Lecture 33

Postcolonial Theory I: Edward Said

Welcome back to yet another lecture on literary theory. And today the topic of our discussion will be postcolonialism. As we discussed in our previous lecture, the postmodern condition is marked by the deligitimisation of a single grand narrative and the foregrounding of little narratives. One of the most powerful manifestation of this postmodernist turn is the rise of postcolonial studies within the various departments of English literature the world over from around the 1980s and 1990s. As we will see in this lecture, as well as the following one, the main thrust of postcolonial studies has been to undermine and deligitimise the grand narrative of European colonialism which gained ascendency especially during the nineteenth and early twentieth century. This is complimented by a sustained attempt by postcolonial scholars to foreground the little narratives of the people who were, and indeed in some cases still are, subjugated by colonialism either politically, or culturally or economically. Today's lecture would try and track the genesis of postcolonialism as a coherent theoretical field by especially focusing on the works of Edward Said. But before we start discussing Said. Let us take a look at the various meanings of the term postcolonial. I would however like to mention here, that this lecture as well as well as the next one would build upon the ten-hour course on Postcolonial Literature that I had offered earlier on the NPTEL platform. So those of you who have already done that course should use my lectures on postcolonialism in this series to refresh your memories. Those of you who have not done the ten-hour course on postcolonial literature may find my treatment of some of the topics under postcolonialism in this lecture slightly cryptic. If you want a detailed elaboration of any of topics that I discuss in the two lectures that I am going

to deliver on postcolonialism, I would urge you to listen to the relevant lectures in that ten-hour course on postcolonialism which is available online.

The colonial context

So first let us come to the term postcolonialism. The term has at its root the word colonialism which is derived from the Latin word colōnia. The term postcolonialism also has another very important component which is the prefix "post-". But we will discuss the significance of this prefix later. First let us focus on the word colonialism. As I just mentioned, the word colonialism derives from the Latin word colōnia which at the most fundamental level means farm land or landed estate. But to understand the real significance of the term colōnia, we will have to know something about the original context in which this term was used. As you will know from your school-level history lessons, the Roman empire had, for a very long time, an aggressive expansionist policy. And during the first hundred years of the common era, the Roman empire that stretched from the modern day Iraq and the Persian Gulf in the East to modern day Portugal in the West, and from Egypt and the northern fringes of Africa in the South to England in the North. Now, within this expanding Roman Empire one of the prevalent practices was to reward veteran soldiers of the Roman army with vast stretches of landed estate or colōnias in the newly occupied territory. The soldiers who would go and settle in these landed estates would retain their Roman citizenship. In return, they were expected to protect the Roman interests in the newly occupied territories and keep the native inhabitants of those lands under subjugation. So colony, which is the modern derivative of the term colōnia, and from which we ultimately derive the term colonialism retains two very important aspect of the ancient Roman practice that I have just discussed with you. The first aspect is that a modern colony, like the ancient colōnia, is established through a process of violent subjugation. The second aspect which modern

colonialism shares with the Roman practice of establishing Roman colōnias is that it involves a relationship between two different territories – the metropolis and the periphery. So what is a metropolis? Well metropolis can literally be translated as mother city or mother country. In the context of Roman colōnia, the metropolis was Rome which was at the centre of the Roman empire and to which all Roman citizens were affiliated. The occupied territory in which the colōnia was established is the periphery to this mother country or metropolis.

Now, though I have traced back the etymological roots of the word colonialism to the ancient Roman empire, the modern use of the word colonialism, especially as it is understood within the field of postcolonial studies, is restricted to the forceful subjugation of the countries in the global South by certain European powers roughly from around the fifteenth century CE. Now these European powers include a number of nations like Portugal, Spain, Netherlands etc. But postcolonial studies has remained most particularly concerned with the British and French colonialism which reached its peak around the nineteenth and early twentieth century CE. During this period of time, the metropolis of Britain and France was connected to vast stretches of Africa and Asia which served as their colonial periphery.

Now, one of the basic characteristic features of this modern colonialism with which postcolonial theory concerns itself is capitalism. To understand this crucial link between capitalism and colonialism let's begin by briefly looking at how capitalism functions.

Colonialism and the Capitalist Imperative

Capitalism is perhaps most simply defined as the process of investing money or capital to make more money in the form of profit. And the West has been moving from the feudal mode of economy to this capitalist mode of economy from around the fourteenth and fifteenth century

onwards with the development of mercantilism. However, the phase of capitalism that is most integrally associated with the kind of colonialism that we are focusing on is the industrial phase of capitalism. This phase started to gain momentum from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century when the effects of the industrial revolution gradually started setting in. This industrial revolution which had its origin in England allowed the Western countries to produce far in excess of their consumption. Which means that the mechanization of the production process led to a huge accumulation of surplus products which during the nineteenth and early twentieth century became a source of great wealth for Western European countries like Britain and France.

