

The English Novel: Interdisciplinary Approaches
Dr. Aruni Mahapatra
Department of Humanities and Social Sciences
Indian Institute of Technology, Roorkee
Lecture - 39
The Reluctant Fundamentalist: Theme, Form & Style

Hello learners and welcome to another video lecture for this NPTEL course on the English novel. Today we will begin our discussion of the novel titled *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* by Mohsin Hameed.

Before I get into the novel, I want to have a brief discussion about second person narration. Now, those who are familiar with basic English grammar and the terminology of grammatical voices will recognize that second person refers most immediately to pronouns. And that is second person pronoun is 'you'. This is different from first person and third person pronouns. First person pronouns are 'I' or 'we', whereas third person pronouns are 'he', 'she', 'they', etc. Now, it is important to define pronouns and voice in narrative theory because most narratives use the third person voice. Those of you who are familiar with reading novels and those of you who've been reading the novels we've been discussing in this course, will immediately recognize the frequency and the preponderance of the third person narrative voice. Frequently characters in the novel are referred to in the third person. This is because most novelists create narrator who occupy the third person omniscient voice. The narrator occupies a sort of God-like position. The narrator has the privilege with which to describe with truth and accuracy the workings, the psychological workings of different characters, as well as the material realities of events, circumstances, etc. This kind of omniscience works best when it is deployed in the third person voice.

Now, some narrators, however, the fictional voices of some stories, novels, etc., occupy voices that are different from this third person voice. They occupy the second person voice. Some narrators frequently address their discourse using the second person pronoun 'you'. That is, they address the reader with this word 'you'. This is not as simple as it sounds. It has multiple narrative and intellectual effects. On one hand, it makes for a more engaging style of fiction. It enables us to appreciate what we are reading better. On the other hand, however, it does produce some confusions. In order to understand how second-person narration produces a range of intellectual, emotional and narratological effects, we'll briefly summarize the differences between classical and rhetorical poetics of narrative. We've

discussed this a little bit earlier, but I just want to recall briefly at this point in order to preface our discussion of the opening section of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*.

Classical narrative theory has had a structuralist origin. In classical accounts of narrative, all forms of storytelling, all acts of storytelling were understood by breaking them down into different structural aspects or devices. So, a story or a novel or a play became effective. It performed its function of education, entertainment and communication by effectively using certain devices, devices like metaphor or simile or narrative voice or plot or character or style. So, this was in some a view of narrative structure as a composite of different parts, different moving parts. As against this understanding of narrative, we also have a slightly more modern or slightly different understanding of narrative, which is a rhetorical understanding of narrative. In this rhetorical understanding of narrative, we understand stories or literature not so much as combinations of different moving parts, but rather attempts at making a connection, attempts at communication. Narrators use different kinds of devices, communication devices, in order to produce rhetorical effects, in order to do things, in order to create new relationships, in order to make their readers or audiences do things. Essentially, in the rhetorical poetics of narrative, narrative is understood as an attempt to produce relationships or to create new kinds of effects between narrators and their audiences. This is a very general difference between classical and rhetorical poetics of narrative and based on their different approaches, classical and rhetorical poetics of narrative have defined the importance and implications of second person narration in different ways. To take one very brief example, Gerald Prince defines second-person narration. Prince is a very influential theorist and can be safely said to belong to the classical or structuralist narrative theory approach. He defines narratee as "the narratee is someone whom the narrator addresses." As you can see, there is a very simple and almost technical clarity to this definition.

I contrast this with what Paul Rabinowitz, who is one of the few scholars who are characterized as the pioneers of the rhetorical theory of narrative. Rabinowitz feels compelled to define audience in four ways. There are four kinds of audience according to Rabinowitz. First, there is the actual flesh and blood audience. That is individuals like you and me who pick up a book and read it. We are the actual audience. then there is the authorial audience, that is the hypothetical ideal audience. That is the audience that Mohsin Hamid or Virginia Woolf or any novelist thinks would best receive their writings. So, at the time that I decide to write a novel, I have in my mind an idea of a reader who would best appreciate and enjoy the work that I write. This is the authorial audience. Then there

