

NPTEL
Nation and Narration

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Week1 Lecture 4
Transcript from the Video

Hello everyone, in the previous lecture, we saw the factors responsible for the origin and development of nation. The three factors that we saw in this context were the Enlightenment, Revolution and the print capitalism. We saw that while Enlightenment ideals challenged the divine right of the kings to rule and intellectually empowered the common populace to aspire for a form of governance based on the will of the people, the Revolutions put those ideas into practice. The print capitalism instilled in people a shared sense of commonality by creating common events in the lives of people. In this lecture, we will primarily explore the route through which the ideas of nation, nationalism, and modernity reached the colonies.

We have seen that the concept of the nation was rooted in progressive ideals such as equality, democracy, individual rights, and popular sovereignty. However, while these principles were strongly upheld within Europe, they were largely disregarded in the context of the colonies. During this time, Europe was also undergoing the Industrial Revolution, which created an urgent need for raw materials to sustain its industries. To fulfil this increasing demand for raw materials, European powers turned to the Afro-Asian world. They set up colonies in the rest of the world to meet their need for raw materials. They extracted resources such as cotton, rubber, coal, and minerals from Asia, Africa, and the Americas to fuel their industries. Additionally, they also established markets in the colonies to sell their manufactured goods, further integrating colonial economies into a system that primarily benefited Europe. Beyond economic exploitation, colonial expansion was also driven by political competition among European powers, each seeking to strengthen its global influence.

The possession of colonies was seen as a measure of a nation's strength. The rivalry between Britain, France, Germany, and other European nations fuelled aggressive expansionist policies, often justified by the need to maintain a balance of power. Colonization was also seen as a matter of national pride. Having more colonies symbolized prestige, superiority, and civilizational dominance. The ideology of imperialism promoted the belief that expanding territorial control was a sign of progress and national greatness. This competition reached its peak during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, particularly in Africa and Asia, where European powers carved up vast regions in pursuit of political and symbolic supremacy.

One of the major problems that European powers faced during this time in the non-western world was a moral dilemma. While they championed the principles of equality, liberty, and popular sovereignty within Europe, they blatantly disregarded these ideals in their colonies. To reconcile this contradiction and justify their continued presence in the non-Western world, they developed the theory of the "civilizing mission." This narrative presented colonial rule as a benevolent effort to uplift and modernize the so-called "backward" societies. Such a strategy allowed European powers to mask the exploitative nature of their domination under the guise of moral responsibility.

In order to justify their involvement in the Afro-Asian colonies, and mask their profit-driven motives, the Empire found it necessary to create a cultural distinction between the East and the West. This distinction was constructed through a deliberate and calculated set of

narratives, which served to rationalize foreign rule in these colonies. These narratives portrayed the East as Europe's cultural opposite. They associated qualities such as irrationality, primitivism, and exoticism with the Orient, while presenting Europe as the embodiment of rationality, modernity and scientific temper. Edward Said coined the term 'Orientalism' to describe the collective body of these discourses that projected the Orient as an exotic "Other" of Europe.

Edward Said in his work *Orientalism* defines his concept Orientalism as follows:

Orientalism can be discussed and analyzed as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient, dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring and having authority over the Orient. I have found it useful here to employ Michel Foucault's notion of a discourse, as described by him in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* and in *Discipline and Punish* to identify Orientalism. My contention is that without examining Orientalism as a discourse, one cannot possibly understand the enormously systematic discipline by which European culture was able to manage—and even produce—the Orient politically, sociologically, ideologically, scientifically and imaginatively during the post-Enlightenment period. Moreover, so authoritative a position did Orientalism have that I believe no one writing, thinking or acting on the Orient could do so without taking account of the limitations on thought and action imposed by Orientalism. In brief, because of Orientalism, the Orient was not (and is not) a free subject of thought or action.

The Orientalist narratives played a crucial role in presenting the Orient as a site of degeneration and cultural lack.

Here we should particularly need to note that the Orientalist narrative, although they were primarily meant for the natives in the colonies to create a cultural lack in them, significantly conditioned the Occident's, particularly the colonizers, perspectives about their colonies in the Afro-Asian countries as well as about the natives inhabiting these colonies. For many of them, the natives of the Orient were untameable beasts that had to be tamed and made fit for a civilized life.