But though I have talked about increase in wealth and profit through excess production, if you look at the phenomenon of increase in production within a capitalist system carefully you will see that it is on the surface actually associated with a decline and not an increase in profit. Let me explain by putting forward an example. Let's take the instance of shirt production. Now let us say that to begin with I only had enough resources to produce clothes for my own self which I did along with my family entirely for our own use. Now let us say that with the advent of mechanized power-looms I suddenly become able to produce shirts in far greater numbers than I require for my own self and my family. I use this excess production to sell them in the market and earn myself profit. Let us say that I sell each shirt at a price which earns me a profit of Rs 100. Now in the market there are other sellers of shirts as well. And some of these sellers in order to cut me out of the business and to win all the customers for themselves reduce their profit per shirt to Rs 50. In order to stay afloat in the business and to win back the customers I will then have to reduce my profit margin even further –let us say to Rs 25. Which will in turn elicit a similar response from my rivals. So as you can see here, we are confronted with a race to the bottom as far as profit is concerned, and this is one of the key features of capitalist economy.

Now, I can try to remedy this phenomenon of constantly falling profit in two distinct ways. The first way is to decrease the production cost. So if I can somehow reduce the cost of the raw materials and of labour that are required to make the finished product, I will be again able to increase my profit margin. This is because profit margin is basically the difference between the market price of a commodity and its cost of production. There is another way in which I can increase my profit and that is by increasing my market share. So let us say that because of intense competition from my rivals, I have had to cut down the profit margin on my shirts from Rs 100 to Re 1. Now I can still make 100 rupees profit if in place of selling 1 shirt I sell 100 shirts. In other words, even if my profit margins go down 100 times I can still go on earning the same amount of profit if I am able to increase my market share 100 times. Indeed, I can even increase my profit in spite of falling profit margin if I manage to expand the market share of my product at a rate that is faster than the rate in which my profit margin is falling. And here is precisely where colonialism comes into the equation. The industrialised European countries colonized vast areas of the global South to use their territorial resources to produce cheap raw materials like cotton and rubber for their industrial production. The subjugated population of the colonies were also used as cheap source of labour which helped the European colonial metropolis to reduce their cost of production even further. But apart from reducing the cost of production, the colonies also helped European profit making in another very different way, which was by providing a captive market. Think of the Indian colonial context for instance. Not only did we provide cheap raw materials in the form of cotton, indigo and opium, and cheap work force in the form of indentured labourers, we also acted as a captive market for goods produced by the industries in the colonial metropolis.

This connection between industrial capitalism and European colonialism explains why with the progress of the former during the nineteenth and the early twentieth century the latter also reached its peak. Indeed, the whole continent of Africa was neatly parceled out as colonies between all the major European powers precisely to provide them with the needs for their growth in profit. It was meant to prevent a full-scale war between the Western industrial nations who were all scouting at that point in time for cheap raw materials and labour for their factories and a captive market for their industrial products. Indeed, a race to colonise and exploit the resources of Africa, which for the nineteenth century West had remained the only major unmapped territory on the face of this earth, was already underway by the early 1880s. Belgium was in fact one of the first European powers to move in and occupy large parts of the Congo basin to procure the important raw materials of rubber and ivory. This had set in motion what is known as the "scramble for Africa" by the other industrialised European nations. In the winter of 1884-85, the German chancellor Otto von Bismark sought to settle the matter of colonizing Africa amicably between the European powers through a conference of the possible stake holders held in Berlin. As a direct consequence of this conference, the whole Africa except Ethiopia, Liberia and some parts of modern day Somalia was parceled off as colonies between the European powers. And what is especially ironic is that in that infamous Berlin conference there was not a single African representative present. To understand more about this connection between capitalism and the European colonial expansion especially from within African context I would recommend that you read the book titled *African Perspectives on Colonialism* written by the Ghanaian historian Albert Adu Boahen.

Understanding the Prefix "Post-"

So now that we have more or less a working idea of what colonialism means especially within the context of postcolonial studies, let us turn to the prefix "post-" and its significance. Now usually when the prefix "post" is added before any word it signifies something that happens after the event or the time period suggested by that main word. So for instance if I ask you to meet me "post-lunch" on a certain date, you will understand that our meeting will happen on that date after lunch. Similarly, if I say that I attended a post-midnight church service it will mean that I have attended a church service which was held after the midnight hour.

