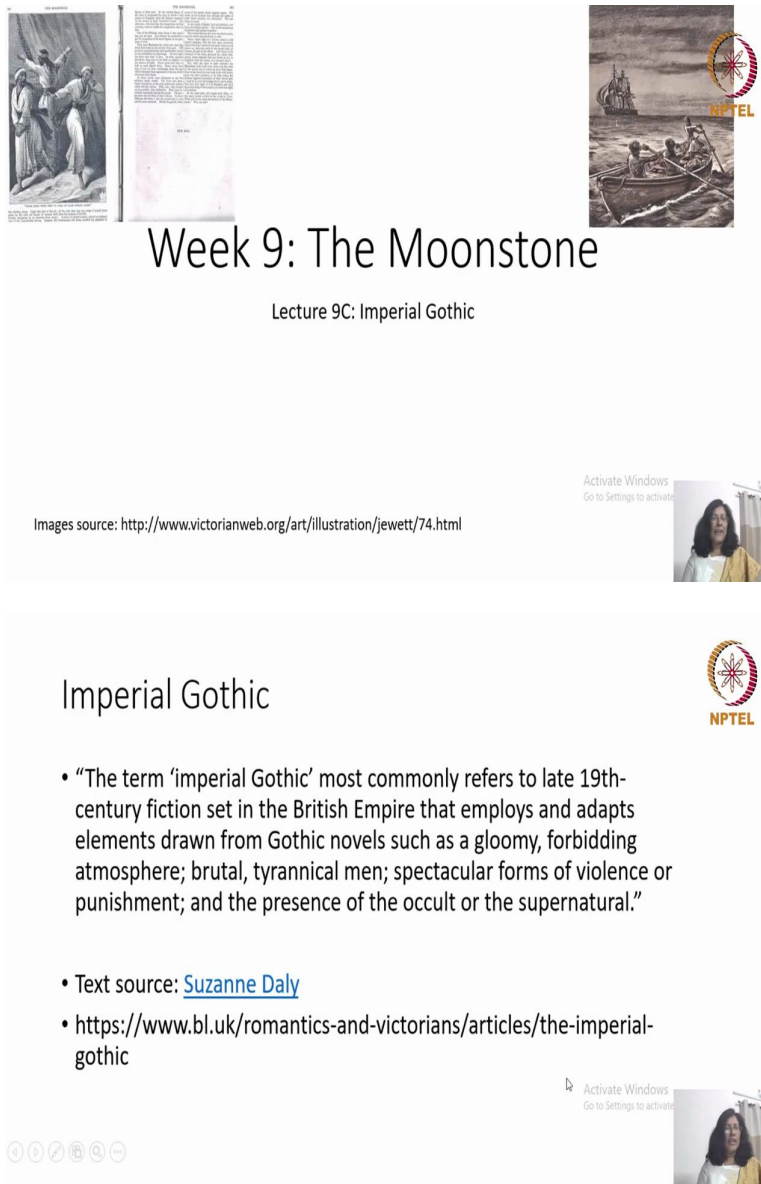


The Popular Gothic Novel
Professor Dr Divya A
Department of Humanities and Social Sciences
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Lecture 43
Imperial Gothic

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Week 9: The Moonstone

Lecture 9C: Imperial Gothic

Images source: <http://www.victorianweb.org/art/illustration/jewett/74.html>

Imperial Gothic

- “The term ‘imperial Gothic’ most commonly refers to late 19th-century fiction set in the British Empire that employs and adapts elements drawn from Gothic novels such as a gloomy, forbidding atmosphere; brutal, tyrannical men; spectacular forms of violence or punishment; and the presence of the occult or the supernatural.”
- Text source: [Suzanne Daly](#)
- <https://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/the-imperial-gothic>

Hello, and welcome to week 9’s lectures on the Moonstone. In today's session, I am going to talk about the Imperial Gothic.

“The term “Imperial Gothic” most commonly refers to late 19th-century fiction set in the British Empire that employs and adapts elements drawn from Gothic novels such as a gloomy, forbidding

atmosphere; brutal, tyrannical men; spectacular forms of violence or punishment; and the present of the occult or the supernatural.”

This particular mode called the Imperial Gothic is used in fiction towards the end of the 19th-century and it pertains to the British Empire. In the late 19th century, British Empire is at its height and this particular Gothic mode called the Imperial Gothic makes use of some of the key attributes that we find in Gothic novels such as a bleak and threatening atmosphere; cruel, cold-hearted man; horrifying brutality or violence; and it also displays elements of the occult, mystical and the spiritual.

