

Twentieth Century Fiction
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Lecture – 06
Heart of Darkness – Part 1

So, hello and welcome to this NPTEL course entitled Twentieth Century Fiction. We will begin with a new text today which is Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness. We have just finished Rabindranath Tagore's short story The Postmaster and in this particular lecture, I will give you an overview of this particular text Heart of Darkness before diving into the text per se. I will talk a little bit about the cultural background of this texts, how this text emerges and what it is reflective of, culturally and politically speaking before moving on to the nitty-gritty of what the text contains.

So, this was written in 1899 Heart of Darkness; so, just 1 year before twentieth century and it is considered to be one of the first modernist novels so to say. There are a number of issues we will deal with while we are looking at this text and it is a very complex text and it does offer lots of lots of readings and it is very relevant. It continues to be relevant at different times in different cultural and political settings.

But, first and foremost where we need to understand this particular novel Heart of Darkness is a big departure; it is a dramatic departure from the Victorian novels of classic realism. So, this is a novel about you know a man's journey in Congo, a white man's journey in Congo you know his experience having worked in a Belgian company in Congo. And, the entire story the entire novel is about that man coming back to London to Britain and then telling a story of what happened to him in Congo what happened to him in that experience the colonial experience.

So, essentially it is a journey, novel, it is a journey of a man you know to a particular place and then coming back and telling a story about that place. But, more than the geographical journey it is about a psychological journey, it is about the mental journey, the emotional journey of that one person. And, it is one of the first novels one of the early novels essentially which deals with very complex themes such as colonial guilt, colonial ambivalence although it is still very much you know embedded in the entire racialized discourse.

I mean it is not really a novel about which completely criticizes colonialism. It is not a novel which breaks away from the racism of colonialism; it does not do all that. In fact, a lot of scholarship on *Heart of Darkness* which deals directly on how racist the novel is. But, then that is racist if you compare that novel, if you read that novel with how our present lenses our critical lenses today.

But, the time in which it is written 1899 it was a very strange kind of novel because it does not glorify colonialism at all, it does not glamorize colonialism at all instead it gives a very dark decadent picture of colonialism. It gives you essentially a glimpse into the very dark decadent underbelly of colonialism where it is not really a noble mission, it is not Christianizing mission it is not nothing to do with any civilizational process it is essentially about naked exploitation. And, the nakedness of exploitation is something which *Heart of Darkness* describes in very graphic details.

So, it is about a white man and his experiences knowledge that the colonialism imperialism as it exists in Congo, a Belgian imperialism in the context of this novel is essentially a naked exploitative enterprise right, it is not nothing to do with civilization at all. So, that is what the novel deals with quite complexly and among other things this is also novel about survivor's guilt, alright. So, it is a term that I will come back to frequently throughout this course.

So, survivor's guilt is it is a very common form of PTSD – Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. It happens a lot with soldiers and veterans who come back from wars who feel the guilt of having survived the war which have taken away lives of their friends, the fellow soldiers. So, Marlow who is a protagonist in this particular story *Heart of Darkness* and who is a storyteller as well who is one he is telling the story inside the narrative. So, you know it is a very complex narrative structure.

So, the novel starts with third person narrative there is a narrator who is also a character in the novel and then a narrator tells us a story about Marlow's story who then becomes narrator in the story. So, it is like a Chinese box of narration right. So, first of all this unnamed narrator who is telling the story about Marlow's story and then Marlow takes over he is telling the story inside the story. So, there are three different levels of narration at play.

So, Marlow is a man who signs up to work for a Belgian company in Congo, he goes to Brussels and you know it is a very interesting juxtaposition of a white city with a non-white space and a white city is essentially described as a dead city something very sepulchral about Brussels that Marlow says something really coffin like something really dead.

And, the whiteness of Brussels is very interesting because that is contrasted with the whiteness that the ivory presents; ivory the elephants' trunk which is a massive trade from the African setting over here the Congo setting is one that supplies ivory to Belgian companies which is shipped conveniently back to Brussels. And, you know it becomes a big mercantile signifier which is consumed you know in a very mercantile fashion it becomes a commodity.

