

**Course Name: The Novel and Change**

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**Week – 06**

**Lecture 28**

Heart of Darkness - Part 1

So, hello and welcome to this NPTEL course titled The Novel and Change. We will start with a new novel today from this session and the new novel happens to be Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness which is sometimes considered as a novella but also a novel. It is quite perhaps one of the most important novels written in the history of English literature. And it is one of those novels which really offer itself in terms of many interpretations. So one can do a postcolonial study of Heart of Darkness, one can do a very, very complex gender studies reading of Heart of Darkness, a very complex memory studies reading of Heart of Darkness. So, it is one of those literary texts really, which is so complexly situated in such an interesting cultural, political, geopolitical context that it keeps lending itself to different forms of interpretation at different points of time. Now, as always, for the purpose of this course, we will be focusing mainly on looking at the novel in terms of its cultural context. But I have chosen an essay which I happened to write many years ago. It was published in a journal called Janus Head and this can be downloaded very easily, but it is also on your screen, which looks at this very interesting entanglement between consciousness, cognition and the crisis of narration, in Heart of Darkness. Now, I will obviously unpack this title as I move along and we will read the essay with some degree of you know detailed attention. But before we do that, before we dive in to a reading of an essay on the main text, let us spend some time talking about the cultural context, the geopolitical context in which the novel by Joseph Conrad is so interestingly situated. Now it was written, I mean the whole you know publication of Heart of Darkness happened around the sort of the last decade of the 20th century that is where that is a cultural context in which the novel is reflective of. So it is a time of real interesting changes going on in different parts of Europe and different

parts of the colonial empires and interestingly the colonial condition depicted in *Heart of Darkness* is that of Congo controlled by the Belgians.

So, it is the Belgian occupation of Congo which is at work, which is illustrated in this novel. Now We have just finished looking at Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations* if you remember and there too we begin to see how the entire idea, expedience of the empire receives a very ambivalent treatment in Dickens because on one hand it is the empire the sort of funding the gentlemanly construct of masculinity in the interiors of London, the interiors of England, while at the same time the knowledge of the very questionable origins of the money, the knowledge of the very shady dark origins of the fund also creates a sense of shame of what is known as what we call the inglorious empire, the knowledge of the inglorious empire which is what the novel is primarily about. And we spent a lot of time if you remember looking at the relationship between new forms of capitalism, new forms of money, you know formalization of money in terms of banking, in terms of share market, in terms of stock and how the entire construct of masculinity which is embodied dramatically by Pip's movement across the plot corresponds to these different points of you know capital construction. Now *Heart of Darkness* 2 is situated, I mean it is a little bit later than you know Dickens's novel, but it is one of the first novels really which talks about the cracking up of the empire, how the cracks in the empire are beginning to show. Now what we will do in this essay, while reading the essay also gently is compare and contrast Joseph Conrad's representation of the empire to, let's say, someone like Rudyard Kipling, the Kipling-esque construct and representation of the empire.

Well, with Kipling, as you know, he had his very famous, you know, philosophical line, the white man's burden and etc., etc., which obviously tried to represent the exploitation and the brutality of the empire by giving it some kind of a benevolent face, by pretending it some kind of a benevolent missionary zeal and drive and civilizing mission, etc., right, which is obviously very, very problematic and very, very racially underpinned. Now, with Conrad, especially with *Heart of Darkness*, there is a lot of really racialized rhetoric in *Heart of Darkness* as well. It is a very politically incorrect novel. It is extremely problematic politically and it is by no way should be seen as a championing of anti-

imperialism. In fact, when we read Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, we will find that how this Achebe's take on Conrad is very interesting because he looks at Conrad as you know a racist writer. Now of course it is always a little bit of a problem in terms of looking back at a writer using modern lenses, modern moral lenses. So, you know lenses of judgment, lenses of measurement, etc. because that is a complicated method and perhaps not entirely fair all the time. But what we can and should do in our reading of any text and context especially in a course like this which looks at relationship between novel and change is to locate the writer, the author in terms of the situatedness and the broader social political matrix of change. Now, when it comes to *Heart of Darkness*, as I mentioned, this is a novel which really brings to the fore or foregrounds the very, very interesting insights about the empire as a very inglorious mission, as a brutal, grotesque mission of violence and exploitation and essentially loot rather than looking at it through any lens of benevolence, right. So, the Belgian mission, the Belgian presence in Congo as depicted in Conrad's novel is an extremely evil occupation. It is an occupation which is entirely, almost entirely driven by greed, by exploitation of unchecked capitalism etc.

