

Michel Foucault: *"Truth and Power"*



**Paper: Paper 22, Option B, Literary Theory (ii)**

**Lesson: Michel Foucault: *"Truth and Power"***

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### **Poststructuralism: Emergence and conceptions**

It was in the late 1960s and early 1970s that poststructuralism was born out of structuralism. It came to be used as a label for a variety of works of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century critical theorists and French and continental philosophers. Some critics use the term with “post” and “structuralism” separated with a hyphen, as they consider “post-structuralism” to be a movement which came after structuralism. However, using the term without the hyphen seems to encompass all possible perspectives. Not only does it free itself from viewing poststructuralism simply as a theory which succeeded structuralism, but also indicates that the development of poststructural thought was already inherent in the early phase.

Even today, critics are divided on the question of whether to consider poststructuralism as a fuller working-out of the implications of structuralism or to see it in opposition to the scientific pretensions of structuralism. In fact, it can be suggested, that poststructuralists are structuralists who saw the shortcomings in their ways and engaged themselves in further exploration of the consequences of the structuralist thoughts. “They reject the self-sufficiency of the structures that structuralism posits and interrogate the binary oppositions that constitute those structures. They tend to see all knowledge as textual, where literature, anthropology, psychology, etc. are not just composed of concepts but of words.” (Craig 597)



**Fig 1 Derrida**

**Source**<<http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Derrida-by-Pablo-Secca.jpg>>

Jacques Derrida's paper on "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences" which was delivered to an International Colloquium in 1966 at Johns Hopkins University marked the conspicuous arrival of poststructuralism. Through this paper he cast the entire history of philosophy in the West into doubt. As it is known, structuralism proposed to provide anthropology, literary criticism and other disciplines with a scientific basis but before it could happen, Derrida exposed the weakness of the entire enterprise. Structuralism depends on structures and structures depend on centers. It was this very notion of a stable center that Derrida called into question, making him oppose the inherited manner of thinking in all domains of knowledge.

He along with other contemporary thinkers like Michel Foucault, Jacques Lacan and Roland Barthes (in the later phase of his life) in their own different ways undertook the task of subverting traditional claims for the presence of self-evident foundations. These foundations

which validate knowledge and truth were countered by the poststructuralists, giving the movement elements of skepticism and antifoundationalism.

**Michel Foucault: A life**



**Fig 2**

**Source**<[http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Michel\\_Foucault.jpg](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Michel_Foucault.jpg)>

Born as Paul-Michel Foucault on 15 October, 1926, Foucault was not a systematic thinker. While everyone tried to give labels to him and his work, Foucault constantly denied being defined by any categories. Often referring to himself as an “experimenter” instead of a “theorist”, Foucault developed the designation of “Professor of the History of Systems of Thought” for himself, when he was promoted to a new professorship at College de France in the year 1970. He deliberately did so to differentiate his work from the intellectual tradition of the history of ideas.



**Fig3**

## Source

<[http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Entrance\\_hall\\_of\\_Uppsala\\_University\\_main\\_building.jpg](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Entrance_hall_of_Uppsala_University_main_building.jpg)>