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Imperial Gothic



- “In *Orientalism* (1978), literary critic Edward Said demonstrated how 18th- and 19th-century European scholars influentially defined the ‘Orient’, in stark opposition to the West, as mysterious, barbaric, irrational, seductive and dangerous. Such conceptions of the ‘East’ would prove highly compatible with the conventions of Gothic fiction.”
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Edward Said’s landmark work called ‘*Orientalism*’ declares that European scholars used to define the Orient in very strong opposition to the West. The Orient or the East became something that is not easily knowable. The East came to stand for something that is barbaric, uncivilized, illogical, threatening, disturbing as well as seductive. There is an aura of attraction in terms of the Orient which is irresistible to the West.

So, these are some of the attributes that are associated with the Orient and very significantly, these attributes are also compatible with the attributes of Gothic fiction. That is, we have elements of barbarism; we have elements of the seductive, dangerous, threatening, and brutal,


displayed spectacularly in the Gothic fiction as well. So, you can see an overlap of attributes between these two concepts, that is the Orient and the Gothic.

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Imperial Gothic

- “Classic examples of the late-Victorian imperial Gothic genre as defined by Patrick Brantlinger include H Rider Haggard’s *King Solomon’s Mines* (1885) and *She* (1887), both set in Africa, Rudyard Kipling’s story ‘The Phantom Rickshaw’ (1888), which takes place in British India, and Richard Marsh’s [The Beetle](#) (1897), set in Egypt and London.”
- Text source: [Suzanne Daly](#)
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Imperial Gothic

- “The roots of imperial Gothic may be seen in the 18th-century literature that has come to be categorised as ‘Orientalist Gothic’. The first English-language translations of *The Arabian Nights* appeared in the early 18th century, and their immense popularity created a public desire for ‘Oriental tales’ in prose and verse that continued unabated into the early 19th century.”
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Nights' appeared in the early 18th century and their immense popularity created a public desire for 'Oriental tales' in prose and verse that continued unabated into the early 19th century."

Though the late 19th century is associated with Imperial Gothic fiction, Suzanne Daly argues that the origins of this particular mode can be seen in 18th-century literature. In fact, in that period, it had been categorized as 'Orientalist Gothic', that is Gothic which originated from the Orient or the East.

The English translation of 'The Arabian Nights' appeared in the early 18th century and their popularity with the British reading public created this huge demand for 'Oriental tales'; tales from the East both in verse as well as in prose, and this was continued and sustained throughout the 18th century and up to the 19th century. So, you can see its peak coming towards the turn of the 19th century.

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Imperial Gothic



- "Drawing on the *Nights*, these stories frequently featured tyrants, harems, dungeons, abductions, betrayals, and mysticism; much of this material would eventually find its way into Gothic novels such as William Beckford's *Vathek* (1786), originally published in English as *An Arabian Tale*, and Charlotte Dacre's *Zofloya* (1806)."

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What is specifically interesting to us with regard to the tales that followed in the wake of the Arabian Nights are these attributes of these Oriental tales. And they are tyrants or dictatorial figures; spaces where women were confined and abused and used; dungeons, rooms where people were incarcerated and abducted.

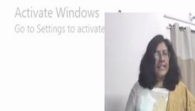
All these narratives were full of events and figures such as these and we had events such as betrayals, and then there was the presence of the mystical and the occults. So, these Oriental tales proliferated with events of this kind- of the negative, of the dark, of the bleak. And all these were associated with the Orient. And that is what is very interesting in this context because Orient becomes a complicated domain from a postcolonial point of view.

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Imperial Gothic



- “In the 19th century, authors increasingly incorporated Gothic and Orientalist elements, including imperial settings, into works of historical and domestic fiction. Walter Scott’s novella *The Surgeon’s Daughter* (1827), set in Scotland and India, concerns the illegitimate son of a treacherous English nobleman who decoys his Scottish fiancée to India in order to sell her into the harem of a fictionalised Tipu Sultan; he is executed by a trained elephant who tramples him to death at his master’s command.”
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We have seen how Gothic and Orientalist attributes are overlapping in these narratives of Imperial Gothic. In both the Gothic as well as in Oriental tale, similar events and similar figures crop up implying that the same ideologies are being communicated by both these modes.

