

Course Name: The Novel and Change

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Lecture 11

So, hello and welcome to this NPTEL course titled The Novel and Change. We will have the concluding session on the Secondary Scholarship in Robinson Crusoe by Jan Watt and of course the work we're reading is Jan Watt's The Rise of the Novel where he talks about the Crusoe story through its historical context and its different diachronic dimensions because one of the things we keep doing in this course is connect the text and the context in terms of how each literary text that we have selected speaks uniquely to the position of his times, the contemporary cultural, financial, economic, moral positions of his times, reflecting those at the same time offering some interesting fault lines, if you will, through which the constructed quality of those conditions may be revealed. Now of course we saw in the earlier sessions where the Crusoe story is very much geared towards the homo economicus narrative in terms of how the angle of the man who is preserving, self-sustaining, building an empire, building a capital, acquiring a capital becomes important. We also touched upon how the gender angle in Crusoe is very very interesting because there's hardly a woman in Robinson Crusoe. Crusoe's wife is mentioned only in passing and it is just ultimately an allegorical story in certain ways about you know, the white male subject, preserving itself as well as building itself through an acquirement of capital and how the capital passes on through different forms of legacy narratives. We also saw how the vocabulary of capitalism in Crusoe and the vocabulary Calvinism the vocabulary of Protestantism and Crusoe are very interestingly dialogic with each other and there are passages in a novel where there are instances of bookkeeping instances of how Crusoe is maintaining a log shall we say in terms of the good things happening to him in terms of the bad things happening to him but interestingly how the vocabulary of bookkeeping and the vocabulary of Christian morality again seem to feed off each other So all these things are

very, very interesting in terms of how, you know, looking at Crusoe as a story about preservation, a story about isolation, a story about self-sustenance.

But at the same time, it is also a very, very male story. It is also a story about the birth of the capital, the birth of, you know, some kind of what we can say European imperialism. Because know, the whole idea of the white male subject getting shipwrecked and landing, finding himself in an island and then completely territorializing the island, not just in terms of space, but also in terms of the entire, you know, civilizational construct that he builds on the island. So, it becomes essentially Crusoe's island. So, we talked about how the sense of ownership and the sense of commodity in the novel are very interestingly linked with each other and almost everything can be a commodity and the island becomes crucial property, crucial commodity etc. Okay, now what we will do in the last session today is look at how the role of fiction becomes important because at the end of the day we have to remember that we are looking at the novel unchanged in terms of looking at the role of fiction, the framework of fiction if you will, in terms of how that is uniquely able to communicate the historical realities, the cultural realities, the material realities of that time. So this should be on your screen. Just as society has made every individual what he is, so the prolonged lack of society actually tends to make the individual relapse into a straightened primitivism of thought and feeling. In Defoe's sources for Robinson Crusoe, what actually happened to the castaway was at best uninspiring. At worst, harassed by fear and dogged by ecological degradation, to thank more and more to the level of animals. Lost use of speech, went mad or died of inanition. So, if you look at the historical sources of Robinson Crusoe, what really happened in those situations, in those stories about survival, the people became more and more animalistic in quality because they were completely disconnected from other human beings. So, they died of starvation in some instances and people who survived they became psychologically very, very scarred, very, very wounded because of lack of company, the lack of other kinds, the interlocutor so to speak. But in Robinson Crusoe just the opposite happens in a certain sense.

Crusoe becomes more elevated as an individual morally, socially, culturally and of course materially. So, the entire crucial story is in a way the inversion of the original sources and

it also becomes some kind of a corroboration of the birth of the capitalist, right. The birth of the lonely capitalist, someone who chances upon a certain situation and then makes the situation work for its benefit and this is the innovative utilitarian dimension of capitalism where almost everything can be converted into something utilitarian, something you know building something constructive and something which is life giving and capital giving. So, the Crusoe story is very different from the soul stories of Robinson Crusoe you know in terms of how the human subject is elevated in Crusoe, in Defoe's Crusoe as opposed to the degradation that took place in the historical characters which may have served as sources to Daniel Defoe. So, one book which Defoe had almost certainly read, *The Voyages and Travels of J. Alfred de Mendoza*, tells of two such cases. Of a Frenchman who, after only two years of solitude in Mauritius, tore his clothing to pieces in a fit of madness. brought on by a diet of raw tortoise and of a Dutchman seaman on St. Helena, who disinterred the body of a buried comrade and set out to sea in the coffin. So, you know, tales of insanity, tales of extreme alienation, which causes insanity and, of course, the entire corporeal behavior that is connected to those psychological states. These realities of absolute solitude were in keeping with the traditional view of its effects, as expressed by Dr. Johnson. The solitary mortal he averred was certainly luxurious, probably superstitious, and possibly mad. The mind stagnates for want of employment, grows morbid and is extinguished like a candle in foul air.