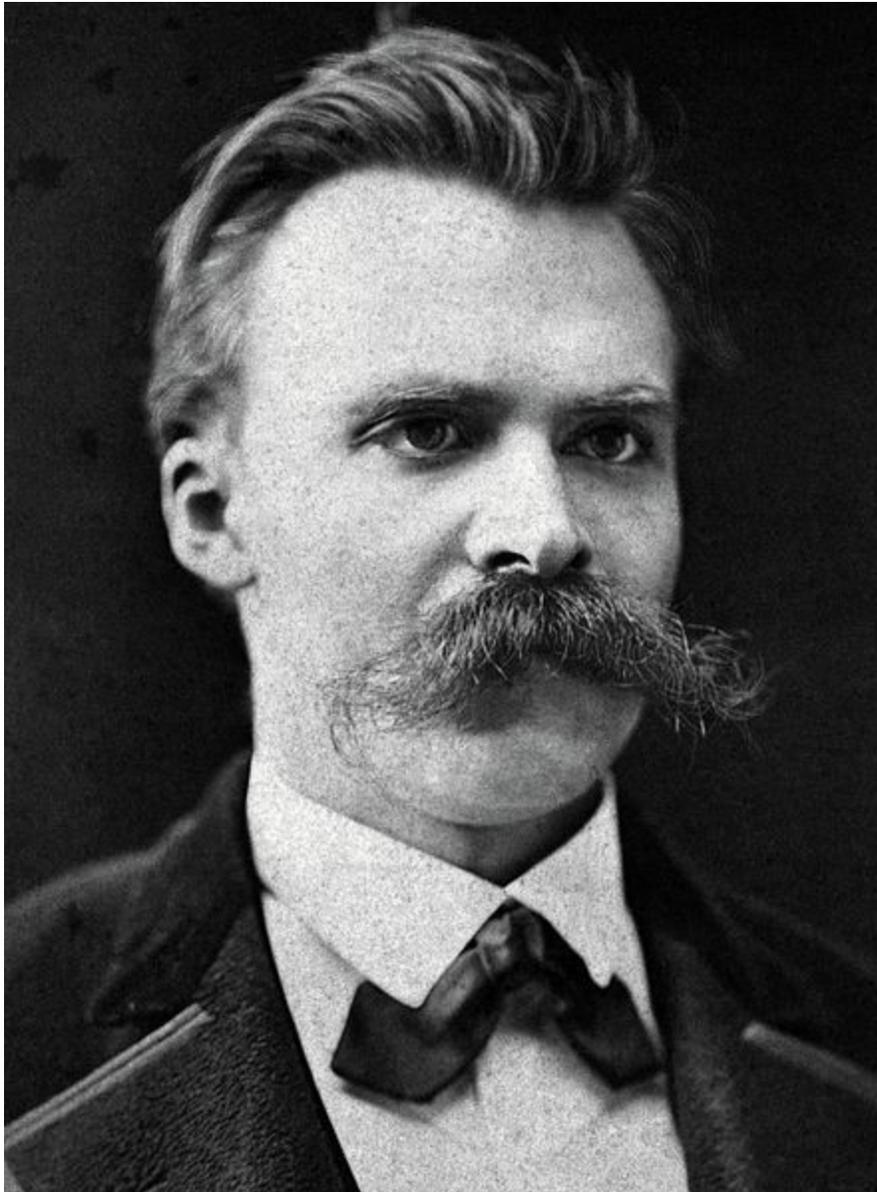
It was in the city of Poitiers in France, that Foucault was born as the second child to Dr. Paul Foucault and Anne Malapert. Being brought up in a prosperous but socially conservative family; Foucault graduated from Saint-Stanislas school having studied philosophy. Following this he attended the Lycée Henri-IV in Paris and in 1946 took admission in the École Normale Supérieure d'Ulm. This phase was marked by depression as Foucault struggled to come to terms with his homosexuality. It was in 1947 that Foucault, owing to his interest in psychology, earned a degree equivalent to BA in Psychopathology. This led him to work under the well-known phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty and receive another degree but this time in Philosophy. Having a consistently excellent academic record, Foucault taught at the University of Uppsala in Sweden, the University of Warsaw and the University of Hamburg.

Taking his studies further, Michel Foucault received his doctorate in 1959 under the supervision of the renowned French philosopher, Georges Canguilhem. His doctoral thesis was later published as *Madness and Unreason: History of Madness in the Classical Age* in 1961. He continued his research throughout his life with significant events like becoming a fellow at the prestigious Collège de France, rewarding his passionate and rigorous approach to academics. He even included several students to assist him in his research and enjoyed this teamwork along with the publication of short books. Although he joined the French Communist Party in 1950 because of the influence of Louis Althusser, he took no more than two years to leave it, out of disillusionment. The later years of 1970s saw Foucault turning away from activism and moving towards journalism, where he covered the Iranian Revolution first hand. However, he contracted

HIV perhaps in the United States and developed AIDS in 1984. Despite the deteriorating health, he did not give up his work and finished editing two volumes on ancient sexuality before his death on 25<sup>th</sup> June, 1984.

### **Foucault and his works: A brief overview**

Known for thinking differently and for producing works which challenged the fundamental aspects of the philosophical traditions of the West, Foucault remains one of the most important figures in critical theory. His works have had an impact that has been felt across disciplines ranging from anthropology and sociology to history and English studies. His rapid rise to stardom in the French intellectual scene and the way his ideas spread in other nations, stand as a proof of his creativity and originality. Being under the influence of Marx, Freud and Nietzsche, Foucault developed an entire oeuvre that illustrates the contingent and historical nature of what philosophy has traditionally seen as universal and absolute.