And we have an example offered by Suzanne Daly in Walter Scott’s novella, ‘The Surgeon’s Daughter’, and how a Scottish woman is treacherously sold to this fictionalized Tipu Sultan and we see how cruelly, even though with a lot of poetic justice, the English nobleman is being executed by this Sultan.

So, there are lots of elements here that we can pick up. We can see the representation of Sultan in a very very Orientalist manner, as one who offers cruel and harsh punishment. We can see also the treacherous nature of the English nobleman who perhaps become treacherous apparently because of his association with this colony.

So, there are plenty of elements here which can be harnessed under the Imperial Gothic and all implying one thing in particular which is that the Orient is associated with cruel punishment such as the one here offered by Tipu Sultan to execute this English nobleman. And we can see how women become victims and this land which again is offered by the Imperial Gothic.

So, we can see how problematic the representation of the Orient becomes in such narratives. Further, it is to be noted that this incorporation of the Gothic and Oriental elements in fiction is done in both the historical as well as in the domestic type of novels.

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Imperial Gothic



- “That risk is compounded when the corrupting element returns to England to prey upon unsuspecting Britons. The ‘demoniac’ Bertha, who eventually burns Thornfield to the ground, exemplifies a common imperial Gothic plot device: people and things with imperial origins turning peaceful English homes into scenes of Gothic terror” (ch. 15).

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The risk that is associated with imperial colonial spaces is also narrativized in these kinds of fiction. The corrupting element could be an English nobleman who becomes corrupt because of his association with the colony. And when this corrupt English nobleman returns back to England, he also causes a lot of disruption and havoc in the spaces into which he enters.

So, that is also displayed in the imperial Gothic narratives. We have the example of the demoniac Berta, the evil Bertha who is demon-like because she is not part of the home, England. She is a colonial woman who is brought back to England. And when she goes to England, she has threatening seeds to sow in that soil.

Bertha, as we saw burnt down our Thornfield because she was mad and she wanted to take revenge on her husband and those associated with him. So, this kind of evil associated with the colony is a recurring trope in imperial Gothic narratives. People or things; figures or objects with imperial associations do turn very harmonious English settings and people into a lot of trouble. There are elements of Gothic terror associated with these imperial figures and objects.

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India and The Moonstone



- “India in The Moonstone serves much the same function that certain elements provide in Gothic fiction. Its mysteriousness, inflammability, locale of curses and omens, furnish the background that once belonged to castles, remote areas, winding passageways, Mediterranean-type killers, and medieval premonitions.”
- Karl, Frederick R. "Introduction." Wilkie Collins's The Moonstone. Scarborough, Ontario: Signet, 1984. Pp. 1-21.
- Quoted in: <http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/collins/pva30.html>

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Now let us talk about India and the Moonstone. ‘The Moonstone’ written by Wilkie Collins. “India in the Moonstone serves much the same function that certain elements provide in Gothic fiction. It is mysterious; it is inflammable; it is the locale of curses; it is the locale of omens”. And on that landscape, we find castles, remote areas, winding passages, Mediterranean-type killers, and medieval premonitions. So, all these attributes that are associated with Gothic fiction is also found in ‘The Moonstone’ in its narration of India. So, you can see the conflation of Gothic fiction and the Imperial Gothic in this particular novel.

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India and the Moonstone



- “The moonstone diamond is itself embedded deeply in superstition, set as it was in the forehead of a four-handed Indian god typifying the moon. It serves something of the function of the statue in Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto*, which began the Gothic genre. The Indian connection, however, gave Collins an additional dimension for his crime-detection novel, for it suggested light-dark imagery, aspects of surface versus subsurface, external events versus background, history, and shadows. If nothing else, the Indian strategy reinforced the pressure of the past upon the present” (Karl 11)
- Karl, Frederick R. "Introduction." *Wilkie Collins's The Moonstone*. Scarborough, Ontario: Signet, 1984. Pp. 1-21.
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We have the classic attribute of Gothic mode in the use of superstition. In ‘*The Moonstone*’, the novel, the diamond itself is associated with spiritual properties. So that is one classic attribute of the Gothic and it is embedded in the forehead of a four-handed Indian god.


And that trope can be compared according to Karl to the statue that we find in Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto*. So he is making associations between these two objects from these two fictions and he is drawing a Gothic connection between these two works.

