

**Postcolonial Literature**  
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**Lecture No. #05**  
**Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness**

Hello and welcome to another lecture on, Postcolonial Literature. Now, in our previous meeting, if you remember, we discussed, how the military and economic processes of Colonialism, is integrally associated with a peculiar kind of discourse, which we refer to as the Colonial discourse. And, we also studied Orientalism, as an example, of this Colonial discourse. And so, how through the discourse of Orientalism, places like Egypt, places like India, were transformed into passive objects of knowledge, for the European coloniser.

And, we also saw the use of Colonial discourse, to justify the process of Colonialism. So, a Colonial discourse like Orientalism for instance, which constructs the Arabs and the Indians, as barbaric, ignorant, and childlike creatures, presents European Colonialism, as a civilising mission, rather than an exploitative economic enterprise. And, the argument is actually, very clear here.

The argument, that a Colonial discourse makes is that, Colonialism, by exposing these less civilised people like the Arabs for instance, or the Indians, to the more civilised Europeans, actually benefit them, more. Because, they get enlightened than, they benefit the Europeans. So, it is ultimately, Colonialism, according to the Colonial discourse, is ultimately beneficial to the colonised subjects.

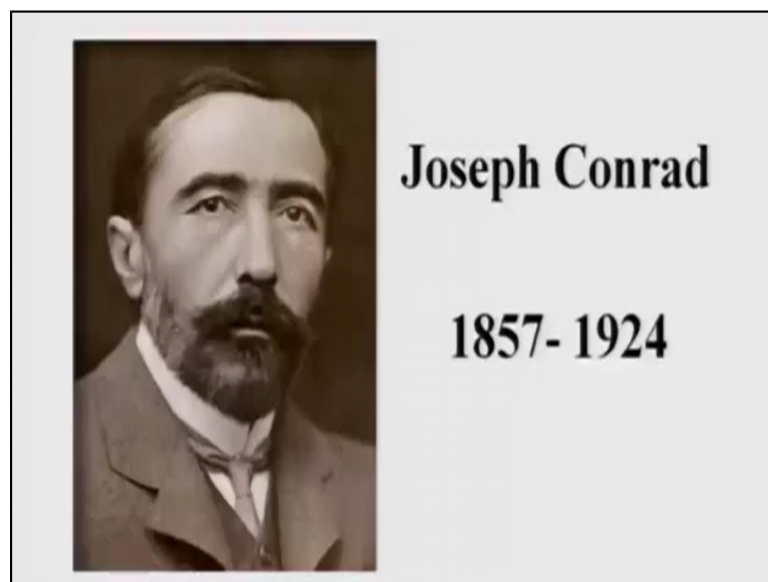
And so, therefore, I mean, in other words, through Colonialism, the adult and civilised European, is seen as leading the child like Oriental natives, to civilizational maturity. Now, however at this point, it is important to note that, Orientalism was not the only instance, of Colonial discourse. It was one example. And, if you look at the European Colonialism of Africa for instance, that carved up that entire continent into colonies, for European countries like Britain for instance, France, Belgium, Germany, etcetera, during the late 19th century.

We encounter another instance of Colonial discourse, associated with this process. And this discourse, of course has its focus on Africa. And though, it is distinct from Orientalism, the

underlying logic is very similar. And, it is similar because, in the Colonial discourse on Africa, Africans are presented as barbaric, as childlike, who need the guidance of enlightened Europeans, to reach civilizational maturity.

So, in other words, the late 19th-century European Colonialism of Africa, just like the European colonisation of the Orient before that, was explained away, as a civilising mission, which was more beneficial, again to the colonised, than to the coloniser. So, in today's lecture, we are basically going to talk about this Colonial discourse, which had its focus on Africa, and the bizarre ways in which, it twisted the Colonial reality. And, we are going to talk about this, with reference to one of the classics of British fiction.

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The name of the novel, that we are going to deal with today is, Joseph Conrad's, Heart of Darkness. But, before we move on to the novel, let me introduce you to the Novelist, Joseph Conrad. And, here, in this slide, you can see his image. And, you can also, see his dates.

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Conrad was born in 1857, in present-day Ukraine, in a family of Polish aristocrats, landed gentry. He died in 1924.

And, you know, if you read about Conrad's life, it is very interesting to note that, though Conrad later went on to become a very celebrated English Novelist, he only learnt English in his 20's. So, he did not know the English language, before that. And, it was in 1886, that Conrad took British citizenship.

