Heart of Darkness Part 3

So, hello and welcome to this NPTEL course titled The Novel and Change. We will continue reading Joseph Conrad's novel Heart of Darkness. So as you can see, the essay that we have selected, which is something I published many years ago, is looking at the way the narrative designs in Conrad, the narrative, the ways in which the plot is designed and the plotment and the categorization and descriptions. happened in the novel correspond very interestingly with some of the research that one may do with cognitive psychology, neuroscience and also narrative theory. So we'll continue in that line of inquiry in this session as well. So, it should be on your screen. It is interesting to establish an analogy between the difficulty faced by Conrad's narrators with the psychological notion of extended consciousness. and the phenomenological awareness of one's cognitive self. So the whole idea of extended consciousness becomes important, whereby consciousness becomes some kind of an extended prosthetic quality rather than being a static, ontic quality. And now we have a reference on very influential work by Andy Clarke and David Chambers in the work on the extended mind.

So again, you can see how the way the mind is conceptualized and theorized in Clarke and Chambers' work. It is more of an extension, an enactment. So some of you know this 4E model of cognition that Andy Clark talks about elsewhere, the 4E being the embedded, the embodied, the extended and the inactive. I'll say it one more time, the 4E model of cognition as proposed and theorized by Andy Clark. It includes the embedded, the embodied, the extended and the inactive. So, it's something similar happening over here in the sense of how the extended consciousness that is happening in Marlowe's novel gets this really interesting narrative representation as well. In the work on the extended mind, Andy

Clarke and David Chambers define active externalism as being, and there's a quotation, based on the active role of the environment in driving cognitive processes. So again, environment or the ecology around the subject becomes important because that determines the cognitive processes at play. So extended cognition and Clarke, and I'll come back to why the environment becomes important because obviously what happens in Heart of Darkness, is the entire environment around Marlow, the speaking subject becomes suddenly defamiliarized, a certain degree of defamiliarization or shall we say de-territorialization taking place in Heart of Darkness. That is obviously influencing and shaping the narrative of Marlow's misadventure story, right.

So, that's a good way to describe it. It's a misadventure story, story about an accident, the whole idea of the empire. not an adventure narrative, but as something which is a very messy, chaotic narrative of a misadventure, you know, that just goes wrong. Right. So extended cognition in Clark and Chambers's view, underpinned by factors such as external environment, shared science and learned language, is a crucial component of the core cognitive processes rather than an accessory, right. So, they are not looking at the external ecology as something accessorial to the entire cognitive process but the external environment is something which is a very key crucial component of the entire narrative and cognition process. Such a view is also harbored by cognitive psychologists, even other cognitive psychologists harbor the same view, who believe that information is a relational feature of the environment, right. So there is a sort of relational, relativistic quality about information. So it is not just about what is the text of the information but equally important, perhaps more important on certain occasions, is the question of the context in information. So, text and context over here, are interestingly corresponding with each other. Heart of Darkness offers an excellent example of the cognitive disjointedness of the otherwise healthy feeling subject, apropos of the immediate environment, and how such state ultimately underpins an existential crisis. So the whole idea of cognitive disjointedness becomes important and how that disjointedness of the cognitive self is corresponding to the very, very fractured understanding of the reality, the ecological lived reality around the subject. So the interesting relationship between sentience which is feeling and narrative which is the mode of storytelling So how healthy feeling subject apropos of the immediate

environment and how such state ultimately underpins an existential crisis. This is evident that's in Marlow's description of the journey of the Congo and this is a very famous passage that happens in the novel where this disjointedness or the sense of being derailed from reality is very interestingly depicted and also notice how it corresponds to some of the contemporary ambivalences around imperialism.

