

**NPTEL**  
**Nation and Narration**

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**Week1 Lecture 6**  
**Transcript from the Video**

Hello everyone,

In the previous lecture, we saw Edward Said's idea of Orientalism. We are going to see the subtle ways in which Orientalism is going to function through an analysis of the text "The Mark of the Beast" Rudyard Kipling. In this analysis, we will examine how "The Mark of the Beast" functions as an orientalist narrative. An orientalist narrative constructs the East as exotic, irrational, and inferior while portraying the West as rational, civilized, and superior. Such narratives reinforce and justify Western dominance over the East. Through literary techniques and authoritative voices, they present biased perspectives as objective truths. In this lecture, our focus will be on how the story constructs the Orient as a source of fear while portraying the Occident as its victim. Before we get into the analysis of the story let us take a glance at the story itself. Rudyard Kipling's "The Mark of the Beast" is a gothic horror short story set in colonial India. The central character of the story is an Englishman named Fleete. One day Fleet drunkenly desecrates an idol of Hanuman by putting out a cigar on his forehead. In response, a mysterious leper curses him. Immediately, Fleete shows strange, animalistic behavior. He starts growling, and biting. He craves raw meat, suggesting he is transforming into a beast. His friends, Strickland and the unnamed narrator, desperately seek a cure. They capture and torture the leper until he removes the curse, restoring Fleete to normal. Now let us analyse how this story becomes an example of orientalist narrative

The first aspect that I would like to explore here is the genre of the story. The choice of genre determines the treatment of the subject-matter. If you use a romantic-comedy, you know that, the overall emotional impact of the story would be pleasurable. Similarly, if you package the story in the genre of a comedy, the emotional impact is going to be comical. Kipling's "The Mark of the Beast" is a Gothic horror story. What are the characteristics of a gothic fiction? Gothic fiction is characterized by a dark, mysterious atmosphere, often set in decaying castles, abandoned mansions, or eerie landscapes. It frequently incorporates supernatural elements such as ghosts, curses, or unexplained horrors that blur the line between reality and the unknown. Psychological horror plays a key role, with characters experiencing fear, madness, or paranoia. The choice of the genre, that is the choice of gothic fiction greatly adds to the negative impression of the Orient in the story. As I told you before, in gothic fiction, there is always a source of fear. In this particular story what functions as the source of horror is the Indian god Hanuman in particular and India or the Orient in general. Adhering to the conventions of gothic fiction, the story presents the East as dark, irrational, and menacing. In Kipling's story, the horror is present in the very setting itself. India is not just a passive background, but source of fear. It is filled with mysterious rituals and supernatural forces. In the story, the Indian god Hanuman and his emissary are portrayed as the symbol of vengeance rather than reverence. Hanuman and his leper-priest reinforce the Gothic trope of the monstrous Other. These elements make India frightening and alien. By employing the Gothic, Kipling aligns India with chaos and superstition, requiring the colonizers to impose order.

The next element that we are going to take a look at is the choice of the Indian god Hanuman. Does it have any significance. Yes, the selection of Hanuman as a representative Indian god is not an innocent act. It is significant to note that in Kipling's narrative, Hanuman is never truly acknowledged as a god, despite being revered as a god in Indian mythology. In Kipling's narrative, Hanuman is just an animal with all animalistic qualities like irrationality, impulsiveness and lack of civility. Traditionally, Hanuman embodies an impressive array of qualities. He is celebrated for his extraordinary strength, unwavering loyalty, and boundless courage, and he stands as a symbol of devotion to his master. Beyond these martial and devotional traits, Hanuman is also renowned as a singer and an erudite scholar, demonstrating his mastery over music and sacred texts. His knowledge and cultural refinement position him as a multifaceted deity who inspires both awe and intellectual admiration among his devotees. However, the orientalist narrative in "*The Mark of the Beast*" consciously removes divinity from the character of Hanuman. Instead of presenting him as an embodiment of scholarly wisdom, musical talent, and moral virtue, the story presents him as a mere animal marked by irrationality and impulsiveness. Kipling presents Hanuman without any sophistication. In this way, the narrative not only reduces his revered status, but also reinforces the orientalist stereotype that Indian gods are revengeful in nature. This is also a statement about the natives who worship Hanuman. If the god is irrational and impulsive, then the devotees who worship such a god is also equally irrational and uncivilized. So, the image of Hanuman functions as a political metaphor to represent the whole natives. Kipling uses an Indian god to argue that Indians are uncivilized, needing urgent reform.