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- **Conrad took British citizenship in 1886**
- **Conrad's first novel *Almayer's Folly* was published in 1895**

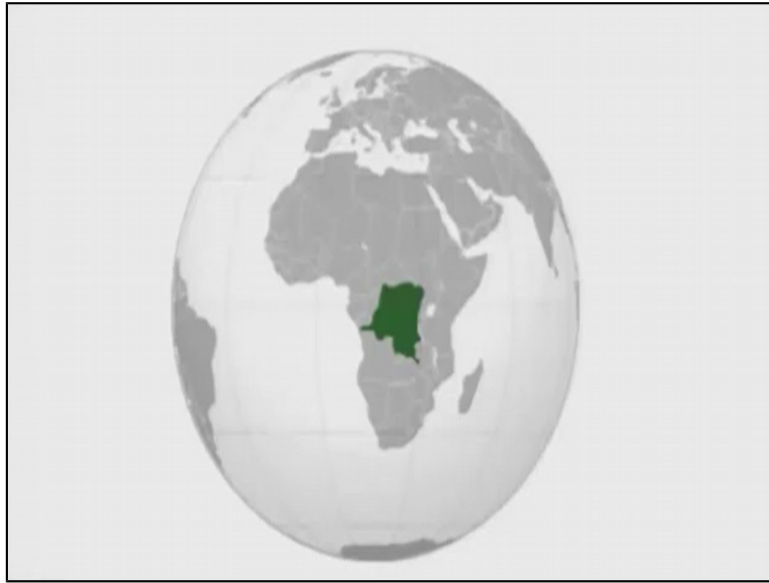
And, his first novel, written in English was published, as late as 1895. And, the name of that novel was, *Almayer's Folly*. Following the publication of *Almayer's Folly* in 1895, Conrad went on to publish other powerful tales like, *The Nigger of Narcissus*, *Heart of Darkness*- which we are going to discuss today, *Lord Jim*, and *Nostromo*.

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- ***The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'* (1897)**
- ***Heart of Darkness* (1899)**
- ***Lord Jim* (1900)**
- ***Nostromo* (1904)**

And, in this slide, you can see the dates of their publication, given within parentheses. And, in many of these fictions, that I have referred to, just now, Conrad's acquaintance with the sea, and with distant lands, as a professional sailor. Conrad was a professional sailor, at one point of time, in his area, is prominently reflected, in most of these novels. And, in fact, the novel *Heart of Darkness*, which we are going to discuss today, also had its origin in one of Conrad's journeys, as a sailor. So, in 1890, Conrad sailed for the Congo region in west Africa.

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And, Congo region, is this shaded region here, roughly. This actually, this map is of a present-day country called the democratic republic of Congo. But, roughly, this is the Congo region. So, Conrad in 1890, went to this region. And, he went on behalf of a Belgian company. Because, he was commissioned by that company, to take charge as captain, of one of the company's steamers, that plied along the Congo river.

King Leopold II, the ruler of Belgium, at that point of time, had recently annexed large portions of the Congo basin, as Belgian colony. Here, done that in 1870's, to be precise. And, when Conrad visited the area in 1890, it had already become infamous, as a site of inhuman Colonial brutalities and exploitation. And, *Heart of Darkness* on the one hand, is a documentation of these European brutalities, meted out to the local African populations.

And, on the other hand, it is a meditation on the gap, between this brutal physical reality of the Colonial process, and the Colonial discourse generated from within the metropolis, which presented this process as a civilising mission. So, it is a meditation on the gap between the discourse, which presents Colonialism as a civilising mission, and the brutal reality of the Colonial process.

One can follow this gap, between the Colonial discourse, and the Colonial process, in Conrad's novel, by focusing on the title of the novel, *Heart of Darkness*. So, in the novel, the character Marlow is a very important character, is commissioned by a Belgian company, to journey to Congo. And here, Marlow reflects Conrad's own journey, to a certain extent. And, Marlow is supposed to go there, take charge of a boat, that plied along the Congo river.

And, he was also supposed to locate, a somewhat mysterious person called, Kurtz. K U R T Z. I encourage you to read the novel, because then, these names will be more familiar. And, the incidents, that I am talking about, will be more familiar. So, Kurtz is a character, who is only gradually represented to the reader. And, this gradual unfolding of the character of Kurtz, is really, what the story of the novel is all about.

But, what is known at the very outset is that, Kurtz is a European agent, who works for the same Belgium company, which hired Marlow. And, he is located deep within Africa, deep within this Congo region. So, at one level, it is Marlow's journey to the depth of Africa, which is signified, as a journey to the Heart of Darkness. The heart darkness of the title, actually signifies, at one level, this journey of Marlow, to the heart of Africa.

