

**Course Name: The Novel and Change**

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**Week – 01**

**Lecture 2**

Hello and welcome to this NPTEL course entitled The Novel and Change. We will begin with Robinson Crusoe today, which is the first text in this course. So, we look at part one of Robinson Crusoe. That's a novel we will study in some details. And as I mentioned in the previous session, that what we are doing in this course is looking at the diachronic relationship. between the text and the context, between the written word and the cultural materiality around which the word is situated and from which the word emerges.

In other words, looking at the relationship in the story and society and how the stories are reflective of the unique conditions, unique material, cultural, moral conditions of the society that they are representing, that they are situated in. Now Robinson Crusoe was written in early eighteenth century, 1719 which was first published. Now you have to understand this is a time in which what we call imperialism, what we call the entire mercantile operation of European imperialism was beginning to happen. I mean people were leaving in ships, they were going across the seas, travelling to different places, initially with the purpose of setting up trade relationships, but gradually those became more and more military relationships, and obviously those got political in due course.

So those became part of what then became imperialism, European imperialism. There are various factors which we will look into when we read Robinson Crusoe. The first, of course, is how the entire story is told from a perspective of the white male, the white European male, who was initially wanted to be a trader and then gradually becomes a conqueror of sort and tendrillizes the entire island in which he is shipwrecked. It is also a story about some kind of a meta text, shall we say, about the beginning of capitalism,

beginning of the formation of capital. How do you control capital? How do you form capital? And how do you consolidate the capital, in other words? Interestingly, Robinson Crusoe claims to be a Memoyer, as you can see on the screen, Robinson Crusoe Part 1 with a Memory. Now, it's a bit of a memory story, you know, so the whole story is written in a retrospective perspective. It's Crusoe telling us what happened to him when he was marooned in an island, when he was shipwrecked in an island. And we get to hear the entire story from his perspective alone. There are no other voices. Let's just put it very bluntly.

There's no other voice in the story except the white male voice, which is telling the story about survival, about consolidation, about expansion, about growth, about prosperity, and so on and so forth. Now, this very monolithic, hegemonic story, and the fact that it's one person telling the story only and we don't get to hear any other part, is actually very very interesting and something which you will have to take very very seriously as students of literature and cultural studies because as you all know who is telling the story becomes a more important question than what is being said in the story because history as you all know is essentially his story more often than not a male story a male version of the story dominant male version of the story, you know, something which is told from a dominant privileged position. Now Crusoe's story about the shipwrecked sailor, you know, Daniel Defoe's story about the shipwrecked sailor, which is told in a first-person narrative, claims to be a memoir, claims to be this very, very playful, playfully situated between truth and fantasy. Of course, it is a novel, it is a work of fiction, but it creates what we now call classic realism, in the sense that there's this omnipotent narrator, the omnipresent narrator, a narrator which knows exactly what is going on. There's absolutely no unreliability about the narration at all. It is, in other words, something which seems to me, appears to be, an absolutely reliable narrator, a reliable narrative. So there's a before, there's a middle, there's an after, and Crusoe, the narrator in the story, uh seems to know everything that is going on around him so there's this omnipotence um omnipresence of all the narrator which obviously is in complete contrast to what we call unreliable narration or you know something which postmodern literature celebrates uh quite rampantly but this is a birth of classic realism now what i'm trying to tell you is you

will notice that a birth of capitalism and a birth of classic realism are almost synchronous with each other. And it's not an accident that these two strategies of control and nourishment are actually happening at the same time. Classic realism is quite territorial in quality.

