

Postcolonial Literature

Lecture 06

Dr. Sayan Chattopadhyay, IIT Kanpur

Welcome again to this series of lectures on Postcolonial Literature. In our previous lecture we discussed Joseph Conrad's novel *Heart of Darkness* and how it provides a contrapuntal reading of the colonial discourse on Africa. But we had ended our previous lecture with an important question: Can there be a contrapuntal reading of the novel itself? You will have to understand that in spite of its sharp criticism of the colonial discourse which was emanating from the West, Joseph Conrad himself was a Western author who was situated in England which was one of the biggest colonial metropolises of the last century. His novel *Heart of Darkness* too was brought out by a publisher based in this colonial metropolis, and in spite of all its criticism the novel was primarily written for a metropolitan readership. Therefore, is it not possible that *Heart of Darkness*, though it is critical of the metropolitan colonial discourse, is not radically separated from the bias and the prejudices of the metropolitan societies which were based on colonial exploitation? The answer to this question, as we shall see during the course of this lecture, is a big YES. Indeed, Conrad and his novel *Heart of Darkness* can be found sharing certain important ideological premises with the colonial discourse in spite of its criticism of the colonial enterprise. And this becomes evident if we try and read the novel contrapuntally. Or, in the other words, if we try and read the novel from a perspective from which its novelist never meant it to be read. What can this perspective be? Well it is the perspective of the colonised Africans – a perspective that is crucially lacking from the novel. You will of course remember that all we get to hear about Africa in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* is Marlow's views...and we cannot forget that Marlow, in spite of all his dislike for how colonialism was operating in the Congo, was himself working there as an agent of the Belgian colonial authority. Therefore, if

we can read the novel from a genuine African perspective rather than from the perspective of a Westerner sympathetic to the Africans we might arrive at a contrapuntal understanding of the novel and its own underlying discursive biases. But before trying to read the novel from an African perspective, we need to first better acquaint ourselves with some major points in African history.... not only the history of colonial rule in Africa but also the history of precolonial Africa.

Berlin Conference of 1884/1885

For this, I turn to the wonderful book titled *African Perspectives on Colonialism* written by the Ghanaian academician and political leader Albert Adu Boahen, and the reason I chose this book is not only because of its scholarship but also because it is short and easily readable. So if you can manage to get your hands on this book I would definitely encourage you to read it. Now coming back to the African historical context, one of the most important dates with which we can begin our exploration is 15th November 1884. On that date a conference started in Berlin, Germany, to decide the fate of the Africans and their territories, and the conference lasted till 31st January 1885. The decisions taken at this conference were so momentous that it changed the political geography of the African continent forever. To get an idea about how big this change was let us look at these two maps. In the one on the left side, which shows how Africa looked politically just a few years before the Berlin Conference, you can see most of the continent divided into small tribal kingdoms barring the large green patch here at the top which was part of the Ottoman Empire, and the blue portion here marked Algeria which was a French colony, and the Cape Colony down south which was under British political domination. Now look at the map on the right. The change is startling, because in this map which shows the political geography of Africa a few years after the Berlin conference, the whole of the continent is neatly divided into large chunks of territories and each of these large colour patches represent the colony of one or the other Western power. For instance, this blue patch here starting from

Algeria all the way down to central Africa represents French domination. The big sections marked in pink represent British colonies in Africa. Here is the Congo region which was colonised by the Belgians and where Conrad situated his novel *Heart of Darkness*. So apart from these two areas, one here marked in yellow which represents the kingdom of Ethiopia, and the light blue area here representing Liberia, the whole of the African continent was divided and parcelled out between the major Western powers during the course of the Berlin Conference. This Conference was attended by all the major Western countries except America and Switzerland. But more importantly and rather ironically no African was present during the entire conference which sealed the political fate of the whole of Africa for decades to come. This situation today, I am sure, hits us as absurd, but it also should give us a very important clue about how colonialism operates. We repeatedly refer to colonialism as a form of exploitation precisely because it does not enter into any form of consultation with the people whose resources and labour it uses to sustain its profit making enterprises. Thus, within colonialism, the colonised subjects are always left without a voice.

As far as the Berlin Conference was concerned, though it decided the fate of Africa and its inhabitants, it was not really motivated by any special concern for Africans. Rather, what the conference sought to achieve was a balance of power in Europe and a resolution of what is known as the Scramble for Africa that had broken out in 1880s. This Scramble for Africa is an important term for us and to try and understand this term we will need to go behind the capitalist motives that guided the kind of colonialism that we are discussing in our course.

Capitalism and the Colonialism of Africa

So let's start with asking ourselves what is capitalism? Simply put, capitalism is investment of money or capital to make more money that is profit. Now Europe had started moving out of the feudal mode of economy into the capitalist mode of economy from around the 15th century.