Walpole is very significant because he is supposed to have begun this Gothic genre itself. So, he is linking *Moonstone* very strongly to that particular originary Gothic narrative. The Indian connection is also useful, according to Karl because it helps Collins, narratively speaking, to play with the imagery of light and darkness. Darkness is associated with the Indian colony and light with England.

And it is also useful because of the play of shadows and darkness. It is also useful in this narrative of crime and detection. Most importantly, India and its history and tradition is in the



past, and it causes havoc in the presence of Great Britain. And that is again a very classic Gothic narrative: the past comes back to haunt the present, to become a disruptive presence in the present.

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The Moonstone and British India

- “The Prologue, clearly described as “the Storming of Seringapatam,” and dated 1799, emphasizes the historical significance of the story. An important English victory in what was the Fourth Anglo-Mysore War of 1789-99 distinguished the beginning of Arthur Wellesley’s rule as Governor-General, which was characterized by ruthless diplomacy extending what Wellesley referred to now as “the empire” of the East India Company.”
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The prologue of the novel, ‘The Moonstone’ is very significant because we have that historical narrative there. It takes the story back to this particular victory for the British, the Fourth Anglo-Mysore War. The Storming of Seringapatam is what happens in that war and it establishes Wellesley’s power as Governor-General, and the empire of the East India Company is sustained very powerfully from then on.

And that rule is also marked by ruthlessness, brutality and violence as we know. So, this prologue sets the stage for that past of Great Britain set in the Indian colony. And that is going to affect the incidents and events in a domestic household in England.

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The Moonstone and British India



- “In fact, the victory at Seringapatam, as Collins knew, represented the establishment of England as the major power on the sub-continent, at the same time confirming expansion and exploitation as a company practice.” (John R. Reed, 286-7)
- Source: Philip Allingham, 2000
<http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/collins/pva30.html>
- Image source:
<http://www.victorianweb.org/art/illustration/jewett/74.html>




“In fact, the victory at Seringapatam, as Collins knew, represented the establishment of England as the major power on the sub-continent, and at the same time confirming expansion and exploitation as a company practice.”



Wilkie Collins was aware of the historical significance of the Fourth Anglo-Mysore War. He knew that the victory at the Seringapatam established Great Britain as an immense power in the Asian subcontinent. It signalled the expansion of the East India Company and it underlined that exploitation was a big practice with the East India Company.

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The Moonstone and the British Empire



- “To Wilkie Collins, the Moonstone is the signifier of all things that humanity strives for, material and spiritual. He begins the novel by demonstrating that the history of the Moonstone is a history of thefts. In having his initial narrator state “that crime brings its own fatality with it” (Ch. 4), Collins underscores the fact that nemesis attends every worldly expropriator of the Moonstone, which to its temporary European possessors is a bauble and a commodity but which to its faithful guardians, the Brahmins, is a sacred artifact beyond price.”
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The Moonstone is both material as well as a symbolic object. It symbolizes everything that humans aspire for. It is a symbol of material aspirations for wealth as well as spiritual aspirations. And in this novel the initial narrator tells us that the crime is hand in hand with the punishment as well.

There is a very close association with the crime narrative and the punishment narrative. Meaning that once you commit the crime, the narrative of punishment will follow eventually, inevitably. And Collins underlines that idea: everybody who appropriates that Moonstone will be punished; there will be justice for that theft.

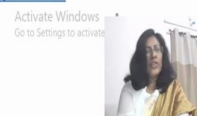
And for the Europeans who stole it, it was a valuable commodity as well as a plaything. But to the Brahmins who guarded it for years and years, it is a sacred object and is priceless.

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Imperial Gothic and The Moonstone



- “The original crime in *The Moonstone*, the theft of the Tippoo diamond after the fall of Seringapatam, is probably Collins’s masterstroke. It connects every detail of the plot to the great imperial drama of India, the society over which Queen Victoria would eventually declare herself ‘Empress’. From the outset, the Indian factor imbues the tale with the sinister mystery of the East. Mid-century, this ‘moonstone’ is given to a young Englishwoman, Rachel Verinder, on her 18th birthday, and then mysteriously disappears. A quest ensues in which, after murder and marriage, the Moonstone is restored to its Indian source.”
- [Robert McCrum](#)
- <https://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/an-introduction-to-the-moonstone>
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Rachel Verinder, on her 18th birthday, and then mysteriously disappears. A quest ensues in which, after murder and marriage, the Moonstone is restored to its Indian source.”

