

Course Name: The Novel and Change

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Lecture 33

Heart of Darkness - Part 6

So, hello and welcome to this NPTEL course titled The Novel and Change. We will have the concluding session on Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness today. So we spent some time looking at the novel, especially the psychological, ecological, the cultural conditions which are reflected in the work of fiction, which is Heart of Darkness. So in this session, which happens to be the concluding session, we look at the very famous Geoffrey Mayer's essay on the anxiety of confluence. Evolution, Ecology and Imperialism in Conrad's Heart of Darkness and this should be on your screen. So, as you can see the very title of the essay looking at the whole idea of the confluence of evolution which is basically the degeneration panic which was very relevant or prevalent at that time, ecology, the different ecological changes and of course imperialism and how this triangulation gets reflected in a very complex fictional framework in Heart of Darkness.

Right, so let us read the essay in some details. Hopefully we will find some interesting points. Right, so at the very beginning of the essay there is an allusion to the new cartographic formations that were happening around late 19th, early 20th century where the new processes of map making were taking place. where there were several parts of the world which were classified under the cartographic construct, while several others were outside of the cartographic construct, which as a result had implications of mystery, exoticism and unknowability. So, the vast unknown, the territorial epistemic unknown. And that's something that Conrad talks about at the very opening of this essay, which should be on the screen. In an oft-quoted remark, Joseph Conrad writes in a personal record in 1912 that as a nine-year-old boy, he placed his finger on a map of sub-Saharan Africa and determined, when I grow up, I shall go there to the blankest of blank spaces on the

Earth's figured surface. So those are spaces which are left blank because their names have not been given. Now, that also tells us something about the politics of map making, the politics of cartographic construction because obviously it is done from a certain situatedness, a certain focal position which allows you, which authorizes you to give a name and render it, some kind of a territorial classification etc.

So, the fact that those are blank spaces mean that they are blank to the European imagination, they are blank to the European reader. which obviously doesn't necessarily mean they don't have a name. Perhaps they have a name and the local language and local culture. But from a European focal perspective, these are the terra incognita, the unknown territory. In the 25 years since the appearance of Chinua Achebe's influential essay, *An Image of Africa, Racism and Conrad's Heart of Darkness*, which we will read in some details later when we examine Achebe's novel, Much criticism has focused on the way Conrad fills the blank space in Western culture with the image of Africa he presents in *Heart of Darkness* and how that work reinforces the racist and imperialist ideology of Conrad's time with replications up to the present. So, we see how the representation politics in *Heart of Darkness* is quite complex and quite dark and very problematic because obviously no African speaks in the novel except the boy who comes and declares Kurt's ass dead. All the narrative agency is given to the white narrator who obviously, you know, confuses different orders of narration and who makes, does a bad job in narration as well. But the fact of the matter is the narrative economy, the narrative agency is almost entirely invested in the white narrator. And that itself is a problem. So, we see how racialized the story is.

And that is what Achebe picks up on and obviously gives a very scathing critique of that. Edward Said says in *Culture and Imperialism*, for instance, that Kurtz's looting adventure, Marlow's journey up the river, and the narrative itself all share a common theme. Europeans performing acts of mastery and will in or about Africa. So the whole idea of European mastery and will and agency and how all those get projected in the African landscape is something that even Edward Said picks up on. Justifiably, Achebe and Said have focused on the work's complicity in reproducing racist stereotypes of African people and the

exploitation, and that's an important thing, the complicit quality of Heart of Darkness, the fact that it's so complicit in the rhetoric of its times, and exploiting the African people and Africans to produce the material culture of the West. What I would like to address in this article is the European self that attempts these acts of mastery not only over other peoples but over the ecology of Africa as a whole. So we can see how the ecology of Africa, not just the geographical ecology but also the epistemic ecology, the knowledge system in Africa, the entire navigational system in Africa which obviously gets appropriated and abused and taken over by the European machines and mines I raise the issue not only because an ecocritical discussion of the way Heart of Darkness treats the environment, environmental destruction of Africa is warranted in and of itself but also because the Western metaphysical construction of the self over and against the other that characterizes the oppressive stance of the colonizer towards the colonized has at its root the alienation of the self from the natural world and no work imagines this alienation as vividly as Heart of Darkness. Now the word alienation obviously comes from a Marxist study because we are talking about how the producer of a certain product gets alienated from the product, right. There is a sense of creating the other, constructing the dark other as opposed to the civilized self of the European. But that production of the other also comes with the production of alienation.

