

Course Name: The Novel and Change

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Heart of Darkness - Part 2

So, hello and welcome to this NPTEL course titled The Novel and Change. The last session we began with Joseph Conrad's novel Heart of Darkness and we'll continue reading it in this session as well. So we started reading an essay which is authored by me many years ago which looks at the entire the aesthetics of narration in Conrad and how that corresponds to the complex political, social, geographical conditions in which this novel Heart of Darkness is situated. So as with all the texts we are studying in this course, we are looking at the relationship, the traffic, if you will, between the text and the context and how the context shapes the text, which in turn illustrates and reflects in the context very complexly. Now on your screen, you should be able to see how the entire narrative dynamics, the narrative politics of Conrad is operated over here, especially in Heart of Darkness and how that really lends itself as it were to some very complex and interesting psychological reading, as well as obviously being connected to the really different ways in which the geopolitical situations of the time were being operated, so Conrad's fiction this should be on the screen, Conrad's fiction frequently foregrounds emotional states where existential motivation emerges disconnected to experientiality. And this disconnect is most often focalised through a crisis in narrativity. So there is a crisis in storytelling, particularly in Heart of Darkness, which is reflected in the title of this essay as well, Do You See the Story? where Marlow, the narrator, is obviously struggling to stitch together a story.

And that narrative crisis, in a way, also is reflective of the cognitive political crisis which the human subject is experiencing. The cognitive quality in Marlow's narration in Heart of Darkness, which is a parabolic text that incorporates the process of unveiling, is further

heightened by the self-reflexivity of the narrative and the way the self emerges entangled, which shifts in consciousness and processes of thought. So the parabolic structure is important over here. There is something of a cyclicity, there's something of a parabolic quality in this, and out of darkness, where the narrative and the storytelling process is very self-reflexive in quality, in the sense that the nervousness of the narrator also becomes part of the plot. So there is this degree of imploding nervousness, how the nervousness, the uncertainty, the contingent condition psychologically as well as politically all become part of the misshapen narrative in *Heart of Darkness* which is why you find that it is a notoriously difficult and you know it takes a lot of time to read *Heart of Darkness* despite the fact that it's just barely a 90 page novel. I mean there's some scholarship which considers it as a novella but despite its brevity there's an immense amount of density in a novel in terms of how slow it is and Partly, part of the reason why that is the case is because of the defamiliarizing quality in the novel, how it constantly defamiliarizes itself and gives us a very defamiliarized sense of reality. In one of his autobiographical asides, Conrad himself has thus spelt out the location of the sentient self that oversees the creative process at work. And this is the narrative method espoused by Conrad.

So, there is a very interesting interplay shall we say, between familiarity and mystery. And there is a sense of outsidership in the narrative as well as recognisability in the narrative as well. And this interplay, this very liminal location between familiarity and uncertainty, between familiarity and mystery is part of the narrative process espoused by Conrad, particularly in *Heart of Darkness*. So the entanglements between epistemological reflexivity and ontological materiality between private perception and shared communication run across the entirety of Conrad's fiction. So there is that epistemological reflexivity, the self-reflexive quality about knowing and unknowing and not knowing the surrounding or the ecological reality around you. And of course, that corresponds to ontological materiality. So the materiality around the subject, the speaking subject, the storytelling subject is always known, right? And that degree of impenetrability about what is around you also lends itself to the narrative design of Conrad, which makes his novel, which makes his storytelling technique sometimes deliberately, intentionally impenetrable in quality. In *Heart of Darkness*, for instance, narration often emerges as a backward process, whereby objects are objectified post-perceptions. There is a sense of what is

known as delayed decoding in Conrad, where the impressions come first and the objects come later in the cognitive sequence of things, which is normally the other way around. First, we see an object, normally we see an object, and then we get the impression or the sensation or the sentient sensation, framework around the object. In the case of Heart of Darkness there is a reversal in the process to a certain extent whereby we see the sensations or the entire experientiality around the object first and then the ontological reality of the object comes later. So the sequence in a certain sense is reversed. So and objects are objectified as is mentioned over here post-perception. So only after perception do we figure out what the object really is.

