

**Course Name: The Novel and Change**

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**Lecture 32**

Heart of Darkness - Part 5

So, hello and welcome to this NPTEL course titled The Novel and Change. We will finish this essay on Heart of Darkness, which you are reading at the moment. And if you remember, the last time we stopped, we talked about the phantom-like quality of the character of Kurtz in Joseph Conrad's novel and how the spectrality of the character corresponds to the very complex political condition that he is embodying and representing. So we will start off from that point and this should be on your screen. So we just left off, if you remember the last session, the very metonymic quality of Kurtz's characterisation where his mother was half English, his father was half French and we also get to know the all of Europe contributed to the making of Kurtz. So, there is this very metonymic quality in which his character is essentially manufactured. So, this again, this is on your screen, this is characteristic of the product perfected and manufactured by the industries and ideologies of European civilization. It is also a pointer to the impalpability that Marlowe experiences while attempting to find a narrative rationale that would describe Kurtz's presence. So, there is no narrative method through which the full body of Kurtz, the full presence of Kurtz can be articulated or described. So, Kurtz always remains some kind of a translucent, impalpable presence and the spectrality and translucence about Kurtz is also part of the narrative confusion that Heart of Darkness exhibits and rather foregrounds and illustrates.

The contingency that characterized the construct of Kurtz appears more explicitly at the end, where Marlow receives various reports and varying reports on Kurtz's political and personal attributes from his various acquaintances and relatives. So, the different reports

about Kurtz, the different kind of attributes and descriptions of Kurtz, which all lead to the very chaotic condition of this very nervous narrative that Marlow was delivering. So Marlow's confusion about Kurtz, who remains more a voice, a spectral presence and a symptom of hollowness out of excess rather than a palpable individual, is made evident thus, and is a quotation from the novel. To this day, I am unable to say what was Kurtz's profession, whether he ever had any, which was the greatest of his talents. I had taken him for a painter who wrote for papers or else a journalist who could paint.

But even the cousin who took snuff during the interview could not tell me what he had been exactly. So this lack of exactitude about goods, the lack of specific certainty about goods makes him a very phantom-like figure, a very spectral figure. And that spectrality is obviously part of the narrative confusion that Marlow was experiencing as well. Now in this section of the essay we will talk about how this corresponds to some critical theory of vocabulary especially Jacques Derrida's idea of the coast or the whole idea of inaccessible articulation that Derrida talks about in his definition and description of the apparition, right. So, the apparition in Derrida is something which is inaccessibly present or inaccessibly articulated or incompletely articulated.

So, there is this interplay of incompleteness and inaccessibility that makes, you know, the whole idea of apparition very, very important. And as Derrida would go on to say, this is the apparition of the inapparent, something which is not visible. So, in his permanent incompleteness and contingency, Kurtz remains for Marlow what Derrida had classified as an inaccessible articulation that characterizes the play between the spirit and the revenant. In its spectral quality that frustrates rational understanding and narrative reasoning, Kurtz is also a disappearing apparition that paradoxically perpetrates presence. This whole idea of appearance and disappearance, the whole idea of apparition and presence, this interplay, this liminality about Kurtz is important because that is what characterizes him as a phantom figure. And this is the quotation from Derrida. For Derrida, analysing the apparition of the inapparent, and there's a quote, for there to be a cause, there must be a return to the body, but to a body that is more abstract than ever. The spectrogenic process corresponds, therefore, to a paradoxical incorporation. Once ideas or thoughts are detached from the substratum, one engenders some curse by giving them a body. A more acute specificity

belongs to what could be called the second ghost, as incorporation of autonomized spirit, as objectivizing expulsion, of interior idea or thought. So, the whole idea of interiors, interiority and projection of phantom and fantasy is present in this idea of incorporation, the paradoxical incorporation. So, the only way the operation can be integrated or incorporated is through methods of spectrality, right. So, you know Derrida over here talks about the spectral presence, the spectrogenic presence, the whole production of spectrality, the production of this phantom like phenomenality if you will and how that can be sort of interestingly mapped and or mappable rather in the description of Kurtz in Conrad's Heart of Darkness. So, with his entanglement of the apparition of the body and the body of the apparition, so there is this interplay, the apparition of the body and the body of the apparition, Kurtz in Heart of Darkness appears to embody Derrida's second ghost that is impossible to exorcise or expostulate away, but must be mourned forever in a manner that approximates the process of fetish formation.