So, the narrator in a classic realist story seems to know everything around that person, most often the he. So, there's this very spatial quality about classic realism, a very temporal quality about classic realism. So, the narrator knows exactly what happened many years ago. The narrator knows exactly what is happening at that point of time. And the narrator also seems to know through a form of projection what is likely to take place at some point in the future. So, there is this very territorial quality about classic realism where there is complete control of the narration, complete control of the story, complete control of the narrative. Now that is in many ways the ultimate fantasy of capitalism, the ultimate fantasy of, you know, the form of capitalism which wants to territorialize new places, set up businesses, control the space and time around. So, what I'm saying here is that the entire fantasy of controlling space-time through which capitalism emerges as a cultural form, as a mercantile form, etc., finds its most perfect voice, finds its most potent and strategic voice in classic realism. which is so territorial in quality, which has a spatiotemporal quality about it in terms of knowing everything around and also knowing the before, the present and the after. is no accident that a birth of capitalism and a birth of classic realism take place pretty much around the same time and how classic realism begins to become the more, the most potent, the most appropriate way to tell a story about what seems to be the meta text of European imperialism, true capitalism, you know.

So these are merchant navy people, sailors who go out in search of better lives, search of fortune, search of wealth, And in the process they conquer territories, they take over territories and the entire story, the entire space is described from their perspective. So, for instance, Crusoe goes to a quote unquote abundant island, a deserted island. Why deserted? Because there is no white man over there, right. So, it seems to be an absolute erased space. Now he takes over the island, obviously with gun and different other

apparatus. He names the entire setting around him. He names the people around him and he essentially discovers the place, right. Now the politics of discovery here is important. So what do we define? How do you call something, you know, discovery? So obviously the place was there before Crusoe moved there. The island was there, there were people, there were some cultural practices which were there before Crusoe moved in. But the very fact that it's not compatible to European culture, the very fact that it's not compatible to the very Eurocentric way of looking at culture makes it a non-entity. And it gives us a genesis point in European imagination from the point in which the white man sets foot on the island. So that becomes a genesis point, that becomes a point zero. from which history begins, so to speak, right. So you can see how the entire fantasy of controlling time and space is very much a hand in glove, shall we say, with the fantasy of capitalism, the fantasy of imperialism, taking over the territory and controlling the territory.

Okay, so that's a very quick cultural background through which this text emerges. Now, so we look at the PDF which should be on your screen. Robinson Crusoe. Interestingly, before the novel begins, there is a quotation. These are the contents in the story, by the way. So, as you can see, there is early life, the shipwreck, Crusoe's island, Crusoe's considers and so on and so forth. And it seems to be quite epistolary in quality in the sense that, you know, he almost appears to be writing a letter. to some addressing, telling in very graphic details, you know, very dense details what is happening in the island, how we are surviving the island, how we are surviving the shipwreck and so on and so forth. journalistic quality about this novel as well in terms of its reporting what is going on in very, very dense details. And again, the detail here is not accidental. There is this fantasy to know everything, that the urge to know everything, describe everything, classify everything which also becomes part of the project of you know territorial control. You give a name to everything, you classify everything around you just so, there is nothing which is not known in other words. There is no sense of mystery. You have a complete sense of control over space and time. Right. Now, okay, so this is something I would like to flag up a little bit. There is this poem, a passage from a poem which appears over here by William Cowper and you know this seems to be one of the inspirations for Daniel Defoe to write this novel. The poem is actually called, you know, The Solitude of

Alexander Selkirk, who was a historical figure and who got shipwrecked in Ireland. And so this entire poem about Cowper, you know, uses, you know, it fictionalizes that particular character, Alexander Selkirk. Now, it's a poem about despair.

