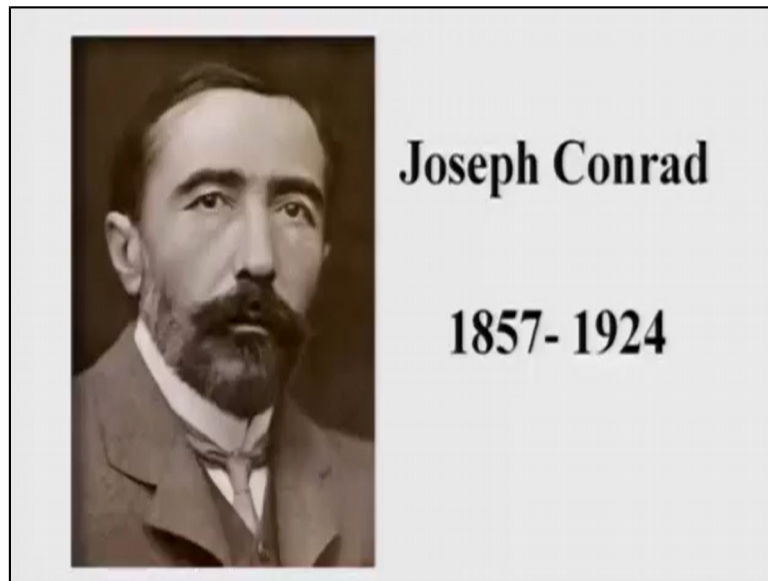


Postcolonial Literature
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Lecture No. #06
Colonialism: The African Perspective

Welcome again, to this series of Lectures, on Postcolonial Literature.

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Now, in our previous Lecture, we discussed Joseph Conrad's Novel, Heart of Darkness, and how that Novel provides, a contrapuntal reading of the Colonial Discourse on Africa. But, we ended our previous Lecture, with a very important question. And, the question was, can there be a contrapuntal reading, of the Novel itself. Can there be a contrapuntal reading, of Joseph Conrad's, Heart of Darkness, the text.

Now, you will have to understand here that, in spite of the sharp criticism of the Colonial Discourse, which was emanating from the West, and the kind of sharp criticism of that Discourse, that we find in Joseph Conrad's Novel, Heart of Darkness. We will have to remember that, Joseph Conrad himself was finally a western author, who was situated in England, which was one of the biggest Colonial metropolis of the last century.

And, his Novel, Heart of Darkness, in spite of its criticism, was itself published by a publisher, situated in the metropolis. And, in spite again, of all its criticism of the west, its primary readership was a western audience, was people located in the Colonial metropolis.

So, on the one hand, we have *Heart of Darkness*, as a very sharp and incisive criticism of western aetiologies, and on the other hand, we find that, this criticism too is emanating from the same centre, which is also forging the Colonial Discourse.

Therefore, the question is, is it not possible that *Heart of Darkness*, though it is critical of the metropolitan Colonial Discourse, is not radically separated, from the bias and the prejudices of the metropolitan societies, which were based on Colonial exploitation. The answer to this question as, we shall see during the course of this Lecture, is a big yes. Indeed, Conrad and his Novel, *Heart of Darkness*, can be found sharing certain important aetiological premises, with the Colonial Discourse, in spite of its criticism of the Colonial enterprise.

And, this becomes evident, if you try and read the Novel, contrapuntally. Or, in other words, if we try and read the Novel from a perspective, from which its Novelist, from which the Novelist Joseph Conrad, never intended it, to be read. So, what can this, other perspective be. What can this, alternative perspective be. Well, it is a perspective of the colonised Africans. A perspective, that is, as again, we will see during the course of our Lectures, following Lectures, that this perspective, the perspective of the colonised Africans, is crucially lacking in the Novel.