So, again we are using some kind of a Marxist vocabulary over here, the commodity fetish or fetish formation. So, we can see how fetish which is sort of hyper materiality if you will, is paradoxically comparable to the idea of spectrality. So, on one hand, at a very political level, Kurtz becomes Kurtz because he is absolutely enmeshed in his very hyper-materialist consumption of the imperial commodity, which is the ivory in this case. But in his absolute absorption into the commodifying process, he also gets reified and alienated in a very Marxist sense, and that paradoxically makes him some kind of a spectral presence. So, the idea of spectrality and materiality combined together in very, very complex ways. Now, so Kurtz in Heart of Darkness embodies what Marlow at the beginning of the novel had classified as an idea, something that you can set up and bow down before and offer a sacrifice to, something noble, something grand, something bigger and broader than the individual, the idea. That desperate clinging onto a strategy of abstraction in an attempt to redeem the vulgar materiality of imperialism and its exploitative machinery, right. So the whole idea of how some kind of a redemption is only possible through abstraction, through spectrality, through phantom formation, right. So Kurtz becomes so absorbed in his entire commodity fetish, the commodity consumption imperialism, his only redemption at a spiritual level is by becoming spectral, right, which is why Kurtz is defined and described

through metaphors of spectrality throughout the novel. Now, Kurtz's over-identification with the imperial order and this is a reference from Žižek who has written extensively on Kurtz.

He moves from becoming, being a universal genius to a degenerate, far from being a painter-musician to an anarchic ruler presiding over savage ceremonies. So, this entire over-appropriation that happens in *Heart of Darkness* emerges as a further pointer the complex cognitive mappings in *Heart of Darkness*, whereby effect precedes the object. So, again we talked about delayed decoding in the earlier class. We see how even here the vocabulary is very cinematic. We talked about how already that this particular novel is written at the time in which the visual vocabulary is changing, the grammar of description at a visual level is, you know, transitioning from a purely textual narrative method to a more shall we say, diegetic method, right. So, there is that visual quality, that visual vocabulary which is quite apparent in *Heart of Darkness* as well. But there is a quality where affect precedes the object, where the impression comes before the entity, right. So, that is the whole delayed decoding thing that happens in *Heart of Darkness* and elsewhere in Conrad's writing as well. The complexity of Conrad's novel is also borne by the manner in which Kurtz's centerlessness and spectrality are conveyed at different, three different yet connected orders of reception. So, there is a sort of centerless spectral quality about Kurtz, which operate at a sort of triangulated manner. So, three different methods, three different points, you know, orders of reception. How? Marlow's, so the way Marlow receives Kurtz, his immediate audience, so the story that Marlow is telling to his immediate people in the boat and of course readers, people like you and I who are reading the novel. So, there is a transferable quality of the horror in Kurtz. So, Marlow receives the horror, he is the first receptacle, the first recipient of Kurtz's spectrality. He tries to pass it on to his immediate audience who are the people in the boat and the inset narrator is also there and of course the ultimate audience of the story are the readers who are reading the book.

The horror that Kurtz articulates in the end, one that appears in Marlow's mind as an expression of some sort of belief, the appalling face of a glimpsed truth stems from the self's cognition of his own hollowness and that appreciable moment in time in which we

step over the threshold of the invisible. So, that again, there is a sort of transgressive quality about it, stepping across the threshold of the invisible. And there is a moment of horror, the horror is the transgression over here, the stepping across the line and the consequences of that. So again the very thin line between capitalist machinery of exploitation and pure atavistic greed, right. So the machines, the engines of imperialism also produce at some level the pure engines of greed, the pure atavistic quality of greed and violence which is sort of primitive in quality as well. The really radical thing about Heart of Darkness is how it locates the primitive, violent quality, not in the non-white person, but actually in the white subject. The pure, the most perfect white subject is also the most primitive, now most atavistic, most primal in its sort of violent manner. This novel is showing is how the sort of borderline between the civilized and the uncivilized, the white and the non-white begin to blur away in these complex geopolitical and psychological conditions. Right. Now, there is that quality that Marlow gains, that the knowledge that Marlow gains from his experiences in Congo, ones that he wants to communicate, encode, implot and then transfer over to his immediate audience and then obviously to the rest of the readers. But of course, the transference is a failed transference.