is also something known as the narrative audience. This is an imaginary audience for which the narrator is writing. For instance, in the case of a novel, the narrator imagines audiences having different places within the fiction as well as the public reception world in which the novel is published. Finally, there is the ideal narrative audience, the audience for which the narrator wishes he were writing. In order to understand these four levels of audience, I've taken an example from the novel *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Bronte. In this novel, there are several events that are not exactly realistic or which cannot be verified by a scientific or a rational register. These can be called supernatural events. One such event is when the protagonist and the narrator, Jane, describes hearing the voice of a man named Rochester calling her name when she is in fact very, very far away. She is in fact in the other end of the country. At this point, the authorial audience and the narrative audience receive this information that Jane, the narrator and the protagonist conveys to them in different ways. The audience who believes that Jane is a real person, Jane is a historical personage who lived in the 19th century in England, who had the kind of experiences that are described in the novel. Now, for this narrative audience, the novel describes the emotional truth of Jane's experiences. So, for this audience, this event, Jane hearing a person's voice when she is in fact on the other end of the country, might not be logical or scientifically proven to be true, but it has an emotional truth. So, the narrative audience feels in this statement something not about the way sound travels or electromagnetism or sound waves or anything like that. But they understand that the statement is an account of Jane's emotional state. Now, the authorial audience knows that Jane Eyre is not an actual person. Jane Eyre is a fictional individual and so for the authorial audience, this kind of statement reflects not an emotional statement but rather a narrative choice. For the authorial audience, Charlotte Bronte is deciding to describe something or choosing to describe the emotional experience of her protagonist by describing an event which cannot be proven or verified scientifically. So, this is one way in which two audiences receive the same discourse in different ways.

In order to understand how second person narration can work in different ways, I'm going to read from a popular and influential story by the contemporary American writer, Lorrie Moore. This is a story that's titled 'How' and it was first published in a collection of short stories titled *Self-Help*. And this is how the story begins.

Begin by meeting him in a class, in a bar, at a rummage sale. Maybe he teaches sixth grade, manages a hardware store, foreman at a cotton factory. He will be a good dancer. He will have perfectly cut hair. He will laugh at your jokes.

A week, a month, a year. Feel discovered, comforted, needed, loved, and start sometimes, somehow, to feel bored. When sad or confused, walk uptown to the movies. Buy popcorn. These things come and go. A week, a month, a year.

We can understand from the tone of these sentences that they are addressed to a second person audience. These lines make the most sense if while we read them, we understand that they are not addressed to us as readers, but at someone else and we are overhearing this address. "Begin by meeting him in a class." So, it seems that the narrator is addressing these lines to someone who is interested in meeting someone else. Given the context of Lorrie Moore's publishing career and given the context of the year in which these stories were published, we can remember that a few months or years before these lines were published, Lorrie Moore published a story titled, *How to Be the Other Woman*. Now, simply that information can lead us to infer that these lines, that the unnamed addressee of these lines or the narratee of these lines is a woman, a contemporary woman who is looking at ways of potentially meeting a man who might become someone with whom she can spend time. Further, this sense that these lines are addressed to a person who is not in fact reading them, but who might be listening to them in addition to ourselves is complicated in the second paragraph. Now, in the second paragraph, we get a sense that we are asked to identify with that role. So, these two figures, on one hand, the reader who is simply receiving this information, and on the other hand, the person to whom this information is aimed, sort of like advice. These are the two roles in which these lines put us as readers and we constantly shift between these two roles.

To understand a little more about the kind of blurring or the kind of confusion that second-person narration produces, we can think of it as a blurring of boundaries between the observer and the observed. Sometimes, when we read these lines, we are asked to observe a world, a world in which a person looks for a kind of advice, that is, how to meet someone. Sometimes we are asked to observe that world. At other times, however, we are asked to inhabit that world. We are put in a position where we do not have the advantage of an outsider's perspective. And this is the shift, this is the shuttling that second-person narration produces, the shuttling between being an observer of a world and of being observed by inhabiting a world of the fictional universe. Now, we will return to this theoretical distinction and the implications of second-person narration, but for now, let us read the opening words of Mohsin Hamid's novel, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*. This is how the novel begins.

Excuse me, sir, but may I be of assistance? Ah, I see I have alarmed you. Do not be frightened by my beard: I am a lover of America. I noticed that you were looking for something; more than looking, in fact, you seem to be on a mission, and since I am both a native of this city and a speaker of your language, I thought I might offer you my services.

We see immediately from the very first line that the narrator of this novel has placed us in a particular relationship to the world that is being described. We know that there is someone to whom the narrator is talking, that there are two people. One person is speaking these words and the other person is the recipient who is listening to these words. Sometimes we may feel that we are the second person, but then sometimes we may feel that we are not. But for now, let us think about what is the relationship between these two. The person who is being addressed has a certain relationship to the person who is speaking. The very first emotional reaction that the narrator is seeking to control is that of fear. The narrator assumes that the narratee might be afraid because the narrator has a beard. The way the narrator allays this concern or reduces this fear is by saying to the narrator that the beard is negated by the fact that the narrator is a lover of America.

