

Contemporary Literature

Prof. Aysha Viswamohan

Department of Humanities and Social Sciences

IIT Madras

Mod-01 Lec-20 Lecture-20

Good morning, we will continue with Albert Camus' *The Fall* novel written in 1956. Four things that we must consider, the setting, the characters, the theme, the technique. The setting is a cold winter night in Amsterdam. The characters are having a conversation first in a bar which is called Mexico City in Amsterdam. The characters, Jean-Baptiste Clemens, he is the speaker. There is an unidentifiable silent interlocutor, a listener.

The theme is the absurdity of human existence. The hypocrisy of the middle class. The cynicism and indifference of the bourgeois. How the middle class devotes their lives to the pursuits of sensual pleasures and remain unconcerned with the larger issues of life, the larger themes of life, their absolute refusal to accept responsibilities for the horrors of the holocaust, the atrocities caused by the Nazis.

So, their absolute refusal, the absolute to accept responsibility, their living in denial, those are the major concerns of *The Fall*. The technique as we were talking is confessional. You have one speaker going on talking about his life, his experience, his concerns, his social concerns, his moral concerns and you have a silent listener. Many people have believed that, just conjured that the silent listener could as well be God, God himself, but there is a question mark. Is he talking to God? Is he talking to a priest during his confession? This technique which is an improvement on the famous dramatic monologue which was perfected by the Victorian poets like Robert Browning and Tennyson.

So, this is as we were just talking about it, just goes a step further from that technique and it has been used by several writers down the over the years. One important novelist is Mohsin Hamid, an Asian American novelist settled in New York who wrote his *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*. In almost the same manner which is a confessional tone, adapting a confessional tone where there is a silent listener who just goes on listening to the speaker. The speaker goes on and on about the life of a Muslim in the present day New York, in present day America especially after the 9-11 tragedy. So, that is also

written in the same, following the same technique as the false.

We will continue page 12. Holland is a dream, a dream of golden smoke, smokier by day, more gilded by night. And night and day, the dream is peopled with low hand grains like these, dreamily riding their black bicycles with high handle bars, funeral songs constantly drifting throughout the whole country, around the seas, along the canals, their heads in their copper colored clouds, they dream, they ride in circles, they pray, sleep walking in the false gilded incense, they have ceased to be here, they have gone thousands of miles away. So, the essential indifference of the middle class Europeans towards the atrocities of the times, of their times. So, they live like characters from a Wagnerian opera, that is the reference to low hand grains.

It is almost as if they are living a life of opera, the reality outside does not matter to them, they live as if they live in a, in a state of dream, in a state of denial, surrounded by the sensual pleasures, which Camus compares with almost like existing in hell, all smoke and gold. But I am letting myself go, I am pleading a case, forgive me, forgive me, have it vocation, also the desire to make you fully understand the city and the heart of things, we are at the heart of things here. Have you noticed that Amsterdam's concentric canals resemble the circles of hell, this is a reference to Daates, the divine comedy, where he describes a hell as a concentric of circles. The middle class hell, of course, peopled with bad dreams, when one comes from the outside, as one gradually goes through the, those circles, life enhance its times, becomes denser, darker. And here we are in the last circle, the circle of, you know that by heaven, you become harder to classify, there is a response, but we the readers are not told what that response is, it is almost like whatever the, the listener says, it is muted for us, it is only for the ears of the speaker, Jean Baptist Clemens.

We as, as readers, we are not privy to this conversation, that means, to, to the exchange, whatever comes from the speaker, the listener, we do not get to hear that. You know that by heaven, sorry, by heaven, you become harder to classify, but you understand that, why I can say that to the center of things is here, although we stand at the tip of the continent. A sensitive man grasps such oddities, in any case, the newspaper readers and the fornicators can go farther. They come from the four corners of Europe and stop facing the inland sea on the drab strand. They listen to the foghorns, vainly try to make out the silludes of boats in the fog, then turn back over the canals and go home through the rain.

Chill to the bone, they come and ask in all languages for gin at Mexico city, that is where I wait for them. So, this is interesting. These people who come from all over Europe, they, they are cold, chill to the bone, not just physically cold, but emotionally, spiritually cold as well and all they do is live a life of dreadful monotony, a life of denial,

a life with very little or absolutely no concern for others and that is where the writer, that is where the speaker waits for them. Till tomorrow then and share compatriot, that my dear fellow traveler. No, you will easily find your way now.

I leave you near this bridge. I never cross a bridge at night is because of a vow. Suppose after all that someone should jump in the water, one of two things, either you follow suit to fish him out and in cold weather, that is taking a great risk or you forsake him there and to suppress a dive, sometimes leaves one strangely aching good night. What those ladies behind those windows dream monsieur? Cheap dream a trip to the Indies. Those persons perfume themselves with spices.

You go in, they draw the curtain and the navigation begins. The gods come down on to the naked bodies and the islands are set adrift. Lost souls crowned with the tussled hair of palm trees in the wind. Try it and that is how the first chapter ends. Very teasingly, what if somebody decides to end their life by jumping down the bridge into the river? You are left only with two options.

