

Postcolonial Literature

Lecture 5

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Hello and welcome to another lecture on postcolonial literature. In our previous meeting we discussed how the military and economic processes of colonialism is integrally associated with a peculiar kind of discourse, which we referred to as the colonial discourse. We also studied Orientalism as an example of this colonial discourse, and saw how through the discourse of Orientalism places like Egypt and India were transformed into passive objects of knowledge for the European coloniser.

We also saw the use of colonial discourse to justify the process of colonialism. Thus, a colonial discourse like Orientalism which constructs the Arabs and Indians as barbaric, ignorant and childlike creatures presents European colonialism as a civilizing mission rather than an exploitative economic enterprise. The argument here is that colonialism by exposing these less civilized people like Indians and Arabs to the more civilized Europeans would actually help them become more and more enlightened. In other words, through colonialism the adult and civilized Europeans would lead the childlike oriental natives to civilizational maturity.

However, at this point it is important to note that Orientalism was not the only instance of colonial discourse. It was one such example and if we look at the European colonialism of Africa that carved up that entire continent into colonies for European countries like Britain, France, Belgium, Germany etc. in the late nineteenth century, we encounter another example of colonial discourse associated with it. This discourse on Africa is however very similar to the discourse of Orientalism and follows the same logic wherein Africans are presented as barbaric and childlike who need the guidance of enlightened Europeans to reach civilizational maturity. In other words, the late nineteenth-century European colonialism of Africa, just like the

European colonisation of the Orient before that, was explained away as a civilizing mission which was more beneficial to the colonised rather than to the coloniser. We will talk about this colonial discourse and the bizarre ways in which it twisted the colonial reality in today's lecture, and we will do so with reference to one of the classics of British fiction—Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*.

Joseph Conrad

However, before we move on to the novel, let me introduce you to the novelist Joseph Conrad. Here you can see his image. Conrad was born in 1857 in present day Ukraine in a family of Polish aristocrats. It is interesting to note that though Conrad later went on to become a very respected English novelist, he only learnt English in his twenties. It was in 1886 that he took British citizenship and his first novel written in English was published as late as 1895. Following the publication of *Almayer's Folly* which was the name of his first novel, Conrad went on to publish other powerful tales like *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'*, *Heart of Darkness*, *Lord Jim* and *Nostramo*. And in many of these fictions, Conrad's acquaintance with the sea and with distant lands as a professional sailor is prominently reflected. In fact, the novel *Heart of Darkness*, which we are going to discuss today, also has its origin in one of Conrad's journeys as a sailor.

In 1890, Conrad sailed for the Congo region in West Africa on behalf of a Belgian company. He was to take charge as captain of one of the company's steamers that plied along the Congo river. King Leopold the second, the ruler of Belgium had recently annexed large portions of the Congo basin as Belgian colony and when Conrad visited the area in 1890 it had already become infamous as a site of inhuman colonial brutalities and exploitation. *Heart of Darkness* on one hand is a documentation of these European brutalities meted out to the local African population. But on the other hand it also a meditation on the gap between this brutal physical

reality of the colonial process, and the colonial discourse generated from within the metropolis which presented this process as a civilizing mission.

Title of *Heart of Darkness*

One can follow this gap between the colonial discourse and the colonial process in the novel by focussing on the title *Heart of Darkness*. In the novel, the character Marlow is commissioned by a Belgian company to journey to Congo in order to locate a somewhat mysterious person called Kurtz. Kurtz is only gradually represented to the reader and this gradual unfolding of Kurtz's character is really what the story of the novel is about. But what is known at the very outset is that Kurtz is a European agent who works for the Belgian company which hired Marlow, from deep within Africa.

So at one level it is Marlow's journey to the depth of Africa which is signified as a journey to the heart of darkness. Africa's association with darkness and its representation as the dark continent was central to the colonial discourse about Africa. However, this darkness has little to do with the physical sun or with sunlight. For Europeans, the interior of Africa remained an uncharted and unmapped territory well into the twentieth century and therefore in the European maps which represented for them the known world, the continent of Africa remained a blank space. For the Europeans, Africa was therefore dark because it was unknown to them.

Within the European colonial discourse on Africa, the contrast between darkness and light also signified a moral opposition. Africa was dark because it was considered as barbaric, primitive, and childish which was unable to distinguish between what was morally good and what was evil. Europe in contrast represented the forces of light because it was perceived as civilized, progressive and mature which was dedicated to the mission of bringing enlightenment to the colonised subjects. It is this light and darkness binary of the colonial discourse that Conrad's novel puts to test.

Plot of the Novel

So what happens in the novel after Marlow journey's to Africa. Well, when Marlow lands in Africa, his first port of call is what is referred to as the Outer Station. And during the course of the novel Marlow will move across many such stations bearing generic names like Outer station, Central station and Inner station and each of these represent sites of colonial activity – they are sites of interaction between the European colonisers and the colonised natives of Africa, and at least according to the colonial discourse they are therefore also sites which represent the progress and civilization that Europeans were supposedly bringing to Africa. Yet, the reality which confronts Marlow is radically different.

