncements of postmodernism were seen as being detrimental and as having negative implications for autobiography by a large number of feminist and other critics, the benefits of these theoretical challenges were gradually and retrospectively realized by some of them. But the debate that took place was a heated one with many critics arguing that the anti-essentialist thrust of postmodernism, that is its refusal to base its arguments on fixed essentialized notions of truth, its questioning of the idea of the author, were elements which posed a challenge to the notion of autobiography. Further, the theoretical implication of the death of the author, also posed a problematic challenge to autobiography.

The idea of the author is a central, unifying, cohesive factor and replacing the author with an author- function is actually a challenge to the “bios” in the term auto-bio-graphy. As the writer Domna Stanton posed the question: why should life-writing be about one’s life, why should the writer be tied to “facts” or “truth”? The term “autobiography”, she suggested, could be replaced by the notion of the “autograph” (Stanton, 1987). As a matter of fact, the term life-writing (and without a hyphen) has increasingly come to replace autobiography in recent criticism, since so many of its founding assumptions have been questioned and demolished. Moreover critics also raised questions about agency, identity and subjectivity in the intellectual climate unleashed and generated by poststructuralism and postmodernism.

As a result of sustained interrogation of all foundational thinking, its questioning of grand narratives of man, metaphysics and history, postmodernism has been viewed as the most thoroughgoing critique of the individual subject, where the subject is merely another position in language. Subjectivity, in this line of thinking, is never complete, whole or entire, but multiple, contradictory and shifting. Thus, it is something that is plural, created from moment to moment, and subject to change and variation.

It was argued by some that by declaring the author's death, postmodernist critics were clearing a space for the emergence of autobiographers who were not dead, white or male. As histories from below and subaltern histories were being written, posing a challenge to grand narratives, lifewritings could be written - of and by hitherto marginalized groups comprising women, slaves, dalits and others who had earlier been hidden from history. There was an increasing conviction among a section of feminist critics that women's complex relationship to representation was better charted with the theoretical interventions of postmodernism and poststructuralism.

Allied to this is a realization that the fragmented and fissured self referred to above that postmodern and poststructuralist theory has propounded, reframes the debate about identity and subjectivity in productive ways, because it shows that the unified self was a construct produced by papering over the cracks. That the singular self was a construct realized even if retrospectively. Catherine Belsey asserts in *The Subject of Tragedy* that the full subject, the transcendental I, which is its own origin, is impossible (Belsey, 1985). The notion of a transcendental subjectivity, a subjectivity which prevails over all else (and which had been propounded by earlier philosophers), is exposed as an illusion by poststructuralist thinkers.

However, poststructuralism and postmodernism, while effecting a dispersal of the self, paradoxically also open up the spaces for writing the self in new and surprising ways as they do away with preconceived notions of self and identity. At the same time, they dismantle and break down notions of the proper autobiographical subject. As an illustration of the first we can see the example of collective autobiographies questioning the bogey of autobiography as generating from the individual, who is autonomous. Another example could be the writing of the self through the other, as we see in Gertrude Stein's *The Autobiography of Alice B Toklas* (1933). Gertrude Stein employs the idea of the alter-ego in talking about herself in terms of her lover and companion of the same name. Thus, the idea that the autobiographical as rooted in selfhood and autonomy is challenged and women's subjectivities are shown as relational and other-related. Stein uses this identity as a ploy or strategy to question notions of autonomy and selfhood rooted in contemporary bourgeois thinking.

In writing the way she did, Stein seems to be displaying a consciousness of dispersed subjectivities. Virginia Woolf, who, like Stein, was a modernist, was also a regular diary writer, and her autobiographical writings which include *A Sketch of the Past* and *Moments of Being*, display an awareness of the politics and matrices of self-representation. Subjectivity is demonstrated as precarious and uncertain, variable and slippery.

*Let us now recall the salient points of postmodernism as we have discussed them above:*

- *Mistrust of Grand Narratives;*
- *Profound Skepticism about Truth; and*
- *Questioning of the referential nature of language.*

*Check Your Progress:*

*i) List the main ideas associated with:*

*a) Poststructuralism:*

*b) Postmodernism:*

*ii) What are some challenges presented by these movements to the genre of autobiographical narratives? Try and summarize these briefly in your own words.*



## 4.4 THE CHALLENGE OF DECONSTRUCTION AND ITS IMPLICATIONS

Perhaps the biggest theoretical challenge leveled at autobiography is from deconstructive critics like Jacques Derrida and Paul De Man (for a discussion of their works see MWG 007, Block 2, Unit 3). These thinkers raise questions about the status of the self and of the border between the life and the text. Some of their often complex ideas maybe approached through Derrida's discussion of Nietzsche (1844-1900), a German philosopher whose thinking has influenced much of 20<sup>th</sup> century philosophy. Nietzsche's ideas were instrumental in the interrogation of a unified subjectivity. He questions the validity of all self-reflection and issues a warning about the dangers of unbridled subjectivity, where either there is no dividing line between 'truth' and 'falsehood', or one that is tenuous and indecipherable. The inevitable corollary of this pervasive uncertainty is that it may be strategic to interpret oneself falsely. An instance is provided by the deconstructionist critic Paul de Man.