He is not able to implot or encode it properly or adequately. So the knowledge that Marlow gains from his journey into the heart of darkness, the one that he cannot completely convey or disclose, like the trade secret of the unnamed Belgian company he had worked for in the Congo, comes to consume him with his hysteric formations. So there is a sort of hysteric neurotic quality about Marlow and part of it is also because he cannot convey, he cannot transfer the trauma, he cannot transfer what he actually went through. into a neat narrative. So, the neatness of the narrative is missing over here. So, classic realism which had worked for Robinson Crusoe doesn't work for Marlowe anymore. So this is a classic deconstruction, if you will, of classic realism. So haunted by the hollowness and horror articulated by Kurtz, as well as increasingly tormented by the memory of Kurtz's death, Marlowe is increasingly characterized by an order of guilt which is intentional as well as existential inasmuch as it's directed towards something specific as well as something indescribable. So there is this hyper-materiality about Kurtz like I mentioned. He becomes the ultimate imperial agent who becomes the ultimate accumulator, if you will, of the

imperial commodity. At the same time, the same hypermaterialism also produces spectrality, also produces something which is phantom-like and cannot be put into words, cannot be described. So, back in the sepulchre city of Brussels. So, you know, when interestingly when Marlowe comes back to Brussels at the end of the novel, There is a coffin-like quality, death-like quality about Brussels as well, which is this white European city. So, back in this sepulchral city of Brussels that sees little men run with their little businesses, Marlow confesses his important rage at the spectacle of triviality thus, and this is how he describes. They were intruders, whose knowledge of life was to me an irritating presence, because I felt so sure they could not possibly know the things I knew.

So, there is that envy that Marlow has while looking back or looking at this sort of other white people in Brussels. It's a patronising gaze, but also envying gaze, because they are protected by their innocence or protected by their ignorance. So, almost Immunized, if you will, by the ignorance. So, there is a sense of immunity produced by the fact that they don't know what really happens or takes place in the Heart of Darkness where Marlow has been too. And once he has seen it, he cannot unsee it, he cannot unremember it and that begins to haunt him forever and that gives him a sense of guilt, a sense of ambivalence, a sense of heaviness, which makes him feel melancholic in quality. And of course, when he looks at the other people running all the businesses, normal lives, he feels envious of their presence. So, I felt so sure they could not possibly know the things I knew. Their bearing, which was simply the bearing of commonplace individuals going about the business in assurance of perfect safety, was offensive to me. It's a very important word, offensive. I mean, I find it offensive that they are going about the business in normal ways, where benefiting secretly and without even realizing it from the fruits of imperialism. Whereas I have been to the heart of darkness where I've seen how the entire imperialism or the engines of imperialism work and the darkness associated with that production process, production consumption process, production consumption perpetration process. Whereas these are people who are the innocent immunized bystanders. Right. Was offensive to me that the outrageous flauntings of folly In the face of a danger, it was unable to comprehend.

So, it's got no idea of the risk and the precarity that the other people are having to go

through for them to enjoy this innocent, idyllic, immunized life. So, what happens is Marlow obviously gets an insight into the Heart of Darkness, an insight, almost an epiphanic insight into what really goes on, what really takes place in the Heart of Darkness. At the same time this knowledge makes him feel superior, at the same time it makes him feel guilty. So, in some sense it's inferior, it's morally inferior because he knows the darkness that takes place in the Secrets of the Empire. So, the privilege that Marlow ascribes to himself emerges also as loss. One that comes with the nihilistic knowledge of the inadequacy of the shared civilizational security that runs across the European metropolis and its mental lives. So, there is a sense of civilizational security and you know if you remember your class the last session we talked about how Marlow was having this sort of desperate address to his audience saying that you are so comfortably situated between the butcher on one hand and the policeman on the other hand, there is security, there is civilization, there is So, you have no idea what we had gone through in the Heart of Darkness. There is that jealousy, that envy of being vulnerable, of being insecure by what you know at the moment. So, as it tottered about the streets, the scene of urban life appears to Marlow as essentially one of ignorance and inanity, and the loss that he experiences and embodies paradoxically bypasses extreme grief in its emptiness and takes the form of apathy. Now, this is very important, apathy. So, the whole indifference that Marlow experiences over here is some kind of feelinglessness. He is also numbed by this repetitive nature of trauma and violence that he is unable to respond to anymore, and then it becomes at a very, very blunt sensorial level, he becomes apathetic in quality, he becomes indifferent in quality. So, appearing as it does, as a survivor of a crisis that had consumed the best of Europe, Marlow emerges as essentially incompatible with the smooth seamlessness of the metropolis and its mental life.

