

Twentieth-Century Fiction
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Lecture - 61
Modernist Fiction

Hello and welcome to this NPTEL course on Twentieth Century Fiction. This is Swikriti Sanyal and I am Soham Chakraborty and we are TAs for this course.

Yes.

And today we are going to mention some key features of Modernist Fiction with respect to some of the texts that have been discussed by Avishek sir. So, to begin with among the techniques of modernism and modernist writing, we have we can talk about the narrative technique which I think has been discussed thoroughly in the previous lectures and which is most important; because it differentiates from the narrative techniques of say the earlier eras like.

Victorian period.

Victorian, yeah, the nineteenth century, the Victorian period where we had the classic realism and that kind of a narrative structure. And when we come to modernism, then we see there are certain changes and shifts from that classic realist frame and those are the things that we are going to discuss about.

Yes.

So, starting the starting point of talking about say nervous narrator is we can take the character of Marlow from Heart of darkness and he himself, he is a very nervous narrator as we know.

Yes.

He is very unsure of what he is saying and he is sure that nobody is getting exactly what he saying.

So, whatever meaning he is making or producing, he is not sure how it is how to translate it or transfer it to his audience.

Would you like to add something?

Yes, as we see that Marlow has a certain white male privilege that he has while he is going, he has a world view through which he makes sense. So, when we see that he is going into the jungles of Africa, that white male privilege is slowly ebbing away. And so, we have examples of delayed decoding.

Right.

So,.

Yeah where he sees a lot of where sequences are mentioned.

Not as directly, you are not going directly into the action or whatever.

Yes.

Is happening, we are not directly reaching the meaning.

But we are just reaching or playing with the signifiers.

Yes.

So, he says he can see arrows flying.

Yes.

And shots. So, so those kind of imageries and symbols come before we actually lead, get the meaning of what exactly is happening in that picture. So, that.

Yes. So, this is like.

Yeah.

Objects.

Right.

Flying off before he knows that we are being shot at.

Exactly.

So, meaning making happens later.

Much later delayed it is a.

Yes.

Delayed performance. So, yeah delayed decoding and similarly we can talk about the technique of defamiliarization.

Yes.

Which is again we see a lot of it in heart of darkness and also in the modernist poetries that have been discussed.

So, defamiliarization is a technique where common, known and everyday objects are represented in a way that their meanings change or their significance changes. So, even in this, in the novels we see that the when we talk about Congo.

And when we talk about the land of the natives and the natives themselves; we see how Marlow again coming back to the idea of the nervous narrator and the neurotic narrator. He does not know how to explain them anymore; because he is again in a very unfamiliar setting, a setting that he himself does not understand so, his tools for meaning making.

If I may put it that way are as you said white and you know white

Male.

Male upper class.

Yes.

And then we he is taken away from that setting and put into Africa, when he is travelling through Congo which is both a geographical and a psychological journey.

Then so, he is again his tools are not with him.

Anymore, they do not make sense anymore.

Anymore.

And he has a great difficulty in grasping whatever is going on.

Around him and defining them.

So, there is a certain degree of defamiliarization there.

Yes I think it is very interesting that you mentioned the privilege of Marlow that he is a white male colonizer and we also see like how the white male colonizer's project is slowly getting subverted.

Right.

And we also see such a figure in Virginia Woolf's Mrs. Dalloway, Peter Walsh who has come back to England after he has been to India; but we see there is a certain amount of emptiness that is inside him, as if the whole grand project of colonization has left him empty, he is loveless, he has not been able to find love in his life the and yes. So, yes and also we see that Virginia Woolf mentioning that how the First World War, the ending of the First World War, it does pose a crisis of colonization.

Right.

Colonialism and we see how by the end of Second World War, the whole project of colonialism, the Britain's colonies falling apart, they have to be decolonized. So, I think in that sense it is very interesting.

Right and then and we can also talk about Conrad's ambivalence.

Yes.

Towards colonialism itself.

Yes.

And which is important, because he is the one who is writing it.

And so, a lot of people see Heart of Darkness as postcolonial text

And lot of people have an objection to that

View, because the common arguments are that are the stereotypical representations of the natives.

The fact that the natives do not have dialogue or they do not have as if the right to speak.

And the perspective that is offered are again racial and gendered in certain ways and.

So, that is the perspective that we get of colonization again, but from the white perspective and not from the perspective of the black people.

No.

So, the people concerned, the natives themselves. So, these are the critiques in ways of seeing it as a post-colonial text but.

Yes.