It's a poem about being shipwrecked in Ireland and obviously feeling very, very alienated. But it's also a very Christian poem in a certain sense because it ends with the idea, the experience of grace, the experience of hope connected to grace. So, it moves between despair and hope in a very Christian way. And the structure is very Christian in many sense, because, you know, the poem begins with a sense of absolute despair and nihilism and almost giving up on life until the point that the narrator realizes, the speaker of the poem realizes that's something which is almost a sin in Christianity to give up hope because then you're questioning God's authority, you're questioning the salvation that you can receive from God. So, it's a very Christian poem in that sense. If you look at the lines which should be on the screen, I am monarch of all I survey. My right there is none to dispute. From the centre all round to the sea, I'm lord of the fowl and the brute. So it begins with some kind of a, it's a deceptive start because it seems to me that he's enjoying [uh] being the monarch over here the king the absolute the ultimate emperor of this place where he's got the ultimate right the ultimate privilege and from the center all around will see whichever you know however he sees it however far his eyes can stretch he's an absolute lord the undisputed king the lord of the fowl and the brute though all the birds or anything living around him you know is subservient to him so to speak but like I said, it's a false start, it's a deceptive start, because very quickly it moves on to that, you know, the note of despair, that poor solitude. Where are the charms that sages have seen in thy, in your face? Better dwell in the midst of alarms than reign in this horrible place.

So the speaker here is obviously very, very shocked and extremely disillusioned by the charms of solitude because you know he says all the people all the charming things that people write about in solitude the sages and the wise men who write about solitude I failed to find the charm because all I can see around is alienation and disconnect and he says better dwell in the midst of alarms so I'd much rather I would prefer to live in a place full of noise and danger and risks but at least I have human company over there than rain

in this horrible place. So, I'd much rather be a common man with other common men taking risks going through noise rather than living in this horrible alienated condition where I am supposedly the absolute monarch of the fowl and the brute. Now obviously the original poem is much longer and I recommend readers actually a very beautiful poem. But the final stanza which appears now is a stanza which, where the speaker embraces grace and looks forward to grace and, you know, rejects despair, so to speak, because the realization that despairing is a sin in Christianity because that means you've given up on God, so to speak. And there's always a possibility of salvation, always a possibility of redemption, which he reconnects to. And this is how the poem ends. But the sea fowl is gone to her nest. The beast is laid down in its lair, rest in place. Even here is a season of rest and I to my cabin repair. There's mercy in every place and mercy encouraging thought. gives every affliction a grace and reconciles man to his Lord.

So as you can see these words, mercy, grace, these are very Christian words, right? And the ultimate sentiment, the final sentiment with which the poem ends is that of mercy, looking forward to the possibility of redemption, the possibility of salvation. I can only come when you embrace your affliction you accept your affliction through grace and with the hope that reconciling you know to your to your fortune to your lot to your luck to your existence you know being stoic about it reconciling to it accepting it calmly might create the possibility of grace which will then lead on hopefully to mercy and ultimately to redemption now there's a reason why I spent some time on this, with this particular poem, because as I mentioned, there's a very deep-seated Christian sentiment that this poem has. Now, if you look at the beginning of Robinson Crusoe, there's this very interesting tension with Christianity that a novel has. And of course, the very name Crusoe, as you can imagine, is some kind of allusion to Christ. So, he's some kind of a Christ figure. But at the same time, the beginning of the novel makes it very, very clear, very, very apparent that he's also breaking away from the father figure. So, there's Crusoe's father who doesn't allow him, who forbids him to do something, to go out in the sea because it's almost described as a sinful thing to do. But Crusoe gives him to temptation. He leaves his father, he leaves his mother, he leaves his family.