So, no longer is it a you know a consumable narrative of an adventure story, a man going, a white man, a white subject going to in Africa or some such place and basically controlling and navigating with perfect precision. Rather what we have over here is a white subject going to Congo specifically and then really struggling to make sense of what is happening around them. And this is a quotation from Heart of Darkness. We were cut off from the comprehension of our surroundings. We glided past like phantoms. Very important description, gliding past like phantoms, almost something non-human. a body movement, gliding like phantoms, this sort of spectral quality of movement. wondering and secretly appalled as sane men would be before an enthusiastic outbreak in a madhouse. So it's almost like a moment before panic, a moment before the outburst, right. So the moment before panic is the apprehension or the anticipation of anarchy is very interestingly depicted and that's what makes a novel very neurotic. There's a neurotic quality about the narrative in Heart of Darkness and we can see how this description is a good example of that. we could not understand because we were too far and could not remember because we were traveling in the night of the first ages of those ages that are gone leaving hardly a sign and no memories The mind of man is capable of anything because everything is in it, all the past as well as all the future. So what's interesting about the passage is how there are different registers, different orders of temporality over here. There is the moment of embodied time, what a subject is embodying, inhabiting at a very corporeal, experiential level. There's also a sense of planetary time, you know, from the beginning of the planet right down to the contemporary, the present moment.

And how different registers of time, different orders of time are overlapping with each other, which is creating a sense of incongruity, sense of incompatibility. And this whole idea of memorylessness becomes important over here, because there is a complete blank

sheet, because what you remember is something which has disappeared, because, you know, you can stretch it back to the beginning of time, right down to the contemporary moment. So there is a sense of impossibility to understand, impossibility to remember, impossibility to archive and chronicle what is going on. And this impossibility of chronicling, excuse me, is also shaping the impossibility to narrate what is going on in terms of how storytelling and chronicling are both activities in which the human subject finds themselves struggling to comprehend, struggling to make sense, struggling to navigate. And I use the word navigate literally as well as figuratively, metaphorically, because there is a real navigation going on as in Marlowe's excuse me, gliding past the Congo, sailing in a boat or a ship, small ship. At the same time, he's trying to navigate experientially in an interpretative way of what's happening around him, the ecology around him. So the existential isolation experienced by Marlow you know which is ironically described using a word collective pronoun we is thus a function of extended otherness and cognitive unsettling. So there is a sense of otherness which is outside of the self but at the same time it is related to the cognitive unsettling. So the fact that the self, the subject is unsettled and has encountered a constant encounter with the other. The reference to the mind of man at the end of the passage further highlights the translucent quality of human consciousness whose interiority is informed by its relationality with external signifier.

So, that that translucence is important over here because the play between transparency and opacity, the play between what can be seen, what can be accessible, what can be penetrable and what is outside the comprehensive can as it were. So that play between knowing and not knowing, the play between presence and non-presence gives a phantom-like quality to the story, both the matter and the manner of the story, which we can see happening here in very, very interesting ways. More importantly, Marlow's disjointness from his immediate environment and existential and psychological alienation consequently experienced point also to the crisis in generating a feeling self which can cognitively respond to mental images. So this reference is from Antonio Damasio. As you can see Damasio being one of the leading neuroscientists who work on the relation between emotion and cognition. So, what we see over here is an example of psychological alienation experienced by Marlowe. how this connects to the experience and the absence or the crisis

in feeling. So he does not really have any uniform, unilateral feeling self which is continuous in quality. So that discontinuity in feeling and the discontinuity in cognition are connected to each other in very interesting ways and we have you know someone like Damasio corroborating this in more extreme ways in his different case studies which we find in reading his work. A further instance of Marlow's cognitive unsettling features in Heart of Darkness thus, and there's another quotation on your screen.

