

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

**Dr. Sreenath V S**  
**Department of HSS, IIT Madras**

**Week1 Lecture 8**  
**Transcript from the Video**

Hello everyone,

In the previous lecture, we discussed the different ways in which Rudyard Kipling's "The Mark of the Beast" becomes an orientalist narrative. We saw the politics of presenting Hanuman as a representative god in the text. We saw that Hanuman who looks partly like a monkey and partly like a human being holds a lot of philosophical significance in Hinduism. He is a scholar, musician and a staunch devotee of his master. But Kipling eliminates all these qualities of Hanuman in the story. He is portrayed as a god who has not completely evolved. He is portrayed as impulsive and violent. This portrayal of Hanuman is intentional because Hanuman is used as a representative image of the native Indians. If the god is portrayed as violent and impulsive, then the devotees who worship such a god may also exhibit violent, impulsive, and irrational behaviour. We saw the politics of using gothic genre to tell a story about the Orient. The overall emotional impact of a gothic story is horror. In the story, the source of horror is the Orient in general and the Indian god Hanuman in particular. As the last point we saw the commentary on the system of justice prevalent in the Orient. While the Orient follows a retributive system of justice, that is a system of punishment where offenders are penalized in proportion to their crimes. Here the focus is not on the correction of the individuals, but on revenge. In short, the story very subtly but in a very menacing manner, presents the orient, especially India, as an uncivilized land. You may wonder why we are doing this exercise. This is because the orientalist narratives are very subtle, but perform very powerfully in instilling a sense of inferiority in the minds of the colonized subjects. It continues to make us believe that there is something inherently wrong with the native culture and civilization and hence we should undergo a thorough reformation. So, it is necessary that we should examine how the orientalist narratives use different textual strategies to present the East as exotic and uncivilized.

**Slide 1**

In today's lecture, we are going to discuss this further. The next element that we are going to discuss is the role of the English speaking priests in the story. The English-speaking priest in the temple plays a crucial role in shaping the orientalist narrative. The priest, who speaks perfect English, represents the Western-educated native. However, his English education, the narrator very subtly says, is only superficial. It does not reform him completely. When Fleet insults the Indian god Hanuman in a state of intoxication, the priest remarks, "Take your friend away. He has done with Hanuman but Hanuman has not done with him." This statement is particularly significant because it implies that the priest does not conform to the English system of justice. He wants a retributive system of justice which highlights punishment and revenge, as opposed to correction. Secondly, even after undergoing the English training and education, the native continues to worship a god who is impulsive and vengeful. By extension, Kipling wants to present the idea that even after an attempt at anglicization, the native remains the worshipper of a deity who is impulsive and revengeful. Central to this narrative is the conception that Indians cannot be completely reformed. They can only be anglicized and they will never truly become English. This means that native subjects, despite adopting the language and manners of the colonizers, remain inherently

superstitious and bound to their traditional, “barbaric” ways. Homi Bhabha’s notion of mimicry is a tenable framework in this context. According to Bhabha, colonized subjects adopt the colonizer’s language and customs, but they are never accepted as fully reformed individuals. The priest’s perfect English is a clear example of mimicry: a superficial adoption that fails to transform his cultural essence. Thus, the orientalist narrative suggests that even with English education, natives continue to be driven by an impulsive and vengeful nature, making full assimilation impossible.

The ending of *The Mark of the Beast* is particularly revealing in how it reinforces the orientalist perspective of the story. The narrator concludes with the statement: *“I cannot myself see that this step is likely to clear up the mystery; because, in the first place, no one will believe a rather unpleasant story, and, in the second, it is well known to every right-minded man that the gods of the heathen are stone and brass, and any attempt to deal with them otherwise is justly condemned.”* Here the expression that the Indian gods are nothing more than idols made of “stone and brass” is very important. Does it mean that the Indian gods are as inert and ineffective as the metal with which their idol is made. No, here the narrator intends to say that the Indian god has no feeling or kindness. They are hardhearted and show no milk of human kindness. 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.

The last but not the least. The story is presented as extremely authoritative. What are the textual strategies used by the author to make the story really believable? First of all, the narrator proclaims that this is a story based on actual lived-experience. It is not a hearsay. Nor is it reported to the narrator by somebody who experienced it before. The actual lived experience gives a narrative authenticity because it comes from real-life events. The narrator’s firsthand experience gives credibility to the colonial perspective. This is further strengthened by the presence of two witnesses—Strickland and Dr. Dumoise. Strickland is a police officer. As a police officer, he represents the law and order of the British colonial system. His presence suggests that the events are not just personal anecdotes, but matters of official concern. A policeman is expected to be rational, practical, and skeptical of superstition. The fact that Strickland is deeply involved in the events makes it harder to dismiss them as mere fantasy or exaggeration. This situation presents two key aspects: first, the event is reported by a rational person, so its truthfulness is less questionable. Second, the event itself defies rational explanation. The narrative reinforces the stereotype that India exists in a realm where logic and modernity struggle against deep-rooted mysticism.

The second witness, Dr. Dumoise, is a medical professional. A doctor is someone who deals with facts, evidence, and logical explanations. He symbolizes scientific reason and modernity. His presence adds credibility to the event. By including these two figures—a law enforcer and a man of science—the story strengthens its credibility. It is no longer just one person’s account but a testimony supported by multiple rational, authoritative voices. This narrative strategy ensures that the horror of the Orient is not dismissed as fiction but accepted as an undeniable and terrifying reality.

We already saw that the British East India Company had only business interests in the colonies. As they functioned in the East for some time, they realized that administrative powers in the colony will greatly help them better protect and execute their business interests. So, they slowly took complete control of governance in the colonies. To hide their

exploitative business interests and to legitimize their governance in the East, they made the natives believe that their real aim in the East is to civilize the natives through a better administration. To warrant civilizing mission, it was important that the colonizers present the colony as a problematic place where there is no order or civilizing mission. To execute this particular project, the colonizers generated discourses (stories), what we call the orientalist narratives, about the degenerate state of the colonies like the story “The Mark of the Beast” that we discussed now. Stories of this ilk are collectively called orientalism. One can say that these orientalist discourses had two roles to play. First, it instilled in the minds of the natives the feeling that they need to get thoroughly reformed and civilized. Secondly, it gave the colonizers a moral ground to execute their civilizing mission. In the West, the impression was that Orient is an exotic place that needs to be tamed and reformed. Many postcolonial critics have talked about this cultural imperialism. In India, the colonizer achieved this culture primarily through English literature. The colonial subjects who were required to study the coloniser's literature imbibed the feeling that the East was far inferior to the West and assimilating with Westerns ways and manners is the only way in which one can attain the cultural superiority.