In Paul De Man's 1984 essay, "Autobiography as Defacement" (1984), he declares that autobiography is not so much about the self as a running away from it. Ironically, when after his death, it was found that he had at one time (during the 2<sup>nd</sup> world war) written for a pro-Nazi paper but had kept quiet about this aspect of his past, there was an outcry that his philosophical pronouncements had probably been politically motivated. Further, both Derrida and De Man have put forward theories of autobiography in which death, as much as life, motivates or determines autobiographical discourse. In De Man's essay referred to above, he critiques contemporary theories of autobiography. For De Man, subjectivity is an effect of language. Also, he argues that the assumed referential status of autobiography, reveals the fictional nature of all referentiality. In other words, all "reference to the 'real' is rendered suspect" by the play of language. So one might assume that "the life produces the autobiography", it is equally possible that the "autobiographical project produces and determines the life" (De Man, 1984, p.172). By this logic, whatever the autobiographer writes is governed by the generic and technical demands of self-portraiture and thus determined, in all its aspects, by the resources of the medium (De Man, 1984, p.172).

To sum up, we can say that deconstruction has provided us with some useful tools for the study of autobiography, though it has complicated notions of subjectivity and agency. As a matter of fact, its interrogation and displacement of agency has actually served useful political purposes since it has brought groups which hitherto lacked agency or could not easily voice their identity, into the fold of life-writing. Thus, ethnic groups, Dalits, transsexuals, tribals and hitherto marginalized groups remained at the fringes

of this genre of writing since they lacked a “locus standi” (a recognized site or position to speak from) admissible in the socio-legal sense.

Moreover, some communities and groups do not always operate with a sense of individual identity which is separate from the collectivity. These groups, perhaps paradoxically (contrary to common sense) have now found a voice in the last decade or so. The shift from autobiography to lifewriting also broadens out the term for the purposes of representing collectivities and communities in a way which is more comprehensive and inclusive. This shift in terminology reflects an epistemological shift, insofar as it removes the biases dominating autobiographical criticism till 1980 or around that time.

Earlier theoretical pronouncements had declared a proper autobiographical class (Anderson, 2001, p.8) and the centrality of notions of autonomy and individuality as forming the cornerstone of autobiography. The more recent theoretical writings discussed above have served to focus attention on collective and plural identities. Thus, we see the inscription of the self in Dalit and slave narratives articulated in terms of collectivities and communities. A case in point is the voices of the women in the Telengana women’s struggle, which you will read about in Unit 3 of Block 4.

Another technical point which is crucial to the question of representation is that the act of self-representation is carried out and therefore mediated through other voices. Whether it is the voice of Baby Halder in *A Life Less Ordinary* (2006), which you will be reading about in the unit on Gendered Postcolonial Identities (Block 4, Unit 2) or *Incidents in the Life of a Slave-Girl* (1861) (see unit on Slave Narratives, Block 4, Unit 1) by Harriet Jacobs, we have to keep in mind that these narratives were related to others who in turn transcribed them into the texts that we know. Therefore, the term lifewriting is a useful one to keep in mind since it includes both biography and autobiography and raises questions about representation without necessarily giving primacy to either term.

So far, we have discussed theoretical viewpoints emerging from the west, in the context of their impact on how life narratives are written and perceived. In the next section, let us turn to some ideas closer to home, that is, those emerging from postcolonial and third world contexts.

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## 4.5 THE CHALLENGE OF POSTCOLONIALISM

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By now, you would have a working definition of the idea of the postcolonial from many of your previous readings (see, for instance, MWG 001, Block 5, Unit 3). The post in post colonial stands not just for “after” as much as a critique of colonialism, imperialism and its discourses. Further, the ideologies

of colonialism had a tremendous impact on mindsets or mentalities and systems and practices. Thus, modes of government, education, medical systems and even private and domestic life were shaped by colonial practices.

The theoretical challenges posed by postcolonialism to gender and lifewriting can be seen as the outcome of the alliance of imperialism and notions of selfhood. Imperial ideologies shaped constructs of masculinity, femininity and identity in particular ways. These gender constructs cast a long shadow and had a lasting impact up to the time of the second world war, which also coincided with the time that a number of countries broke away from imperialism. As a British educationist said, “A physically weak nation is drained out mentally: the battles of England are fought and won in the fields of Eton” (cited in Chaudhurani, 1975, p.136-7). Ideologies of masculinity went hand in hand with imperial ideologies to create a model of individualism which was autonomous, self-enclosed and complete. The idea of femininity was viewed in terms of selflessness and purity, in terms of an angel ministering to the needs of all others in the house. Deriving from these ideologies, autobiography became a form ideally suited to narrating the lifestories of western men and extolling their achievements. The lives of women and non-white men was seen as lacking in consequence of any kind and therefore relegated to neglect and obscurity.