So, Marlowe's knowledge of an existential experience of loss and eventual impossibility of communicating the same and shared language highlight the unreliability inherent in the narrative process, right? So the whole idea of existential loss, you know, Heart of Darkness is about the revelation of the knowledge of nothingness that happens in the heart of darkness, in the heart of the you know the empire where Marlow goes working as an agent. So in that sense it is a very interesting you know very interestingly dialogic with Charles Dickens's Great Expectations which we just finished and that knowledge of nothingness that sense of darkness, that very nihilistic understanding of reality, it also lends itself to the unreliability in the narrative process, how the narrative itself is unsure of its implotment mechanism, unsure of its narrative mechanism. the narrative impossibility and unreliability of Marlowe which he acknowledges right at the heart of his tale correspond complexly with the current thesis in cognitive psychology that only a self-reflective autobiographical narrative by the feeling subject can be a valid measure of understanding subjective experience of horror shock or loss right so how Experientiality becomes important and that is something which even modern cognitive psychology seems to support. The self-reflective autobiographical narrative by the feeling subject may be seen as the most potent measure, the most reliable measure of understanding experience, the subjective quality of experience. The failure of narrativity in Conrad's novel and the consequent crisis of agency are also in close correspondence with a thesis in modern cognitive neuroscience, that the ability to construct a narrative and give shape and meaning to one's life is underpinned by abilities in abstraction, metaphors, and complex symbols in language.

So how linguistic ability and cognitive ability are connected to each other. And part of the cognitive crisis in *Heart of Darkness*, the fact that Marlow doesn't understand what is going on around him, as he sails down the Congo, it's almost like a descent into nothingness, a descent into cognitive confusion. Now the entire cognitive confusion gets played out or gets foregrounded by the very, very interesting use of language or the linguistic interruptions, the narrative interruptions in *Heart of Darkness*. So together, this whole idea of narrativity and experientiality inform the self-awareness and agency which make us uniquely and mimetically human. So, the uniqueness of the mimetic mind of the humans in terms of how we can tell stories, how we can encode experience and convert that into a story, that itself is a linguistic ability, that itself is an ability through which communication processes take place, through which representation of processes take place. So, such view such views find resonance in the claims of modern cognitive narratology which state that storytelling can emerge as a means of distributing intelligence, disseminating knowledge about ways of engaging with the world across space and time. So cognitive narratology as you can imagine is a study of cognition and narrative together and obviously the cognitive qualities of storytelling which itself becomes a method through which intelligence can be distributed in quality, information can be distributed in quality, can be encoded in quality, disseminated also as a way of engaging with the world across space and time. So how do you calibrate time? How do you calibrate and laminate space and time? And this entire laminating method that happens through storytelling is something which is in cognitive narratology and also storytelling as a collective activity, as something which is done through rituals, through different kind of collective practices etc. So Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* may be read as a story about the crisis in storytelling and the resultant loss in the self's existential situatedness in an experientially shared world, right. So, the whole idea of situatedness and how the subject gets re-situated, the fluidity of the de-situated subject is reflected in the very, very messy story that Marlow in *Heart of Darkness* is trying to shape, stitch and deliver to his audience.

So what this essay is trying to say and what we're trying to engage here as well is how even the narrative method in *Heart of Darkness*, the very, very messy, confusing narrative

method in *Heart of Darkness* may be seen as reflective of the ambivalence, the moral, cognitive ambivalence about the geopolitical reality and the topography around the subject, the feeling subject, right, and that is important, that constant dialogue between the inside and the outside, between the storytelling self and the ecological reality around is an important aspect which, you know, shapes many readings in *Heart of Darkness*. So Marlowe in *Heart of Darkness* emerges as an unreliable and nervous narrator and this nervousness of Marlowe is important because that neurosis that he has is part of his storytelling method and it almost becomes a neurotic narration in many ways and there are many interesting passages which look at *Heart of Darkness* as a neurotic novel, as a novel about not knowing what is happening around you, trying to grasp the sense of meaning around the subject. Now he is an unreliable and nervous narrator who, with stammerings of his conscience and the outspoken consciousness of the difficulties of his work, points to the inadequacies of classic realist narrative and normal cognitive processes. So in many ways, and I want to arrive at this point in this lecture today, because in many ways, *Heart of Darkness* may be seen as a deconstruction of the *Robinson Crusoe* story because the *Robinson Crusoe* story is about the expansionist vision, the territorially expansionist vision of, you know, the newly emerging empire, newly emerging colony and how the storytelling method also lends itself to it in this expansionist overarching kind of way. *Heart of Darkness* is just the opposite.