We talked about the idea of unchecked capitalism to a large extent in both Mary Sherry's *Frankenstein* and Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations*. Now, *Heart of Darkness* is also about the unchecked quality of the capitalist machines of the empire and how it is not sustainable. So, the unsustainability of this mission and how that begins to take its toll psychologically, mentally, emotionally, morally as well as politically other things that keep coming up in any reading of *Heart of Darkness*, which is why you find the very title of this essay is about consciousness, cognition and the crisis of narration. So, in terms of the very flawed understanding of what is going on and also the very flawed representation of the same, you know, in terms of how do you put that in the narrative, the very insufficient narrative, the very incomplete narrative about what really goes on in the heart of the empire machine. And we notice as we move on in the reading of *Heart of Darkness* how certain things must be lied about, certain things must be withheld from the insider of Europe, right. So certain things are not reported back because they cannot be reported back, they must not be reported back, right. So the very famous example being in this particular case you know the character Kurtz's last words which we know in the novel happens to happen to

be the horror, the horror. whereas in when the narrator Marlow comes back to Belgium, comes back to the European metropolis, he goes and visits Kurtz's fiancée where she asks him what were Kurtz's dying words and he has to lie about it, give a romantic report posthumously about Kurtz by saying that well he died with your name on his lips. So again this very deliberate withholding of information or passing on of misinformation It is a very interesting part of how the entire machines of empire were operative in terms of half truths, in terms of misinformation, in terms of the mandatory misinformation really. you know, representing the empire and its various evil exploitative engines.

Now, as I mentioned, this novel really lends itself very, very interestingly and very complexly and very fruitfully I should say to several readings. Now, for the purpose of this particular course, We were located through a very strong historical, robust historical diachronic lens in terms of how the darkness is very interestingly illustrative of the changes going on, the geopolitical changes going on around Europe and the colonial setting in 1890s. which happens to be the setting of the novel as well. How the Belgian presence in Congo is essentially one of natural degradation, ecological degradation, as well as dehumanization, right? And of course, all these things which are happening elsewhere are not getting reported back to the inside of the metropolis, which makes Heart of Darkness and Great Expectations very interesting and dialogic with each other. Because if you remember, great expectations as long as Pip does not know that the source of his funding which is funding his education, upbringing, gentlemanliness is as long as he does not know it is coming from the dark corridors of the empire, he is perfectly happy to accept it without questioning the source, right. Only when he comes to know later that it is from Magwitch who is a convict and who has now made himself some wealth in New South Wales, then his guilt begins to get you know the foregrounded and then he begins to question his own standing, his own moral standing apropos the entire capital of the empire, right. So there is this very interesting play of truth and half-truth information and misinformation going on in both Great Expectations as well as in Heart of Darkness, right. Now of course Heart of Darkness the very title suggests that it is about darkness, it is about this very negative enlightenment about the real machinery of the empire, about the horrors and insights about what really takes place. And several instances in our novel we find Marlow the narrator

telling his audience, his immediate audience who are sailing in a small boat called Nellie that well this is you know how the empire really works. This is how the exploitation, the brutality and the violence really take place.