So, the subject producing the otherness also becomes alienated in the whole process. So what Meyers is doing in this essay and which is also connected to the way we have read the novel already is looking at the psychological, political, ecological complexities and how this novel becomes in many sense a really rich and complex product of his times. in terms of the political activities happening around the time, in terms of territorialization, racialization, the instrumentalization of the imperial machinery, etc. And of course how all these come together to create a sense of self and the other, the self being the civilized European self and the other being the atavistic African. Now of course this novel is more complex than that because in a way it breaks away from the dualism because it shows us the character of Kurtz, Kurtz being the European self, in fact, the finest specimen of the European self, which goes native, which becomes atavistic. So, that border between the self and the other, between the civilized and the atavistic, that border is deconstructed to a

large extent in *Outer Darkness*. Right. And just as colonial mastery over colonized people has had, even beyond the brutal atrocities committed at the time, far-reaching consequences in the post-colonial world, so too has the conquering of nature continued to affect the human relationship with the environment up to the present time. So there is this very interesting ecological, narratological, existential dynamic going on because obviously what happens in Congo in *Heart of Darkness* is the European machines, European ships come over and de-territorialize and re-territorialize Congo in the sense that it becomes this massive site of profit making. The ivory, the diamonds, all these things which are produced because of these acts of imperialism essentially massacres the natural landscape, essentially destroys the natural landscape.

So, there is this big ecological damage done too. But of course, it doesn't stop there. That ecological damage also extends onto a psychological damage. The self, the African self, the sense of the non-white identity becomes almost entirely appropriated through a certain prism of power and powerlessness. So, I would like to look at Conrad's story from an eco-critical point of view that adds to post-colonial criticism of the work. So, you can see how the eco-critical and the post-colonial are merging together in this kind of reading, in the sense that if you're saying that, well, this is a novel about colonialism, this is a novel about how the colonial machinery and the subjects came and took over the space and essentially defamiliarized it in making it a profit-making machine, What is also evident in that reading is how that changes and disturbs the ecology of this particular landscape. Right. In order to explore how the Eurocentric bias inscribed in the text is a narrow point of a broader anthropocentric bias. So the anthropocentric and Eurocentric are connected together. So, the entire human in *Heart of Darkness* is a white human, the European human. Right. So that becomes the problem because it is exclusively European, the existential angst or alienation that are described in the novel are almost entirely from the European perspective. So the anthropocentric is also by default the Eurocentric. One that gains its particular strength as a reaction to the rise of Darwin's theory of evolution in the half century leading up to the publication of *Heart and Darkness*. So the evolution theory of Darwin of course was a big cultural moment because it seems to undercut in certain ways entire racial

supremacy thing. Of course, it, but it very quickly also spills over into other things such as criminology, which then reinscribes the racial vocabulary.

So, if you look at how evolution, degeneration, panic, criminology, they're all coming together in late 19th, early 20th centuries, you realize how racism, the way we call it today, was beginning to be systematized at that point of time. So the systematization of racism, the almost institutionalization of racism was happening around the time where Darwin's, the very, very spectral presence of Darwin's evolution theory was fueling it in many ways. There was irony of it because at some point, the evolution theory suggests that we all come from the same source. So there should not be no racial difference. But of course, what happens right after that is how, that theory gets re-inscribed and re-interpreted and obviously misinterpreted into reinforcing the racist stereotypes. Now, central to an understanding of the conflict in *Heart of Darkness* is what Neil Evernden refers to as the overarching dualism in the European conception of nature. A Cartesian separation of the self from the natural world. So, as you know, René Descartes, one of the biggest philosophers of European Enlightenment had this very interesting and dualistic idea of the mind and the body, so that famous Cartesian line. I think therefore I am or cognition is the function of the ego right and the other way around the ego is a function of cognition and thinking. Now that in a very interesting way it really foregrounds the primacy of the mind as opposed to the body. Now this mind-body dualism very quickly spills over and connects to other kinds of dualisms which are quite problematic in quality. man-woman being one of them, white-non-white being one of them, civilized-atavistic being one of them. So there is a whole economy of dualisms which are produced out of this Cartesian logic. And of course, *Heart of Darkness* belongs to that era where these dualisms were getting more and more systematized in institutional ways. And there seems to be some kind of an epistemic backing, you know, in terms of how a lot of pseudoscience around the time was invested in proving the supremacy of the European intellect as opposed to the degeneration of the African body.