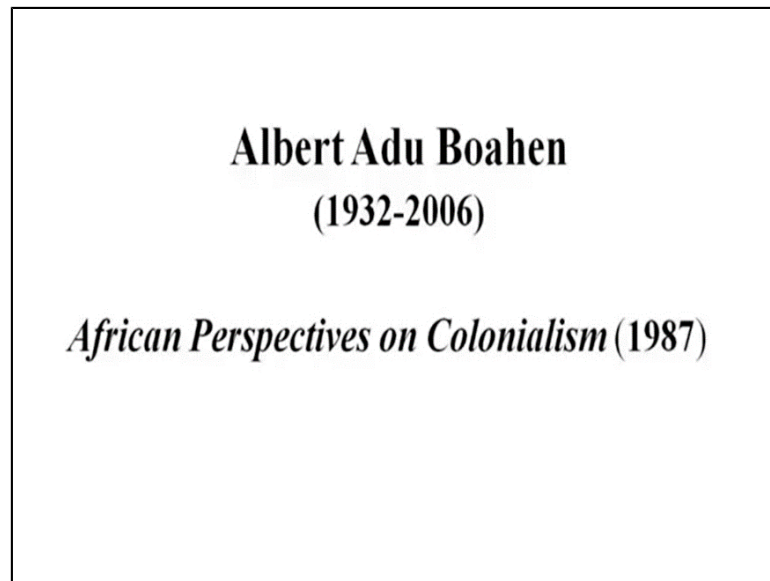
And therefore, this can give us that, alternative perspective from which, we can have a contrapuntal reading of the Novel itself. Because, the Novel was never meant to be read, at least by Joseph Conrad, by the colonised Africans. You will of course remember that, all we get, if you read the Novel carefully, you will see that, there is a lot of talk about oppression in Africa, there is a lot of sympathy, even for the Africans, who are oppressed.

But, all we get to hear about Africa is, ultimately the voice of Marlow. And, we cannot forget that, Marlow, in spite of all his dislike for, how Colonialism was operating in the Congo region, was himself working there, as an agent of the Belgian Colonial authority. Therefore, if you read the Novel from a genuine African perspective, rather than from the perspective of a westerner, who was sympathicans, we might arrive at a contrapuntal understanding of the Novel.

And, how it is itself informed by the very same prejudices, that also informs the Colonial Discourse, on Africa. But, before trying to read the Novel, from this African perspective, we

first need to better acquaint ourselves, with some major points in African history. And, not only the history of Colonial rule in Africa, but also the history of Precolonial Africa.

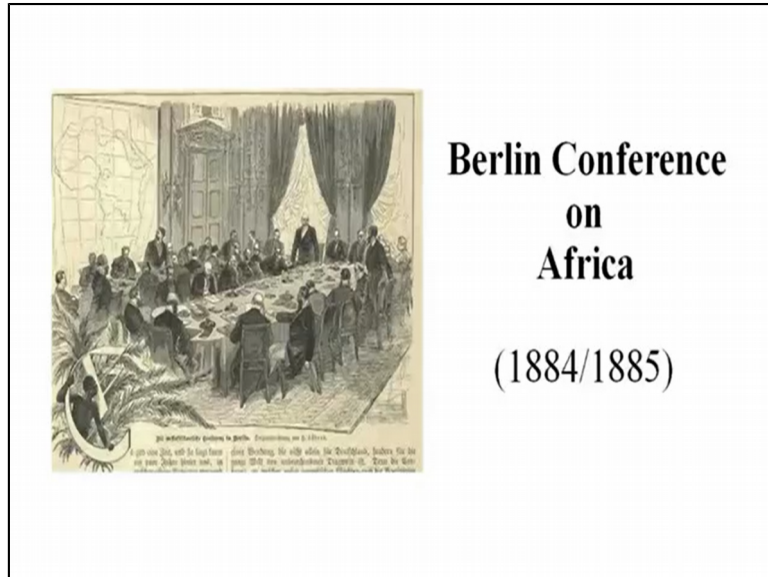
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And, for this, I turn to this wonderful book titled, African perspectives on Colonialism, which was written by the Ghanaian Academician and Political leader, Albert Adu Boahen. And, the reason, I choose this book, is not only because of the quality of scholarship that is there, to be found in this book, but also because, it is short and very, very, easily readable.

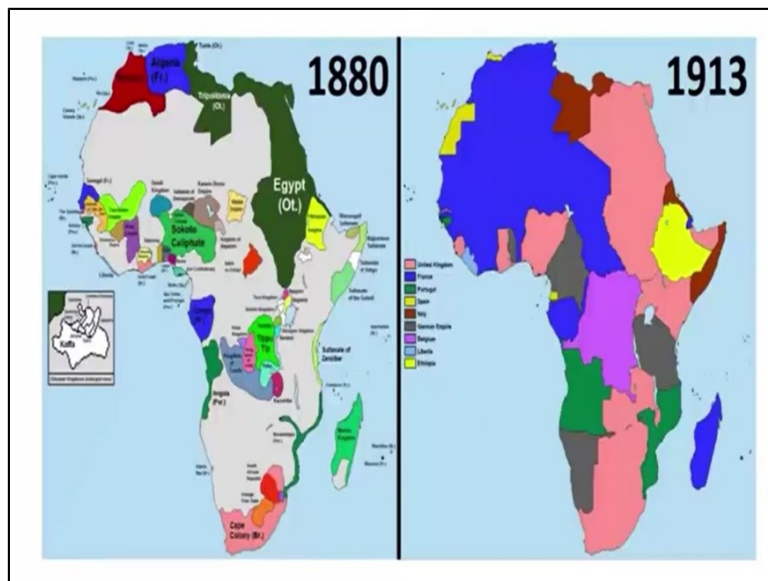
So, if you managed to get your hands on this book, I would definitely encourage you to read this book, in its entirety. Now, coming back to the African historical context, all the most important dates, which will help us, explore this African context, both Colonial and Precolonial history, is the date, 15th of November 1884.