**Fig 4 Nietzsche**

**Source**<<http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Nietzsche187a.jpg>>

According to him philosophers have created over simplified and dualistic worldviews that provide humans a mistaken sense of their abilities to gain certainty about the world. It gives them an assurance and security that they can master the world. Going against this trend of duality, Foucault does not look for the universal structures of all knowledge. Instead, he attempts to

identify the situations and conditions that have formed the current morality and knowledge and which continue to legitimize them. It can be noted that in his works, he constantly tries to rethink concepts like power, freedom and subjectivity for arriving at new ways of countering domination and oppression. Such an inclination in his works sprouted from his observation that Marx, Freud and Nietzsche recognized the existence of relationship between power and knowledge. In Foucault's opinion this took the shape of a relation between ideas and economic power for Marx while Freud conceived it as a relation between knowledge and desire and Nietzsche saw all forms of knowledge as expressions of a "will to power".

It can be said that throughout his life Foucault rejected the understanding that all his works considered together, aspired to the label of a global theory. In his view the human sciences turned people into subjects by using global theories as tools for exercising power. His interest lies in the way in which rationality does not pre-exist but is rather constructed by social and political forces. He studies how this rationality is then applied to human subjects to transform them into objects of different forms of knowledge. Moreover, what makes Foucault's oeuvre difficult is the fact that the structure of his works remains anti-disciplinary. Regardless of the obstacles in understanding his works, their interpretation today inform the studies and analyses of identity, the body, subjectivity, ethics, morality and technologies of the government.

Interestingly, at various points of his life, Foucault kept revisiting his earlier works where he made developments and transformations in the light of the new concerns that caught his attention. Beginning with *Madness and Civilization* in 1960, Foucault addressed the question of the conditions that gave rise to the distinction between reason and madness and reason and unreason in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. His thesis explored how psychiatry and psychology emerged as sciences alongside the decline of the ancient regime of the institutional confinement. He also

undertook the analysis of the 18<sup>th</sup> century establishment of the asylums where he aimed to reveal how madness was silenced by the rise of the monologue of reason.

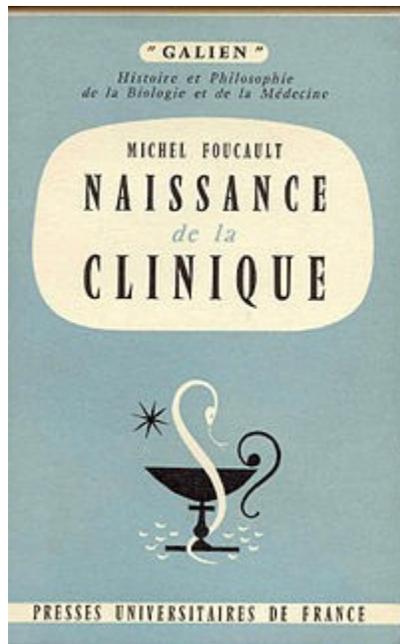


Fig 5

Source<[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Birth\\_of\\_the\\_Clinic](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Birth_of_the_Clinic)>

To achieve his objective of the understanding of the present, Foucault, in his next work *The Birth of the Clinic* (1973), carried out an extended exegesis of how an individual's body was formed "as an object of scientific medical examination and analysis." (Smart 35) His research in *The Birth of the Clinic* reveals how it was the medical science which was the first scientific discourse to view human beings as both the subjects and the objects of positive knowledge. He carried it out by studying the experience and knowledge of medicine in the classical era and of the change that came about in the Western civilization during the 18<sup>th</sup> century. In *The Birth of the Clinic* consequently, he decoded medical discourse among a collection of late 18th century political,

scientific and philosophical texts, locating changes in methods of thinking about death and disease.

The idea of how humans are made into objects of knowledge was then taken into account in *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* which was published in French in 1966. This work further signified the influence of structuralism on Foucault's way of working. Here, Foucault discussed the rules of organization which differentiated and structured various modes of thought. Encompassing three eras of history, Foucault focused on the thesis that modern thought and its historical development was not gradual. He opposed the idea of the progress of reason and asserted that certain epistemological assumptions have remained in all possible periods of history which have determined what was acceptable and what was not. For this he considered three main disciplines that emerged during the 19<sup>th</sup> century i.e. biology, philology and economics.