As sir has also mentioned that, instead of taking this black and white binary we can look into the, it is more interesting to look into the ambivalence of it. So, whereas, Conrad is not critiquing colonialism or completely invalidating its requirement or its existence; but we see that he brings out the reality, the stark-naked truth of what colonial enterprise means and what it what is the experience of it both for the natives as well as for the colonizers.

Colonizers.

And. So, if we see this more of the psychological effect of colonialism and the material and the discursive effects of the colonial enterprise.

In both the parties involved in that case. So, this ambivalent attitude is something which brings around a very strong critique of colonialism, but in an indirect way.

Yes.

Where he is not directly saying that colonialism is bad and we should put an end of it end to it; but he is showing it as the truth - as the material reality of the times. And, but he is also highlighting the oppressive structures that are inherent in.

This novel. Yes and we are also reminded of the figure of colonel Kurtz.

Right.

Who is traumatized we see that and looking at him is also a traumatizing experience for Marlow, which also brings us that the trauma that the First World War created in the soldiers.

Right.

And it was a destruction of an unprecedented range.

So, when soldiers came back, they were diagnosed with something that was called shell shock or.

Right.

PTSD post-traumatic stress disorder.

Talking about PTSD as you mentioned so, after the Second World War.

And when a lot of soldiers were returning home and they were definitely affected.

By what happened during the war and they were unable to again speak about it or narrate those incidents exactly as it happened much like our narrator Marlow in Heart of Darkness.

So, they are they also were nervous narrators and totally unable to.

Narrate, because nobody back home wanted to know.

What is happening?

Those kind of realities, what exactly happened was; there was no way they could convey those experiences and when. So, they became sort of repressed experiences of violence.

That they were carrying back home with them.

Yes.

And so, they were definitely affected psychologically and with also physical manifestations of PTSD.

Of PTSD.

So, we see Sigmund Freud, very interestingly comes into popularity during that time in Vienna and also his studies being accepted more and more during that time in America, where he conceived what we know as the talk, talk therapy.

Talk therapy.

Yeah and where he which is obviously, a part of the psychoanalytic strategy or the treatment project. And he that was the time that the that came into the mainstream the that people need help.

Psychologically and so, and they were victim of a very specific event like.

Say the Second World War.

Yes.

And that initiated that kind of a need for a therapy among the soldiers and that kind of help that they received and this is what precisely later on, because PTSD has meant different things in different times when you if you see the you know, the DSM which is the diagnostic statistical manual.

Yes.

For mental health. So, the definitions of PTSD like most of the illness, say depression keeps on evolving and changing.

Yes.

So, even now currently as much as I know PTSD is again can refer to any traumatic event like childhood abuse or any experience adult exp.

Of course yeah.

Any experience of violence and oppression that has marked you during a particular point of time and there are certain trigger points in presence or in the present times or in the future times that can bring back those violent vivid memories that have been repressed.

So, and that is an illness which is again treated with both therapy and medication.

And as you very interestingly mentioned that Freud brought this talking cure and that was there and we see that Walter Benjamin in his essay the Storyteller says; how men when they returned from war they were much less talkative. They could not speak.

Rather than telling stories of the war, they could not even speak. And we see something like that happening with Septimus Smith in Mrs. Dalloway that, he cannot speak or he cannot speak in the way the society wants him to speak. As we see that his wife Rezia Smith constantly exerting him to speak, to talk; but he cannot talk and even when he talks, he talks in reveries, he talks in fits and starts, but that becomes a traumatic source of like trauma, a source of trauma even for Rezia Smith that why is my husband talking in his sleep.

Why is he suddenly starting in the crowd and there is this always this thing that this needs to be hidden.

There is this stigma around mental illness and also like a weak man.

Yes.

That that needs to be hidden, that a man cannot show signs of such mental illness that.

The crisis of masculinity that happened.

Crisis of masculinity that comes up. So, we have that in there and so, and so, and instead of we see that there are doctors in the novel Mrs. Dalloway, Bradshaw, Doctor Holmes and they do not actually ask, they do not actually apply this kind of talking cure that Freud probably.

Suggested, they what they do is they ask for a rest cure.

Yes.

Where you must rest for a long time and you must eat; so and we have seen another fiction Charlotte Perkins Gilman.

Yes exactly.

Yes.

I was thinking about it.

Yes.

When you said rest cure and rest cure is a very nineteenth century or very Victorian sort of approach to mental illness, yes.

Specially administered to women because they felt that you know too much physical activity.

Or exertion is bad for.

Women who have hysterical or neurotic tendencies.