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And, what happened on this date. Well, on this date, a conference started in Berlin, Germany. And, this conference was organised, to decide the fate of the Africans and their territories. And, it lasted till the 31st of January 1885. Now, the decisions, that were taken during these few months of the conference, were so momentous, that it changed the political geography of the entire African continent, forever.

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And, to get an idea about, how big this change was, let us look at these two maps. So, on the left side, the map on the left side, which shows, how Africa looked politically, just a few years before the Berlin conference. You can see, that most of the continent is divided into small tribal kingdoms. Barring the large green patch here, at the top, which of course, is a part of the Ottoman Empire. And, the blue portion here, at the top marked Algeria, which was a French colony.

Apart from this, if you look down near the south of the continent, you can see a pink portion marked, Cape Colony. And, this was the colony of the British. Now, look at the map on the right, and the date. Both these maps, they have the dates, on top of them.

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So, the first map is, how Africa looked in 1880. And, the second map gives you the date, 1913. And, if you compare the first map, with the second map, the difference is really startling.

Because, as you can see here, most of Africa, is now in 1913, divided into large chunks of territories. And, each of these large chunks of colour patches, each of them represent the colony of one or the other European power. So, for instance, the large blue patch, which starts from the North, where Algeria is located, and which continuous down almost to the centre of the continent, represents the French colony in Africa.

The pink patches, throughout the continent, they represent the British colonies in Africa. And, of course, this portion marked in violet, is the Congo region, which was the Belgian colony in Africa. And, this is the place, where Conrad situates his Heart of Darkness. So, and apart from two areas, one marked in yellow here, in the East of Africa. So, apart from these two areas, one here, which represents the Kingdom of Ethiopia. And, the other one here, which is marked in a light blue, which represents Liberia.

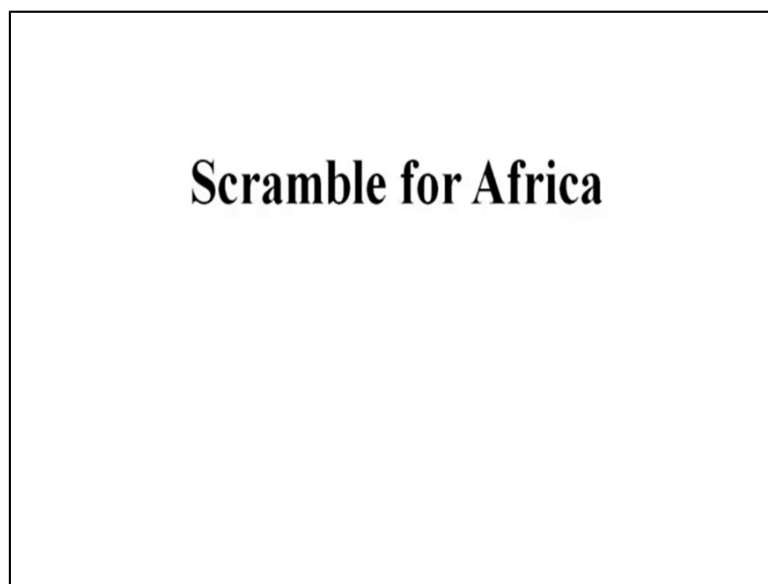
Apart from these two regions, the whole of Africa, by 1913, was neatly parcelled out as colonies, of various European powers. Now, the Berlin conference of 1884-1885, in which this decision to parcel out this entire continent was taken, was attended by almost all the major western countries, except America and Switzerland.

But, what is more important to note here is an, this is very ironic that, in this conference, which decided the fate of the African continent for decades to come, not a single African representative was present. So, no single African person was present, during the Berlin conference of 1884-1885. Now, I am sure that, such a situation today, hits us as absurd. How can you decide the fate of an entire continent, without any representative from that continent, being there?