In 1969 Foucault penned down his methodological approach of "archaeology" in a treatise titled *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. It explained the approach which he had used extensively in *Madness and Civilization*, *The Birth of the Clinic* and *The Order of Things*. Here, Foucault argued for and explained archaeology as an appropriate method of analysis of the ignored domain of statements. It is not the discussion of a formal theory but an account of a specific kind of approach to history. The debate in this book engaged with both discourses and discursive practices along with practices which are non-discursive, behavioural patterns, institutions and socio-economic processes. Foucault, in addition, made a case for the rules governing knowledge which function beneath the consciousness of subjects and define the boundaries of the language under use and circulation of thoughts, in a particular period.

After dealing with discourses, his 1975 book *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* scrutinized the kind of mechanisms, both social and theoretical which led to huge changes that happened in the penal systems in the West, during the modern age. Examining the questions of power and the body, Foucault contributed to the knowledge of how various cultural shifts brought about the dominance of prisons. This work continues to be influential for its emphasis and elaboration of ideas of "discipline" not just in prisons but also in institutions such as schools, hospitals and military barracks.

His final years saw the publication of a breakthrough work titled *The History of Sexuality* (1976-1984). In it he discusses the discourse about sex to refute the claim that sexuality has been repressed and the only solution to liberate people is to talk about it. Foucault proposes that despite the apparent attempts to repress sexuality, it was always discussed and written about in various discourses dealing with adolescent sexuality, homosexuality, etc. In order to prove his argument, he comments throughout the work on how the 18<sup>th</sup> century saw a proliferation of the

discourses on sex where religious confessions among other things, made sexual activity and an individual's sexual life the objects of statistical and demographic analysis.

### **The Questions of Methodology**

If Foucault's works are considered, there seem to be two different methods of analysis- archaeology and genealogy. This shift in method in his writings of 1970s does not indicate a distinct break between his works, but point towards the change in his preoccupations from the discourse, as influenced by structuralism to the concerns of institutions, power and the self and social practices.

**Archaeology:** It is a way of conducting historical analysis of discourse or systems of thought. Archaeology studies and describes the archive and involves questions like which statements disappear, transform, get censored, reused or survive. Among many things, this method attempts to raise issues of validity and invalidity of terms along with the relationship between statements which were used in the past with the statements which are used in the contemporary time. In other words, archaeology as a method of studying discourse aims at documenting the conditions of its existence and the practical field in which it is positioned.

**Genealogy:** Foucault's later works show how genealogy triggered the replacement of the method of archaeology. Although it did not lead to its complete erasure, archaeology definitely acquired a secondary position which continued to facilitate the isolation and analysis of "local discursivities in a manner which was complementary to genealogy." (Power/Knowledge 85)

The links and continuities between archaeology and genealogy hence did not mark a categorical break in the works written by Foucault.

The concept of genealogy comes to a fuller employment in Foucault's essay "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History" where he differentiates his writings from traditional history. This essay also articulates Foucault's acknowledgement of Nietzsche's role in introducing him to a radically different notion of historical analysis i.e. genealogy. For Foucault, such method goes against the quest for the origin of things and the whole process of regarding the point of origin as the high moment of the process of evolution. "In contrast genealogy reveals disparity and dispersion behind the constructed identity of the origin; it shows historical beginnings to be lowly, and beneath 'measured truth, it posits the ancient proliferation of errors.'" (Language, Counter Memory 143) Genealogy, thus, exposes the contingency and complexity that surround historical events and discards continuities and stable forms that have been the characteristics of traditional history.

## **"Truth and Power"**

### **The Text**

"Truth and Power" is an excerpted version of Michel Foucault's interview with Alessandro Fontana and Pasquale Pasquino. It first appeared in 1977 as "Intervista a Michel Foucault" in *Microfiesca del Poetre*. In this interview Foucault revisits the chief theoretical trends of his career as the interviewers ask him to trace the path of his career and elaborate on the major questions he dealt with.

### **Major Concepts and Ideas**

**Discontinuity:** Foucault's analysis of discourse in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* promotes the rejection of historical unity and itself debunks all the presumptions about the same. In its place

Foucault describes the fissures, thresholds, disruptions and complexities of the process of discourse. He offers a critique of the manner in which the history of ideas depends on continuities between different historical worldviews. He argues that even though history of ideas identifies the discontinuity between modes of knowledge, it ultimately assumes that these modes are present as a whole. Such assumptions fall short in justifying the complexities of discourse. Foucault propounds that the discursive and institutional relationships by which discourses emerge are as much governed by disruptions as they are by unified themes, making discontinuity an integral part of discursive formations that are unified.