So again, notice how the African has a body, the European has a mind, so that the refinement of the mind as opposed to the appetitive brutality of the body. So that separation

was a very convenient separation. in terms of fueling racist differences, you know, racialized differences. So, in a modern biological view of the universe, the self of autonomous consciousness, separate from the human body and the body of nature, the voice that Marlow constantly speaks of in reference to Kurtz, loses its primacy, right. So, obviously, if you look at a modern neuroscience or modern psychology, that idea of the self as being mind-centric has lost almost entirely its currency because obviously we can't have the mind without the body. So, the sense of embodiment becomes important as well. A number of ecological perspectives dating back at least as far as Conrad's composition of Heart of Darkness, each in the different ways accommodate themselves to the fallacy of human superiority or reconcile themselves to this erasure of personal subjectivity. So there's a lot of intellectual impetus around the time which was invested into, you know, foreground in the supremacy of the human and of course the human being is almost almost entirely the European human so how the human and the whiteness the white man get really sort of interchangeable and the equivalence between the human and the Eurocentric view of humanity becomes itself a problem so we skip a little bit and then we come to what happens later in Heart of Darkness and how it connects to you know the idea of know the white subject going atavistic and going native. So this second paragraph over here which talks about the erasure. The erasure of their personal subjectivity and anxiety over reincorporation into the body of nature drive the seemingly motiveless atrocities that Kurtz and others commit.

So, a large part of Heart of Darkness is also talking about the seemingly purposelessness, the seeming purposelessness of the atrocities and violence. So there is this machine gun which keeps firing for apparently no reason. So the sense of waste which is also produced in Heart of Darkness through repetitive functionality of different kinds. And it is Kurtz the character who comes closest to the realization of the illusory nature of subjectivity and the irrelevance of his individual consciousness to the non-human world, who lashes out the most viciously in a desperate bid to define and substantiate his own being. Kurtz goes mad, not because the restraining influence of European civilization can no longer act as a check to some darker atavistic side, but because Kurtz comes to understand that European civilization and its prevailing construction of human subjectivity over and against the otherness of the natural world are ecologically and evolutionarily irrelevant. That's a very

important point that I'll spend a little bit of time with. So the whole idea of the ecological and environmental supremacy supposed supremacy of the European, as opposed to which the otherness of the non-European was constructed as an inferior construct, that itself appears in front of Kurtz as an irrelevant construct full of fallacies. an erroneous construct and that itself is invested in Kurtz's insanity. The fact that his entire faith system gets simply erasure, his entire belief system, the one he is ascribed to in order to become the European man takes a big hit. So that itself contributes to his degeneration to a large extent.