But, I mean, yes, it is absurd, there is no denying that fact. But, it is also, it, this fact also gives us a very important clue about, how Colonialism operates. We repeatedly refer to Colonialism, as a form of exploitation and oppression, precisely because, it does not enter into any form of consultation with the people, whose resources and labour it uses, to sustain its Profit-making enterprises. Thus, within Colonialism, the colonised subjects, are always left without a voice.

Now, as far as the Berlin conference was concerned, we also need to keep in mind that, though it decided the fate of Africa and its inhabitants, the conference was never really motivated, by any special concern about Africans. Rather, what the conference sought to achieve, was a balance of power in Europe, and a resolution of, what is known as the scramble for Africa, that had broken out in the 1880's.

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And, this scramble for Africa, is an important term for us, which will help us understand the African context, better. And, in order to explore these terms, scramble for Africa, we need to go behind the Capitalist motives, that guided the kind of Colonialism, that we are discussing in this course. So, from the very beginning, I have been associating Colonialism and Colonial enterprise with Capitalism. Right. So, here, I would be talking briefly about this connection, between Capitalism and Colonialism, as it related to African Colonialism.

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What is Capitalism?

Capitalism is the investment of money or capital to make more money i.e. profit.

So, let us start by asking ourselves, the basic question, what is Capitalism. Now, very simply put, Capitalism can be defined as, investment of money or capital, to make more money, that is Profit. Now, Europe had started moving from a feudal mode of economy, to a Capitalist mode of economy from, say around the 15th century. And, it was of course, a very gradual progress.

And, this progress towards Capitalism, and this progress of Capitalism, has passed through various phases. And, indeed even today, Capitalism is a force, that is continuously renewing itself, and taking newer forms. But, in our discussion of the African context, the kind of Capitalism that is most important is the one, that is associated with the rise of the industrial mode of production. Right.

So, by the 18th-century, Europe had witnessed, what is known as the industrial revolution, whereby the capacity of various European nations to produce commodities, far surpassed the capacity of these nations, to consume these commodities domestically. But, these surplus products, these surplus commodities, were nevertheless produced to rake in huge amounts of Profit.

Now, when we are talking about Profit and Capitalism, I want you to note a very interesting aspect of this Profit, which is, that in Capitalism. The Profit margin is something, which is forever going down. What do I mean by this. Let us suppose that, I am producing shirts in my industry. And, I am selling one shirt for 100 Rupees. Now, in Capitalism, there is always

competition, which means that, say tomorrow, another person might start producing the same shirt.

And, might reduce his Profit margin to 50 Rupees, and start selling that shirt, to cut me out of the competition. Which means, that, in future, I will have to reduce my Profit margin, further below 50 Rupees, to stay in the race. As a result, therefore, the Profit margin, within the Capitalist mode of production, industrial mode of production, is seen to be continuously deteriorating. Now, you can only sustain this ever-lowering Profit margin, by two ways.

One way is, if you can keep increasing the market, for your commodity. So, in other words, if earlier, you got rs.100 profit, by selling one shirt, to one person. In the changed circumstances, where your profit margin has come down to 50, say for instance. In order to make that same profit, you will have to sell the shirt to two persons. You will have to make two shirts, and you will have to sell it to two people, in order to get that profit.

If your Profit margin further declines, if it goes down to say Rupee one, then of course, you will have to find a larger market. Which means that, you will have to, in order to make Rs.100 Profit, you will have to sell it to 100 people. Right. So, by continuously increasing the size of your market, you can still reek in the same amount of Profit, that you were doing earlier, before the competition.

But, another way, there is also another way, which is usually coupled with this first way, to sustain the business, in spite of a deteriorating Profit margin. And, that is, if you can find some way to reduce the price of raw material, that goes into the making of a commodity. So, for instance, if you can somehow procure cotton at a reduced price, then even if the final price of your shirt has fallen down due to competition, you will still be able to make a Profit

Because, ultimately, what is Profit. Profit is the difference between, the price of the raw material, plus the labour charges, that are required to make a commodity, and the final selling price of the commodity. So, if you can find some way, to reduce the price of the raw material, and the labour input, then even if your final price is coming down, the difference is maintained, and Profit is maintained.

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Primary reasons for European colonialism of Africa:

- i. quest for a larger market to sell European commodities
- ii. search for cheap raw materials to feed the European industries

Now, according to Albert Adu Boahen, the quest for a larger market, and for cheap raw materials to feed the industries, were the primary causes, why Africa was colonised by the West. So, by the 19th-century industrial mode of production, had become the norm, for most of the European countries. Who were, as a result, because industrial mode of production, had become a norm for them, they were perpetually searching for cheap raw materials, as well as for a larger market, for their produced goods.