This notion of discontinuity which was present in the theoretical trajectory of Foucault, made people label him as a “structuralist historian”, which Foucault in “Truth and Power” completely refused to accept. He explained his stance by stating that all he intended to do was to show how scientific statements and sciences are disposed to the pressures of power.

**Power:**

Most works of Foucault explore the relationship between institutions, social structures and individuals. In some way or the other, they concentrate on the effects of variety of institutions on groups of people and the function that those people perform in either resisting or affirming those effects. What forms the central concern of Foucault’s studies is the analysis of power. His research and writings counter the negative idea of power in which it is seen solely as oppressive and constraining. Foucault changed this general belief on power and formulated perspectives which went beyond the repressive notion of power. What made Foucault so important was the way he examines the manner in which power operates in everyday life including relations between institutions and people.

In "Truth and Power" particularly, Foucault doesn't involve himself with the issue of what external power acts on statements that are scientific but describes at length what effects of power circulate in the scientific statements. He discusses the constitution of the internal regime of power of those scientific statements and the reasons as to why and how those regimes undergo modifications at different points of time.

"Truth and Power" offers exposition of Foucault's belief that the occurrences of history which appear to be chaotic are actually conflicts of power. For him each and every action and event in history is a manifestation of the exercise of exchange of power. While the general conceptualization of power remained that it is a capacity of people to exert their will over the will of others to make them succumb to things they were not willing to submit to, Foucault revolutionized this conception by concerning himself with how power itself works rather than the motives behind the quest of power or the purposes behind it. He posed questions, such as, who are the people who have the right to assert power and how does the embodiment of power occur in the local and regional institutes? He viewed power as something that has to be constantly performed and is more like a strategy than a possession operating at micro levels as relations of force.

What became highly influential was the comparison that Foucault made of power with war like domination. He noted that in the case of power the only difficulty is that it is problematic to identify who is fighting against whom, as power doesn't flow in one direction. It travels in various directions as per the various forms of power relations in the network of power exchange. As Foucault wrote, "Power must be analyzed as something which circulates, or as something

which only functions in the form of a chain . . . Power is employed and exercised through a netlike organization. . . Individuals are the vehicles of power, not its points of application."

(Power/Knowledge 98) This theorization of power made thinkers reconceptualize power as well as the place of the individual in power relations as active agents in their power dynamics with others.

Some critics comment that since Foucault portrays power as a major force governing almost all relations within the society, his views can be seen as influenced by Louis Althusser who focused his analysis of power on Ideological State Apparatus. Foucault's conception of power also placed him in contrast to the early feminists and conventional Marxists as they saw power simply as a form of repression.

### **Intellectuals:**

On being questioned about the position of an intellectual, Foucault in "Truth and Power" differentiates between the "universal" and the "specific" intellectuals. Foucault disputes the traditional role ascribed to the universal intellectual who is responsible for upholding reason and to present the mastery over truth by universal theorization. Foucault rather believes that people know about their circumstances and can express themselves without the help of a universal theory propounded by a universal intellectual. (He argues that people in general no longer require a consciousness which is represented by a select few people (universal intellectuals) of governing agencies but they are not able to free themselves of the universal theories because the forms of knowledge of their own conditions have been obstructed and prohibited by the systems of power, which are brought into circulation through intellectuals acting as its agents). For

Foucault, a universal intellectual should ideally fight the forms of power in which intellectual movement was entrenched.

In charting out the difference between a universal and a specific intellectual, Foucault remarks that the universal intellectuals got replaced by specific intellectuals who are the more political intellectual subjects. He thinks that unlike universal intellectuals, the specific intellectuals work in “specific sectors, at the precise points where their own conditions of life or work situate them (housing, the hospital, the asylum, the laboratory, the university, family and sexual relations).” (Power/Knowledge 126) As an alternative, Foucault wants the specific intellectuals to attempt to detach the power of truth from the arrangements of socio-economic and cultural hegemony.

In his discussions with the interviewers, he then calls the writers the intellectuals par excellence. However, he simultaneously notes that the writers have also been coopted by the structure of the regime in the modern society. He comments that incorporation of the written expression has led to the decline in value of the genius of a writer and moreover promoted the “absolute savant” who has the powers which he can either use for or against the State.