Either you have to jump in the cold water to rescue them or just walk away. Both are not very comfortable. You see when you jump in the cold water, you inconvenience yourself. If you do not jump, then you are burdened with some sort of guilt and the narrator obviously does not want to be saddled with either of the two choices. This is again a very existentialist point of view.

Although Camus always denied being an existentialist in the conventional sense, in the Sartrean sense, but many people regard him as one of the key philosophers of the existentialist movement of the philosophy. We will continue with the second chapter. What is a Judge Penitent? Now, this is very interesting. A judge, he calls himself a Judge Penitent. You know what a judge is.

A judge is someone who judges others. Conventionally speaking, traditionally speaking, you have a court of law where a judge decides, he presides over cases and gives his verdict. So, a judge is somebody who is appointed to pass on judgment on somebody. Penitent, however, is somebody who has sinned, who has done some wrong. So, judge, that is his identity, judge-penitent.

So, he does not have a singular or a unique identity. He is a combination of the two. He is a judge as well as a penitent. He has sinned as well as judged others for sinning. I intrigued you with that little matter.

Now, what is Judge Penitent? The listener finds it very interesting, very intriguing. I

meant no harm by it, believe me, and I can explain myself more clearly in a manner of speaking. It is really one of my official duties, but first, I must set forth a certain number of facts that will help you to understand my story. A few years ago, I was a lawyer in Paris. So, gradually, as we were talking about the theme, sorry, the technique confessional dramatic monologue, gradually, you find the speaker revealing about himself.

The life revelation is at the core of any dramatic monologue. So, he was a lawyer in Paris and indeed, a rather well-known lawyer. So, he was a very successful lawyer. Of course, I did not tell you my real name. I used to specialize in noble cases, the widow and orphan as the saying goes.

I do not know why because there are widows who cheat and orphans who are quite savage, yet it was enough for me to snip the slightest scent of victim on a defendant for me to swing into action. And what action? A real tempest. My heart was on my sleeve. You really might have thought that justice slept with me every night. I am sure you would have admired the accuracy of my tone, the appropriateness of my emotion, the persuasion and warmth, the restrained indignation of my speeches before the court.

Nature has favored me as to my physique and the noble attitude comes effortlessly. Furthermore, I was buoyed up by two sincere feelings, the satisfaction of being on the right side of the bar and an instinctive scorn for judges in general. That scorn after all was not perhaps so instinctive. I know now that it had its reasons, but seen from the outside, it appears to be more like a passion. Now, consider the way he describes himself and what action.

Look at the language and what action. A real tempest as a lawyer, he was able to raise quite a storm and he was able to perform. So, this is also a very intriguing commentary on the performative aspect of human life of any profession. We are all performers. Nature has bestowed upon him many bounties.

For example, he says he was blessed with a good physique. He had a very persuasive tone. He could use a persuasive tone. He had a grand demeanor. He was overall an extremely impressive personality and he used it to the health.

As a lawyer, he could perform well to perfection inside a court and that is how he became popular and successful. So, it is also the innate duplicity, the innate mendacity of human character that Camus is talking about. We all put on a mask. We all perform all the time. I could not understand however, how a man could set himself up to perform such a surprising function.

I accepted the fact because I saw it, but rather as I accepted locus. This is another biblical illusion, acceptance of locus around us. With this difference that the invasions of those orthoptera never brought me a sieve, whereas I earned my living by carrying on dialogues with people I scorned. He hated judges. That is what he says, but still he treats them like locus, like pests, but still he carried.

He made his living, a very successful, very impressive living by conversing, by carrying on dialogue with people he hated, but after all, I was on the right side. That was enough to assure my peace of conscience. The feeling of the law, the satisfaction of being right, the joy of self-esteem, shame are powerful incentives to keep us upright or make us move forward. On the other hand, if you deprive men of them, you transform them into dogs frothing with rage. How many crimes committed merely because their authors could not endure being wrong? I once knew a businessman who had a perfect wife, admired by all and yet he deceived her.

That man was literally enraged to be in the wrong, to be cut off from receiving or granting himself a certificate of virtue. The more virtues his wife displayed, the more vexed he became. Eventually, living in the wrong became unbearable to him. What do you think he did then? He gave up deceiving her? Not at all.

He killed her. That is how I came to have dealing with him. This is an exploration of the distorted human psyche. One always resents people who are more virtuous than they are. This man has a wife who accepted her husband's faults, his indiscretions, his adulteries and all with a smile. She never questioned him and he hated her all the more for that.

What did he do? He ends up murdering her and the case comes to Jean Baptiste Clemens. My situation was more enviable. Not only did I run a no risk of joining the criminal camp, in particular, I had no chance of killing my wife being a bachelor, but I even took up their defense on the sole condition that they should be noble murders just as others are noble savages. The very manner in which I conducted that defense gave me great satisfaction. So, that is how he defended the accused people that this was a crime of passion.