The fact that his supposed supremacy of the European, the supposed supremacy of the European seem to disappear and this big chaotic anarchic world that Kurtz finds himself inhabiting and then subsequently embodying. The force behind this realization by Kurtz, a realization at which Marlow also arrives but attempts to elide, is a theory of evolution and its decentering of the European man as universal cynosium and final product of a teleological and historical progression. So this humanistic understanding of the white man, the European man, the center of the universe obviously is massively undercut by the theory of evolution which tells us all of us evolved from animals. There is no hierarchy in humans at all because at the end of the day we arrive, we have arrived in an evolutionary way through animals, through apes, right. That of course is fundamentally contrary to the idea of you know the human centric idea of the world that was subscribed to at the time of Western Enlightenment and including philosophers like René Descartes. So, what we can see here is how this particular novel Heart of Darkness, it's a perfect text in many ways in a course like Novel and Change because we see the social faith changes happening around that time where the idea of humanity, the idea of humanness is changing and we have a more quote-unquote scientific evolutionary idea of the human and the realization that we all have come from emerging animals of different kinds. And no human can be superior to the other because at the end of the day, they all come together from the same kind of gene pool as it were. So that undercuts the supposed supremacy of the white man, which itself becomes the the part of the de-centering in Heart of Darkness where sort of the center cannot hold and mere anarchies let loose upon the world, you know, things fall apart which obviously becomes Achebe's title and of course the poem being WB Yeats's Second Coming, right. So the sense of centerlessness which is beginning to get exposed in Heart

of Darkness gets a more extreme example in Achebe's novel which we will read subsequently, right. Let's now come towards the middle of the essay, where this evolutionary insight, how this is fueled in the narrative.

So, this paragraph about the evolutionary insight is something that we would like to spend some time on. That these evolutionary insights, without the deep ecological understanding of what they imply, are the source of Kurtz's madness and the impetus for its atrocities against the human and non-human inhabitants of the Congo. which manifests through all the texts of Heart of Darkness. As I continue, I would like to concentrate on three aspects. First is a severed elephant tusk, ivory, as an emblem for the commodification of the African landscape, as well as the self-attempted mastery over nature. So, the tusk becomes a signifier, as it were. Obviously, the mercantile mercenary profit-making principle, a purely profit-making principle in the heart of Congo as the tusk is, you know, snatched away from the elephant, the elephant being presumably killed. So that becomes a sign of brutality, a signifier of brutality and pure greed. And of course, it is connected to commodification, how the elephant's body becomes commodified with the price tag, with the tusk coming out, as well as the other thing being that this also exhibits the self or the European self's supposed mastery over nature, because the sense of cohesion, territorialization, they all take place together with this ivory trade that is happening at this point of time. So, second is a figuring of not only the human inhabitants, the wildness of wildness itself as undifferentiated generalized other against which the anthropocentric self takes its identity, right.

So, the whole idea of the anthropocentric self as opposed to the wild self that becomes problematic in Heart of Darkness because the anthropocentric self, the anthropocentric understanding can also become wild and it does in the novel in the form of Kurtz. Third, is the effect the narrative structure as a tale told on the Thames about the Congo has on Victorian notions of progress. with what is implied about evolution and ecology in this river's figurative confluence. So Thames being the civilized river, the white river of the you know the heart of civilization, Congo being the supposedly dark river, the heart of darkness and how these two rivers get connected because the trade that is going on. So all that is

picked up from Congo is dumped on the Thames and of course it gets passed on as the you know trophies of imperialism. But, if you remember the opening of Heart of Darkness, Marlow also talks about the cyclicity of these historical forces because at one point of time, the Thames too was seen as a site of darkness where the Romans were conquering England. What was, you know, that in England at that point of time, they used Thames in pretty much the same way as the Belgians used Congo. So coming over there, you know, making this a site of imperialism and taking the spoils back to the origin, right. So the same cyclicity of social historical forces of, you know, supremacy, brutalization are taking place in Heart of Darkness as well. Kurtz's outpost is set, as the chief accountant tells Marlow, in the true ivory country.

And long before Marlow reaches Kurtz, he claims that the word ivory rang in the air. So there's a sense of disembodied voices in Heart of Darkness. You can hear the word ivory all the time in the air. A phrase that is repeated later in the book. Indeed, the word ivory rings in this text as a figure for the commodification of the African landscape and as an emblem of the European dominance of Africa in this period. So, in one hand, it is an example of commodification. Ivory is a perfect commodity. On the other hand, this also becomes a signifier of European supremacy over the non-European because the European supposedly comes over, kills elephants, takes over the tusks and converts them into an ivory which is then sold in with massive profit margins. And this is after the slave trade has ceased. One of the uses to which ivory was put in the 19th century was the fashioning of billiard balls. So, that was a very common use of ivory. The word ivory, repeated continually, functions as a cue ball which sets in motion other conflicts in the text. So there is a sense of domestication of ivory. Ivory becomes some kind of a leisure object, leisure entity, most frequently the billiard ball. So that transition from the wild organic entity into some kind of a miniaturized commodity is interesting because it also tells about the historical forces and imperialism and what are the aims and objectives at a consumer's and at a business level. A little bit description about how ivory was an important signifier of trade at that time.