So, the whole thing basically fizzles out, the mind, the subject, the spirit inside fizzles out because of a lack of company and that is what was the more dominant narrative about loneliness in the time in which Defoe was writing. As we mentioned in the story of Robinson Crusoe just the opposite happens. We see the mind getting more elevated, the subject getting more fortified, literally more fortified with ammunition and capital. So, the birth of the capitalist is a story of sustenance, self-preservation and also elevation through fortification. So, it is just the opposite of what happened biologically and historically which we can see in Crusoe's soul stories. The real Crusoe story in the piece of fiction that Daniel Defoe constructed in the novel *Robinson Crusoe*, we see just the opposite direction taking place in terms of the embodiment of Crusoe. So. Crusoe turns his forsaken estate into a triumph. So again, this ability to convert almost anything into a triumph is a very, very

capitalist ability. It is absolutely in hand and glove with the engines of innovation which drive capitalism, the engines of optimism and innovation which drive capitalism. The interesting thing in the story is how these engines of drive, the engines of capitalism, the engines of innovation, the appetite for innovation is also connected to a very Christian vocabulary. So that Christian vocabulary somehow smuggled in and foregrounded in a way in this otherwise very, very hardcore capitalist mindset.

And that combination is very interesting. And we talked about how the Protestant work ethic and a capitalist work ethic were very interestingly and sometimes seamlessly welded together and we have different you know theorists who speak about that Max Weber for example, Adam Smith for example, we talked about those earlier as well. So Defoe departs from psychological probability in order to redeem his picture of man's inexorable solitariness and it is for this reason that he appeals very strongly to all who feel who at times does not, right. So, all stories of isolation they find their beacon of hope in Robinson Crusoe and as what says and who at times does not. So, all human subjects feel isolation at different points of their times, at different points of their lives. So, the Crusoe story becomes almost like a moral fable of possibilities during isolation. So, what can you gain out of isolation, what can you create, what can you redeem and rebuild during isolation. So that becomes almost like a meta-text. An inner voice continually suggests to us that a human isolation which individualism has fostered is painful and tends ultimately to a life of apathetic animality and mental derangement. Therefore answers confidently that it can be made the oddest prelude to the fuller realization of every individual's potentialities and solitary readers of two centuries of individualism cannot but applaud so convincing an example of making a virtue out of a necessity so cheering a colouring to that universal image of individualist experience solitude.

Now this has almost a meta quality because at some level the novel too appeals to the solitary man because reading a novel is a solitary act. Reading the novel is a work in isolation, an exercise in isolation. It cannot be done as a group. So, you cannot have many people sitting together reading one novel. The novel itself becomes a solitary exercise. So, the novelty of the novel, we discussed it earlier, is also connected to alienation, to the whole

idea of individualism and isolation. Now this very slippery liminal territory between individualism and isolation is very much in keeping with the tenets of capitalism, right. So, what we call today let us say something like neo liberal alienation where individualism is foregrounded and celebrated to such an extent that the zone between individualism and alienation become a little bit a little bit indefinable, undefinable, right. You cannot really define where individualism ends and alienation begins. At a certain level capitalism promotes individualism because it is connected to innovation, it is connected to the avant-garde, it is connected to the whole idea of going against the grain and which can then be converted into something utilitarian and productive.