And for the last part of the beginning of the story novel, which we will read right now, he is very much the prodigal son. He is very much someone who is doing something which is not allowed and not sanctioned by the Holy Father. So, there is a Christian tone to it but obeyed in a very complex way. It is not really an absolute affiliation to Christianity or an absolute affiliation to Christian sentiment but rather it is some kind of a departure from the conservative Christian norm, from the conservative Christian more. So the Cowper poem, which is situated right as a preface, so to speak, before the novel begins, gives a very interesting counterpoint, a very interesting contrast to what is about to happen in the story. And there is a sense of the greed, the lust to go to the sea, the seduction of the sea, which is against, which is pulling you away from your family, from your Christian home, etc. And for a large part of the story, there's a sense of having committed a sin, so I must pay for my sin because I broke away from the Christian home. Now, we need to situate the sentiment and the cultural materiality of the time, because as I mentioned, this is, you know, early 18th century, where the entire seafaring culture is beginning to happen, the mercantile culture is beginning to happen. You know, very common people, common men and women, mostly men, leaving their homes with the hope of getting a better fortune, with the hope of getting a, you know, more prosperous future, and they're sailing on to the sea. So, the sea becomes this very interesting place liminal territory which connects the human subject to, you know, a possibility of a prosperous future, right? So, the sea becomes a very symbolic site, a very fluid symbolic site which connects the ordinary human subject to the possibility of an extraordinary future, right? And of course, that comes with its own dangers and pitfalls because, you know, the extraordinary future may not happen. Humans can lose their lives in the sea, which is what happens in Robinson Crusoe as well. All but Crusoe, everyone else dies in the shipwreck. So, there is constant sense of danger as well, the precarity of the sea. So this very interesting entanglement shall we say of interplay between a promise and precarity, between prosperity and precarity which goes on in a loop in Robinson Crusoe is something we have to take into account. It is also reflective of the culture of the time where there is this rise of the middle class, rise of the common man who can become uncommon.

All you have to do is seek out your fate, go out in the sea and find your wealth, find your fortune, and then you can quickly rise in a social ladder, quickly rise in a cultural ladder and become someone else, become something that you could never have become if you never left home. But at the same time, for that to happen you need to leave your home. So, there is this unhomely uncanny quality about the scene which you find in a lot of literature on that time. But this is also reflective of the entire seduction, the entire promise of rise, promise of social rise, the upwardly mobile class, right. So, it is like a big cultural movement is happening and you can connect it to let us something like artificial intelligence or industrial technology, IT coming over, a new sector starting to happen and suddenly that sector begins to become a massive promise to the otherwise dormant class, the otherwise not so privileged class. Who can use the sector? Who can use that particular site to quickly climb the social ladder, right? So, the mercantile, the merchant navy around this time was exactly, you know, what, let's say something like IT became much later, something like computers became much later. This was an opportunity for the middle class to quickly rise. But for that to happen, there has to be a dramatic departure from the social, cultural, moral standards, right. So, suddenly you want a different kind of lifestyle, suddenly you want something very different from the kind of lifestyle you grew up with. So, the departure from the father figure is quite symbolic.

So, it's like one old order, a world order is giving way to another world order, right? Now that is couched in very Christian terms in Robinson Crusoe. So, the old father, the old patriarch is forbidding the son to go out to the sea, to give in to the seduction of the sea. But a son feels a pull way too strongly to control himself and hence gives in to the seduction of the sea. An entire story can also be seen as some kind of a caveat story. You know, this is what happens if you disobey your father. But at the same time, it is also about how to become wealthy. It is also about how to quickly become rich in an upwardly mobile class, in an upwardly mobile time. Okay, so hopefully I've given you some kind of a background to the story and we'll obviously spend some more time after we finish reading the novel talking about the 18th century cultural materiality from which this story emerges because, you know, as you all know, every story is situated in a certain cultural, political, social context. Of course, in order to understand a story well or more

fully, we need to understand the cultural context which produces a story. So, every story is produced by certain conditions, cultural, material, political, social, moral conditions. Now, the story can have a very interesting relationship to those conditions.

It can be passively reflective of those conditions, but it can also be refractive. It can also depart from those conditions in interesting ways. Okay, so this is how Robinson Crusoe begins, Chapter 1, which should be on your screen, Early Life of the Protagonist. I was born in the year 1632 in the city of York, of a good family, so York obviously is in England, of a good family, though not of that country.