You lost your way on that river as you were in a desert and butted all day long against shores trying to find the channel till you thought you were bewitched and cut off forever from everything you had I have known once somewhere far away in another existence perhaps. So this complete disconnect from knowledge, knowledge templates and knowledge networks and the plunge into a blank tabula rasa sort of nothingness if you will. There is something nihilistic about how the navigation occurs and how the darkness and how the navigation both with the environment and the navigation with the narrative are taking place in very nihilistic ways. There were moments when one's past came back to one, as it was sometimes when you have not a moment to spare to yourself. But it came in the shape of an unrestful, a noisy dream, remembered with wonder amongst the overwhelming realities of the strange world of plants and water and silence. So, how the geographical otherness and the psychological otherness in novel are connected to each other and how the novel, the entire novel can be seen as some kind of an anti-narrative in the sense that the narrative method used in Heart of Darkness constantly frustrates itself, constantly interrupts itself. So the self-interrupting process that we see in Heart of Darkness is very interesting. That's something which this article goes on to elucidate. What is depicted here is an existential disjointedness underpinned by a nervous and cognitive crisis extending into the crisis of narration and recollection, which otherwise inform the embodied and feeling subjects. So again, we can see the beginning of the essay where the crisis of narration, the crisis of feeling, crisis of cognition are coming together in a very triangulated   way.

So there is a crisis of narration, which is representative of the crisis of cognition and the crisis of feelings. All these are getting interrupted at different levels. It may be argued that

the epistemology of narration in Conrad is synchronic with the slippage between the narrative self and its incomplete awareness of its own subjectivity, which struggles to grapple with the lived reality around. This disconnect described above in Heart of Darkness depicts how learned and internalized patterns of meaning which give a sense of the self are violently defamiliarized. So, the violence in Heart of Darkness is both epistemic violence as well as psychological violence. So, there is this constant derailing taking place. Along with the language which accompanies the subject, such defamiliarization takes place with a series of cognitive and epistemic unmappings. So I use the word unmapping very deliberately over here because if the entire Impaled Project was about mapping. Heart of Darkness talks about unmapping. So how the process of unmapping is psychological, corporeal and also to a big extent you know at a narrative level as well. The constant unmapping of narrative agency along with sentient agency or political agency. Right. It may be indeed argued that Marlow's struggle to sustain and fully inhabit history augments the thesis in modern cognitive narratology that storytelling acts are grounded in the perceptual, conceptual abilities of embodied human minds. So this is a quotation from David Herman, a very famous book called Storytelling and the Sciences of the Mind. Herman talks about and I was very lucky to meet him in Durham for a brief while but his work is absolutely phenomenal and he talks about how storytelling as an activity both at the psychological as well as at a collective level are grounded in the perceptual, conceptual abilities of embodied human mind.

So the whole way that consciousness gets embodied and embedded and extended and enacted are all through the process of storytelling. So storytelling becomes a very important part in the entire embodiment process. So what we see in Heart of Darkness is a crisis in embodiment which is connected to a crisis in storytelling. So Conrad's Heart of Darkness dramatizes the disruptions in those otherwise taken for granted abilities. So normally we take, these are seamless assumptions, the way that storytelling and cognition and navigation and bottoming will take place is through a seamless process. But that seamlessness is interrupted and defamiliarized and to a large extent deconstructed in Heart of Darkness. So what is the highlight? It highlights the connection between epistemology and narrative technique. So epistemology being the order of knowledge and narrative

technique being the way in which knowledge is transmitted. So the deep organic connection between what can be known and what can be narrated, knowledge and narration. So both get fractured in Heart of Darkness and obviously that fracture of knowledge and fracture of narration in a way become pointers to the bigger fracture and so the political agency in Heart of Darkness, the notionally powerful white subject, the notionally powerful imperial white subject becomes less and less agentic in quality, if you will. As a narrator, so this section now we're about to start is where Marlow becomes, the narrator in Heart of Darkness becomes increasingly frustrated with the realization of his own incompetence as a narrator. So the whole incompetence is turned on his head and Marlow becomes acutely aware, one might also argue self-reflexively aware of how inconclusive and incompetent he is. And obviously that is connected to the broader structures of storylessness in Heart of Darkness. So as a narrator of Heart of Darkness, Marlow is evidently aware of the inconclusive quality of his narration that borders on the absurd and appropriately enough, juxtaposes his nervousness and his narration in an attempt to account for his imperfect and frustrated articulation. So, his anxiety to articulate, anxiety to tell what really happened or took place is very much palpable, is palpably present in Marlow's narration.