Heart of Darkness is about the awareness of shame and guilt and ambivalence. the darkness of the empire in terms of the brutalities, the grotesque forms of violence which take place and the pure exploitative engines of imperialism and consequently the narrative method and narrative style in *Heart of Darkness* is rather than being expansionist is actually fractured in quality. is constantly self-reflexive, is constantly ambivalent, is constantly fractured in quality. And so in many ways, thematically as well as at a narrative level, *Heart of Darkness* may be seen as a deconstruction of the *Robinson Crusoe* narrative. So the sensory quality of Conrad's writing, one that underlines the self-embodied and experiential struggle to situate its relation to the physical world, is thus described by Michael Levenson. So, Michael Levenson is a very famous modernist critic, right. So this is the sensory confusion, the cognitive confusion in *Heart of Darkness* which lend themselves to the

narrative, you know, the very nervousness in the narrative in the novel. And this is the quotation from Levenson. The fragility of identity, the barriers to knowledge, the groundlessness of value, these great Conradian and modern motives appear most often in terms of sensory derangement that casts the individual into unarticulated space, a space with no markers and no boundaries, with nothing behind, nothing above, nothing below. So there's a sense of vacuum created over here where the subject's situatedness is questioned, the subject's situatedness is derailed and this derailing process, this de-situating process is constantly projected, is constantly foregrounded by the narrative method in Conrad, most important in *Heart of Darkness*, where the narrative method constantly calls into question its own ontological reliability.

So, it becomes a very unreliable narration, and it foregrounds its unreliability in a very direct way. It's not trying to conceal its unreliability. Rather, it's trying to foreground it. It's trying to embellish and amplify it. And it becomes part of the narrative method. It becomes part of the narrative itself. So the unreliability of the method in *Heart of Darkness*, the method of narration in *Heart of Darkness* becomes part of the story. So the how of the narrative, the manner of the narrative also becomes part of the matter, the what of the narrative, if you will. So, more significantly, as that evasive centre that is everywhere and nowhere, that constantly slippery production of knowledge and how it constantly slips away from meaningfulness, the contingent storytelling voice that characterises the narrative economy in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* is remarkably dialogic with current theses and philosophy of mind that examine epistemological differences between purely subjective points of view and objective orders of meaning. So that intersectional and sometimes conflicting relationship between the subjective first person experience and the objective third person experience, that intersectionality is there in *Heart of Darkness* as well.

So, Marlowe's narrative unreliability with its sudden shifts in consciousness that compulsively defy the norms of standardized realist narrative may be read as an authorial strategy of mixing psychological and narrative confusion in a story which signals the coordinates of an otherworldly map. So this entire narrative confusion is deliberately

designed obviously by Conrad, and by foregrounding Marlow's narrative unreliability, by foregrounding Marlow's narrative nervousness, what he does is he is trying to signal the confusion which happens in an otherworldly map. So a map which is going beyond the meaning making mechanism, the map which is moving away from the normal coordinates of meaning, the normal normative coordinates of meaning. In other words, if you bring it back to historical, political, cultural reading, Heart of Darkness is about the spectral, slippery empire, the empire which cannot be controlled, which cannot be territorialized anymore. cannot be made into some kind of a convenient cartographic construct anymore. The post-cartographic empire, the spectral, uncanny empire, right, and how it begins to become a site of guilt, a site of shame, a site of violence, a site which stares back at the perpetrator of violence, right. So that, that political reading is obviously that, which is why you'll find that Heart of Darkness lends itself, the sentimental structure, the narrative structure in Heart of Darkness lends itself to many more narratives which draw on it. I mean, for example, one obvious film which comes to mind is, you know, the film about the Vietnam War, you know, the whole Apocalypse Now narrative by Francis Ford Coppola. And I'm guessing some of you may have seen the film already, Apocalypse Now, which is about the American shame and guilt about the inglorious Vietnam War. and how it is essentially the Heart of Darkness narrative, but the setting is different, it's deliberately made different, but we have Colonel Kutz, played by Marlon Brando in the film, but there is the same amount of, a very similar structure of uncertainty, contingency, chaos and confusion which take place.