This made the continent of Africa, especially alluring to the European countries, both for its resources, which till the 1880's had largely remained untapped by the European industries, and for its potential, as a market for European commodities. Now, at this point, I would like to point out that, Africa, since long, had been a place, from where the West had acquired slave labour, for its industries. And, this kept on going, till slavery was banned in the West, in the 1830's. And, the slave trade from Africa, ended.

But, therefore, Europe was involved in one particular kind of trade with Africa, even before 1880's, the trade of humans. Now, it is important to keep in mind that, during this period of slave trade, the direct influence of western powers, largely remained limited to the fringes of the African continent. But, during the late 1870's, something new started happening.

Two countries, France and Belgium, they started showing interest, in expanding their Colonial influence, deeper within the continent. And, this expansionist agenda of France and Belgium, started causing a great deal of alarm, amongst other major European powers like

Britain for instance, like Portugal, like Germany. Because, we will have to remember that, all of them by 1870's, were major industrial nations. And, they were therefore, always in search for larger markets, and cheaper raw material.

And, Africa therefore, they could not allow only two countries, to colonise the entire continents. So, they also moved in. And this, therefore, set out a kind of race, between these western countries, all of them, France, Belgium, Britain, Portugal, Germany, all of these countries, became involved in a race, to colonise Africa, from say around 1880's.

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Scramble for Africa

And, this race is, what is known as the scramble for Africa. The Berlin conference held in 1884-1885, was an attempt by the European powers, to settle amicably between themselves the conflict, that inevitably accompanied this competition. Therefore, it is not entirely surprising that, no African representative was present there, at the conference. Because, the conference, as I have told you earlier, was ultimately a way to resolve the competition between European nations.

And, the way that the conflict was resolved, was by amicably cutting up Africa, the continent of Africa, between themselves, and sharing the large African cake, as it were. But, that is only one side of the story, is in it. We also have to ask, how did the Africans react to this European attempt, to divide up their lands, into European colonies. Well, the reactions, African reactions, of course varied. And, some African kingdoms, did establish alliances with various competing European forces.

And, they did that primarily, to protect themselves, safeguard themselves, against other hostile African kingdoms. But though, there are these stories of alliances, the overwhelming African response to this European colonisation, was of military resistance. And, this resistance was met in the battlefield, by advanced European military technology, in the form of things like the grass repeater rifle, things like the maxim gun, which the Europeans had, the Africans did not.

And, this really decimated the African military, that the Europeans encountered in the battlefield. And, as a result, within a decade of the Berlin conference, all major African kingdoms, except Ethiopia and Liberia, lost their independence, and became European colonies. Now, as we know from our earlier discussion, this military colonisation, which characterises Colonialism, is inevitably accompanied by a Colonial Discourse, right, which transforms the bloody process of colonisation, into a civilising mission.

Wherein, Africans were presented not as victims of European oppression, rather they were portrayed as immature savages and barbarians, who were about to benefit from the light of civilisation, that the European colonisers were bringing with them. Now, this is of course, a very well-known to us, this is the Colonial Discourse, as civilising mission. However, Boahen points out in his book that, contrary to this Colonial Discourse, the Africans, who were subjugated by the Europeans, were far from being savages and barbarians.

Not only, did they have a very long and rich cultural tradition, they were also thriving economically and socially, till before 1880's, when the scramble for Africa began, and when their independence ended. Now, indeed by the 1870's, African kingdoms had largely shaken themselves, out of the ill effects of slave trade, that had plagued them, till the 1830's. And, they had started prospering, in terms of trade, for instance.

African societies were witnessing, a more equitable distribution of wealth. The necessity of commerce, had also started resulting in the development of infrastructure, for instance, wherein land and river routes were being linked, to form large trade networks. African population was also increasing, till before 1880's. And, this was a sign of progress, because the slave trade had considerably depleted the African population.

And, of course Colonialism, post 1880's was again, going to reverse this population trend. The population was again, going to go in decline, which of course points at a general impoverishment of Africa, and Africans. And finally, a lot of interesting experiments with constitutional politics, was also going on in Precolonial Africa, especially in places like Ghana, before the Europeans forcibly came in, to claim the whole of Africa, for themselves.

And, they clear the Africans as savages, and brushing all these signs of progress and development, aside. Now, in our next Lecture, we will return to the Novel, *Heart of Darkness*, but with this new awareness, of the Colonial and Precolonial African context. And, we will see, how this African perspective, can lead to a powerful contrapuntal reading, of one of the most celebrated Novels, in British literature. Thank you.