By the 1890s, the decade during which Conrad made his own journey to the Congo and

wrote *Heart of Darkness*, ivory was a stuff of Leopold II's greedy dreams, the Belgian king. So it was very much part of the European greed to acquire as much ivory as possible and then, of course, make a lot of money out of him. It is not of course insignificant that Marlow tells his tale to the lawyer, the accountant and the director of companies. If you look at the immediate audience of Marlowe, these three people also feature in that as a lawyer, an accountant and the director of companies. In other words, the perfect empire machine, the empire business machine which will protect and legislate the way it wants and of course the final thing being the greed of this machine to make as much profit as possible. All capitalized and with the definite article, ivory represented over half of the total export value from the Congo Basin and a staggering, sorry, and the total of ivory exported was as high as 76,000 kilos a year. So that is the amount, that is the extent to which elephants were killed and profit was made, 76,000 kilos a year. So you can imagine how much brutality and violence was taking place and how it is, entire empire machine is also a big ecological disaster because if that is extent to which elephants are killed off so you can imagine how what that does to the landscape what that does to the wildlife balance and all the rest of it right so a staggering uh storage of severed elephant tusk ironically what ivory experts had largely replaced the traffic and slaves the ivory trade only increased oppression for most Africans on the continent in terms of forced labor. And because the desire to eliminate the middleman brought European ivory merchants deeper into the interior where they bought ivory at a tiny fraction of its value. So, there's different kind of labors emerging, cheap labor, human labor emerging.

And also, the businessman could directly come in and deal with the ivory people and take the ivory away back to Europe. with a massive profit margin. So again the margin, the money margin over here is also some kind of a supremacy margin. So that is also the political margin. So, we have this elite, wealthy white people who are essentially acquiring the elitism and wealth from exploiting the Africans and the African landscape. Right. So not only does ivory function as a symbol for the commodification of African ecology, it also functions as an emblem of European attempts at mastery over nature. Both European culture in general and individual European identity, Kurtz's identity in particular. So Kurtz also becomes some kind of ivory man. He becomes almost sepulchre, as white as ivory.

So, he becomes the commodity. In maintaining the commodity, maintaining the commodity production to a large industrial extent, he becomes a commodity as well. So again, we see how the organic and inorganic begin to mix very problematically in *Heart of Darkness*. Right, so we come towards the end of the essay where we talk about, you know, the whole idea of commodification, domestication of wildness and what that does to the vocabulary in *Heart of Darkness* and why should we consider that vocabulary racist in the first place. But at the same time, it's interesting because of its political incorrectness, it tells us what the empire really was at that point of time. And mind you, this is a Belgian empire, not the English one that we are used to believe, we used to, we are more acquainted to, right.

Now, this quality becomes interesting, particularly when it comes to the setting of the novel, and this is something which we will focus on now, how the opening of the novel is Thames, not Congo. And sitting in Thames, Marlow talks about what happened in Congo many years ago. So the two rivers almost become connected as fluids. So the memory landscapes spilling into each other, flowing into each other in very, very complex ways. So that the setting of the novel is not the Congo, but the fact, in fact, the themes. Marlow's tale a story within a story, because there is this inset narrator who tells us a story, but within the story of the inset narrator, Marlow's story is nested inside it. So, something similar to *Frankenstein* and that is of course significant to this ecological or ecocritical reading. At the very beginning, the narrator describes the themes as at the beginning of an interminable waterway. So, the endlessness of themes is important, and that is something which is highlighted right at the beginning. One that stretches, as he says here, and repeats at the very end, to the uttermost ends of the earth, making the connection between Britain and Africa.