Except, of course, he really makes his novel, makes his narrative, makes his plot into a very, very messy, convoluted narrative, which is why you'll notice when you read Heart of Darkness, despite the fact that it is almost a novella, which is the point it started off with, it is extremely dense and it requires a huge amount of time to finish reading it because of the density of description. the very opaque quality about the novel, which really sometimes is really impenetrable. You don't understand what is going on. And it's cognitive confusion. density or opacity that you experience as a reader is very interestingly reflective of the cognitive opacity that the characters face in the novel as well. So, for example, when Marlow is sailing down the Congo, he does not have a clue of what is going on and he just gives you a very interesting representation of his sensory perception of the environment, right. So, there is a very famous line, very famous passage where he is very shot at by the locals around the river And only when, you know, the arrows begin to fall, only much later, a little bit later does he realize these are arrows. So the impression comes first and the objects come later, which is the reversal of the normal cognitive process. So there's all that going on in Heart of Darkness, which is also the time in which, you know, the reality of the empire is beginning to come out, where there's less and less glory and more and more shame about the empire. where there is a degree of ambivalence, a degree of reluctance, a degree of cynicism coming in. There is a lot of existential exhaustion in Heart of Darkness which is again reflective of the geopolitical exhaustion which is about to happen about the empire in terms of how the whole enterprise or the impression or the euphoria around the nice noble empire is coming to an end, that narrative is coming to an end and instead we have the beginning of a pretty dark narrative about what really goes on which is why you know we have this sort of metaphor, the biological metaphor of the heart. the heart of darkness, right. So, Congo in this novel becomes the heart of darkness, but equally Brussels in Belgium is also the heart of darkness. Now, if you look at the color mechanisms in the story, the color contrasts in the story, we will realize that Brussels is seen as a sepulchral

city, you know, a city which is almost spectral in quality in terms of its whiteness. There is something dead-like, coffin-like about Brussels, right.

It is very white, very pale, you know, very, very, you know, death-like in quality. It is all vitality in other words. Whereas, of course, when it comes to Congo, it is again, you know, a dark continent, it is Africa. But at the same time, it is also the place where ivory is a very important commodity, ivory, the white color of ivory. is a very interesting visual contrast with the darkness, the otherwise darkness of Congo, right. So that, you know, that color contrast is very interestingly situated in Heart of Darkness. What we also notice in a novel is the idea of narration. It is mentioned already that narration becomes an important point in Heart of Darkness in the sense that the crisis of narration, the inability to put everything together into a story is also part of the existential political experience where it does not lend itself to a seamless linear storytelling process which is why you find that the narrative method in Heart of Darkness is full of interruptions is full of these digressions, interruptions and boredom and ennui and exhaustion and all the rest of it, right. So there is that you know that line which is in the title as well of the essay, do you see the story which is a bit of a strange line because you meant to listen to a story. So, what is it about seeing the story which again of course is a very classic Conradian method of making the reader see the very interesting visual quality about Conrad's narrative method. Now Marlow of course he is a narrator in Heart of Darkness. He wants to re-visualize the experience. He wants to create everything into a visual narrative for the audience which is why he asks his question to his immediate audience in the boat called Nelly floating in the river Thames. Do you see the story? Of course the audience doesn't right and all but one members of the audience, they go to sleep, right, and which is the, you know, also a reflection of the boredom in Marlowe's story, right. It is a boring story, it is a cynical story, it is a very dark story about what happened many years earlier in Congo, right, a quality of trauma narrative as well in Heart of Darkness. So, you know, Marlow, the survivor in the catastrophe in Congo, comes back to tell the story about what happened, what took place many years ago in a very, very dark, grotesque, violent Congo, right. except that he cannot put it together into an adventure story narrative. And so, among many things Heart of Darkness should also be seen or read as a novel about misadventure, right. So, it is about an adventure gone wrong, it is about the

imperial mission gone awry, you know, it is just something which did not work out.