Those murders happened or were done because the murderer was in a crime of passion in a fit of some kind of a righteous rage. He killed those people. Otherwise, at heart, he is a noble person and that became his defense. I was truly above reproach in my professional life. So, he was extremely self-satisfied personally as well as professionally.

I never accepted a bribe. It goes without saying nor again did I ever stoop to any shady proceedings and this is even rarer. I never deigned to flatter any journalist to get him on my side nor any civil servant whose friendship might be useful to me. I even had the luck to see the leisure of honor offered to me two or three times and to be able to refuse it with a discrete dignity. See people usually remember those who refuse great honors. If someone refuses Nobel prize or any other award of excellence, they are more remembered than people who actually receive the prize, the much coveted prize.

So, that is in refusal also, what he is trying to be is to become is more significant, more visible. So, there is an inner contradiction in the character of Jean Paul as Jean Baptiste Clamence and that is what Camus is intrigued about. The hypocrisy of human nature, refusing an award so that they become more popular in which I found my true reward. Finally, I never charged the poor and never boasted of it, but you can already imagine my satisfaction. I enjoyed my own nature to the fullest and we all know that therein lies happiness, although to soothe one another mutually.

We occasionally pretend to condemn such joys, a selfishness. At least I enjoyed that part of my nature which reacted so appropriately to the widow and the orphan that eventually through exercise, it came to dominate my whole life. His whole life is a lie. That is what we have to understand why he performed all these acts of charity, saving the, helping the widows and the orphans, not because he actually cared about them, because he wants to create an impression that he is a very good person, a very selfless person, but Camus tells us that actually Jean Baptiste Clamence is an example of a smug, hypocritical middle class which has no compassion for the downtrodden, but why they want to help is in order to earn their gratitude, to earn the gratitude of those they claim to help. So, in a way, they project themselves as the ultimate in nobility, in sacrifice, in charity, but they are not what they pretend to be.

So, it is an attack on the middle class hypocrisy and mendacity. For instance, I love to help blind people cross streets. Now, this is another example of trying to come across as a selfless human being, a person with great social responsibility. From as far away as I could see a cane hesitating on the edge of a pavement, the typical scenario of a blind man trying to cross a road, I would rush forward, sometimes only a second ahead of another charitable hand already outstretched, snatch the blind person from any solicitude but mine and lead him gently, but firmly over the pedestrian crossing amidst the hazards of the traffic towards the quiet haven of the other pavement where we would separate with a mutual emotion. In the same way, I always enjoy telling people the way in the street, giving a light, lending a hand with heavy barrows, pushing a stranded car, buying a paper from the salvation army girl, a flask from the old woman peddler, though I knew she stole them from the Moparnath's cemetery.

I also like and this is harder to say, I like to give alms. A very Christian friend of mine admitted that once initial feeling of seeing a beggar approach one's house is unpleasant. Well, with me it was worse. I used to exert, but let us say no more about it. So, all the traditional acts of generosity and charity, he would love to do.

He would love to participate in the buying a newspaper from a young child, buying flowers from an old woman. He does not really need flowers, but he would claim to help the old lady and buy flowers from her, giving alms to the beggars, helping people cross the street, giving them a hand while with heavy barrows, trying to help people in pushing their stranded cars. All these acts of generosity, all these acts of charity towards fellow human beings, they were performed not out of any inner feeling of goodness, but in order to elicit gratitude from people and this according to Camus is a very inauthentic characteristic. Let us speak rather of my courtesy.

It was famous and yet beyond question. So, he is a good performer. That is what he has been telling us from the beginning. He performs well before the judge. He performs well before the strangers. All kinds of people can come and approach him and ask for favors and he will do that and it would make him feel extremely important.

Then his courtesy, his famous courtesy, it was famous and yet beyond question. Indeed, good manners provided me with great delights. If I had the luck on certain mornings to give up my seat in the bus or the underground to someone who obviously deserved it, to pick up some object an old lady had dropped and return it to her with a smile, I knew well or merely to forfeit my taxi to someone in a greater hurry than I.

It was a red letter day. I even rejoiced. I must admit on those days when because the public transport was on a strike, I had a chance to load into my car at the bus stops some of the unfortunate fellow citizens unable to get home. So, small acts of charity, small acts of kindness he would do and it would make him feel extremely good about himself. It would make him feel morally superior to other people. Giving up my seat in the theater to allow a couple to sit together, lifting a girl suitcases on to the rack in a train, these were all deeds I performed more often than others because I paid more attention to the opportunities and was better able to relish the pleasures they gave. So, this inborn, this innate hypocrisy which is common to all, now this is not just Jean Paul, Jean Baptiste Clamence that is being talked about.

It is also the people of our society. They most of us would indulge in such kind gestures of kindness, but when it comes to addressing the larger concerns, we are silent and that is what bothers Camus. It is not helping a girl in lifting her suitcase or helping a blind man

cross the street. It is also how well you are connected to people and what lacks in Jean Baptiste Clamence's character is his inability to actually, inability to get connected to people.

That is what is lacking in his character. We will continue. Thank you.