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Q3(c)

Explain the basic features of 'Postmodernism' in Anthropology

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2015 · Anthropology GS 1 · 20 marks · Post-modernism in anthropology.

(j) Post-modernism in anthropology.

Core demand of the question

- Explain the basic features of 'Postmodernism' in Anthropology
- Write about 250 words for 20 marks

Revision summary

Postmodernism treats ethnography as a written, situated account.

Writing Culture named the crisis of representation.

Reflexivity, polyphony, and partial truths are the kit.

Foucault and **Said** tied knowledge to power and empire.

The limit is paralysis; the gain is honest voice and better ethics.

Introduction

Postmodernism in anthropology is a late-twentieth-century doubt about the omniscient ethnographer. It treats the field text as a made, power-laden account, not a glass window on 'the native'.

Body**Core features**

- **Crisis of representation:** after **Clifford** and **Marcus** in Writing Culture, ethnography is writing, with tropes and authority moves.
- **Reflexivity:** the observer's race, gender, and funding belong in the account, as **Rabinow** showed in Morocco.
- **Polyphony:** more than one voice should appear. The monograph should not speak as a single colonial 'we'.
- **Partial truths:** **Clifford Geertz** already called description interpretation. Postmodernists pushed further: no complete culture-out-there.
- **Power/knowledge:** **Foucault's** influence made culture theory watch the state, the clinic, and the museum.

Method and style

- Dialogue, confessional openings, and blurred genres replaced the silent third-person tribe.
- **Crapanzano, Tyler, and Fischer** experimented with form. **Said's** Orientalism named the imperial archive behind older pictures.

Critique of postmodernism

- **Spiro, Sangren**, and many Indian fieldworkers **said** endless doubt can paralyse comparison and policy.
- **Bourdieu** kept reflexivity without dropping structure. Feminist and Dalit ethnography used the crisis to demand better evidence, not no evidence.
- A fair use is humility about voice, not the claim that villages are only text.

Flow diagram

Postmodern anthropology -> Writing Culture
Postmodern anthropology -> Reflexivity polyphony
Postmodern anthropology -> Power knowledge
Critique -> Evidence still needed

Conclusion

Postmodern anthropology made ethnography confess its making and its power. Its lasting features are reflexivity, partiality, and suspicion of the imperial monograph, not a ban on doing fieldwork.

Facts & figures

Clifford and Marcus

Writing Culture (1986) became the manifesto for ethnographic textuality.

Rabinow

Reflections on Fieldwork in Morocco put the ethnographer's position on the page.

Said

Orientalism showed how scholarly pictures of the East served imperial power.

Geertz

Interpretive anthropology was a bridge: culture as text, still aiming at thick description.