So, we see something happening, for example, if you read a novel like you know, Virginia Woolf's Mrs. Dalloway. So, there too we have a character called Septimus Smith, who comes back after the First World War, but he is absolutely unable to reintegrate himself into normal normative civilian life in a metropolis. So, he is always the outlier, he is always the alienated killjoy, if you will, and something similar happens with Marlow here. So, everyone seems to be getting on with their lives. But Marlow is unable to get on because

he has seen too much, he has suffered too much, he knows what really goes on and he cannot unknow it, he cannot dismember it from his memory. So, there is this very interesting existential neurological quality that Marlow embodies which is you know the whole idea is about describing his alienation. Now, towards the end of the passage, you see that Marlow also complains of some medical conditions. He has fever, for example, anxiety attacks, for example. So, unsurprisingly, this should be on the screen, unsurprisingly, Marlow describes himself at this passage as not very well. grinning bitterly at perfectly respectable persons. So, there seems to be some kind of a lack and loss of nervous controls. He grins at the most inappropriate places. So, obviously, he is exhibiting signs of nervous control, of lack of nervous control. With the temperature, he is almost feverish, with a temperature that was seldom normal in these days. So, he experiences and he know he shows symptoms of you know PTSD to a certain extent. So, he is restless, he has anxiety attacks, he is feverish on many occasions etc. So, in his neurotic temperament and existential disconnectedness, falling and experiencing horror and loss, Marlow may be read as a figure embodying the state of the Turgenevian superfluous man. So, this is a very important figure in modernism, you know, the Tugenevian superfluous man. So, the whole idea of the superfluous man comes from the Russian writer Turgenev, theorized by Turgenev. One of the best examples would be, you know, Gogol's story, The Overcoat, where the protagonist is a classic example of the superfluous man. buried by bureaucracy, someone who is so buried by the engines around him, the engines of functionality, the engines of production, the engines of consumption that you know his entire human agency gets absolutely depleted and the depletion of agency makes him superfluous. So, we have that superfluous quality in Marlow as well.

So, there is a Turgenevian superfluous man who embodies and there is a quote. an egoistic albeit intelligent sensibility, rather decadent or neurotic in its oscillations of mood, a cynical or ironic quality and above all the sense of being superfluous without role or function isolated from society. Sense of isolation is there as well, right. So, there is that quality that Marlow begins to exhibit in Heart of Darkness too. Ending as it does in the pose of a meditating Buddha. Mallow in heart of darkness emerges less as a signifier of spiritual wisdom than a hollowed-out seer who can pose like a prophet but is unable to

articulate his knowledge of loss, as that would have been too dark, too dark altogether. Right, so there's this fear of darkness, the abyss that he's looking into and he cannot communicate it, so he can pose like a Buddha, he can, you know, have this anatomical, mimetic ability to imitate the Buddha or the enlightened person. But unlike Buddha, unlike the Prophet, he cannot talk about what he has learnt. He cannot talk about his knowledge because it is a very nihilistic knowledge of darkness. So, the enlightenment that Marlow has in *Heart of Darkness* is a negative enlightenment. Darkness is a knowledge of nothingness, if you will. And that knowledge of nothingness is something which we find consuming him at some point of time. Right. So *Heart of Darkness* remains a very, very complex text about a very complex geopolitical situation about imperialism and its entire ambivalence on imperialism and the guilt and shame of imperialism which is comparable to some extent with Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations* which we finished reading, but also it is a deeply and profoundly psychological novel. So, there is alienation, there is neurosis, there is trauma and this constant sense of anxiety attack and self-doubt and very self-reflexive hyper awareness that Marlow suffers from.

So, *Heart of Darkness*. Just to conclude, *Heart of Darkness* is a complex narrative that situates itself and its existential inwardness in moments of epistemic violence and cognitive crisis. With a backdrop of a real imperial setting and with all its horrors, and hubris. There is hubris, there is horror and there is that entire misadventure narrative of the empire agent gone wrong, gone rogue shall we say. Its uniqueness despite the rhetoric of his times which retains his descriptions of non-Europeans and African activism. So, for example, you African speaks in *Heart of Darkness* and there is no voice given to the non-white person. So, it is very problematic by modern standards which is why Chinua Achebe calls it a racist novel. But you know one must also locate *Heart of Darkness* in terms of its contemporary standards, in terms of its you know its times. So, that entire thing emerges from is and there is a quote, a tension, some split heritage divided between the demands of the adventure and the literary novel. So, there is that adventure novel story in *Heart of Darkness*, but it is also the very self-reflexive literariness in Conrad's writing as well which is manifesting itself through defamiliarization, through delayed decoding, through deceleration. So, all that self-reflexive literary language, literary register is also making his presence felt along with