In the Outer Station segment of the novel Marlow witnesses an attempt to build a railway track. The reference to railways is important here because if anything has ever been touted as a sign of progress and civilization that the European colonial powers brought to the lands that they colonised it is the railways. However, in the novel, this notion of progress and development that the railways signified within the colonial discourse is undercut in two major ways. Firstly, while Marlow witnesses the attempt to construct a railway project it does not appear to him as a project that will bring progress but rather as an enormous folly. Machineries and rail tracks have been brought in from Europe and a lot of blasting was being done but Marlow could not see any visible sign of progress. The machineries were decaying and the railways tracks, as soon as they were being laid, were being consumed by the forests. Clearly the very attempt to build a railway is perceived by Marlow as a futile project because it neglects the immediate context. Railways like much of the other things that the colonisers brought with him to the parts of the world they colonised tried to replicate the notions of progress as developed in Europe onto very different lands where the geographical and the social context varied widely. The railways in Congo therefore becomes a symbol of an alien endeavour which far from representing progress, represented a certain kind of foolhardiness.

The novel undermines the project of railway building and its association with progress also by questioning about the beneficiaries of this so called progress. When we talk about European colonialism ushering in progress and development in the colonised parts of the world it is always important to ask the question – progress for whom? As Marlow realises, if the railways being built in Congo was supposed to bring civilization and progress to the native population of Africa then that proved to be a signal failure. This was because the project rather than elevating the position of Africans had actually transformed them into bonded labourers who were toiling to complete a foolhardy work that has been thrust on them by the colonising outsiders. The Africans that Marlow observes near the railway site are thus found tied in chains, walking desolately with basket full of earth on their heads. This is what the promise of colonial progress achieves in Africa, it tears the native population from their own social and cultural fabric and converts them into chained brutes.

Delayed Decoding

At this point, it is important to take note of one of the narrative techniques that Conrad uses in this novel to tell the tale of European colonialism of Africa. This technique is best understood as a delayed decoding of the external reality. While narrating his experiences in Africa, Marlow tells of how he perceived the reality that surrounded him through his sense organs, and it is only after a delay that the reader actually gets to understand what these sense impressions really mean. To understand this technique, let us consider these lines where Marlow is describing his experiences in the Outer Station where the work for the railways is going on:

"Black shapes crouched, lay, sat between the trees, leaning against the trunks, clinging to the earth, half coming out, half effaced within the dim light, in all the attitudes of pain, abandonment, and despair. Another mine on the cliff went off, followed by a slight shudder

of the soil under my feet. The work was going on. The work! And this was the place where some of the helpers had withdrawn to die.”

The first line presents a bizarre landscape of black shapes which confronts Marlow’s eyes while his other sense organs are overwhelmed by the constant blasting for the railways. It is not until we come to the line “And this was the place that some of the helpers had withdrawn to die” do we actually grasp the meaning of the black shapes. Those bizarre shapes leaning and clinging in pain are nothing less than emaciated and dying African workers – the apparent beneficiaries of European progress.

This slight delay in decoding the reality experienced by Marlow is indicative of how the truth of colonial discourse is disjointed from the colonial reality. Marlow takes time to grasp what is happening around him precisely because as a European fed on the myth of colonialism as a civilising mission, he finds it difficult to make sense of a reality that is so removed from any trace of civilized behaviour and of progress.

The Character of Kurtz

This disparity between a discourse which presents colonialism as a civilising mission, and the colonial reality is however most powerfully represented through Marlow’s discovery of the character Kurtz. Before Marlow gets to meet Kurtz in person he hears him being praised as a prodigy and a superior being who personifies all the civilizational virtues of Europe. Kurtz is also praised for being one of the most efficient agents who can procure an astonishing amount of ivory from the interiors of Africa to be shipped to Europe – ivory being one of the most prized resources that the European colonisers extracted from the Congo region for their domestic consumption.

When Marlow finally gets to meet Kurtz in the Inner Station he is again confronted with a reality that is so radically different from the discourse about Kurtz that he finds it difficult to

make sense of it. Here again there is a masterful use of the technique of delayed decoding. Thus when Marlow sees Kurtz's house by the river for the first time through his binoculars he is struck by the number of poles surrounding the house with what appeared to be ornamental knobs on top. It is only after a substantial delay and careful observation that Marlow realises these knobs to be something more sinister. With mounting horror Marlow recognises them as dried and shrunken heads of Africans which Kurtz had severed from the bodies of the native villagers to spread terror among the local population. This horrible exercise was in fact how Kurtz compelled the locals to hunt for ivory on his behalf – this was the secret of his efficiency as a colonial agent.

At this point in the novel, the title *Heart of Darkness* assumes a new and altered significance. Darkness ceases to be a qualification of Africa and Africans and becomes associated with the iconic European figure of Kurtz and the process of colonial extraction of resources that he represents. Thus Conrad's novel really turns the colonial discourse on its head and explodes the myth of civilising mission by placing it against the brutal realities of colonialism. Seen from this perspective *Heart of Darkness* appears to be Conrad's contrapuntal reading of the colonial discourse. As discussed in the previous lecture, a contrapuntal reading attempts to read a discourse against the grain – against the ideological bias that underlines the discourse—so as to bring out its fault lines. This is precisely what *Heart of Darkness* does with the colonial discourse – it brings out the biases, the contradictions, and the falsehood that underline it. But here we come across another question: can we also read the novel *Heart of Darkness* itself contrapuntally? After all the novel in spite of its anti-European orientation is itself a product of the European metropolitan culture. We will take up this important question in our next lecture. Thank you.