

Postcolonial Literature

Lecture 3

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Hello and welcome to another lecture on Postcolonial literature. In our previous meeting, we discussed how the field of postcolonial literature combines within itself two already existing areas of studies, namely the study of commonwealth literature and colonial discourse analysis. Among these, we have already discussed the category of commonwealth literature at some length and today we are going to explore the aspect of colonial discourse analysis. Now if you remember the first lecture of this course you will know that there we had defined colonialism, or more specifically the post sixteenth century forms of colonialism, as a capitalism driven enterprise where one country or group of people forcefully acquires the land and economic resources belonging to another country or group of people for the purpose of profit making. But how does this process of violent subjugation that is colonialism relate to idea of discourse. To understand this, we have to turn to the works of the twentieth-century French intellectual Michel Foucault because it is from there that postcolonial studies derive its understanding of the concept of discourse.

What is discourse?

If we consult a dictionary, we will see that the simplest definition of discourse is that it is a set of meaningful statements, made orally or in writing, on a given topic. The insight that Michel Foucault brings to this simple definition of discourse through his works like *The Archaeology of Knowledge* or his essay like “The Order of Discourse” is that there are certain deep-seated regulations which structure and limit the creation and circulation of discourses. In other words, what Foucault is saying is that though in theory the number of things that we can say or write is infinite, in practice the number of meaningful statements that we can make is strictly limited

by certain factors. What are these factors that regulate and limit discourse? Well Foucault primarily talks about three factors: taboo, madness/sanity and institutional ratification.

1. Taboo

Let's start with the notion of taboo. In any society at any given point of time there are always prohibitions surrounding certain topics. Any discussion on these topics which are considered taboos are socially looked down upon. Therefore, there is an absence of discourse on certain topics within certain social milieus. Take for instance the subject of sexuality. Even today certain areas of sexuality are considered to be taboos in our society and therefore it becomes very difficult for instance to talk about sexual violence that happens within the domestic confines. Though our ability to have a meaningful discourse on sexual violence has increased greatly compared to how things were say a hundred years back, yet certain areas of sexuality and sexual violence still remains taboo. Now such prohibited subjects might vary from one society to another and from one time to another, but the fact remains constant that there will always be some subjects on which it is impossible or at least extremely difficult to have socially acceptable discourse. Thus, though in theory the topics on which we can have a discourse is infinite, in practise, we cannot talk or write about anything and everything.

2. Madness and Sanity

Now let us come to the second point. According to Foucault, the notion of madness and sanity also acts as another factor limiting the possibility of discourse. For instance, if someone says that "humans walk on their heads" then in all likelihood that person will be taken as mad and his or her statements would be considered as outpourings of an insane mind and which therefore has no meaning. Thus, if discourse is to be understood as composed of meaningful statements, then someone who is deemed mad cannot generate discourse. So even though a mad person might be able to speak, that speech never gains the acceptance of a discourse. Here it is

important to note that like the concept of tabooed subjects the definition of madness too changes with time and place. That is to say different societies separated from one another by time or space might draw the line separating madness from sanity differently and in fact Foucault has an interesting work on this very aspect titled *Madness and Civilization*. But however a society might choose to demarcate madness from sanity, the basic concept of madness remains present in all society. Which means that in any given society, at any given point of time, there would always be a group of statements which will be kept out of the pale of discourse because of its association with madness.

3. Institutional Ratification

Apart from taboo and madness, Foucault also talks about institutional ratification as an important factor that limits the proliferation of discourse. If we think carefully then we will understand that our process of knowing about things and talking or writing meaningfully about them are closely guided by various institutes, including our schools and colleges, the publishing industry, the news agencies, learned societies, laboratories etc. If I were to state today that the sun goes round the earth, then such a statement won't be admitted as part of a meaningful discourse because it won't be ratified by these institutions which regulate knowledge production and knowledge consumption in today's world. Yet at one point in history this very statement that the sun revolves around the earth enjoyed institutional validity. Thus for instance during the sixteenth and early seventeenth century Europe, it was the geocentric model of the universe that enjoyed institutional validity and proponents of the heliocentric model like Galileo Galilei, who claimed that it was the earth which revolved round the sun and not the other way round, were imprisoned to stop them propagating this new idea. As this example shows, institutions control the discourse by regulating the circulation of statements and by prioritising and foregrounding certain statements while marginalising and gagging certain other opposing statements. Therefore, the kinds of discourses that are prevalent in any given situation

largely depends upon the institutions which regulate and ratify the production and dissemination of knowledge. And if the social situation is underlined by a power imbalance then it is the institutions of the more powerful that gets to regulate knowledge and its discursive manifestation.