So, in among other things Heart of Darkness is also story about naked commodification about how everything becomes a commodity, crude commodification and the difference between the Belgian imperialism and the British imperialism was that Belgian imperialism did not make any effort to dress up some kind of a lofty mission, it did not make any effort to dress up as a noble narrative at all. It was always a very naked exploitative enterprise and there was something which is sort of staring on the face of all the time among everyone.

So, you know that that quality of imperialism is something which is very present in Heart of Darkness as Marlow represents it and Marlow embodies the nakedness of the imperialism of that exploitation and a guilt which comes out of the knowledge. So, you have been part of the exploitative machinery that you have been part of the exploitative process it is very very much complicit to it whether you like it or not. And, that guilt that knowledge of being complicit that ambivalence about colonialism that nervousness about colonialism, about survivor's guilt, it also affects the storytelling process to a large extent. So, Marlow emerges as a very very unreliable storyteller.

So, in that sense he is one of the first unreliable narrators in fiction in English fiction and which becomes a very big thing in postmodern fiction as some of you would know. The last part of post modernism is about unreliability; unreliability of memory unreliability of storytelling, unreliability of narrativizing etcetera so Marlow becomes one of the earlier unreliable narrators. And, we are told in different times in the story that you know he

puts his listeners to sleep and at one point the omniscient narrator the narrator outside the frame the one who is telling us a story, he is the only one who is awake all the other people go to sleep on a little boat. So, the entire setting is on a boat in Thames.

And, again the river Thames and the river Congo are very interestingly juxtaposed with each other besides Brussels and Congo, the white space and a non-white space. So, while Thames becomes the metaphor of civilization of trade of commerce of industry of imperial industrial growth Congo becomes a site from where the growth you know gets its wealth from. So, it is very very uneven kind of a juxtaposition, very very uneven kind of traffic at play over here.

So, Congo becomes a naked river, the African river or the other river so to say compared to Thames and the whole idea of otherness is very very important over here the whole idea of otherness the alterity which is the production of otherness is very important over here. And, a lot of critics have criticized you know Conrad in Heart of Darkness very rightly by saying the entire novel is prisms as it were through the white man's lens. No African ever speaks in Heart of Darkness.

There is no dialogue, there is no line given to any non-white person which obviously, means that entire ambivalence, guilt, you know it all becomes the white man's guilt, the white man's exile, the white man's nervous condition etcetera and you know all it does is that it is projected onto the non-white people and non-white spaces which is obviously, a very reductionist way of looking at the non-white setting the Congo setting in this case which is a very very valid argument which is a very very right argument.

Because, I know Heart of Darkness does come with that kind of thing it is entirely about the white man's mind as well as white man's ambivalence, the white man's nervousness, the white man's decadence so to say. but what is also interesting to see is how whiteness as a civilizational construct, whiteness as a cultural construct, whiteness as a racial construct. It is so deliciously deconstructed in Heart of Darkness because we have the character of Kurtz colonel Kurtz in Heart of Darkness who is essentially the protagonist I mean he is really the protagonist in Heart of Darkness because the entire novel is about the mission to find Kurtz, to bring him back to the white space.

So, what do you know about Kurtz? So, Kurtz essentially is a white man, the ideal white man the ideal white soldier who was created by imperialism. He is supposed to be the

best embodiment of the machinery of imperialism. So, he is a perfect embodiment, perfect extension, the perfect extended embodiment of imperialism. So, he is a perfect soldier who is sent to Africa and then something very interesting happens to him. He turns native and this whole idea of turning native is very very sort of colonial discursive study that we do in post colonial studies quite often.

But, the whole point is when Kurtz turns native what he does is he completely betrays a system which creates him which had created him historically right. So, he turns his back to the system and he becomes the autocrat in that particular island, in that particular setting in that particular setting of Congo. So, he essentially becomes the dictator of that particular island right and he stops being an officer of colonial machinery. He stops being an officer in Belgian imperial machinery and he takes over as the sole white person, the sole individual lord the god of that particular place so to say.