Now you may ask what is the form of an orientalist discourse. Well, the Orientalist narratives did not have one specific format or pattern. They covered the entire terrain of knowledge production and appeared in many forms, in the form of literary representations, anthropological observations, artistic representations, documentaries and so on. An example of orientalist narrative from literature is the poem "White Man's Burden" by Rudyard Kipling. The poem reflects the colonial mindset of the late 19th and early 20th centuries vis-à-vis the orient. The poem is in the form of an appeal to the United States to take up imperial responsibilities in the Philippines. It presents colonialism as a moral duty of Western nations. Kipling portrays colonized people as "half-devil and half-child," suggesting they are incapable of self-rule and require Western intervention for their upliftment. The poem justifies imperialism as a self-sacrificial act, where the colonizers endure hardship for the supposed benefit of the colonized.

Another interesting example is the genre of detective fiction. Many of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's detective stories, featuring Sherlock Holmes, present the Orient as the despicable Other of Europe. The story that immediately comes to my mind is "The Adventure of the Speckled Band." The antagonist of the story Dr. Roylott is a person who had a strong connection with the Orient. The backstory of Dr Roylott is very interesting. Roylott's family

was once among the wealthiest in England. However, over the past century, four successive heirs led a life of total extravagance and wastefulness, thereby causing the downfall of the family. After the extravaganza of his ancestors, all that remained were a few acres of land and a two-hundred-year-old house. But Roylott unlike his predecessor. He was smart, enthusiastic and enterprising. He was determined to restore his family to its erstwhile glory and establish himself as a successful man. He secured a loan from a relative and pursued a medical degree. He then travelled to Calcutta to start off his career. His professional expertise and strong-willed nature helped him establish a thriving practice. But certain turn of events in Calcutta ruined Dr. Roylott's life. One day, a series of thefts happened in his house. In a fit of rage over these thefts in his household, he fatally beat his native butler and narrowly escaped the death penalty. Instead, he served a lengthy prison sentence, after which he returned to England as a bitter and disillusioned man.

Dr. Roylott, initially depicted as an ambitious and capable young man who adapts to changing economic conditions by pursuing a medical career, experiences a dramatic transformation during his time in India. The story suggests that his violent outburst and subsequent downfall were direct consequences of his exposure to the colonial environment. His rage, which culminates in the brutal murder of his butler, reinforces the stereotype of India as a lawless, treacherous place that corrupts the moral fabric of those who engage with it. This aligns with the broader imperialist discourse that views the "Orient" as a space of moral ambiguity, where European rationality and civility are challenged by an alien and chaotic world. The idea that India was responsible for Roylott's degeneration echoes Kipling's *White Man's Burden*, which frames colonial subjects as burdensome and dangerous, necessitating control by the colonizers. The implicit warning in Doyle's narrative is that prolonged exposure to the colonies leads to a loss of discipline, reason, and even humanity—a notion frequently explored in Victorian literature. The story portrays colonial rule as just and fair. Though the crime was by a white man, he was punished. British law upheld order, unlike the "chaotic" colonies. This subtly legitimized imperial rule.

It is time to wind up the class. Let us take a glance at all the major ideas we discussed in this lecture. The concept of the nation was based on progressive ideals like democracy and equality, but these were not extended to the colonies. The Industrial Revolution created a demand for raw materials, leading European powers to exploit resources from Asia, Africa, and the Americas. Colonies also served as markets for European manufactured goods, integrating them into a system that primarily benefited Europe. Beyond economic motives, political competition among European nations fuelled aggressive colonial expansion. The possession of colonies became a measure of national strength, symbolizing prestige and civilizational dominance. One of the main challenges European powers faced in the non-Western world was a moral contradiction. While they upheld ideals of equality, liberty, and popular sovereignty in Europe, they disregarded these principles in their colonies. To justify their continued dominance, they developed the theory of the "civilizing mission." European powers justified their colonial rule by framing it as a "civilizing mission," masking exploitation under the guise of moral responsibility. They constructed the East as Europe's cultural opposite, portraying it as primitive, irrational, and exotic. Edward Said termed these narratives portraying the orient as an exotic other "Orientalism." This distinction helped rationalize foreign rule and shaped both native and colonial perspectives. Orientalist narratives appeared in various forms, including literature and anthropology, reinforcing the idea that colonized societies were backward and in need of Western intervention.