And so the empire, the elsewhere in both Apocalypse Now as well as Heart of Darkness is constantly spectral and constantly slipping away from the cartographic grasp, so that cartographic containing method is not working anymore. So that again brings us back to the point how Heart of Darkness becomes a reversal or a deconstruction of the Robinson Crusoe story, which is about the beginning of cartography. the beginning of territorialization, which is why the narrative in Robinson Crusoe is so detailed. It seems to know everything that is going on. It has a very dense ontological reality, very dense layered ontological mapping, whereas the ontological reality is constantly slipping away through a very spectral process in Heart of Darkness. So, the intense and explicit self-reflexivity of

Marlow's story, he flacks up and pathetically justifies his own nervousness. He's a very pathetic narrator, a superfluous man, if you will. Reprimands his audience for not being attentive enough and mocks their sense of complacent, civilized security, which flies in the face of horror of his Congo experience. All this may be read as a substantiation of the phenomenological view that inner awareness is most often an integral component of human consciousness before it becomes an appropriate pattern of neural activity. So inner awareness before it begins you know consciousness before it begins the neural activity becomes the integral component of consciousness awareness right so from awareness it becomes sentience from sentience it becomes a representational method now in heart of darkness that transition is not seamless the awareness and ascension do not necessarily lend themselves you know uncritically or easily or seamlessly into a narrative pattern so narrative pattern is constantly getting frustrated and among many things uh heart of darkness may be also be seen as an interrupted and frustrated effort to tell a story about an imperial misadventure, an imperial catastrophe which went wrong, right? So Marlow's narrative predicament, and again, notice how narrative predicament is used over here, narrative chaos, right? Something just spiraling out of control.

Marlow's narrative predicament is underlined by, you know, is underlined by his crisis and conveying his inner awareness and a shared discourse, right? So the whole idea of how the narrative predicament gets worked out is very, very important. So he's Part of the precarity in Heart of Darkness, part of the peril in Heart of Darkness is also some kind of a a crisis in storytelling methods. So the standard structures of storytelling, standard recipes of storytelling become unavailable or become obsolete, become dysfunctional in Heart of Darkness, right? Now what happens in the process is there's a substitution going on in the novel. In substituting empirical and imperial coordinates with psychological allegory, Marlow's tale in Heart of Darkness unfolds as an inconclusive inquiry into existential interiority. It's like a bad report of what went wrong, a bad report of an accident, right? So, it's an inconclusive investigation, an inconclusive inquiry into existential interiority. So, what happened at a spiritual, existential, psychological level in the heart of darkness? The report is a frustrated report. The report is an interrupted, truncated report. It's an aborted report, right? So it becomes a very, very inconclusive investigation, a very inconclusive

inquiry. So the complex cognitive quality of Marlow's narrative is highlighted early on in Heart of Darkness by the unnamed narrator thus. So there is this Chinese block structure of narration as well in Heart of Darkness. We saw something similar happening in Mary Shelley's Frankenstein as well. So there is this unnamed narrator who is one of the listeners of Marlow. And within the unnamed narrator's story, there is Marlow's story about what happened in Congo. Of course, what happened cannot be fully communicated, cannot be fully reported, right? There is this inconclusive, incomplete quality about the report. But this is a distinction, this is a distinctive quality in Marlow's story, which is not typical, which is something which the narrator is very quick to flag up.

But Marlow was not typical, and to him the meaning of an episode was not inside like a kernel, but outside, enveloping the tale which brought it out only as a glow brings out a haze, in the likeness of one of those mystery hallows that sometimes are made visible by the spectral illumination of moonshine. So again, look at the spectral quality over here, the translucent quality. And again, I use the word translucent very, very consciously because it's something between opaque and transparent. It is penetrable only to a certain extent. It's partially penetrable, right? And therein lies a cognitive confusion in Heart of Darkness. So, what we see again, and I may have said this already, how the narrative method in Heart of Darkness is reflective of the narrative matter in Heart of Darkness. So the story about cognitive confusion is told in a way which is confusing, right? So there is some authenticity, some legitimacy in this dialogic relationship. The uniqueness of Marlow's narrative thus lies in its scooped-out quality, its radiating significance, which, self-reflectively, extends its interiority over and above its formal frame. So there is that extended quality in Marlow's narration, and that extended quality becomes a hollowed-out centre. The hollowed-out centre only has a radius around it, and that radius is a story. So, when you come to the bottom of the story, there is no center. There is a slippery vacuum which the story cannot hold it together. So it's a failed story. It's a failed report in many ways. In some sense, the entire story of Heart of Darkness may be seen as a report of what went wrong in Congo.

