**Unit III: Literary Modernism**

**Lecture 1:** Introduction to Literary Modernism

**1- Definition:**

As a literary movement, modernism gained prominence during and, especially, just after the First World War; it subsequently flourished in Europe and America throughout the 1920s and 1930. Modernism is characterized by a self-conscious break with traditional styles of poetry and verse. Modernists experimented with literary form and expression, adhering to the modernist maxim to "Make it new." Modernist authors sought to break away from traditions and conventions through experimentation with new literary forms, devices, and styles. Their work reflected the pervasive sense of loss, disillusionment, and even despair in the wake of the Great War, hence their emphasis on historical discontinuity and the alienation of humanity. They tended to perceive the world as fragmented. Moreover, it believes that we create the world in the act of perceiving it. It elevates the individual and the inward over the social and the outward, and it prefers the unconscious to the self-conscious. In many respects it is a reaction against REALISM and NATURALISM and the scientific postulates on which they rest.

A prominent feature of modernism is the phenomenon called the avant-garde; that is, a small, self-conscious group of artists and authors who deliberately undertake to "make it new." Frequently, avant-garde artists represent themselves as "alienated" from the established order, against which they assert their own autonomy; a prominent aim is to shock the sensibilities of the conventional reader and to challenge the norms and pieties of the dominant bourgeois culture.

**2- Historical Background**

**3- Some Attributes of Modernist Literature**

**a/ Formal/Stylistic characteristics**

**Perspectivism**: The locating of meaning from the viewpoint of the individual; the use of narrators located within the action of the fiction, experiencing from a personal, particular (as opposed to an omniscient, "objective") perspective; the use of many voices, contrasts and contestations of perspective; the consequent **disappearance of the omniscient narrator**

. **Impressionism**: An emphasis on the process of perception and knowing: the use of devices (formal, linguistic, representational), to present more closely the texture or process or structure of knowing and perceiving.

**The use of fragmentation and juxtaposition, motif, symbol, allusion**.

**Experimentation in form**: In order to present differently, afresh, the structure, the connections, and the experience of life.

**The (re)presentation of inner (psychological) reality**, including the "flow" of experience, through devices such as stream of consciousness.

**The use of interior or symbolic landscape**: the world is moved "inside", structured symbolically or metaphorically -- as opposed to the Romantic interaction with transcendent forces acting through the exterior world, and Realist representations of the exterior world as a physical, historical, contiguous site of experience.

**Time is moved into the interior** as well: time becomes psychological time (time as innerly experienced) or symbolic. Time is used as well more complexly as a structuring device through a movement backwards and forwards through time, the juxtaposing of events of different times, and so forth.

**A turn to "open" or ambiguous endings**, again seen to be more representative of "reality" -- as opposed to "closed" endings, in which matters are resolved.

**Irony and satire** are important tools used by the modernist writer to comment on society.

**b/ Thematic characteristics**

Common concerns of modernism are: the breaking down of social norms, rejection of standard social ideas, and traditional thoughts and expectations, rejection of religion and anger against the effects of the world wars, the search for a ground of meaning in a world without God; the critique of the traditional values of the culture; the loss of meaning and hope in the modern world and an exploration of how this loss may be faced. As well, modernists tend to reject history, social systems, and emphasize alienation in modern urban and industrial societies