So, in that sense it is also comparable to Frankenstein where the, the bio-scientific project goes terribly wrong and what gets unleashed in the process is a form of monstrosity. Now we have similar monstrosity happening in Heart of Darkness as well because again if you look at the character of Colonel Kurtz we are told repeatedly that Colonel Kurtz is the best of Europe. So he is you know the embodiment of all the values of Europe put together. So he is a painter, he is a soldier, he is an absolute controller of chaos but then all of it put together makes him even more problematic because he now becomes the problem for the entire system which created him. So, he becomes a bit of a what we now call, in spy stories rogue agent, right. So, there is this rogue like quality, renegade, like quality about Colonel Kurtz which makes him a threat to the very system which had formerly and historically constructed him or created him, right. So, all this is happening in Heart of Darkness at different levels, the temporal confusion, the narrative confusion, the political confusion which makes the novel into a very, very chaotic novel. It is a very messy novel. There is no you know linear binary between what is right, what is wrong. It is a very liminal narrative and the liminality is something which we must take very, very you know pay a lot of attention to. Now we'll start reading this essay in terms of looking at the abstract first and then sort of dive into the essay as it were. The aim of this article is to examine the ways Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness dramatizes an existential crisis that is psychologically as well as politically underpinned. So the psychological situation and the political situation are constantly connected with each other. It's a very intersectional way in which the psychological and the political conditions interact and intersect. It explores how the novel is reflective of the ideological complexities of his day while also corresponding to current ideas in cognitive psychology and philosophy of mind which examine the entanglements of embodied feelings, subjective sentience and ability to narrativize experientiality in shared language.

So the ability to put together experience into shareable language, something which can be shared, something which can be passed on, something which can be essentially told and encoded into a shareable narrative. So, among other things, Heart of Darkness is also a

crisis of encoding. It is a failure of the encoding process. What Marlow experiences as a person working in Congo, he cannot put into words, he cannot put into a linear narrative which is shareable and understandable immediately. Instead, he creates this very convoluted and chaotic narrative, which frustrates his listeners as well as himself, which is why he has exasperated questions. Do you understand what is going on? Do you see the story? And so on and so forth. In investigating how the crisis of narration in *Heart of Darkness* is reflective of the psychological and existential alienation experienced by the protagonists in a novel, the article draws on the debates on the role of a literary narrative as a vehicle to communicate the the phenomenal quality of consciousness. So, again the quality of literariness comes into being in a very interesting way. So, to what extent is literature an important vehicle to represent the social, phenomenal, cultural, psychological changes and to what extent is literature one of the most potent vehicles, one of the most potent forms of representation which can correspond and calibrate this, this interplay of psychology and ideology in terms of what happens in the mind and in terms of what happens outside the mind, right.

So, because in *Heart of Darkness* we find that there is of course the ecology around Marlow, the very defamiliarizing ecology, strange, uncanny environment that he has around him in Congo and how that uncanniness or strangeness around him, the material extended strangeness around him also contributes to his psychological strangeness, psychological alienation, the fact that he does not quite understand what is going on. So again there is this very interesting interplay going on over here which the literary narrative very uniquely able to capture, right. In some sense it is a meta novel as well *Heart of Darkness*. It is a novel about writing the novel about what went wrong, the misadventure story. Now just to locate you know Joseph Conrad as a writer, as a premodernist who is essentially unclassifiable and floating uncertainly somewhere in between Proust and Robert Louis Stevenson, Conrad's writing epitomizes the epistemologies and uncertainties in philosophical cultural imagery. So, again, he is someone, as Jameson says in his reference over here, he is someone located between Proust and Robert Louis Stevenson. Now, Proust, of course, as you know, Marcel Proust, a very famous French writer who wrote this wonderful book, *In Search of Lord's Time*, you know, deeply encompasses a

psychological novel. So, the psychology in Proust is very important about memory, about time travel. about different kinds of sensory experiences which you know enable the subject, the feeling, sentient subject to travel across time.