But, what is the connection between Africa and darkness. Well. Africa, in Colonial discourse, was frequently referred to as the dark continent. And, this darkness, has actually nothing to do with lack of sunlight, in Africa. Africa gets, plenty of sun. This darkness, actually is a reference to lack of knowledge, about Africa. So, for Europeans, the interior of Africa, remained an uncharted and unmapped territory, well into the 20th century.

And therefore, in European maps, which represented for the Europeans, the known world, the continent of Africa remained a blank space. And, because, it remained a blank, unmapped, unknown space, it was referred to as the dark continent.

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But, within the European Colonial discourse on Africa, the contrast between darkness and light, also signified a moral opposition. And, this is something very important, that you need to understand.

So, Africa was dark, because, it was considered as barbaric, primitive, and childish, which was unable to distinguish between, what was morally good, and what was evil. And, Europe in contrast, represented the forces of light, of knowledge, of civilisation. Because, it was perceived as progressive, and as mature. And, it was also considered as a force, as a power, which was dedicated to the mission of bringing enlightenment, the light of civilisation, to the colonised subjects in Africa.

And, it is this light and darkness binary of the Colonial discourse, that Conrad puts to test in his novel, *Heart of Darkness*. So, what happens in the novel, after Marlow journeys to Africa. Well, when Marlow lands in Africa, his first port of call is referred to, as the outer station. And, during the course of the novel, Marlow will move across many such stations, bearing very generic names like outer station, central station, and inner station. What are these stations? What do they represent?

Well, they are actually sites of interaction, sites of European settlement, sites of European Colonial activity. And therefore, they are sites of interaction, between the European colonisers, and the colonised natives of Africa. And, following the logic of the Colonial discourse, they are also sites of progress and of civilisation. Right. Yet, the reality, which confronts Marlow in these stations, is radically different. So, for instance, in the outer station segment of the novel, Marlow witnesses an attempt, to build a railway track.

Now, the reference to railway is important. Because, if anything was ever touted, as a sign of progress and civilisation, that European colonisers brought to the colonised parts of the world, it was railways. It still is, in fact. The apologists of Colonialism, still refer to railway tracks in India, for instance, as the boon of Colonialism. However, in Conrad's novel, this notion of progress and development, that the railways signified within the Colonial discourse, is undercut in two major ways.

Firstly, while Marlow witnesses the attempt to construct a railway project, it does not appear to him as a project, that will bring progress in any way, rather it appears to him, as an enormous folly. So, Marlow for instance, finds that, machineries and rail tracks have been brought from Europe, and a lot of blasting of cliffs, and the nearby landscape, was taking place. But, Marlow could not see any visible sign of progress.

The machineries, that he witnessed were evidently decaying. And, the railway tracks, as soon as they were being laid, were being consumed by the forests of Africa. Clearly, the very attempt to build a railway, is perceived by Marlow, as a futile project. Because, it neglects the immediate context. Railways, like much of the other things, that the coloniser brought with him, to the parts of the world, that they colonised, tried to replicate the notions of progress, as developed in Europe, and implement that, on to lands, which were geographically, socially, culturally, very different.

And, the railways in Congo, suffers from this lack of context. It is a European thing, that has been forcefully replicated, in an African landscape. And, because of this, the railways rather than becoming a symbol of progress in the novel, becomes a symbol of an alien endeavour, which represents a certain kind of foolhardiness. The novel also undermines, the project of railway building, and its association with progress, by questioning about the beneficiaries of this so-called progress.

So, when we talk about the European Colonialism, assuring in progress and development, in the colonised parts of the world, it is always important to ask the question, progress for whom? As Marlow realises, if the railways being built in Congo, was supposed to bring civilisation and progress to the native population of Africa, then that was proving to be a signal failure. Why?

Because, the project rather than elevating the positions of Africans, rather than ennobling them, had actually as Marlow witnessed, had actually transformed them into bonded labourers, who were toiling to complete a foolhardy work, that was thrust on them, by the colonising outsiders. The Africans, in fact, that Marlow observes, near the railway site in the outer station, are found tiding chains, walking dissolutely, with basket full of earth, on their heads.

This is what, the promise of Colonial progress, achieved in Africa. It tears the native population, from their own social and cultural fabric, and converts them into chained groups. Now, at this point, it is important to take note of, one of the narrative techniques, that Conrad uses in this novel, to tell the tale of European Colonialism of Africa.