So, they were given dose of you know regular rest, a healthy diet and outrageous propositions.

Like you cannot, write you cannot read.

You cannot write yeah.

Just completely lying in the bed, like an invalid which is definitely seen as a form of oppression.

Yes.

Like psychiatric oppression by many writers like Gilman, Perkins

Gilman and also many mental health activists who later on spoke against this kind of approaches.

This kind of rest cure, yes.

Right.

And so, this inability to tell stories, inability to come with - the society is exhorting to come out of himself as if he is trapped inside; but he the ways that he wants to come out are not acceptable either. So, we see this certain blockage appearing and we see this theme of blockage of not being able to move also in the Wasteland.

Right yes.

Yeah where we have deadly growth where growth and regeneration are not organic forms, but a form of deadness. So, it is deadness growing from deadness, there is this blockage like we have the blocked nose of Madame Sosostris in one of the sections. So, it signifies a certain blockage in society where the flows.

Have stopped and they are not flowing and also another interesting thing if you remember that, the mechanization of human motor processes.

Right.

Things that.

Are the mechanization; so the human processes are slowly becoming mechanical.

Yes.

The and the machines are becoming more and more humanised.

More and more human.

Yeah.

And humans are becoming more and more.

Machine-like, right.

Mechanized.

And so, that again brings us to the fragmentation which is again very important as a narrative technique we might see in the modernist age.

Because as we are talking about; so there is no possibility for a holistic understanding or representation of things anymore.

Yes.

Because life as we see it, itself is fragmented.

Uh

And we do not have the rhetoric tools to bring them out like a and coherent narrative is not possible.

So, even when we see and taking another of Eliot's poems Love song of Prufrock, J Alfred Prufrock and also in Preludes, we see people being represented as say a set of hands or multiple feet or just walking down trampling newspapers and drinking coffee.

So, we do not have again like a full image of a human body.

Or a human narration; even the even the scripts are fragmented.

So, even when you are having a dialogue, you cannot finish the line or you cannot you stop, you pause.

And so, again so, there is this stream of consciousness.

Yes.

Technique which is there. So, all these. So, all these features and these multiple techniques that we are talking about, they bring out the crisis of the modern times which is again due to excessive commodification and due to the technocracy and machine mechanise machine sorry mechanization of life. So, human life has become fragmented and detached and very melancholic because everybody is alienated and everybody is fragmented in their own personal as well as extended lives.

Yes.

So, and that I think these techniques beautifully exhibit that kind of attendance as an important text.

Yes and as I mentioned that there is this blockage there is this.

Fragmentation and this narrative of stream of consciousness, we see like it signifies a certain flow which is otherwise missing in society.

Right.

So, probably we see this kind of narrative that speak whatever comes to your head.

Because we see people are getting lost inside their heads, they do not know what to say.

Right.

What not to say. So, maybe the answer is to say whatever comes to your head, because we need to start moving.

Back again and this stream idea we also find at the end of the Wasteland where Eliot almost exhorts Ganga to come down and flow through Europe again to revitalize it. So, the idea of streams, the flowing that the rivers can come and rejuvenate us, I think that where.

Where we must speak out, where whatever comes we must speak out; we not must not hold back.

Right.

That becomes a very important.

Yeah a very important and then and even I think in the in Ulysses.

So, there are certain passages without punctuations which run on lines which.

Yes.

So, the lack of punctuation again is.

Very relevant, that we cannot follow the conventional way of saying things.

So, our pauses and our gaps cannot be measured.

In the conventional rhetoric possibilities and we have to invent new ways of expressing. So, when we are expressing an emotion.

And a very strong emotion and often we do not, we are not able to narrate it in a conventional structure, within a conventional structure. So, and the lines the emotions run onto each other because you cannot identify one emotion separately from another emotion.

True.

So, our common pauses like periods or a comma or a semicolon, they also carry a lot of meaning so, where you are pausing, why you are pausing.

That also is relevant to the meaning making.

Of course.

Process and getting away, doing away with the you know punctuations altogether also shows you know how as I said the different emotions like run onto each other and there is this urgency that I need to speak this now.

This in my mind and I did.

Yes.

So, there is no time, leisurely time to sit and frame your ideas.

So, that is the kind of.

Very yes.

Narrative they are trying to project.

Yes and even like even if it is in coherent you

Speak it out.

Exactly.

Like you mentioned Joyce and we have there was Finnegan's Wake.

Finnegan's yeah Finnegan's wake.

So, you mentioned Joyce and we have another novel by Joyce called *Finnegan's Wake*, where we see jumbled words, it is a mixing of languages.