Now, this is what's interesting now, Crusoe is not really an Englishman, if you think about it, if you look at it carefully, his father came from Germany, Bremen, right. Now, That also tells you something which we'll come to in a minute. My father being a foreigner of Bremen who settled first at Hull. So, he's again the outsider coming in to Germany, from Germany to England, essentially an immigrant in search of a better fortune who comes and settles in Hull. Maybe a tradesman, maybe someone who works as an apprentice and then walks his way up gradually. He got a good estate by merchandise. He was a trader. and leaving off his trade, lived afterwards at York, from whence he had married my mother, whose relations were named Robinson, a very good family in that country, and from whom I was called Robinson Kreutznaer. So, the actual name of Robinson Crusoe is Robinson Kreutznaer. So that's the technically correct name. But by the usual corruption of words in England, we are now called, nay, we call ourselves and write our name Crusoe. So, my companions always come in, right? Now, This is a good example of cultural assimilation. So, this is also the time in which these cultural assimilations are taking place. Now, we find that Crusoe's father had also left his home and essentially came from Germany to England and started being a tradesman and then settled in New York. But then it hadn't really been to an exotic faraway place.

It was pretty much an intercontinental thing. So, within the continent, right? Intracontinental. So, from Germany to England and then settling down over there, obviously as a cultural outsider, but gradually very much becoming an insider. And the

transition... from Kreutznaer to Crusoe is quite symbolic because that also gives a good account of what you know the entire cultural assimilation was. But it was very much within the white cultural Christian territory right. So yes, it is a one country to another country but it wasn't really a dramatic departure from in a way that Crusoe does in a subsequent generation. So, we can see some kind of a intergenerational movement happening here. So, Crusoe's father comes from Germany to England and Crusoe obviously goes off to other places like the Caribbean and Venezuela. So, Being the third son of the family and not bred to any trait, my head began to be filled very early with rambling thoughts. So, this is where the prodigal son metaphor comes in very, very heavily. So very, very Christian. So, Crusoe is very much the prodigal son, the third son of the family, but someone who wants to leave the family, someone who is very, very, very much a misfit in this particular moral, social condition. My father, who was very ancient, had given me a competent share of learning. So again, the ancientness of the father, it has a Christian ring to it, but also a very interesting cultural ring to it.

So this is the old-world order, almost biblical in quality. The ancient father forbidden the son to go away and stay within the home, but the son being a prodigal son is too strongly seduced by the possibility of prosperity and hence leaves the home. So, my father was very ancient, had given me a competent share of learning as far as house education and a country free school generally goes and designed me for the law. Now this is interesting. So, Crusoe was trained to be a lawyer. So, Crusoe's father wanted him to be a lawyer. So again, the legality of this upbringing, the legality of the father's desire is in complete contrast to the quasi-illegality of the sea. So, you know in the sea there's no law, you know that time there was no law, anyone could go anywhere and take over any territory and then bring about laws subsequently. So, Crusoe very much departs from law. So, there's this transgressive quality about Robinson Crusoe breaking the law through an act of transgression which can be moral, biblical but also legal in many senses.

But I would be satisfied with nothing but going to sea. So, you can see how the sea and the law are symbolically contrasted with each other. And my inclination to this led me so strongly against the will, nay, the commands of my father, and against all the entreaties

and persuasions of my mother and other friends, that there seemed to be something fatal in their propension of nature, tending directly to the life of misery which was to befall me. So, as I mentioned, it's also some kind of a caveat narrative, some kind of a warning narrative that, you know, I turned down the wishes of my father, I disobeyed the wishes of my father, my ancient father who wanted me to be a man of the law and instead of that I went about and gave in to the seduction of the sea and hence this is a warning morality tale of what goes wrong, what happens if you don't listen to your father, accept that. This is more complex than that because he also ends up being very prosperous. He also ends up being a wealthy man. He also ends up becoming the new capitalist man, right? Not the ancient man, but the new capitalist. The new age money coming in because he wanted to take a risk. He wanted to try his fortune in the sea. So, this is the beginning of Robinson Crusoe and I think I hope to have given you a fair bit of the cultural context in which this text is situated and we'll continue with this story, we'll continue with reading the text in the subsequent classes as well. Thank you for your attention.