The incident where Fleete insults Hanuman in a state of intoxication highlights this contrast. Fleet desecrated Hanuman while he was not in his senses. According to the narrator, this mistake should be seen as a moment of weakness. Since Fleet committed this mistake while he was not in his senses, he should be forgiven, or he should be punished leniently, taking into account the fact that he was not sober, as he committed the crime. However, Hanuman in the story is portrayed as showing no milk of human kindness towards Fleet. Instead of forgiving Fleet, the narrator says that Hanuman punished Fleete severely by turning him into a beast. Hanuman wanted to turn Fleete into a beast. According to the narrator, this punishment is more than what Fleete deserves.

This also talks volumes about the native approach towards the question of justice. In "*The Mark of the Beast*," there is an important observation about how the story presents the Indian way of dealing with crime. The narrator expresses hope that the natives will use English law to punish Fleete rather than relying on their own traditional justice system. According to the narrator, the natives believe in retributive justice. What is retributive justice? This is a form of justice that is based on the principle of "an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth." This means that the Indian system of justice seeks direct revenge rather than correction. In contrast, the Western legal system is portrayed as a fair and rational, focusing on reforming the wrongdoer rather than simply punishing him or taking revenge on him. This difference is central to the orientalist perspective of the story.

This idea is reinforced through the way Hanuman's emissary is shown in the story. Fleete who insults Hanuman is punished not through legal means. He is punished through the mechanism of retributive justice. That is to say, he was punished in a supernatural revenge by slowly turning him into a beast. The punishment is harsh and immediate, leaving no room for correction or forgiveness. The story makes it clear that Fleet offended Hanuman, while he was drunk and not in his senses. In the Western system of justice, this might be seen as a reason to lessen his punishment. It could be argued that he was not fully aware of his actions, so he should not be judged too harshly. However, in the story, the Indian system of justice,

never considers this. Instead, it simply takes revenge without any regard for Fleet's state of mind. In the story, Strickland hopes that the natives will resort to the Indian Penal Code to seek justice. Strickland observes "I said that the Managing Committee of the temple would in all probability bring a criminal action against us for insulting their religion. There was a section of the Indian Penal Code which exactly met Fleete's offence. Strickland said he only hoped and prayed that they would do this."

This contrast between the two systems reinforces the orientalist stereotype that Western law is superior because it is based on reason, fairness, and the possibility of change. Indian justice, on the other hand, is depicted as cruel and unforgiving, driven more by emotion than by logic.

This idea clearly falls in line with the colonial notion that British rule was necessary to "civilize" and reform India. Since the Indian justice is brutal and based on revenge, then British rule can be justified as a way of bringing fairness and progress to the country. The statement directly reinforces the colonial idea that Indian gods are nothing more than idols made of "stone and brass." However, it is important to note that the story does not suggest that Indian gods are entirely lifeless or powerless. Instead, it implies that they are unfeeling and merciless, much like the cold, unyielding materials they are made of. Rather than portraying them as completely inert, the story presents them as lacking compassion or moral depth, acting with mechanical cruelty rather than wisdom or justice. This characterization aligns with the broader orientalist narrative, which contrasts the supposed rationality and benevolence of the Western God with the harsh, unforgiving nature of Indian deities.

Okay let us summarize all the major points we discussed in this lecture. In this lecture, we analyze Rudyard Kipling's *The Mark of the Beast* as an orientalist narrative. Using Edward Said's idea of *Orientalism*, we examined how the story constructs the Orient as irrational, exotic, and menacing. It contrasts the carefully constructed irrationality of the Orient with Western rationality and civility. The first element in the story that we discussed was Kipling's choice of the Gothic genre to tell a story about India. We know that the primary emotion that gets invoked in a gothic story is the feeling of horror. In this story, the source of horror is India. India is portrayed as a place of supernatural terror, posing a serious threat to the civilized West.

A key element of the orientalist portrayal in the story is the portrayal of Hanuman. In Indian religious tradition, Hanuman is always revered deity, embodying qualities like strength, devotion, and wisdom. However, Kipling strips Hanuman of his divinity, and portrays him just as a powerful animal with the undesirable qualities like irrationality and lack of civility. This is also a statement about the natives who worship Hanuman. If the god is irrational and impulsive, then the devotees who worship such a god are also equally irrational and uncivilized. So, the image of Hanuman functions as a political metaphor to represent the whole natives. Kipling uses an Indian god to argue that Indians are uncivilized, needing urgent reform. The story further contrasts Indian and Western notions of justice. Indian justice is depicted as harsh and retributive. According to the narrator of the story, the Indian system of justice believes in an "eye-for-an-eye-a-tooth-for-a-tooth" system. But the Western law is presented as rational, fair, and corrective. The narrative means that British rule is essential to civilize India. Our discussion of the story is not over, we will discuss it in detail in the next lecture.