And it's a false report. It's an incomplete report. It's an inadequate report. So

unsurprisingly, there's a degree of decentering happening in Heart of Darkness. So this entails a form of decentering, which is pervasive throughout Marlow's tales, whereby characters appear more as apparitions than as palpable presence. And this apparition quality is important over here because there is a spectrality about the story in Heart of Darkness. So, no characters appear as a full... flesh character right so you know they're not really fleshed out so everyone comes as voices sometimes disembodied voices for example Kurtz in Heart of Darkness appears as a disembodied voice and he just you know the famous last words of Kurtz the horror the horror seems like an echo to Marlow right so an echo is something which is not connected to a body but this disembodied quality makes it more fluid more dark and more uh more polyphonic in quality as well So it's more as apparition than as palpable presence. And with the journey to the center can only end with an embodied experience of centerlessness, right? So the experience of centerlessness is something which Marlow's novel flags up. So the centerless quality of Marlow's tale is frequently made evident in his descriptions. And all the descriptions we have of Kurtz, the renegade soldier, the renegade agent of the empire, who now becomes a problem for the empire. So, the way Kurtz is described, there is a sense of spectrality, a sense of centerlessness about Kurtz.

There is no center, there is a hollowness about Kurtz, which is why he is a hollow man. In many ways, some of you would know there's a very famous T.S. Eliot poem called Hollow Man, which also alludes to Kurtz in Heart of Darkness. So, the hollowness in the middle of it all. So that's Kurtz is hollow at the core. And this is a description for the novel. So I mentioned how there's a scooped out quality with the narrative as well. So once you go to the bottom of it, it's a bottomless pit, a descent into darkness. The manager tells Marlow that men who arrive in a Congo should have no entrails. There is a centre-less quality about the men who live in Congo. They must get rid of the entrails. And the brickmaker appears to Marlow as a paper-mashed Mephistophilus composed of little loose dirt, something very fragile, something very, very loose about the people over here. Nothing solid, nothing of ontological solidity or density about the people or the characters over here. So, what emerges as fundamental in Marlow's story of the horror of hollowness is Conrad's seemingly endless pursuit of the quality of solidity in things. And that solidity is obviously

absent. All the characters are phantoms in the story. So there's a phantom limb-like quality, an apparition-like quality, a spectral quality in *Heart of Darkness*. And then comes the famous quotation, which also begins the title of the essay we're reading. The existential anxiety of such pursuit is evinced, thus in Marlowe's exclamation. So, Marlowe wants to get the bottom of the story and wants to control the narrative, deliver a very centred narrative, but of course it is a frustrated effort.

So, he ends up becoming another hollow man because he's a poor storyteller, a de-territorialized storyteller. And this is a quotation. Do you see him? Do you see the story? Do you see anything? So interesting question, right? Do you see the story? He's trying to make it visual again. He's trying to reanimate it again for the audience. But we realize it's a failed effort. He cannot do it. So there's a failed, an aborted attempt by Marlow. But his frustration, his frustrated exclamation is very clear. Do you see the story? Do you see him? Do you see anything at all? It seems to me that I'm trying to tell you a dream making, a vain attempt, because no relation of a dream can convey the dream sensation, that commingling of absurdity, surprise and bewilderment in a tremor of struggling revolt, that notion of being captured by the incredible, which is the very essence of dreams. It is impossible. We live as we dream alone. So Marlow in the novel becomes a very, very lonely storyteller, the alienated storyteller who's so alienated from his own story, who's so alienated from his own experience that he cannot put it together into a shareable story, right? So the whole idea of shareability becomes a problem in *Heart of Darkness*. And that, again, in a very interesting political way, is a glimpse into guilt. So the awareness or the revelation, the knowledge of guilt about the empire, the knowledge of shame about the empire is something that cannot be shared through a seamless narrative. So there's that aloneness at the end of this quotation is important because the aloneness is both existential and political in quality, right? And this is how we see how *Heart of Darkness* is a novel which lends itself so wonderfully and so richly, should I say, into different kinds of readings, psychoanalytic readings, psychological readings, of course, political readings, post-colonial readings, etc. And also, a level of cognitive narratology, how the entire narrative crisis, the narrative cognition, the narrative crisis in *Heart of Darkness* becomes a part of the political crisis. So, the geopolitical cognitive crisis and the narrative crisis in

a novel are all supplementing each other in structural as well as experiential functional ways. So we stop at this point today and we conclude this essay in the subsequent session. Thank you for your attention.