## Lecture 35

## Conclusion

Welcome all of you to this final lecture with which we would be concluding our series on literary theory. Today, though we would be very briefly touching upon ecocriticism and the rasa theory, my main intention would be to open up certain fundamental questions, which should help you to think about literary theory beyond what we have already discussed so far. Now, if you look at the various kinds of literary theory that has been gaining ground from around the second half of the twentieth century, you will see that almost all of them speak in terms of decentering something or the other. So for instance with feminism you have the decentering of man and male centric discourse. With poststructuralism you have the decenetreing of the author and of any notion of transcendental signified in general. With postcolonialism you have the decentering of the West and the Eurocentric discourse of colonialism. And all of these various decentering projects add up to form the postmodern condition that is characterized by incredulity towards metanarratives in general. Now, when we turn towards such contemporary trends in the field of literary theory like “ecocriticism”, then we find this decentering gesture taking a radical new form. In ecocriticism, what is decentred is the idea of human itself and all the anthropocentric grand narratives pivoted on the human being.

Though ecocriticism majorly draws its inspiration from the works of three nineteenth century writers, namely Ralph Waldo Emerson, Margaret Fuller, and Henry David Thoreau, who is the author of a fascinating book about his two-year stay near the Walden pond, it only came to prominence in the Anglophone sphere of literary studies, and especially in America, from around the last decades of the twentieth century. And its main thrust is to undermine the idea of human being as a dominating force vis-à-vis nature. Instead of regarding man as the master of his

physical surrounding, the ecocritics try to situate human beings as merely one of the elements within a complex ecosystem. In the post-Renaissance West, a man, or more specifically the white adult human male, is upheld as the measure of all things. Nature, with all its living and non-living components, is imagined in the form of a pyramid where man is posited at the top as a triumphant master. This notion of man as the master was even further bolstered by the tremendous technological advancement made in the West during the centuries following the Enlightenment. But as we saw in our lecture on modernism and postmodernism, the devastation created by the two world wars shook this confidence in the grand narrative which posited man as a supreme master, who exercised control over all other inanimate and animate beings. And this of course included women and the "immature" and "barbaric" inhabitants of the colonies who were regarded to be at best as aspirants to the status of a fully developed human being. This confidence in man being a sane, mature and even protective master of the world was jolted by the world wars but also by the very real fear of our ecosystem running out of various necessary resources like clean water and clean air after centuries of systematic exploitation. Within this scenario of fear and despondence, ecocriticism mainly tries to address the following issues:

1. The first issue is that of how man's conceptualization of himself as a dominating force in nature disrupts and destroys, sometimes irretrievably, vital aspects of the ecosystem.
2. The second issue is that of imagining man as a part of, rather than as the master of, the ecosystem. So the first and the second issues act as counterparts to each other.
3. The third issue with which ecocriticism highlights is that of creating a canon of what is known as ecoliterature – i.e. literature written with the purpose of drawing our attention to environmental crisis and imagining possible futures for the ecosystem.

4. The fourth issue also deals with cannon formation but from a different perspective. Ecocriticism concerns itself not just with contemporary ecoliterature. It also tries to reread the established literary canons from the perspective of ecological concerns. Which is why, within the field of ecocriticism, you will find readings of say the works of William Wordsworth or Thomas Hardy through the lens of the twin concerns that I have spoken about in points 1 and 2.

So, now that we have a rough idea about what constitutes ecocriticism, this is the question that I want to open up for you: In this series of literary theory, we have seen how the activity of literature has always been understood in human-centric terms. Let's understand this through examples. One way of looking at literature has been by making the author the pivot on which any literary creation rests. This is a view where the human-centricity of literature is most clearly evident as literature is conceived as a product of an extraordinary human mind. But this same human-centricity is also strongly evident in the ways of looking at literature which foregrounds the reader and the methods in which literature involves the reader's human cognitive abilities and his or her human emotions. Even literary theories, which foreground language also actually centre the whole discourse around human beings because language is ultimately a part of human social relations. If we consider a theory like ecocriticism, where man is not at the centre, can we then have a substantial discussion on literature at all within its purview? In other words, does ecocriticism breach the fundamental boundary of human-centrism within which literature has been created, consumed, and discussed for centuries now? If we decentre man, does literature itself become decentred? These are the questions that I will leave for you to ponder upon.