So according to this logic, when we attach the prefix post to the word colonialism it should refer to things political, cultural, economic, social etc. that take place after colonialism. But we have to be slightly careful here because within the field of postcolonial studies, "after colonialism" does not mean after the *end* of colonialism. Rather, it means after the *beginning* of colonialsm. Let us try and understand this statement more elaborately. Colonialism as a process works on the colonized as well as the colonizing countries in a number of different ways. This is why it is difficult if not impossible to mention a specific ending when all of these impacts of colonialism simultaneously stop exerting any influence. Think about the Indian context for example, what happened on 15th August 1947 was only one aspect of British colonialism coming to an end in the subcontinent. In other words, on that date India ceased to be politically governed by the British monarch and the British parliament. But India's engagement with several other colonial legacies is still continuing to this day be it for instance in the field of culture or in the field of economics. Even politically the decoupling between India and British colonialism has only been partial because we still use the parliamentary system of democracy which is very much a part of our colonial legacy. So as you can see, we really cannot have a definitive date on which

European colonialism ended, either in India or anywhere else in the global South. This is why postcolonialism, at least within the field of study bearing its name, is understood as the sum total of all the various social, political, economic and cultural changes that are brought about following the first impact of colonialism. And if we are focused on the context British colonialism in India, then this postcolonialism does not begin in 1947 but can be traced back at the very least to the early eighteenth century when the then Mughal emperor Farrukshiyar granted through his *firman* or official order in 1717 duty-free trading rights in the province of Bengal to the British East India Company.

Edward Said

So now that we have explored the term postcolonialism in depth, let us try and see what constitutes postcolonial theory per se. And we will discuss this topic with reference to works of three iconic figures in the field of postcolonial theory, who are often regarded as the Holy Trinity of postcolonialism: Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. So today, we will start with Said and his seminal text *Orientalism* whose publication in a way inaugurated the field of postcolonial theory. But here I must mention, that there is a figure who predates Said and his pioneering text and who is today considered to be one of the key figures within postcolonial theory. He is the psychatriast, philosopher, and cultural theorist from the Caribbean island of Martinique, Frantz Fanon (1925 -1961), whose texts *Black Skin, White Masks* and *The Wretched of the Earth* today enjoys canonical status within the field of postcolonialism. Indeed, his theory that colonialism, even when it seems to end formally, actually continues surreptiously in the global South through the imposition of a neo-colonial order by the indigenous middle class leaders plays a significant role in how postcolonial theory approaches the question of colonialism. But Fanon was only appropriated by the postcolonial scholars once the field was

established following the 1978 publication of Edward Said's *Orientalism*. So, it is to Said and to *Orientalism* that we now turn.

Edward Said was born in British occupied Palestine in 1935 and he died in America in 2003. He did his doctorate on Joseph Conrad from the University of Harvard and subsequently became a professor at the Columbia University where he taught till the last year of his life. During his lifetime, Said wore a number of hats including that of a scholar of comparative literature, a music critic, a public intellectual, and an advocate of the Palestinian cause. But his most lasting academic contribution is perhaps his book *Orentalism* where he explored how the European colonialism of the "Orient" or the East was not simply a matter of military occupation. It also involved the creation and proliferation of a peculiar kind of discourse that legitimised the colonial subjugation of the East by the West. It is this discourse and the ways in which it gets generated and circulated that Edward Said refers to as "orientalism". So according to Said Orientalism has three distinct aspects. The first aspect represents Orientalism as a way of thinking and talking about the "Orient" or the East by the "Occident" or the West. The second aspect represents Orientalism as an academic discipline. And the third aspect is that of Orientalism as a corporate institution for dealing with the Orient. So let us discuss these three aspects one by one.

Orientalism as a style of thinking

According to Said, the Western tradition of thinking about the Orient as a single entity with homogenous characteristic features can be traced as far back as the Greek tragedies of the 5th century BCE. In this tradition, we find Orient being depicted not just as a landmass but as an "other" of the European "self". In this imaginative geography represented by Orientalism as a peculiar way of thinking, the Orient, is presented as the exact opposite of all the qualities which

the West consciously cultivates as part of its cultural self-fashioning. Thus, if the West considers itself to be characterized by a culture of masculinity, then the Orient by contrast assumes a feminine entity in this imaginative geography. If the Occident likes to think of itself in terms of mature adulthood then the Orient becomes for them a representative of childish immaturity. If the Occident considers itself to be at the pinnacle of civilization, then the Orient comes to represent the depths of barbarism and moral and cultural depravity. Now Said argues that this particular way of thinking and talking about the Orient as simultaneously foreign, loathsome and yet enticingly exotic gained a special significance during the heydays of European colonialism and provided a template for formulating a discourse about the subjugation of the East by the West. In this later phase, Orientalism emerged as an academic discipline which built upon the millennia-old Western prejudices about the Orient under the garb of objective knowledge gathering.