Power > Knowledge

Here we come to another important idea of Michel Foucault, which is very significant if we are trying to understand colonial discourse analysis. The big idea that we are talking about here is that power and knowledge are interrelated. As I stated just now, if in a society there is power imbalance then it is the institutions of the more powerful that gets to regulate knowledge and its discursive manifestation. To try and understand this let us look at the following statement:

“I have no knowledge of either Sanskrit or Arabic. But [...] I have conversed both here and at home with men distinguished by their proficiency in the Eastern tongues. [...] I have never found one among them who could deny that a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia.”

This statement is extracted from a document dated 2nd February 1835 and is titled “Minutes upon Indian Education”. The author of this document is this gentleman here: his name is Thomas Babington Macaulay, his dates are 1800 to 1859, and while writing these words he was employed as a member of the Governor General’s Council which was a body that looked after the East India Company’s affairs in India. Now such a statement which denigrates the rich tradition of Indian and Arabic literature and compares the whole of it with just a single library shelf of European books is at best a thoroughly biased statement. Indeed, listening to it today one might be tempted to dismiss it as the ramblings of a madman. However, in 1835 this statement was not dismissed as madness. In fact, it was taken very seriously—and it was taken seriously because Macaulay was making this statement from a position of power. As a member

of the Governor General's Council, Macaulay represented the colonial authority that was backed by Britain's military and economic domination of India and the Middle East. The very fact that the Governor General's Council, to which Macaulay belonged, represented the institution of the powerful colonisers gave the statements issued by one of its members an unquestioned truth value and this in spite of the fact that Macaulay did not know either Sanskrit or any other Indian or Arabic languages for that matter. It doesn't take much of an imagination to figure out that if Sanskrit or Arabic scholars from India and Middle East were asked to compare their literary traditions with that of Europe they would have come up with a very different answer than Macaulay. But their status as representatives of a subjugated population meant that their statements never enjoyed the institutional backing that was given to Macaulay's statements. So in any situation characterised by an imbalance of power it is always the discourse of the powerful that gets circulated as true knowledge.

Knowledge > Power

Now in our discussion so far we have tried to demonstrate how power influences knowledge and discourse. But Foucault's understanding of the power knowledge interrelationship also tells us that knowledge and its discursive manifestation also influences power and how power is enacted. To understand this let us go back to Macaulay's statement. This highly biased statement which today frankly sounds ridiculous not only enjoyed widespread circulation because of its relationship with colonial authority but it in turn influenced how colonial authority would function in India. So Macaulay's 1835 "Minutes Upon Indian Education" was soon turned into a legal act called the English Education Act of 1835. This resulted in East India Company diverting all the funds allocated for the purpose of education in India to English education. This meant depriving the educational institutes in India that taught Sanskrit and Persian of all monetary support. In other words, Macaulay's discourse resulted in an exercise of colonial power that sought to systematically destroy all native institutions of learning.

Orientalism

This connection between discourse and colonial power relations was most elaborately explored in a book titled *Orientalism* that was published in 1978. It was authored by the Palestine born American professor of literature Edward Said and you can see his image and his dates [here](#). Said is widely regarded as the founder of postcolonial studies and what we now know as colonial discourse analysis was something that was initiated by his book *Orientalism*. In this seminal text as well as in his later works like *Culture and Imperialism*, Said contends that the expansion of post sixteenth century European colonialism especially in Asia was inherently connected with a particular kind of discourse which he refers to as the discourse of Orientalism. Said further argues that much of Western literature ranging from Greek tragedies produced during the 5th century BCE by playwrights like Aeschylus to nineteenth and twentieth century novels written by authors like Gustave Flaubert and Joseph Conrad forms an integral part of this discourse of Orientalism which justified the colonial domination of the East by the West. We will talk more about Edward Said, Orientalism as well as the implication of connecting literature with colonialism in our next lecture.

But today I would like to point out just one interesting thing before ending. Edward Said who founded postcolonial studies with the literature that was produced from within the European colonial metropolis. Postcolonial literary studies as the legacy bearer of Edward Said's works therefore also includes discussion on metropolitan literature. Here we find yet another point of distinction that separates postcolonial literary studies from the study of commonwealth literature. As mentioned in my previous lecture, one of the shortcomings of commonwealth literature was that it was solely focussed on the literature that was emerging from the colonies. In postcolonial studies, thanks to Said, the novel of a British writer like Joseph Conrad is as much an object of study as novels written by an Indian writer like Raja Rao. and this shift is crucial because it allows us to gain a more comprehensive understanding of how colonialism

relates to culture not only of the colonised subject but also of the coloniser. We will continue with this discussion on Postcolonial literature in our next lecture. Thank you.