Right.

But so, it highlights the fact that whatever you might be speaking at the end of the modern era I think; but the fact that you must keep speaking.

You must not stop. And to come back to this thing that the lack of human agency and we have seen in some sense that the human self is a storytelling self.

You are right.

I am reminded of a paper by professor Parui that he published and there he mentions that what distinguishes the human self from some other selves is that we have a natural knack for storytelling.

And so, we see that with the lack of the storytelling, almost the human quality of people are.

Right.

Kind of going down, they are becoming more object like.

Right.

And we see in the novel *Mrs. Dalloway*, how Septimus Smith is constantly portrayed as a tree sorry yes a tree. And so, he is like an object, an object that cannot speak, that object that is mute and so and Rezia Smith, his wife is trapped in that marriage like a small bird trapped in a tree and we have other also references to objects like the big ben.

Right.

That slowly come to control, have a certain control over people's lives.

With their announce control of people's life with announcement of time that the fact that something can stand like a phallic device.

Standing there and announcing time to everyone that they must obey and it is it is it is also mentioned in the story as a young boy who is just flicking around dumbbells. So, as we see that there is a certain order, certain thing about announcing that time, at the same time there is this arbitrariness.

There is this whim of oppressing people with that time that is also kind of seen. And we see that that is also very nicely countered with a very small clock that is in Mrs. Dalloway's room, which announces time always two minutes later than the.

Yes.

Big ben. So, that becomes very interesting. So, while in the public sphere it becoming like our lives are under control.

Big ben; but we see that there is slowly still some possibilities of reclaiming life within the private sphere.

Yeah.

Where the clock still gives you time which is 2 minutes less.

Yes.

It still gives you some leeway, some.

Some relaxation from this urgency of life.

This is what sir has also mentioned.

Yes.

There is a difference between real time and the.

Yes

Personal.

Yes clock time.

The clock time.

Yes.

And personal no, and this discussion about time and the you know distorted time as well as the clock time which brings us, which constantly up can be seen as an oppressive force which ties us to our mundane, mundaneness of the daily lives.

So, we can differentiate between the two times; which is a psychological time as well as the clock time.

So, the clock time is the worldly time.

The universal time that everybody has to adhere to and whereas, the psychological time is a more personal understanding of time because how our minds conceive events.

And react to them and it does not always, most of the times I think it does not stick to the universal time. So, it has a time of its own.

Of its own.

The our minds and our bodies.

So, and whenever there is a disjunction between those two times and those two paradigms; I think there is a distortion, there is again there is a split, there is a gap.

A fissure sort of and so, that is what again further complicates things.

And many of these texts that we have in our syllabus and the poems, the fictions; we see that this has been brought out by most of the writers and the authors that this split between the time the individual time as well as the universal time.

The universal time.

All right.

And it is very interesting. So, we see that this with this a sense of time passing on and everything and we see that there is this element of epiphany that kind of comes almost towards the end.

Right.

In the end like it is a journey that you take undertake across time.

And when you reach towards the end, there is this epiphanic moment that you encounter; it is not always a nice.

Thing; the epiphanies are not always nice things. So, we see in Araby, the boy is looking for a more profound truth.

A more profound truth in life in love; but what he is finally, greeted with is not even a profound lie.

But a flippant lie, that the world is just the way it is. And we also see in novels like Heart of Darkness, the epiphany is one of annihilation.

Right.

That it kind of destroys the self.

That you kind of understand that you are in Eurocentric civilization, your Eurocentric view of life that can always be threatened; that a person like Kurtz who has been the paragon of European civilization he can come and there are certain elements that can almost get him to a prehistoric time nullifying any idea of civilization that has been inscribed on him.

Yeah the image of Buddha I think is very important in Heart of Darkness.

Ok.

Where Marlow is compared to a Buddha but then where see that the enlightenment that he receives is not one that of light it, but it is.

It is one that of darkness.

It is almost a reversal of enlightenment and similarly like Buddha, he could not become a prophet.

He cannot, he does not have the instrument to narrate his enlightenment or experience.

To the extended world, because again because his experience is that of darkness and is that of disorientation in that.

And then he does not, something that cannot be expressed in the conventional structures of language that are available to us. So, this we also see in Love Song where we talk about figures like Hamlet and Lazarus.

And so, these are all you know positive images; but then what we end up being are the fools, Shakespearean fool who has a lot to say.

Yes.

He is always speaking the truth.

Yes.

But nobody is taking him seriously.

Seriously.