Further, as Doris Somner significantly asks:

Is autobiography the model for imperializing the consciousness of colonized peoples, replacing their collective potential for resistance with a cult of individuality and even loneliness? Or is it a medium of resistance and counter discourse, the legitimate space for producing that excess which throws doubt on the coherence and power of an exclusive historiography?

(Somner, cited in Watson and Smith, 1998, p.1)

Postcolonial autobiography or lifewriting has, in a sense, its task cut out. Depending on the way they are interpreted and can be made to speak, lifewritings of people historically under the yoke of colonialism can function as a space of resistance and counter discourse. Both in its novels and criticism as well as in lifewritings, the empire has written back. You would be coming across some of these works in the unit on ‘Postcolonial Gendered Identities’ (Block 4, Unit 2).

Here, instead of surveying postcolonial lifewritings which you will do in the unit mentioned above, we will look at some of the theoretical underpinnings of postcolonial theory which make it pose a challenge to questions of identity and subjectivity. The biases/prejudices of traditional autobiography criticism prior to 1980 visualized the authorial subject as white and male.

These inherent biases in criticism were impacted by postcolonial writings of Edward Said, Frantz Fanon, Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Spivak, among others. Chandra Talpade Mohanty and other feminist writers raised their voice against this tendency to homogenize the non-west in western scholarship. Third wave or difference feminism, which stated that all women's experiences could not be universalized and put under the rubric of one singular, monolithic feminism, staked its claim to be accorded a legitimate place in the annals of scholarship.

It was not only geographically diverse regions which sought to be represented or to represent themselves. The efforts of feminists, Marxists and deconstructionists resulted in the publishing of diverse material like slave narratives (Harriet Jacobs), travel narratives (Mary Seacole) and captivity narratives. In India we see the emergence of Dalit and transgender narratives. Moreover, most of these writings demonstrated not just one but multiple historical oppressions, for instance of race and gender (see unit on "Women of Colour", Block 4, Unit 5) as also of caste and class. The depiction or portrayal of subjectivity in these narratives also shows a divided or split consciousness, often as a result of the colonial experience. Notions of 'hybridity' and 'mimicry' challenge the idea of the singular unified self. As Peter Barry phrases it:

The notion of the double, or divided, or fluid identity which is characteristic of the postcolonial writer explains the great attraction which post-structuralism and deconstruction have proved to be for the postcolonial critic. Post-structuralism is centrally concerned to show the fluid and unstable nature of personal and gender identity, the shifting, polyvalent, contradictory currents of signification within texts, and the....numerous contradictions and multiple allegiances of which the postcolonial writer/critic is constantly aware (Barry, 2010, p.189).

The writings of Spivak and Homi Bhabha are influenced by poststructuralism and deconstruction, but there are different approaches within postcolonialism. The writings of Edward Said, the Palestinian-American critic whose work *Orientalism* (1979) was tremendously influential in rethinking the conceptual, epistemological place of the orient in the western imagination, displays a liberal humanist orientation and his interpretation is influenced by that orientation. In his lifewriting *Out of Place* (2002), he gives an account of his boyhood and youth in Cairo. It would be an interesting exercise to see the shaping of his masculinity in a fairly privileged setting, the fact of being an exile, notwithstanding, and then to contrast Said's account with the writings of women like Nawal el Saadawi.

One distinction we could keep in mind is that postcolonialism is not so much a method as it is an ideology, and a way of looking at identity and difference. The challenge of postcolonialism to lifewriting can be summed up under the templates of difference, hybrid identities and divided subjectivities.

Thus, along with poststructuralism, postmodernism and deconstruction, postcolonialism has helped remap the whole field of lifewriting studies in a way that shows the construction of gender in the contemporary world.

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## 4.6 LET US SUM UP

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We have seen in our discussion in this unit that the theoretical challenges posed by the ideas of deconstruction, poststructuralism and postmodernism initially seemed to pose a threat to autobiography. This is because, with their emphasis on fluid subjectivities and interrogation of truth and reality, they signaled the death of the author. However, ultimately, as we have seen, the interface between these theories and the genre of life narratives served to broaden the canvas of lifewriting and to make it more inclusive in its embrace of marginalized, unstable, shifting and contingent subjectivities.

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## 4.7 UNIT END QUESTIONS

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- 1) How did poststructuralism and postmodernism challenge earlier ideas of autobiography?
- 2) Do you think the ideas of poststructuralism pose a challenge to settled notions of gender? If so, how?
- 3) Do you think the theories described here are useful in discussing women's lifewritings? Discuss.
- 4) How do theoretical perspectives introduced by postmodernism and poststructuralism lead to the opening up of lifenarratives to make them more inclusive? Explain.
- 5) Analyse the impact of postcolonialism on life narratives with the help of examples.

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## 4.9 SUGGESTED READINGS

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