So that's the Proustian method of writing. And then we have the Robert Louis Stevenson which is more oriented towards adventure, more oriented towards landscapes, more oriented towards plot and action etc. So Conrad may be seen as somewhere between the two because his writings ostentatiously in terms of where they are located are very much located or situated in islands or colonies or adventure ships etc. But at the same time the treatment that he gives, the treatment that he offers to this entire encounter with you know strangeness, encounter with political otherness is also very, very deeply psychological in quality. So there is a Proustian quality as well as a Stevenson quality about Conrad's writing which is why this particular quote describes him as floating uncertainly somewhere between Proust and Robert Louis Stevenson. So, consequently, his fiction offers not so much the pleasure of masculinist adventure tales along the lines of Henry Rider Haggard's stories, rather showcases the tensions and indeterminacies essentially and stylistically incompatible with high Victorian imperial ethos, right. So, if you read the novels and stories of Henry Rider Haggard, those are very neat adventure stories where there is excitement, there is plot, there is a very glamorous representation of you know whether it is empire, whether it is adventure etc. Whereas, of course, when it comes to Conrad, it is very dark, very unglamorous, very deglamorized, right, a very dull, gritty description of misadventure stories, right. So, in a way, it undercuts the masculinist fantasy adventure stories of Henry Rider Haggard. And in a way, it is also incompatible, deliberately incompatible, intentionally incompatible with some of the high Victorian imperial engines of classification, representation, etc.

Now, while the political knowledge in *Heart of Darkness* emerges as an articulation of the ethical ambivalence around European imperialism, the narrative proxy in Conrad's novel is symptomatic of later modernism's tendency. to foreground psychological interiority over external materiality, the process of consciousness over the perceived object, right. So there is an ethical ambivalence about Conrad, the articulation of ambivalence as well where we

don't quite know whether he is pro-Empire or he is directly and uniformly anti-Empire, that bit is uncertain, that bit is quite grey in quality. But at the same time, that uncertainty and contingency and lack of clarity also informs this narrative method, which in a way also seems to anticipate some of the high modernist methods later on. So, there is interior monologue, stream of consciousness etc. right. So that is why we consider Conrad to be such an influential writer because on the one hand he is writing about some very you know dark and complex geopolitical conditions but at the same time the treatment that he gives from those conditions is deeply psychological and it brings in a lot of literary devices, a lot of literary methods to represent those kind of states of cognitive shock, states of cognitive confusion. So, unsurprisingly, Conrad's narratives are characterized by a cognitive mood that emerges with a self-reflective process aware of its own incompleteness, right. So, this awareness of their fallibility, awareness of their lack of clarity, awareness of their lack of finality is what ironically shapes Conrad's narrative. So, there is an inbuilt sense of incompleteness in Conrad's narrative. So it's an inbuilt sense of non closure, there is no need to answer, there is no closure but what it does essentially or instead of that it keeps creating his own interruptions, it keeps creating his own incompleteness and this interplay of interruption and incompleteness becomes a very important part in the Conradian narrative method especially when it comes to novel like Heart of Darkness where there is no need right or wrong, there is no need black and white but everyone is implicated in this very very morally gray area this morally gray area of action and you know reconciliation and forgiveness etc, right there is nothing redeemable about this situation as well which is why it is so morally gray and so morally complex now there is a deliberate deconstruction of the typical imperialist romance in Conrad's uh Heart of Darkness because there is that typical anti-imperial quality where there is no attempt to give some kind of a transcendental narrative about redemption, about heroism, about supremacy, etc. Where, but instead what we see is the whole conventions and resolutions of the typical adventure fiction are deliberately problematized by narrative complexities which incorporate entanglements of shifting time, memory and crisis of storytelling. So, in a very interesting sense, Marlowe in Heart of Darkness, also elsewhere in Conrad's writing, is a very, very unreliable narrator.

He is a neurotic narrator. He is very nervous. He has several anxiety attacks while telling