So, this whole idea of turning native the whole idea of the white man who is created by in the entire imperialist machinery and sent off to control the empire what if that white man cracks up, what if that white man turns native what if that white man becomes a renegade to a certain extent. So, *Heart of Darkness* deals with that as well to a large extent and this whole encounter with Kurtz becomes very symbolic existential and political encounter.

And, we find that and that is why what I meant at the beginning when I said that this is a novel which is very relevant and topical to us today. Because you know even if you look at some of the geopolitical crises at the moment in the world, the whole idea of setting up an empire, the whole idea of setting up a civilizing mission somewhere and sending someone whether it is a dictator, whether it is you know a puppet government whether it is some kind of a democratic setting you know which is controlled essentially by a white government from outside controlled by a white power center from the outside.

Now, what happens to that setting, that dictator, if that puppet government that democratic setting turns renegade and turns its back to the white power controlling it supposedly controlling it from the outside, then it becomes a problem, then becomes a crisis it becomes a betrayal of sorts. So, *Heart of Darkness* you know deals with these issues as well and in many senses it's very relevant to some of the geopolitical tensions that we have in the world today you know the world we inhabit today.

It does have very similar tensions in terms of certain kinds of power centers being set up by eccentric powers, powers you know exist outside that particular space that wants to control it completely. And instead of coming over directly the new forms of imperialism they descend, they set up some little systems of governance which are obviously, puppet systems which are completely controlled, but eccentrically from the outside.

Now, oftentimes we find that you know those little settings they turn renegade, they turn the back that they betray and they become subversive they challenge and delegitimize authority of the white imperial center at the outside which is something which happens in *Heart of Darkness* as well. But, so, the entire complexity of *Heart of Darkness* which is very political you know emotional, existential, racial complexity. It is Marlow attempts to put that into a story.

You know the inset character, Marlow the narrator inside *Heart of Darkness* he you know the inset narrator he turns to he tries to turn this into a story, but he fails each time and the failure of Marlow is very very symbolic. And, because in many instances we have been looking at it from the history of the novel, but so to say. This is also the failure of classic realism.

Classic realism as a white bourgeois mercantile construct which essentially grew with imperialism. If you look at the history of the novel little bit digressing a bit, but this is relevant if we look at the history of the novel the novel as a genre it grew along with imperialism.

So, it came into being so to say with the rise of a mercantile class who essentially became the imperialist subsequently and very very quickly. So, classic realism as a narrative trope as a narrative strategy as a narrative machinery it was very much complicit with imperialism. Now, if we look at *Heart of Darkness* politically as a novel which is about the breaking up of imperialism, is about the cracking up of imperialism so to say.

It is also in a very interesting sense a cracking up of classic realism because you know the classic realism does not quite work in *Heart of Darkness* anymore. And, Marlow struggles to put that story into a classic realist frame and that departure from classic realism, that ambivalence about classic realism as a stylistic category as a stylistic

instrument of narration is very very important because that is very very parallel politically speaking with the crisis of imperialism so to say.

So, we have a narrative style and we have a political style at you know dialogue with each other a very very interesting which has historically been the case. So, imperialism as a political instrument and classic realism as a narrative instrument were you know very very synergic with each other in the history of British empire so to say.

So, with the crisis emanating from imperialism the complexity, the guilt, the nervousness, the decadence, the knowledge of decadence, the imminent decadence is coming out and if you compare that into the narrative strategy of classic realism not working anymore it becomes very interesting study and very often in the novel *Heart of Darkness* Marlow acknowledges his failure as a classic realist narrator.

He knows that this machinery of narration does not work anymore and there are moments in the story where he gives a very exasperated sentence by saying oh you have fallen asleep, I must be boring you to death, I must be a very nervous narrator. And, the nervousness of Marlow as a narrator is sort of dialogic with his nervousness as an imperial agent inside Congo as well.