So, he constantly draws attention to his own incompetence as a narrator, he constantly draws attention or highlights his failing as a narrator and he has his anxious moments when he realizes that he is losing his audience, he realizes that his story is sounding increasingly absurd and that becomes that realization, that awareness of failure, that awareness of incompetence ironically and rather appropriately also informs the narrative content in Heart of Darkness. And there is this quotation which should be on your screen. Absurd, he cried. This is the worst trying to tell. Here you all are, each moored with two addresses like a hulk, with two anchors, a butcher around one corner, a policeman around another corner. Excellent appetite and temperature is normal. Here you, normal from year's end to year's end. And you say, absurd. absurd be exploded absurd my dear boys what can you expect from a man who out of sheer nervousness had just flung overboard a pair of new shoes so there's a degree of envy that Marlow has over here so you people who are listening to the story have no idea of what happens in the heart of darkness you are comfortably situated

with a butcher on one hand someone who supplies you food meat and the policeman someone who keeps you safe and secure so your life is very stable secure you have good appetite so your health is normal all of you are leaving or leading a very, very normal regulatory life. And you are being spoken to by a person who, out of his sheer neurosis or anxiety, out of fear, out of shriek, just threw a pair of good shoes onto the river, just flung overboard, because that was how bad my nerves were.

So, something must have triggered, something must have made him nervous. And as a result of that nervousness, he just threw it, flung it across the boat. So there are several things which are loaded in this particular passage. Obviously, there is a sense of losing the audience, but at the same time, there's also a sense of drawing attention to its neurosis or neurotic narrative. So the passage foregrounds the anxiety of losing the attention of the audience. That's obviously there. It's foregrounded. An anxiety that accentuates the haunted order of loss. There's something spectral or haunted about Marlow's story. One might say, using Derrida's vocabulary, something ontological, the haunted ontological quality in Mahler's story, which keeps coming back like a spectral return, which is also the way in which classic trauma theory in a Freudian sense operates, the return of the repressed, the return of the traumatic reputation through which you know, that kind of a self situates themselves in very tragic circumstances. So there is a sense of a haunted order of loss that Marlow is forced to embody through his narrative. Now we have some interesting research over here which comes in. As Robert Ambrosini suggests, Marlow's narrative indeterminates. See the fact that it's very inconclusive, indeterminable quality about Marlow's narrative. and loss of control. So why, I mean, this is a passage where it begins to show that why are we spending so much time doing a psychological reading of Heart of Darkness? Because, you know, How does it connect to the sort of novel and change, the text and context thing that we have been doing so far. The reason why the psychological derailment, the reason why the alienation, the unsettling, the cognitive you know sense of you know inconclusion are so important in Heart of Darkness because it connects, all these connect to the broader structures of political unsettling, the broader structure of institutional anarchy which is happening at this point of time.

How that must be covered up with a set of lies. So among many other things Heart of Darkness is also about how what happens in the Empire, what happens in the Heart of Darkness must be either insufficiently narrated or be lied about, right. So there is a big lie in the Heart of Darkness where Marlowe comes back and we read the passage in some details later When Marlowe comes back and essentially lies to Krista's intended or fiance that he died with your name on his lips, whereas we know for real that you know he died with an utterance, the horror, the horror. So the insider, the white insider in you know Europe must be light too about what happens in the Heart of Darkness. There is either a romantic report that you have to give, very untrue, embellished or If you want to make an honest story out of it, if you want to do an honest description of what really took place, then obviously you'll fail because the narrative tools at hand were insufficient. So, Marlowe's narrative indeterminacy and loss of control, and this should be on the screen, undermine the white man's language and consequently many of the ideological presuppositions which ground his audience's response. So, there is a set of presuppositions of privilege, of supremacy, of control, of cohesion which are all deconstructed in Marlowe's you know indeterminate narrative right. So there is a sense of innate narrative indeterminacy which take place over here followed by a component with cognitive loss of cognitive control. And all these together, they reflect the white man's supremacy, supposed supremacy in the land of Africa over here. So the excellent appetites and temperages normal that characterise his listeners are in sharp contrast to the narrator's lean appearance. A lean-appeared face that appeared long, worn, hollow, with withdrawn folds and drooped eyelids with an aspect of concentrated attention.