the misadventure novels. So, the sort of seamless flow of action along with the inaction and the interruption of the literary novel. So that goes sort of hand in hand, they go hand in hand in very incongruous, sometimes incompatible ways. So that incompatibility is important because that is foregrounded, which is what makes a novel so dense and difficult in many ways. So, in his self-reflexive epistemology of unlearning and uncertainty, Conrad's novel maps a feeling, unchanging mind onto an imperial order that historically perpetrated its ideologies through an entanglement of falsehood and self-contradiction. So, the whole idea of legitimizing imperialism, legitimizing territorialism, territorialization is sort of deconstructed and debunked in Heart of Darkness because there is this anxiety and a guilt and a self-doubt and a cynicism foregrounded right at the beginning of the novel.

So, in its articulation of failure and its failure of articulations, there is an interplay that it talks about the failed project of imperialism. At the same time, it talks about the failure to articulate what really happened or describe what really happened. Heart of darkness dramatizes a complex political, psychological and existential ambivalence that shows what it means to be fully and painfully human. in a world of ideological overdeterminism. So, in a world where everything is overdetermined, preset, predetermined by ideological, dominant ideological constructs. So, Heart of Darkness gives us a very human picture of hollowness, cynicism, ambivalence and agencylessness. So, it reveals the ability of a literary text and a work of fiction to describe the complexities of human consciousness and embodied experience. mapping the same onto a crisis of knowledge, and narration. So that old thing about knowledge and narration comes back. So, what is known by Marlow cannot be communicated because there is a narrative method which can adequately communicate what he has seen and what he has seen he cannot unsee. So, there is a glimpse into darkness, the epiphany into nothingness, a deep sense of shame and guilt looking at the entire politics of exploitation, territorialization and grotesque violence really which happens in the heart of darkness and it is a failed report. The entire novel, it fails to deliver the true, correct, authentic report of what really goes on in Heart of Darkness. At the same time, it's a report about failure. So there is that, you know, like it's written over here, articulation of failure and fear about, and failure of articulation. So that interplay is important in Heart of

Darkness, which then obviously gets, you know, reflected through a crisis of knowledge compounded by the crisis of narration.

So, with that we end reading this essay. We will have one more session on Heart of Darkness where we talk about the sort of cultural, political, geographical setting in which this novel is written, through which a novel emerges. But it is important for us to situate the novel in the context of its times in terms of looking at how it is one of the really first novels to talk about the guilt of imperialism, to talk about the uneasiness of imperialism. the ambivalence about imperialism. Not trying to whitewash it, not trying to glamorize it, glorify it, but rather talking about the the inglorious empire and how that can create, bring out the worst out of humankind. Because what happens to Kurtz is a classic case of, you know, descent, moral descent, spiritual descent, you know, emotional descent. And of course, it ends with his very mysterious death. And of course, the final words that he has before he dies are the horror of the horror. So, there is that quality of horror. there is a quality of descent, there is a quality of degeneration which take place in Heart of Darkness. And I think it's a very important novel because it speaks to our times in very complex ways. It speaks to the whole idea of the complicit agent of terror, the complicit agent of violence and the self-doubt and cynicism and anxiety that happens, that come when you're complicit in something that you don't fully or spiritually subscribe to fully. So, there is that quality of ambivalence, the quality of self-doubt, the quality of anxiety. And all that get you know really entangled in a narrative crisis in Heart of Darkness, right. So, there is that quality of not being able to say what really took place, not being able to articulate what really went wrong in the sort of the Heart of Darkness as it were and its constant self-doubt, the constant neurosis of being the bad narrator. So, it's a really good story about writing the inadequate story about what went wrong, not finding the right narrative method to describe what went wrong in the, in sort of the recesses of the empire.

So, with that we end reading this essay. We will have a few more sessions on the, talking strictly on the political, cultural context from which this novel emerges. But I hope this essay gives you some flavor of the psychological, existential, emotional, cognitive conditions informing the very misshapen narrative in Heart of Darkness and how that

corresponds to the very complex, very dark, very ambivalent you know geopolitical conditions in which the novel is situated. So, with that we end this particular essay. We move on to a new essay through which we will end this particular novel. Thank you for your attention. I will see you in the subsequent sessions.