But at the same time this constant engagement in individualism can also create a sense of isolation, a sense of alienation, which is not seen necessarily as a bad thing in capitalist narratives, because, you know, that is a very small price you have to pay for individual genius. Now, interestingly, if we compare Robinson Crusoe to more modern stories about the famous capitalist, the famous innovator, someone who changed the world, someone who made a lot of money, at the same time, engaged in loneliness we find that same trajectory happens to, let's say, a story like Citizen Kane. I'm giving some film example, Orson Welles' film Citizen Kane, or the story about Steve Jobs, which is made into a film. this whole very seductive story about the very individualistic innovator who is also lonely. In a way it sort of tells that loneliness is a price you have to pay for individual genius and loneliness may not be a bad thing in a certain sense because that guarantees you a shorter way to success, a quicker way to capitalist success. So, the sense of this interplay of alienation and individualism is something which gets replayed in many ways in modern context as well in films like Citizen Kane as well as films made on Steve Jobs and you can think of other examples also. So what I am trying to establish through here is that Crusoe belongs perhaps is one of the first figures in art literature etc. which embodies in a certain sense this interplay, this very complex interplay between capitalism, alienation and isolation, right. And you know because it is very much a capitalist narrative, the alienation in Crusoe is not seen as a bad thing.

So, he does not become mad, he just becomes in a way more sane, more spiritually fortified and of course more materially fortified as well. Okay, that it is universal, the word that is always found to be found inscribed on the other side of the coin of individualism can hardly be doubted. So, solitude and individualism are two sides of the same coin. We have already seen how, although Defoe himself was an optimistic spokesman of the new economic and social order, the unreflecting veracity of his vision as a novelist led him to report many of the less inspiring phenomena associated with economic individualism which tended to isolate man from his family and his country. Modern sociologists have attributed very similar consequences to the other two major trends which are reflected in Robinson Crusoe. So, this is why we bring in someone like Max Weber and Emil Durkheim as well, anthropologists and philosophers who look at the relationship between capital and embodiment, capital and individualism, capital and subject formation. So, Max Weber for example has shown how the religious individualism of Calvin created among its adherents a historically unprecedented inner isolation. While Emile Durkheim derived from the division of labour and its associated changes, many of the endless conflicts and complexities of the norms of modern society, the anomie which sets the individual on his own and incidentally provides the novelist with a rich mine of individual and social problems when he portrays the life of his time. Both Durkheim and Weber are important over here as philosophers and thinkers and sociologists who are looking at the relationship between the economic capital and the individual capital and how isolation, individualism, loneliness, they all become part of the same engine of capitalism which are produced and reproduced in different points of time. But more importantly, the novel's business also becomes the business of the individual, about the individual. So, in a certain way, we talked about the ordinariness of the novel in terms of the novelty of the novel being that it is for the first time you have a literary genre which is about the modern man, about the common man, for the common man, right?

At the same time, there is something deeply individual about the novel because we are not talking about a civilization or a collective identity, but more often than not, the novel has a protagonist. It has one subject or maybe a few subjects, but most importantly, more often than not, the one focal point through which the story begins to be unfold, the one focal

point where the landscape and the terrain and the territory and the cosmos is seen, is viewed as a perspective. So, it becomes very much a vehicle for individualism, right. So, novel itself becomes in a very novel, innovative way one of the first forms to which individualism may be portrayed and encapsulated, encoded and articulated. Defoe himself seems to have been much more aware of the larger representatives of his epic of solitude than is commonly assumed, not wholly aware since, as we have seen, he departed from his actual economic and psychological effects to make his hero struggle. So there is a very interesting departure as well as adherence that Defoe was doing over here. On the one hand, he seems to be quite aware of the different historical stories, different historical narratives and documents about you know people getting shipwrecked in the island and the survival story born out of that sense of isolation. At the same time, he makes a very deliberate departure, a very dramatic departure from the stories in the sense that his stories, Robinson Crusoe being a case in point, are much more optimistic because they point towards a brighter better future. So, a shipwreck ends up being a good thing for the subject because the subject becomes as you mentioned more fortified in terms of capital, in terms of spirit, in terms of longevity. The serious reflections of Robinson Crusoe published in 1720 are actually a miscellaneous compilation of religious, moral and thaumaturgic material. And the volume was primarily, and cannot as a whole be taken seriously as part of the story, the volume was primarily put together to cash in on a great success of the first part of the trilogy, *The Life and Strange Surprising Adventures*, and a smaller one of the further adventures. There are, however, in the prefaces and the first essay on Solitude, a number of valuable clues as to what, on second thoughts at least, Defoe saw as a meaning of his hero's experiences. So, As you can see the devil was going to cash in on the success of Robinson Crusoe by giving different spin-offs and the one that Watt is picking up over here are the serious reflections of Robinson Crusoe. It seems to be more meditative in terms of retrospectively and retroactively understanding what took place in the first story. In Robinson Crusoe's preface, he suggests that a story, though allegorical, is also historical. And again, we have this very thin line between allegory and history, between fiction and fact.