The Indian narrative in Collins's, the moonstone is a spectacular element in this imperial Gothic. This narrative has historical, spiritual, and domestic implications. While it causes a lot of havoc in Great Britain, it results in murder as well as in marriage, and ultimately the moonstone is restored to its rightful place. It is returned to its home.


So, this Indian narrative is remarkably utilized in *The Moonstone* and it becomes a cautionary tale. If you steal something, in very simple terms, you will be punished for it and you will also lose the object that you have stolen. That seems to be the message. The stolen object could be a moonstone, it could be an entire land and the nation. The message is simple and clear: the punishment will ensue for the theft in manifold ways.

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Imperial Gothic and *The Moonstone*

- “The appearance of the diamond, which Rachel inherits on her 21st birthday, heralds the loss of her lover, the dissolution of her household and the death of her mother. Yet Collins's treatment of the imperial theme is equivocal; *The Moonstone* depicts the Indian priests who follow the diamond to England as murderous and superstitious, but condemns the greed of its English characters in biting terms. “To the English, the diamond represents Indian wealth that they regard as theirs to plunder; the Brahmins, to whom the diamond represents spiritual values, ultimately reclaim it and return to India unharmed”
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You can see the supernatural quorum court effect of the diamond. As soon as Rachel inherits it, she at once loses her lover. She is no longer interested in Franklin Blake. In fact, the

household breaks up, the mother dies. So, these can be considered to be the impact of the moonstone on the possessor. And these seem to be the symbolic as well as the material punishments that ensue for the person who is been gifted that stone.

With regard to the Indian priests, the novel represents them as spiritual, superstitious, even murderous and in their single-mindedness, their only purpose in life is that notion of retrieving the stone from the English possessors. The English people are represented in this novel as ones who are extremely greedy, and they regard the colony as a place where they can plunder its wealth. So, for the Brahmins, the diamond represents spiritual values, and they return to India completely unharmed and they replaced the stone on the forehead of the Hindu god.

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Imperial Gothic and The Moonstone



- “*The Moonstone’s* central mystery is eventually solved by Jennings, a half-English, half ‘Eastern’ physician whose strangely foreign appearance evokes fear and suspicion. Although Jennings is a sympathetic character who is seen to suffer greatly because of English racism, he dies shortly after restoring Rachel to the man she loves.”

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The novel's mystery is ultimately cleared up by Ezra Jennings. If you remember the story, Ezra Jennings is the assistant of Mr. Candy, the doctor. Ezra Jennings who helps the doctor recover from fever and while he is nursing, Mr. Candy, he comes to know of how Franklin Blake is made to steal the diamond through the usage of opium. So that is the backstory for you.

So, Ezra Jennings is very interesting to us because he is half-English and half-Eastern. So again, there is hybridity in this character and his foreign appearance is associated with a bit of fear on the part of the onlookers. There is also suspicion from those who come in contact with him but ultimately, he proves to be a source of good.

In fact, he helps clear that mystery. He is the one who helps set up that experiment in which everybody comes to know that Franklin Blake innocently took that diamond under the influence of opium. So, Jennings is a sympathetic character in Collins's narrative and he does seem to suffer a lot because of English racism towards that mixed heritage. And it is strange that he dies as soon once he has restored Rachel to her lover, he seems to quit the stage.

He is written out of the narrative and that is also very interesting towards how the hybrid character, the mixed-race character is written out, eliminated from the pages of the novel. So, this imperial Gothic narrative is also solved by somebody with Oriental, Eastern associations.

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Imperial Gothic and Moonstone



- “Unmarried and childless, he is the last of his line. Thus *The Moonstone*, while refusing to pander overtly to contemporary fears of racial impurity and racial contamination, effects narrative closure in part by purging the foreign characters from its pages.”

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“Unmarried and childless, Ezra Jennings is the last of his line. Thus, ‘The Moonstone’ while refusing to pander overtly to contemporary fears of racial impurity and racial contamination, effects narrative closure in part by purging the foreign characters from its pages.”

Ezra Jennings is single. He does not have a child to continue his line. When he dies, his line dies with him. So, the implication seems to be that racial impurity embedded in his figure is erased making sure that the impure line of Ezra Jennings is not continued. So, the racial contamination stops with Ezra Jennings.

And therefore, Suzanne Daly argues that *The Moonstone* very effectively brings a close to that chapter of mixed heritage by eliminating these foreign characters from its pages. And of course, the Indians also go back home with the Moonstone securely in their hands. Thank you for watching. I will catch you in the next session.