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## Delayed Decoding

And, this technique is best understood, as a delayed decoding, of the external reality, as a delayed decoding. So, while narrating his experiences in Africa, Marlow tells, of how he perceived the reality, that surrounded him through his sense organs. And, it is only after a delay, that Marlow, as well as the reader, actually gets to understand, what these sense impressions actually mean. To understand this technique, let us consider, these lines from the novel, where Marlow is describing his experience in the outer station, where the work for the railways, is going on.

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**Black shapes crouched, lay, sat between the trees, leaning against the trunks, clinging to the earth, half coming out, half effaced within the dim light, in all the attitudes of pain, abandonment, and despair. Another mine on the cliff went off, followed by a slight shudder of the soil under my feet. The work was going on. The work! And this was the place where some of the helpers had withdrawn to die.**

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Now, the first line, presents a bizarre landscape of black shapes, which confronts Marlow's eyes, even while his other sense organs are overwhelmed, by the constant blasting, that is taking place, for the railways. But, it is not until the last line. The line, and this is the place, that some of the helpers had withdrawn to die. Do we actually grasp, the meaning of the black shapes?

Those bizarre shapes, leaning and crying in pain, and abandonment, we realise, Marlow realises, are nothing but, emaciated and dying Africans, African workers, who are the apparent beneficiaries of European Colonial progress. So, this slight delay in decoding, the reality, experienced by Marlow, is actually indicative of, how the truth of Colonial discourse is disjointed, from the Colonial reality.

Marlow takes time to grasp, what is happening around him, precisely because, as a European, fed on the myth of Colonialism, as a civilising mission, he finds it difficult, to make sense of a reality, that is so far removed from any trace of civilised behaviour, and of progress. Now, this disparity between a discourse, which presents Colonialism as a civilising mission, and the Colonial reality, is however, most powerfully represented.

So, Marlow's discovery of the character called Kurtz. But, before Marlow even gets to meet Kurtz, in person, he hears about him. He hears him, being praised as a prodigy, as a superior being, who really personifies all the civilizational virtues of Europe. So, he is presented as this iconic European. And, Kurtz is also praised, for being one of the most efficient agents, who can procure an astonishing amount of ivory, from the interiors of Africa, to be shift to Europe.

An ivory, of course, was one of the most prized resources, that European colonisers extracted from the Congo region, for their domestic consumption. Now, when Marlow finally gets to meet Kurtz in the inner station, he is again confronted with the reality, that is radically different, from the discourse about Kurtz. And, it is so radically different that, he finds it difficult to make sense of the reality, that he encounters, when he actually meets Kurtz, or goes to the inner station, where Kurtz is located.

Here again, there is a masterful use of the technique of delayed decoding. Thus, when Marlow sees Kurtz's house, by the river, for the first time. And, by now, Marlow has journeyed from outer station, through central station, to inner station, where he finds Kurtz's house. And, he first sees it, through his binoculars. And, he is immediately struck by the number of poles, wooden poles, surrounding the house, with what appeared to be ornamental knobs on their top.

It is only after a substantial delay, and careful observation, that Marlow realises, that these knobs are something more sinister, than merely ornamental wood work. With mounting horror, Marlow recognises them, as dried and shrunken heads of Africans, which Kurtz had severed from the bodies of the native villages, to spread terror among the local population. This horrible exercise, was in fact, how Kurtz compelled the locals, to hunt for ivory, on his behalf.

This was in fact, the secret of his efficiency, as a Colonial agent. At this point, in the novel, the title *Heart of Darkness*, assumes a new and altered significance. Darkness ceases to be a qualification of Africa, and Africans, and becomes associated with the iconic European figure of Kurtz, and the process of Colonial extraction of resources, that Kurtz represents. Thus, Conrad's novel really turns, what it actually does here is, it really turns the Colonial discourse on its head, and explodes the myth of civilising mission, by placing it against the brutal realities of Colonialism.

And, seen from this perspective, *Heart of Darkness* appears to be, Conrad's contrapuntal reading of the Colonial discourse. So, as discussed in our previous lecture, you will know that a contrapuntal reading, attempts to read a discourse, against the grain, against the aetiological bias, that underlines a particular discourse, so as to bring out its fault lines. And, this is precisely, what *Heart of Darkness* does, with the Colonial discourse.

It brings out the biases, the contradictions, and the falsehood, that underlines it. But, at this point, we come across another question. Can we also read the novel, *Heart of Darkness*, contrapuntally? After all, the novel, in spite of its anti-European Orientation, is itself a product of European metropolitan culture. And, this is an important question, that we will take up in our next lecture. Thank you.