So, we have all these very different complex narrative strategies playing in *Heart of Darkness* which as I mention are very dialogic with the political crisis in *Heart of Darkness*. So, yes, it is very very racist novel; it is a very very reductionist novel, is entirely told from white man's perspective, but given the time in which is written and still exists as a very very interesting novel so to say.

And like I said despite its political incorrectness or maybe because of its political incorrectness it becomes a very relevant novel for us today, a very topical novel for us today because you know we find so many resonances about *Heart of Darkness* in terms of what is happening in geopolitically across the world the Middle East, other parts of Africa, some parts of Europe and even closer to home in India.

So, you have different kinds of crises and tensions, political tensions which are quite dialogic with whatever happens in *Heart of Darkness* historically. So, that becomes a very very interesting kind of study which we will move on in due course of time. Now, the different readings of *Heart of Darkness* that we can do one obviously, is a colonial

reading which is very much foregrounded in *Heart of Darkness* it is about colonialism, it is about imperialism, it is about the entire Belgian empire in Congo.

It is also about the question of gender, the gender question is very important in *Heart of Darkness* and we find unsurprisingly that entire machinery of colonialism is an all male machinery it is all the men who go out there to control the colonies and we have some very interesting women figures, female figures in *Heart of Darkness*. So, we have the very stony woman in the Brussels office who sit and who look at Marlow very very stonily and they essentially embody the sepulchral quality of Brussels, the dead quality of Brussels, the emotionless quality of Brussels as it is very very still you know emotionless you know imperial enterprise.

And, then we have very interestingly another female character in *Heart of Darkness* who appears in the end of the novel actually two characters and I am going to talk about them in some details as we move on. So, when it comes to when you come to colonel Kurtz we found that he had a fiancée in Brussels someone who he was intended to marry is called the Kurtz's intended, a white woman of course, who he had left behind and gone to Congo with a promise to coming back and marrying her, but of course, they never married.

And, then we have the other woman that Kurtz you know lived with in Congo the African mistress and of course, the African mistress is described in very corporeal details. So, the hyper embodied quality of the African mistress is contrasted with the almost bodiless quality of the European intended and if you look at the words which are very very interesting fiancée or intended are markers of prestige, markers of respectability whereas mistress is essentially a marker of sexuality, beastly sexuality maybe you know it is not respectable at all.

So, again the terms are quite revelatory so to say one is very white, civilizational, respectable and the other is non-White of course, non-civilizational and you know not respectable at all. Now, and then we take a look at the more complex situation in terms of the gender politics in *Heart of Darkness*. So, you find that Kurtz's intended is mourning at the end of the novel and she appears as very elegant mourner as someone who is mourning the deaths of Kurtz whereas, the African mistress does not say anything,

does not have any voice, is not given any line at all unsurprisingly and she just wails out a cry of despair when Kurtz dies in the novel.

And, the wailing is again something of a beastly performance there is something very beastly and corporeal about the mistress. Her whole body, a very hyper sexualized body and the wailing the scream is an embodiment of the hyper sexuality and that the African other woman represents or embodies with her situatedness whereas the very elegant you know nonverbal I mean almost nonverbal and definitely non-embodied mourning of Kurtz's intended the white woman is the marker of prestige, respectabilities, sophistication - you know very very bourgeois markers of agency markers of respectability and privilege so to say.

But, interestingly we find that both woman despite the oppositional status one being civilization quote unquote, one being un-civilizational quote unquote they both have absolutely no access to agency and this denial of access to agency is very important in Heart of Darkness because what it shows us is that the entire male machinery of imperialism it was essentially a very very gendered thing. It is only the male who got access to power, privilege, agency etcetera etcetera.

Whereas, the woman complete you know unable to have any access to agency, they were either lied to as in the case of Kurtz's intended we will come to that in a moment or they were just used as a messy, corporeal, hyper sexualized body and that's about it they did not really have any political agency or social agency or cultural agency in terms of gaining privilege from Heart of Darkness. So, they were just there as reflected persons, persons who were left in reflected glory, reflected privilege which is brought in by the men or the males and Heart of Darkness.