And why or how can this logic work? Why is this a logical statement? How can the fear produced by a beard be negated by a love for America? The answer lies in the context in which the novel was published in 2007. This was a time right after the attack on the Twin Towers, the World Trade Center, and how at some point there was a great deal of suspicion, hatred and Islamophobia. The association of beards was made immediately to terrorism, to a sort of hatred of America, to an assault on America. To assault on values that Americans hold close and cherished. So the narrator immediately addresses both this fear as well as consoles or tries to reduce that fear by stating that he is a lover of America. And further, the narrator also then describes that this person is on a mission. We're not sure what that mission is, but the narrator senses that without the narrator's help, the narrative cannot move further.

And how can the narrator be of assistance? The answer is that the narrator is both native of this city and a speaker of your language. So, there is a contrast, your language and this city. Your language, we can assume that language here refers to English and city refers to something which is not English. That is, it is a place where English is not the common language. However, the narrator occupies this very unique position. He is an expert in a city, he is a native of a city and therefore has the right amount of expertise or knowledge or cultural upbringing or situation which he will translate into a language that is familiar to

the narrative. Here we see that the blurring that I talked about earlier is beginning to occur. Now in this sentence, "a speaker of your language", the narrator is referring to English and is now addressing us as readers of this novel, which is in English, which is titled *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*. We do not have to be Americans. We do not have to be suspicious of a beard. We can simply be readers of this novel. The novel is like a city. The world that the novel is creating is an unfamiliar space, like a city of which we are not natives. Hence, we need a guide. We need an expert who can show us, who can tell us what is what. We see how the opening of this novel brilliantly creates two positions that we can take as readers. We can either be the real recipient of the narrator's words, that is, we can be a narratee, or we can actually be shuttling between the positions of this narrative, who is an American, probably, who does not speak the language of a native city, and who only speaks English, and who therefore needs help.

Let us continue to read further, and to understand how these two positions will be developed with greater specificity.

How did I know you were American? No, not by the color of your skin; we have a range of complexions in this country, and yours occurs often among the people of our northwest frontier. Nor was it your dress that gave you away; a European tourist could as easily have purchased in Des Moines your suit with its single vent and your button-down shirt.

So, further details. The narrator says that "we have a range of complexions in this country and yours occurs", 'yours' refers to a very fair skin, a light-colored skin. There is an assumption that Americans have light-colored skin and it is suggested that people in "our Northwest frontier", that is, northwest frontier of a country where the narrator calls home, which the narrator calls home, have a complexion that is similar to that of Americans. We can further infer what country or what northwest frontier the narrator is referring to from the fact that Mohsin Hamid is publicly known and identifies and has chosen to be identified, has declared in multiple public places, fora that he is from Pakistan and is based at least partly out of Pakistan. He divides his time between Pakistan and the US. He was educated in the US and worked in the US for many years, after which he began a career as a novelist and continues to visit and spend time periodically in Pakistan. So we can assume that the narrator refers to the author, Hamid's country, that is Pakistan, and to the northwest frontier. Further, the narrator says that it's not even the dress, because a European tourist could easily have purchased that dress. There's something other than dress or skin color, which

the narrator has noted and which the narrator has inferred correctly to be American. The narrator goes on.

True, your hair, short cropped and your expansive chest--the chest I would say of a man who bench-presses regularly and maxes out well above two-twenty-five--are typical of a certain type of American; but then again, sportsmen and soldiers of all nationalities tend to look alike. Instead, it was your bearing that allowed me to identify you, and I do not mean that as an insult, for I see your face as hardened, but merely as an observation.

So again, we see that the narrator is deploying a lot of American phrases and idioms in his discourse. The narrator wants to be recognized as someone who is very familiar with the way Americans talk. He infers from looking at the narratee's chest that he bench-presses above 225. This is a reference to 225 pounds, not kilograms, 225 pounds of weight in the bench press. And this is a common figure. This is a well-known fact among individuals who have interest in athletics, gymnasiums and bodybuilding. So, these are references to Americanisms. Further, the narrator says that despite his knowledge of Americanism, It is in fact a bearing, not the physical manifestations, the clothes or the skin, but rather something in the attitude of the narrator, which the narrator has identified as American.

We will see further in the next lecture when we read more how this second-person narration continues to develop multiple subject positions and how a shuttling between these positions can enable us to understand and appreciate this novel to our advantage.

Thank you.