It is based on a life of a man alive and well known too. The actions of those whose life are the just subject of these volumes and to whom all or most part of the story most directly

alludes. and Defoe hints that he is himself the original, of which Robinson Crusoe is the emblem, that it is his own life which is portrayed allegorically. Many critics have denied, even derided the claim. Robinson Crusoe had apparently been attacked as fictitious, and it is argued that Defoe was merely using the allegorical argument very largely to controvert this criticism, and also to elevate the popular Puritan aversion to fiction which he largely shared. Now this is very, very interesting because this is a classic example of why we should study novel and change because the common Puritanical notion at that time was that art and literature and anything which is providing entertainment is a bad thing. So, it is important for Crusoe to defend his novel and with a claim at least that it is not wholly a work of fiction but it is a piece of truth which happened to someone that he knew and he also attributed himself, he described himself as a character that you know went through similar experiences. So that in a way was a way to fortify against the attack against fiction. You know which was very prevalent at that time by the puritanical audience if you remember the puritans also blocked and censored the theatre, stopped the theatre essentially in England till the Restoration period and the legacy of puritanism of course continued even after the movement so to speak ended politically. So, in Robinson Crusoe you find this sense of anxiety that Defoe seems to have in terms of trying to project the factuality of the story is also a way to whitewash it and also a way to justify the story and also protect it against attack against from the puritanical quarters. So, it was also done to ward off the puritanical aversion to fiction which ironically and interestingly enough Defoe himself shared to a large extent.

Still the claim to some autobiographical relevance cannot be wholly rejected. We never know whether the claims to autobiographical elements can be completely dismissed or not. Robinson Crusoe is the only book for which he made the claim and it fits in very well with much of what we know of Defoe's outlook and aspiration. So Defoe was himself an isolated and solitary figure of his times, witnessed the summary of his own life which he wrote in the preface to a 1706 pamphlet I reply to a pamphlet entitled The Lord Havisham's Vindication of Speech, where he complains how we stand alone in the world, abandoned by those very people that own I have done them service, how, with no helps but my own industry, I have forced misfortune and reduced them, exclusive of composition, from

seventeen to less than five thousand pounds, how in gaols and retreats all manner of extremities I have supported myself without the assistance of friends or relations. So, this is very much a Robinson Crusoe story where the white male subject is supporting himself, preserving himself, sustaining himself against all kinds of situations and adversities completely friendless. So, the autobiographical claim to Robinson Crusoe may not, cannot be entirely dismissed. Because at the end of the day the relationship between fiction and truth is always slippery and Crusoe seems to be, Defoe seems to be speaking from a position of experience, right. So, if you come to the final section of the story where this whole thing about looking at the Robinson Crusoe figure as a monetary example of self-sustenance, an economic example of the homo faber who is also the homo economicus and how this interplay between building and capital making are connected together in very complex ways. Robinson Crusoe then presents a monetary image of the ultimate consequences of absolute individualism. But this tendency like all extreme tendencies soon provoked a reaction. As soon as man's aloneness was forced on the attention of mankind, the close and complex nature of the individual's dependence on society, which had been taken for granted until it was challenged by individualism, began to receive much more detailed analysis. Man's essentially social nature, for instance, became one of the main topics of the 18th century philosophers, and the greatest of them, David Hume, wrote in the Treatise of Human Nature, a passage which might almost have been a refutation of Robinson Crusoe. So this is also a time 18th century where different philosophical discourses about community and isolation and the moral necessity of staying together as a community helping each other altruism were very big, were very dominant in cultural discourses, David Hume being a very good case in point where this work, the Treatise of Human Nature, it offers a passage which in a way is just the opposite of what happens in Robinson Crusoe and the whole The whole idea over here, the whole principle over here is that man cannot operate in isolation. Human subjects need each other as connected categories, as intersubjective categories only through which we will have the sense of society, the sense of altruism and a sense of building, the sense of community formation.