**Truth:**

The notion of “truth” in Foucauldian canon is inextricably linked with power. As per Foucault, truth doesn’t lie outside of power as it is a thing which belongs to this world and has regular effects of power. Writing about the vulnerability of truth, Foucault argues that truth is not pre-given. It is formulated as per the beliefs and values of a particular society. It is the political and economic forces which define the majority of the power in the web of the society which construct “Truth”.

In analyzing the Western civilization, Foucault observes that truth is created by centering it on scientific discourses, its accountability to socio-economic forces, circulation and consumption of truth via social apparatuses and the regulation of the distribution of truth by economic and political devices.

Truth can then be understood as a systematic procedure which produces, distributes, regulates, circulates and operates statements. A regime of truth is formed as truth operates in a circular connection with the systems of power, which not only produces it but also sustains it. The circle is completed as truth also induces certain effects of power which lead to its extension.

### **The Impact of Foucault**

The impact of Foucault's thinking and formulations influenced various disciplines including feminism, post-colonialism and queer theory. His reworking of power relations made him an often cited thinker in post-colonialism while the significance he accorded to the body as a site of power increased his importance for feminist enterprises. His intervention in the philosophical and political debates came at a time when France and other nations were experiencing important shifts. His analysis of power made people see how power acts at every interaction and majorly influenced political thinking. Foucault also affected the events of May 1968 and encouraged intellectuals to reconceptualize the very basic building blocks that were used to study social situations.

### **Glossary**

**Archive** - The archive is generally understood to be the set of collected texts from a specified period of history. Foucault describes the archive in terms of the circumstances of the possibility of its construction. This changes it from being a static collection of texts to a set of institutions

and relations that allow statements to continue to exist. Consequently, for Foucault the archive is not a set of statements or a set of things, instead a set of relations. In his opinion it is the general organization of the construction and alteration of statements.

**Discipline-** Discipline is a way of governing the operations and movements of the body in a constant way. It is a kind of power that constrains the body by controlling and dividing up both its movement and the space and time in which it moves. (The disciplines are the approaches by which this control became possible)?. Foucault suggests the origins of discipline back to armies and monasteries. He, however, acknowledges that this concept changed in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Discipline then became an extensively used practice to control entire populations.

**Discourse** – It is the elementary unit that Foucault analyzes in all his works. He defines it as a system in which certain knowledge is conceivable. Discourses regulate what is true or false in a certain field. The discourse of psychiatry, for example, defines what it is likely to know about madness. Talking of things outside of a discourse is almost impossible. Foucault's argument about prisons is a good example as eliminating the prison is unthinkable partially because there are no words to refer to any substitute. The prison then resides at the center of the modern discourse of punishment.

**Post-colonialism** –It is the analysis of the legacy of the domination and control of several parts of the world by European and even American powers. Post-colonialism as an academic discipline focuses on the colonizer-colonized relationship, taking in its ambit the questions of political, psychological and socio-economic effects of the history of colonization. Post-colonialism can be referred to the anti-colonial writings which were produced both during the

period and after the end of the domination of the colonies. Its central premise is the exposure of the underwriting of socio-economic life in literature due to colonial exploitation.

**Statement** - The statement is the elementary unit of discourse, and hence the fundamental unit examined in the archeological method. The statement has, nevertheless, no steady unit. Anything from a scientific chart to a novel to a sentence can be a statement depending on the conditions of its advent and the range of the field in which it is to be analyzed.

**Structuralism** – It is a movement which began in the 1950s with Claude Levi-Strauss's work whose analysis was based on Saussure's linguistic model and analyzed phenomenon like kinship, mythology, etc. Structuralism concerns itself with the general ways by which structures are governed. It revolves around the proposition that units of any system have meaning only in their relations to each other. Analytical in nature, it isolates deep structures that are not visible at the surface. However, structuralism gave way to deconstruction and poststructuralism in the late 1960s with its influence remaining in fields like stylistics, analysis of culture, etc.

**Unreason** - Unreason, similar to madness, is a term that changes in meaning. It denotes those literary works, people and familiarities that are outside reason. In the classical era, reason tended to restrain unreason in the form of social deviance where unreason comprised of the mad, the lazy and the bad. Unreason and madness have a relationship which is complex and changing. While at times unreason and madness are entirely separate there are times when madness forms a part of unreason.

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