a story. One can read those as traumatic triggers. One can read those as flashes in his mind when he's trying to remember and reconstruct what happened many years ago. But what we see most definitely happening through these processes is the creation of a very badly stitched narrative, a very, very convoluted narrative of what took place. which puts people to sleep, which bores people, which doesn't really make into some kind of a seamless, exciting story, right? And so, it's very dark, very boring, sometimes very, very slow and decelerated in quality. And that's exactly part of Conrad's plan to give you a sense of reality, which is not really recognizable from word go. which is not really presentable in a seamless way from the word go, but it requires a lot of unpacking, a lot of cognitive complexities and a lot of miscalculation, right. So, that is very much there in Conrad's writing. So such unsettling, whether it's cognitive unsettling or political unsettling or ethical unsettling, such unsettling emerges as a psychological as well as an existential condition or alienation in Conrad's novel represented in a deliberately defamiliarized language. Now I may have mentioned defamiliarization a little bit already. Some of you will know, but it was a term which was used very interestingly with the Russian formalists, by the Russian formalists, especially by someone called Viktor Shlovsky. Now, Shlovsky and the Russian formalists when they use defamiliarization, they use a word called *ostranenie*, right. So, *ostranenie* is a Russian word which means the production of strangeness, the production of abruptness, uncanny, right. So, one of the things that you know Shlovsky and other Russian formalists talked about is how one of the main tools of art, one of the main aims of art is to constantly produce strangeness, constantly produce the uncanny. And Conrad does it very, very skillfully, I should say, in *Heart of Darkness*, but it's very deliberate deceleration, there's very deliberate defamiliarization where the human subject who's telling the story seems to have no idea what is going on around him.

And more importantly, he is making us believe in some kind of a trick kind of a way into you know experiencing Marlow's panic at that point of time whereas in reality Marlow is telling a story about what happened to him many years ago, right. But in some sense there is a temporal dissolution going on between the moment of narration and the moment of experiencing. So Marlow, the entire story of Marlow in *Heart of Darkness* is a flashback story, is a story which happened many years ago and we of course know that this is coming

and reconstructing you know the past. There is a sense of immediacy which happens in Heart of Darkness and that immediacy is created with defamiliarization, with the production of uncanny, with the production of strangeness, etc. So that is something which we see happening at a very, very narrative level. So, we stop the essay at this point today, but it is interesting for us to remember that how Heart of Darkness creates this cosmos of chaos, not just at a level of plot or action or emplotment, but also the enactment of the same through its narrative methods. How do you enact what is encoded? How do you put into language, shareable language what took place? And of course, the novel is a novel about the failure to narrate. So, in a very ironical sense, it is a very Heart of Darkness is a very successful story about narrative failure, right. It is about, it is a very authentic representation, a very authentic iteration of what went wrong in trying to tell the story of what happened in Congo, right. So that entire narrative crisis and narrative collapse if you will in Heart of Darkness is a very ironically successful representation of narrative crisis entangled with geopolitical crisis, entangled with psychological crisis, right.

So, we stop at this point today. but I hope to have given you a flavor into in terms of what we are what we can expect as we move along and read this novel. It is a profoundly political novel. It is a novel about social changes, political changes, but equally it is a very interesting novel from a psychology perspective as well. The whole idea of delayed decoding as I mentioned already the famous episode in Heart of Darkness where Marlow is sailing down the Congo and he only decodes the thing later. The impressions come first, the arrows hit first and then he realizes those are arrows, right? But the object comes after the effect, right? So it completely converts or inverts the causal logic, the temporal logic between object and effect, right? Which is part of the delay decoding and defamiliarization in the novel iterative method. But this narrative method is obviously corresponding with the political condition around that time, where there is no need to right or wrong, where there is no need binary between what is redemptive and what has gone beyond the point of redemption, the possibility of redemption, between darkness and horror, darkness and light, right, which is why the enlightenment in Heart of Darkness, the moment of awakening or enlightenment in Heart of Darkness also a moment of deep cynicism, a moment of realization that you know it is all doomed, there is no liberation at the end of it, there is no

redemption at the end of it and that ironically is the only enlightenment available to the subjects in Heart of Darkness, right. And this of course corresponds to different kinds of social changes, political changes and geopolitical changes as well. in terms of how the whole notion about the empire, about the entire belief system backing the empire, some kind of a benevolent project is beginning to get exposed increasingly. So, the psychological, moral, cultural, political dimensions all crisscross each other, intersect each other in very complex and very, very fruitful ways which we will hopefully unpack in the subsequent sessions. Thank you for your attention.