Just as a modern study of society only began once individualism had focused attention on man's apparent disjunctions from his fellows, so the novel could only begin its study of

personal relationships once Robinson Crusoe had revealed a solitude that cried aloud for them. So, the Crusoe story is a very good example of how absence can be used to corroborate a point because in a certain way the Crusoe story is also about the moral requirement of society, the moral requirement of community and the moral message is conveyed through absence in the story in the sense that the community and the society are absent for the longest time in the novel because Crusoe the protagonist is shipwrecked in the novel. So, the idea of the community, the idea of the society becomes important and so in a way the Robinson Crusoe story can also be seen among many other ways as a story which morally presents the necessity of altruism, the necessity of community formation the necessity of collective action. Defoe's story is perhaps not a novel in the usual sense since it deals so little with personal relations. So, there are not many characters in the story who have these personal relationships with each other. In fact, the only personal relationship we have at a sustained level is a very unequal relationship in Crusoe on Friday. But that apart, we hear very little of Crusoe's relationship with his friends, with his family. You know, we can see how he departs from his father and then his very, very reluctant and almost non-committal description of his wife is also interesting. So there is no interpersonal, intersubjective network in Robinson Crusoe, in which sense, in that sense, is quite untypical as a novel. But it is appropriate that the tradition of the novel should begin with the work that annihilated the relationships of the traditional social order and thus drew attention to the opportunity and the need of building up a network of personal relationships on the new unconscious pattern.

So personal relationships were more oriented and geared towards the capital that you become successful, you become a professional. And through your professionalism, through your success, through your adventures you build relations, you establish kinship networks. So essentially it is a departure from the erstwhile kinship networks of family-oriented relationships and a movement towards the more innovative, the more abrupt kinship networks which may be found, the almost accidental kinship networks which may be found in different ways. The terms of the problem of the novel and of modern thought alike were established when the old order of moral and social relationships was shipwrecked with Robinson Crusoe by the rising tide of individualism. So it is a very beautiful finale that

Watt is offering over here. The shipwreck in Robinson Crusoe may be seen as a very symbolic a very symbolic finish, a very symbolic termination of certain kinds of social orders where family becomes important, the guild becomes important, the community becomes important. So, the ship in Robinson Crusoe essentially and symbolically sings with the old-world order and what emerges from the shipwreck is a new world order in the island and again you know the entire island may be seen as a new map which maybe you know made into a new cartographic territory, a new map which might become a different epistemic territory, a different intersubjective territory of a new kinship network. It is a terra incognita which becomes the familiar terrain, which becomes a new terrain. So, in a way it is a brave new world. which Crusoe established. So, the ship wrecks and the ship sinks through the old world order, the old kinship networks, the old interpersonal relationships and the new order emerges from there, from the shipwreck onto the new island. So, the island becomes a very symbolic chronotope as it were which is the beginning of a new order of time, a new order of space, a new order of space-time and also a new order of relationships, a new order of kinship which is more capitalistic in quality, more individualistic in quality and more utility driven in many sense, breaking away from the family oriented, guild oriented, church oriented, community oriented establishment of kinship that Crusoe was born into. So, in a way the birth of a new order in Robinson Crusoe is quite symbolic and as Watt reminds us the shipwreck may also be studied symbolically as a death of one era and a birth and an emergence of a new era with new epistemic relationships, with new moral relationships, with new kinship relationships. So with that we end the Secondary Study of Robinson Crusoe. We hope to have established by now how the texts and the contexts are intimately and cognitively and almost complexly connected to each other and how each text can be studied, should be studied in its diachronic context. It should be situated in its material, political, social, moral setting and within its situatedness it also offers new forms of description, new forms of dramatization, new forms of defamiliarization which Defoe does very, very ably in Robinson Crusoe. So, with that we end this particular session. We end the secondary criticism on Robinson Crusoe. We will move on to a new text in a subsequent session. Thank you for your attention.