Orientalism as an academic discipline

So now, let us come to this idea of Orientalism as an academic discipline which, according to Said began from around the late eighteenth century. In 1798, Napoleon Bonaparte of France led an armed invasion to Egypt which according to Said was a major turning point in the history of colonial subjugation of the East by the West. This is because Napoleon in his invasion was not only accompanied by soldiers but an army of scholars and scientists who would transform the occupied territory in a field of academic inquiry and systematic knowledge gathering. This would in fact lead to the production of a multi-volume encyclopaedia of Egypt called *Description de l'Égypte* which would meticulously describe, the geography, history, flora and fauna, and the people of Egypt. And though the perspective was Western the encyclopaedia was

presented as an exercise in scientific knowledge gathering written from an apparently Archemedian vantage point of objectivity.

Such "scientific" knowledge gathering about the subjugated territory and its people can in fact be observed as a major characteristic feature of almost all European colonialism of the East, and we can also see it for instance in the context of British colonialism of India. Thus we have figures like Warren Hastings, the first Governor-General of British India, or colonial officials like William Jones and Nathaniel Halhed, who during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century researched, compiled and published voluminously on various aspects related to India. The most famous examples of their scholarship is in the field of Sanskrit studies and the study of ancient Indian scriptures but they also published academic monographs and papers on subjects as diverse Indian law, literature, astrology, botany and history.

The products of such systematic knowledge gathering about the subjugated people, their society, and their land in the form of various academic publications were given pride of place in the libraries of the West and soon the study of Orient generated such full-fledged academic disciplines like Egyptology, Indology etc. Indeed, this growing accumulation of academic publications about the East in the libraries and learned institutions of the West soon came to represent the most authentic way of knowing about the Orient. In fact, this conviction became so deep-rooted by the first few decades of nineteenth century that someone like James Mill, a British philosopher but also associated with the East India Company, could write these lines in the preface to his multi-volume history of British India:

> This writer […] has never been in India; and […] has a very slight, and elementary acquaintance, with any of the languages of the East. […] [Yet] it appeared to me, that a sufficient stock of information was now collected in the languages of Europe, to enable

the inquirer to ascertain every important point, in the history of India.

Preface, Volume I, *The History of British India*

Orientalism as Corporate Institution

Such knowledge gathering about the Orient deeply influenced how Orient was governed by the colonial authority and this brings us to the third aspect of Orientalism which is Orientalism as corporate institution. Now, as you will know from our discussion of Foucault, Althusser and Gramsci, subjugation is exercised not merely through brute force but also through several institutions through which administrative power is wielded directly and indirectly. This cluster of institutions through which the Orient was controlled systematically "by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it" is what is referred to by Said as the corporate institution of Orientalism. And as I have just stated, the way this corporate institution functioned and wielded its administrative power was heavily determined by the biased view of the East which by the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century had come to be translated into respectable form of academic knowledge.

Contrapuntal Reading

Now as students of literary studies we need to keep in mind that this discourse about the Orient underlined by age-old prejudices and ratified by colonial institutions also deeply influenced the way Orient was being conceptualized and written about by Western litterateurs including celebrated authors like Lord Byron, Gerard de Nerval, Gustave Flaubert, Rudyard Kipling and of course Joseph Conrad on whom Said wrote his doctoral thesis.

Said through his writings offered an insight into how the discourse that framed the works of these canonical authors within the field of literature was characterised not only by a deep

association with the processes of colonial subjugation but also with the millennia-old Occidental bias about the Orient. But Said's intervention into literary studies went much beyond this insight. In fact, Said's main purpose was not simply to reveal this connection between literature and colonial discourse but also to undermine it by revealing its fault lines. To do this Said developed something called the technique of "contrapuntal reading". It is a reading strategy with tries to read a text underscored by such colonial discourse like orientalism by question some of its inherent assumptions which the author and the intended reader would have shared as axiomatic. So for instance a contrapuntal reading of a nineteenth century British novel set in the Orient would proceed by undermining the basic assumption that the West is civilizationally superior to the East or the former is more masculine than the later, or that the Occident is more mature than the Orient. In other words, contrapuntal reading reads a text against the grain, and since Said, this reading strategy has been at the centre of postcolonial literary criticism. So if you are interested to know more about how to read a text contrapuntally, I would suggest that you listen to my lectures on Joseph Conrad's novel *Heart of Darkness* in my other NPTEL course on postcolonial literature. So with this we end our first lecture on postcolonialism. We will continue with our discussion on this topic in our next lecture where we will especially focus on the works of Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Thank you.