But to these set of questions, I want to add a few more. And I want to do so by first talking briefly about the rasa theory. Now, as I had mentioned early on in this lecture series, one of my

intentions has been to connect the field of literary theory more closely with our position as students of English literature located within India. Recent developments, like the rise of postcolonial studies within the field of literary theory, have been promising from this perspective. It has succeeded, albeit unevenly, to decentre the West from its pivotal position within the departments of Anglophone literary studies around the world. And one of the signs of this decentering is that names like that of the Nigerian author Chinua Achebe, or the Caribbean author Derek Walcott, or the Indian author Salman Rushdie now appear in the syllabus of English departments across the world with growing regularity. This was of course unthinkable even sixty or seventy years ago when the syllabus would almost exclusively consist of white male literature produced in the West.

But though the literature that is studied within the English departments have been becoming more and more cosmopolitan, thanks to the inclusion of works produced in the global south, what we understand by literary theory in our English departments has still remained largely Western. And by that I mean the literary theory that gets studied by us as students of English literature still gets generated within Western academia. And this includes the literary theory of postcolonialism, because as you will remember from our earlier discussion, be it Edward Said, or Homi Bhabha or Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, all of them are or were primarily associated with elite Western universities like Columbia and Harvard. Moreover, the philosophical templates on which they have built their theories have also been primarily European templates. So for instance we see Said building on Foucault's philosophy of discourse, Bhabha engaging with Freud, and Spivak finding her interlocutors in people like Immanuel Kant, Karl Marx, and Jacques Derrida. Now here, since I am making some generalized comments about the West and about a European philosophical or intellectual template, let me try to partially absolve myself of the charges of

essentialism by quoting a passage from Dipesh Chakraborty's *Provincializing Europe* in my defence. Chakrabarty writes that:

> [T]he so-called European intellectual tradition is the only one alive in the social science departments of most, if not all, modern universities. I use the word "alive" in a particular sense. It is only within some very particular traditions of thinking that we treat fundamental thinkers who are long dead and gone not only as people belonging to their own times but also as though they were our own contemporaries. In the social sciences, these are invariably thinkers one encounters within the tradition that has come to call itself "European" or "Western." I am aware that an entity called "the European intellectual tradition" stretching back to the ancient Greeks is a fabrication of relatively recent European history. […] The point, however, is that, fabrication or not, this is the genealogy of thought in which social scientists find themselves inserted. […] [F]ew if any Indian social scientists or social scientists of India would argue seriously with, say, the thirteenth-century logician Gangesa or with the grammarian and linguistic philosopher Bartrihari (fifth to sixth centuries), or with the tenth- or eleventh-century aesthetician Abhinavagupta.

What Chakrabarty says about the broader field of social sciences, also holds true about the narrower field of literary theory. So for instance, even when we see Bhabha or Spivak engaging with India and with the literature coming out of this subcontinent as their subjects of inquiry we do not find them engaging with let us say aestheticians and literary theorists of ancient India like Bharata Muni, the author of *Natyasastra*, or Anandavardhana, the originator of the *dhvani* theory and the author of *Dhvanyaloka*.

So, what if we try to decentre the primacy of the West or Europe by re-engaging with such ancient Indian aestheticians from within the framework of English literary studies? It might be

interesting to see how something like the “rasa” theory that is based on the idea of emotional essences and that is mentioned in *Natyasastra* can be made “alive” within the context of the departments of English literary studies. I would encourage you to pursue this line of thought, but I think there is also a catch here. As I have been saying from the introductory lecture itself, theory within the field of literary studies cannot exist independently of literature. We have, thus, seen how the emergence of theories like feminism, postcolonialism or even ecocriticism is also marked by the foregrounding of new literary canons, or at the very least a conscious re-evaluation of pre-existing literary canon? If we decide to engage with the “rasa” theory or the “dhvani” theory for instance, what kind of literature should we apply them to? In its original context these theories were complemented by certain traditions of Sanskrit dramatic and poetic literature. But these literary traditions are unavailable for a modern student situated within the department of English literature. Should we then try and modify these ancient aesthetic theories into tools of literary criticism that will help us read the kind of literature that is usually read as part of the English literature syllabus? But then, will such an attempt at radical modification completely dismantle the basic tenets of these ancient aesthetic theories?

Or should we try to enlarge the kind of literature studied within the English departments and include the Sanskrit dramas and poetry that originally complemented the rasa theory and the dhvani theory? But then, will such an expansion of the field of our studies result in a dilution of our fundamental understanding of English literature? I do not have ready answers to these questions, which is why I would invite you to think about them and see where these questions lead you to.

I will end this series of lecture here. I am acutely conscious of the many topics that I have not been able to touch at all or touch only very briefly. However, that was a conscious decision

because I wanted you to grasp some of the major concepts in sufficient details rather than give you a comprehensive but superficial account of the field. I hope that you would use this lecture series as a first step that will lead you to enquire further into the field of literary theory. And I wish you all the best for your further research. Good bye.