And, of course, he says of Britain that this also has been one of the dark places of the earth, right? Again, Britain and Africa get connected almost in a bit of an amniotic kind of way. At the same time, there's a sense of cyclicity, which is reminding us that Britain too at one point in time was a heart of darkness where the Romans were there. Now, we come towards the end of the essay now. And then of course we have the idea of Thames and Congo

flowing into each other into the Atlantic and this real geographical confluence in a global ecology sense where Thames and Thames also becomes part of the trade traffic through which the machines, the engines of imperialism work. The artifice of imperialism, the machines of imperialism and the existential maps in Heart of Darkness, they get into a very uneasy relationship. So, which is why at the beginning we talked about the maps, the cartographic territories and also the terra incognita, the ones that are not known about. and how the lack of cartographic construction and lack of comprehension, they become connected. Because many points in the novel, Marlow doesn't have any sense of what is going on. He doesn't have a clue. And that cluelessness or ignorance of Marlow is also part of the terra incognita. He doesn't know what this place is called. So that sense of classification, cartographic construction, and a sense of mastery over the immediate ecology, they all become quite evident in their lacks, in their absences, in their crises, in the heart of darkness. So just to wind up, there are infinite confluences too in the branches of evolution connecting humans to the rest of the species on the planet and confluence between the self and the rest of the human and non-human world in an intricate ecological web. This story recognizes all this confluence. So there are these different rivers flowing into each other, different humans flowing into each other, the most white supreme civilized person tipping over into becoming this atavistic other. So, all these confluences take place and obviously the triangulation here is ecology, you know, the idea of degeneration or the idea of evolution and of course imperialism.

Imperialism becomes this machine through which these confluences are taking place. Right. So the work, however, lacks the ecological consciousness that would allow Marlow to reconcile himself to holding an equal place with other beings in a natural world. and the consequences are formidable. For although Conrad calls into question the metaphysics underpinning of human and ecological oppression, he nonetheless flinches from facing the implications of this interrogation, which would entail his reimagining as benevolent and liberating a reincorporation of the self into the wilderness. A reincorporation that a story imagines as powerfully threatening. And that is an important word, threatening. So there's a real threat with Kurtz. The reincorporation of the self into the other and how the self and the other end up not being dualistic, but again, like Thames and Congo, connected

categories. They sort of flow into each other, inform and deform and reform each other. So, you find how the geographical territories and the subjective territories shape and reshape and misshape each other in *Heart of Darkness*. He therefore reinforces, the final line, he therefore reinforces those underpinnings in *Heart of Darkness*, a work that remains widely influential in a culture where many still lack the ecological consciousness that would make such oppressive attitudes untenable, right. So at the end of the day, the novel is also about sustainability. So what happens in *Heart of Darkness* is not sustainable, right. So Kurtz dies in the end.

The ivory tower, the ivory trade will come to an end at some point. So the non-sustainable profit making of capitalism, imperialism, I mean imperialism about to become capitalism is critiqued in *Heart of Darkness* you know in a very subtle complex way and but also it's an insider's critique. It is someone who is very much on the payroll of the empire a payroll of this imperial machines at the same time getting increasingly uneasy about what is going on and this existential uneasiness is also part of the unsustainability of this mode of production and consumption which is why ecology the existential angst and imperialism they all come together and give us this really complex picture of the social conditions of the time and also the fate systems and how those are changing at the time and how those were becoming or producing this economy of anxiety This economy of angst, economy of uncertainty which *Heart of Darkness* inhabits, not least with its narrative inconsistencies, narrative insecurities and narrative nervousness as it were. So with that, we formally end Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. I hope to have given you some kind of flavor of how this novel is a really interesting representation of his times, the cultural, political, social times in which it was situated. And of course, one can compare this with *Great Expectations* in many ways. how both novels become important vehicles and representations of the 19th and early 20th centuries. So we now finish this section in *How the Darkness will move on* to a new text in a subsequent session. Thank you for your attention.