So, there is no possibility to become a prophet and to articulate a greater understanding of things; but even if you are able to or if you are attempting to articulate it, all that you can articulate is darkness.

Yes.

And negative thoughts and an in broken language, language that is again fragmented and defamiliarized.

Not coherent.

Not coherent.

And yes, and we see like, we were talking about this language about this flow Heart of Darkness Marlow sailing into the heart of darkness; so we see this connection forming between rivers and narrative and storytelling and it is very interesting and, but we see that even this flow in heart of darkness not that it necessarily leads the white man to something good.

It is a, as you said it is it is not an epiphany of darkness.

Right.

It is an it is not an epiphany of light, but an.

The dark.

Epiphany of darkness. So, as you said like, if even if we see this kind of flowing as a sort of remedy; but it still becomes something like it might lead you to some dark places. And so, we saw how colonialism started as this project through the seas.

Right.

Where people started flowing out and everything and not only do we see in modernity that there is this critique that people are not being able to flow so easily; but the fact that they are coming to a standstill, that there are probably no more places left in the world to conquer.

To conquer yes.

And, but and now it is time to let go of them.

Right.

It is time to lose sovereignty over them; but even this project of flowing is also questioned.

That where are we flowing to?

Right.

Where are we going towards and I think that is very interesting.

Yeah and then we see, when we talk about this language in Marlow's experience, we see towards the end of the novel Heart of Darkness; how he is unable to say the truth to Kurtz's fiancée or the woman, the woman he was supposed to marry.

And then when they have this conversation and she wants to know what were his last words were and so, Marlow says that he said your name.

And, but then that is just exactly the opposite.

Yes.

Of what he said and he said the horror, the horror and so, and there is a complete reversal of this truth of what Marlow knows, because he does not have again the proper setting or the proper audience, because even that the white woman waiting or mourning for Kurtz, she does not want to know what happened really and Marlow definitely cannot tell her, what the reality is and she is not the proper audience for it.

And nobody back home can again know. So, even if you are willing to narrate your experiences or you do not have the proper setting, you do not have the proper audience who would understand or make meaning of what you are saying, without distorting it or making it you know farcical.

In a particular sense so they lose their meanings, the incidents of says a colonial enterprise.

Lose their meaning as soon as they go away from the setting as soon as they go away from the Congo setting and return back to the Brussels, the white city of Brussels and so, everything, the meanings themselves change and acquire different dimensions.

And this is again another which shows the you know the inability to narrate.

Yeah yes.

Your personal experience, inability to use language successfully and coherently in.

Yeah.

Yes I think that is very interesting and we can slowly wrap up now.

Right.

And would you like to say something about the female characters that we have seen in these novels.

Yes the female characters mostly if you again talk about Conrad's novels. So, we see there are two female characters; the one is Kurtz's fiancée waiting back in Brussels for him to return and the other one is the woman he is having an affair with or mistress.

As you might say and she is the black woman and both the representations are very stereotypical and in the sense that the black woman is shown as exotic or very sensuous.

You know she is almost reduced to her body and she is no longer a human being anymore whereas the woman back in Brussels, she is the epitome of you know purity and she is obviously, white which again equates to purity.

And she is civilized most importantly.

And she is represented more in more of asexual term.

And which is again contradicting to that image with a.

The black woman.

The black woman.

Yes.

She is completely sexualized.

And here we see her as asexual so.

This is again of this.

Dichotomy shows us how we understand both native women and white women.

And how there is always like this angel in the house and.

And the.

Yes.

This is what we say in the say those Madonna Magdalene dichotomy.

Dichotomy.

That we have.

Yes.

So, you can either be good or evil, black or white sexual, asexual.

So, in terms of these binaries, but that they do not represent a complete you know, does not do justice Conrad.

I believe.

Does not do justice to either of the women in the novel and funnily enough they do not have a single line or.

Yeah.

A single speech or any dialogue or script.

And it is interesting that you mentioned that the black woman is all body.

Right.

All embodiment and the white woman is very asexual kind of. So, we also see that, the fact that Kurtz's fiancée must be lied to provides that she has the psychological life which can be wounded.

And also we see Rezia Smith, there is also her inner life, a psychological life where she where we see her thinking which is like an area that must be protected, a sphere of memories, a sphere of love for others.

Yeah.

And that is that is.

Right.

I think very interesting.

It also shows the vulnerability that.

Yes.

You know mostly women cannot handle hard truth.

Yes.

And they have to live in that oblivion you know that bubble that man creates for them.

Yes.

We will wrap up today's discussion.

Thank you for listening.

Thank you for listening.