So, we will talk about that in more details as we move on and how the entire location of female in Heart of Darkness is very very important very symbolic in quality as well because it does reflect the entire male machinery the homosocial male, hyper masculinist machinery of imperialism which is represented and embodied by the novel Heart of Darkness so to say. So, this being the cultural setting, this being the political setting in Heart of Darkness, you find that this is extremely complex novel in terms of what it does, in terms of what it reflects, in terms of what it represents.

There are so many different readings we can emerge we can get out of this novel and I as a faculty in English, a teacher in English, a researcher in English and student in English I never failed to be amazed by the novel in terms of how topical it is, how resonant it is in terms of what is happening geopolitically today. And, although it is written in 1899, although it has many problematic you know representations, is very politically incorrect as racist in many levels you know, but despite the like I said because its politically incorrectness, it does appear to be a very honest novel about a very honest human condition you know condition of crisis, a condition of unpredictability, a condition of precarity right.

So, it is a very it is a novel about fragility, you know it is a novel about decadence, it is a novel about darkness. And, you find that by the time we finish reading the novel it is a very thin novel by the way, it is more of a novella than a novel, but it is a notoriously long novel despite this brevity. It will take you an enormous more time to read it because of something that Conrad does you know very very consistently and I will come to that term later it is just a term called defamiliarization or ostranenie, but I will spend a lot of time on it as we move on to the next lectures.

But, you know suffice it to say that despite its brevity it is probably 90 pages. It will take a lot of time to read it because of the way language is used in Heart of Darkness, the way narration is you know structured and designed in Heart of Darkness. So, that becomes very important character so to say. So, you know we will deal with all this in the times to come, but you know this is a novel like I said it never fails to be resonant and topical and relevant in the world we live in today. It is about imperial guilt, it is about political incorrectness, it is about racism, it is about the knowledge of racism, it is about the knowledge of the hollowness of any attempt to justify human exploitation.

Any attempt to justify human torture, any attempt to justify human inequality the knowledge that you know all these attempts are hollow at the core, is a knowledge of horror in Heart of Darkness. There is a famous line Kurtz's dying words in Heart of Darkness which is "the horror, the horror" and there have been many interpretations of that. But, we find, but in the novel that the Heart of Darkness is not really in Africa, the Heart of Darkness is actually in Europe, the Heart of Darkness is actually in the white space because the entire civilization the white people you know as is represented in the

novel the beautiful the posh, pristine white city of Brussels is essentially being fed by the exploitation that comes from Congo.

The different markers of exploitation, the different markers of torture, the different markers of inequality that come from Congo and that knowledge you know makes the entire European civilization entire European culture a Heart of Darkness. So, the Heart of Darkness is actually European over here, if you will read the novel carefully that is what the novel is going to tell you that it is not really out there in Africa, the Heart of Darkness that is not really the world that the dark space. The dark space is actually inside Europe and the acknowledgment of that is the producer of guilt.

So, the entire novel is about the production of guilt, the production of nervousness, the production of admission of nervousness and guilt and the inability to convey that into a narrative right. So, the inability to convey the nervousness, the knowledge of guilt into a narrative in a classic realist narrative; so, it does not fit into the classic realist narrative at all and therein lies the complexity even as readers we find it is such a complex novel.

It is not a novel that we can consume very quickly; it is a novel which we have to reinterpret even as we are reading it because it is a very complex novel which works on different layers of cognitive complexity. It is a knowledge about guilt, it is a knowledge about trauma and the inability like I said to convey all that into classic realist frame which is what takes place in Heart of Darkness.

So, there we conclude the lecture today. I hope you get a brief and sufficient overview of the novel in terms of its cultural and political setting. And, the next lectures we move into the text will we do some sections carefully and consistently and find out how its dialogic with some of the broad strands we talked about in this lecture.

Thank you for your attention and I will see you in the next lecture.