It was of course a gradual process and passed through various phases. Indeed, capitalism even today is something that is evolving and taking new forms. But in our discussion of the African context, the kind of capitalism that is most important is the one associated with the rise of the industrial mode of production. By the eighteenth century Europe had witnessed what is known as the industrial revolution whereby the capacity of various European nations to produce commodities far surpassed the capacity of these countries to consume these commodities domestically. These surplus products were produced to rake in huge amounts of profit. But there is one interesting thing about this profit making enterprise. Due to competition the profit of each industrial manufacturer decreases over time. So say if I am producing a shirt and selling it at a profit margin of hundred rupees tomorrow another person will start manufacturing and selling the shirt with a profit margin of 50 rupees to cut me out of the competition. As a result, I will have to further lower my profit margin below 50 rupees to stay in the race. So you see there is usually a continuous deterioration of the profit margin in this capitalist mode of industrial production.

Now you can only sustain this low profit margin by two ways: one way is if you can keep increasing the market for your commodity. In other words if earlier you could get 100 rupees by selling a single shirt to a single person now with a profit margin of 50 rupees you need to sell it to two persons in order to get Rs 100. If your profit margin goes down to Rs 1 you will need to sell it to hundred people to make a profit of Rs 100. So you will constantly need to increase your market as your profit margin goes down.

Another way you can sustain your business in spite of a deteriorating profit margin is by reducing the price of raw materials that goes into making the commodity. So for instance if you can somehow procure cotton at a reduced price then even if the final price of your shirt has fallen down due to competition you will still be able to make a profit, since profit is ultimately the difference between the price of the raw material plus labour input and the final sales price

of a commodity. According to Albert Adu Boahen the quest for a larger market and for cheap raw materials to feed the industries were the primary cause why Africa was colonised by the west. So by the nineteenth century, industrial mode of production had become the norm for most of the European countries who were in turn searching for cheap resources for their industries and a scope to enlarge the market for the finished goods that these industries were churning out. This made the continent of Africa especially alluring to the European countries both for its resources, which till the 1880s had largely remained untapped by the European industries, and for its potential as a market for European goods.

The Scramble for Africa

Africa since long had been a place from where the West had acquired slave labour for its industries, till slavery was banned in West in the first half of the nineteenth century. However, till that period the direct influence of Western powers had largely remained limited to the fringes of the continent. But when in the 1870s France and Belgium started showing the desire to expand their colonial influence deeper into Africa it caused significant alarm amongst other major western powers like Britain, Portugal, Germany etc. This set out a kind of race between these Western countries to expand their colonies in Africa and it is this race for African colonies which started during the 1880s that is known as the Scramble for Africa. The Berlin Conference held in 1884-1885 was an attempt by the European powers to settle amicably between themselves the conflicts that accompanied the competition to colonise Africa. Therefore, it is not entirely surprising that no African representative was present there at the conference because the conference ultimately was an attempt to maintain the balance of power in Europe.

African Reaction

But how did the Africans react to this European attempt to divide up their lands into European colonies? Well the reactions were of course varied, and some African kingdoms did establish

alliances with various competing European forces primarily to protect themselves against hostile African kingdoms. But the overwhelming African reaction was military resistance, and this resistance was met in the battlefield by advanced European technology in the form of Gras repeater rifles and Maxim guns which massacred the African forces. Within a decade of the Berlin conference all major African kingdoms except Ethiopia and Liberia had lost their independence and become European colonies.

As we know from our earlier discussion, this military colonisation was accompanied by a colonial discourse which transformed the bloody process of colonisation into a civilising mission wherein Africans were presented not as victims of European oppression. Rather they were portrayed as immature savages and barbarians who were about to benefit from the light of civilization that European colonisers brought with them. This is the known discourse of colonialism as a civilizing mission.

However, Boahen points out in his book that contrary to this colonial discourse, the Africans who were subjugated by the Europeans were far from being savages and barbarians. Not only did they have long rich cultural traditions they were also thriving economically and socially just before the 1880s when the Scramble for Africa began and ended their independence. Indeed, by the 1870s, African communities had largely shaken themselves out of the ill effects of slave trade that had continued till the 1830s, and they had started prospering in terms of trade. African societies were witnessing a more equitable distribution of wealth. The necessity of commerce had also started resulting in the development of infrastructure wherein land and river routes were being linked to form large networks of trade. African population was also increasing since the days of the slave trade which again was a sign of progress. And colonialism was to again reverse this population trend showing a general impoverishment of Africa and Africans. Finally, a lot of interesting experiment with constitutional politics was also going on, before the Europeans forcibly came in to claim the whole of Africa for themselves and declared

the Africans as savages brushing aside all these signs of progress and development. In our next lecture we will return back to Joseph Conrad's novel *Heart of Darkness* but with this new awareness of the colonial and precolonial African context, and we will see how this African perspective can lead to a powerful contrapuntal reading of the novel. Thank you.