Something very neurotic about Marlowe and there are interesting studies which show that how Marlowe appears in terms of having bad dreams, in terms of having this nervous disorder, in terms of having this anxiety attacks. can be compared to modern studies in PTSD, or post-traumatic stress disorder, which happens a lot when veterans come back from the war or from conflict zones, etc. So similarly, Marlow comes back from Heart of Darkness, which may be also seen as a conflict zone, a site of conflict at corporeal, political,

psychological levels. He comes back from there and he has essentially no clue or no navigational method to put his experience into a story or to emplot his experience as it were. That in a way, the failure to emplot his experience contributes or accentuates his nervousness, his anxiety, In effect, Marlow's failure of narration in Heart of Darkness, a text that may be read as a melancholic response to a crisis, enacts an epistemological inquiry into representation of the lost subject. Very important. The failure of narration is connected to a melancholic response to crisis. What is melancholic? Again, we can use the Freudian sense of melancholia. That kind of sadness, that kind of existential exhaustion which contributes to low self-esteem, which contributes to a sense of enervated ego, right. The ego begins to get enervated, exhausts itself. So you know the self starts valuing itself less and less. So the sense of self-value really lowers during melancholia. So that kind of sadness. which lowers self-esteem, lowers the evaluation of the subject which the brain is hardwired to do, right.

 So, that begins to become a problem. And how that connects to the representation of the lost subject, right. Of course a lost subject here it can be Kurtz who dies ultimately, it can equally be Marlowe, the subject who is permanently derailed, permanently neurotic in quality or permanently experiencing anxiety. The horror that Marlow cannot communicate in his narrative is as much mimetic as emotional. So there's a mimetic quality that he cannot talk about or cannot simulate or cannot recreate or reconstruct what took place. At the same time, it's deeply emotional and constitutes psychological confusion between self and others, which in turn deprives subjects of their full rational presence to selfhood. So, the whole idea of selfhood is a sense of continuity, rationality, narrativity. So all these different aspects of selfhood are compromised, cognitively compromised in Heart of Darkness, which is why Marlow always remains some kind of a spectral self rather than a full embodied self. So he suffers what may be argued as insufficient embodiment. So that insufficient embodiment of Marlowe is also reflected in his very neurotic narrative which doesn't allow him the luxury or access to his full self. So, that becomes inaccessible to a large extent. So, Conrad's novel is a graphic account of such failure of selfhood and its representation, one that underpins an existential crisis in a politically charged setting. So how the existential and the political are connected to each other is a very interesting reading

of Heart of Darkness which is also, as this particular sentence says, may be read as a novel about the failure of selfhood and its representation. So the full access to selfhood doesn't occur and of course the representation of selfhood also doesn't work out, right. So now we will look at a very interesting narrative method that Conrad uses after which we'll wind up this particular reading, the whole idea of delayed decoding, right. So we'll start with this and then we'll wind up and we'll move on to the next session.

Now this should be on your screen. First used by Ian Watt and described as a forward temporal progression of the mind as it receives messages from the outside world with much slower reflexive processes of making out the meaning, Conrad's delayed decoding attracts attention from literary critics who view it as a strategy of narrative apprehension, of a deliberate frustration of linear temporality and processes of a perception. Now what happens in delayed decoding is the forward temporal progression in terms of how the mind receives messages from the outside and how that messages get integrated, the signals get integrated and helps the subject move forward in time, that process, the linear process of temporality is disturbed and defamiliarized in Marlowe. And of course Conrad uses this magnificent method of delay decoding to depict that cognitive crisis. So we stop at this point today. I will continue with more attention on this particular passage in a subsequent session. Thank you for your attention.